Rethinking Open Universities: What Makes Them Unique?

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Abstract

This paper considers the current state of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) and the implications for the evolution of higher education, whether through open or traditional institutions. Although 50 years have passed since the establishment of UKOU, the first open university, such institutions seem to be losing their ground, notably because they face challenges in creating a clear identity for themselves. By definition, they have been distinguished from traditional universities by offering both open access and open admission. However, some cases of open access (i.e., distance teaching through the adoption of various technologies) are found in China, South Africa, the USSR, and the US. Even so, the introduction of open admission policies can be considered a core feature of open universities. Such policies have been criticized for creating a so-called revolving door, with students failing almost immediately. To counteract this, UKOU developed a particular quality assurance system, which allowed them to be an authoritative higher education institution. Specifically, they structured regional networks with shared responsibilities, to offer all the elements that make up a university including headquarters, regional offices, and even spaces for students. This form of networked university is what differentiates open universities from the traditional university model and constitutes a unique feature of this type of educational institution.

Keywords: open universities, open access, open admission, quality assurance, networked university

Introduction

It has been 50 years since the establishment of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU). Since then, UKOU has been introduced as a university model directly or indirectly in a number of countries, which have established their own open universities. However, UKOU, the original open university, has been undergoing significant changes while its identity has also been threatened. The majority of its regional offices, which were responsible for direct education and student support, have been closed. Also, in 2018, a large number of faculty members were made redundant. The university has been suffering from financial difficulties for some time, especially as a result of government funding changes for part-time students. While these kinds of changes may be inevitable, they have raised the concern that "the OU as we know it" (Swain, 2015, para. 4) will be destroyed and reduced to being "a digital content provider" (Taylor, 2018, para. 4, 11). Although it is unclear what constitutes the 'OU as we know it' exactly, the changes seem to be threatening the university's identity.

Open universities have long agonized over their identity, because of how they differ from more traditional university models. When the OU was established, many greeted it with skepticism, scorn, and ridicule (Perry, 1977, pp. 18–19). There have been studies about its efforts to become "a real university" (Student Research Centre, 1986, p. 14), distinguishing UKOU from "genuine universities" (Keegan & Rumble, 1982, p. 246). As UKOU was a new type of university, it had to prove how it was different from conventional universities, including the specific advantages it offered, as well as how it could, nevertheless, be an authoritative academic institution like a traditional university.

Today, open universities are destined to ask themselves the same questions again. In the past, the cause for self-questioning was to distinguish between the two types of institution, but now, the differences between conventional and open universities are disappearing. The open university model has spread around the world and has been able to attract numerous students, and gain recognition and credibility. However, with the introduction and development of information and communication technology (ICT), the boundaries between traditional universities and open universities have started to disappear. Traditional universities are developing and offering more courses online, replacing some conventional undergraduate or graduate courses and credits. The emergence of these competitors was foreseen some time ago (Raggatt, 1993). More recently, Tait (2018, pp. 14–15) argued that the first-mover advantages that were once enjoyed by open universities have already been eroded due to the emergence of new competitors. According to Tait, at least four open universities in Europe have been threatened with closure or mergers, either because of new, competitive challengers and/or perceptions of their own poor performance. Many open universities are experiencing both a decline in student enrollment and a loss of the monopoly position they previously enjoyed in the market, leading to financial difficulty in some cases (Garrett, 2016, p. 41).

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the core features of open universities and their particular structure for quality assurance by revealing the fundamental differences in their educational model compared to that of conventional universities.

Methodology

This research focuses on UKOU, which is generally considered representative of open universities worldwide. The estimated number of full-fledged open universities varies according to researchers or time of publication; for example, 72 universities are recognized by Jung (2006, pp. 58–59) and only 50 by Tait (2018, p. 14). Among these institutions, UKOU appears to be the most influential prototype model for open universities (Daniel-Gittens, 2016, p. 884; Open University, 2000, p. 2086). Also, according to Ramanujam (2009, pp. 31–32), the success of UKOU has inspired policy-makers in various countries to establish their own institutions: (a) Thailand (established in 1971, 1978); (b) Pakistan (1974); (c) Malaysia (1980); (d) Sri Lanka (1981); (e) South Korea (1983); (f) India (1985); (g) Bangladesh (1988); (h) Hong Kong (1990); and (i) Singapore (1991). Research concerning specific details on the influence of UKOU on other open universities, however, remains insufficient. Meanwhile, it should be noted that this study mainly focuses on the educational function of open universities rather than their research function.

This study relied mostly on a literature review. First, it considered the concept, the historical facts, and the current issues of UKOU specifically, through reviewing an extensive range of literature, including academic resources, autobiographies, encyclopedias, governmental reports, and newspaper articles. Second, it explored studies on conventional universities to provide a comparative framework for the idea of an open university. For the conventional university, this study relied mainly on Kerr (2001), who put forth three representative ideas of traditional universities, namely a university, a modern university, and a multiversity. Even though Kerr's work began with the idea of a university in the 1850s, this starting point is adequate to describe the transition of ideas of conventional universities from the 1960s, when UKOU as the first open university was about to emerge and be established, to the present. Meanwhile, for open universities, this study considered Peters (2001) who provided insights into the idea of an open university, with specific focus on the processes and forms of production in distance education. In addition, Brubacher's (1977) work on open admission from the perspective of conventional universities, which also constitutes one of the features of open universities, was reviewed.

Definition of Open University

UKOU, the world's first open university, was founded in 1969. Since then, other universities, inspired by its success, have been established all over the world. A number of higher educational institutions also included the term open university in their names (McCulloh, 2008, pp. 418–419). Universities such as Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan and Indira Gandhi National Open University in India referred to themselves as an open university from the very beginning. Meanwhile, some institutions changed their titles only relatively recently, such as the Korea Air and Correspondence University, now known as Korea National

Open University (as of 1994); the University of the Air, now known as The Open University of Japan (as of 2007); and the China Central Radio and TV University, now The Open University of China (as of 2012). Even if some institutions do not include open university in their name, some, such as Athabasca University and the Tele-Université in Quebec, are considered open universities (Daniel & Smith, 1979, p. 64). Several open universities have started to form a single identity and community. One representative example is the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), which was established in 1987. Some of the association's member institutions do not have open university in their name, and some are distance education departments at traditional universities. However, the member universities, especially those whose name contains the words "open university," seem to share a common identity as open university to a certain extent.

In fact, the definition of what constitutes an open university is well established. According to the Cambridge Dictionaries and the Oxford Dictionaries, the lexical definition of an open university is, "[in the UK], a university that teaches mainly by broadcasting, correspondence, and summer schools, and is open to those without formal academic qualifications" (Cambridge University Press, 2018, para. 1) and "in the UK, a university that usually accepts students without formal qualifications and allows them to study from home, receiving and sending work by post, by email, or over the internet" (Oxford University Press, 2018, para. 1). These definitions refer to a specific open university in the UK, but they are also definitions that characterize open universities more generally. A more specific definition can be found in Daniel-Gittens (2016), who wrote that "open universities are geared toward reducing barriers and increasing university access for adult learners who were previously excluded from attaining a university education and are characterized by several features" (p. 883). Daniel-Gittens also suggested that open admissions process and flexible delivery models are core elements of open universities. These two features can also be described as open admission and open access, respectively, and are also referenced in other literature. The original inspiration of UKOU, which can be considered a prototype of open universities, was the following: the openness of the university in respect to (a) people, since it would not debar applicants on account of their lack of educational qualifications; (b) place, in the sense that learning would be home-based and not restricted to classrooms or a campus; (c) the use of new methods of teaching; and (d) ideas (Rumble & Keegan, 1982b, p. 12). From among these, the first represents open admission and the second represents open access.

In the 1970s, Rumble and Keegan (1982a, pp. 206–207) conducted a comparative study of the characteristics of the then established open universities, including UKOU. They used the term distance teaching universities in their study, but it can be regarded as equivalent to open universities as described in this paper because the institutions selected for Rumble and Keegan's (1982a) study were mainly inspired by UKOU. They observed two main sets of shared characteristics of those universities, namely that (a) that distance teaching reached a new target group of adults who, for a variety of reasons, have been unable to study at a conventional university or who wanted to study at the same time as they continue in full-time employment; and (b) that no formal educational qualifications were required of applicants, and only the normal minimal entrance requirements for universities in their country must be met.

Core Features of Open Universities

Open access is a term that signifies that admittance, usually to higher education, is guaranteed at any stage of life, and regardless of the student's location and time availability. One way to ensure this access without any limitations is through distance education, often thanks to the use of advanced technology. People can go to university whenever they choose and wherever they are living. To participate in distance learning, it does not matter if students have a full-time job, are disabled, bringing up a child, or even imprisoned. However, these features are not indigenous features of open universities. There were higher education institutions offering distance learning degrees even before UKOU was established. For example, there is evidence that the Peking Television College in China already used television (Abe, 1961, p. 159) prior to 1969. Similarly, it is also widely known that distance education had already been adopted at higher education institutions in South Africa, the USSR, and the US before the founding of UKOU, and, indeed, some of these institutions had an effect on the establishment of UKOU itself (Briggs, 2001; Crines & Hickson, 2016; Perry, 1977; Kanwar & Daniel, 2010; Rumble & Harry, 1982; Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2014; Weinbren, 2015). That is, while distance learning at traditional universities may have been given little attention compared to the conventional segment, it does not mean that the open access segment did not exist at all. Open access can be considered as one of the fundamental characteristics of open universities. However, new technologies are constantly being introduced in all sectors of higher education. In recent years, open access has been emphasized through the introduction of ICT at traditional universities. A number of conventional universities now design online courses, offering them to their own students as well as to the general public, sometimes providing recorded classroom instruction with further educational resources on the Internet. Thus, distinguishing between open and traditional universities is set to become more difficult in the near future. From the perspective of open access, open universities may no longer be distinguishable from other universities just because they feature a distance teaching element.

The crucial and defining difference between open universities and traditional universities will be the open admissions factor that allows people to attend universities with or without the same minimum entrance requirements as independent universities. In the UK, where the first open university was established, there have been attempts to provide more higher education opportunities for the public than in the past. Yet these opportunities were mostly limited to qualified people. British higher education was monopolized by the ancient universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, for centuries, but the foundation of the University of London in 1836 contributed to ending the monopoly. The University of London also ran an external degree program, allowing students in remote locations to obtain a university degree if they were able to pass the university's examinations. People were able to study at colleges in their area as well as by themselves and could take the examinations at provincial examination centers. This tradition was inherited to build the structure of UKOU (Bell & Tight, 1993, p. 128). However, there is the view that London's external degree model could hardly be characterized as a full university, but that it constituted a federation (Flexner, 1994, p. 5; Kerr, 2001, pp. 231–232). The reason is that the university had administrative functions only, with educational functions entirely outsourced to external colleges. Thereafter, in the 1960s, through the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), the expansion of higher education opportunities for school leavers, based

on the national need for trained brain power and egalitarianism, was emphasized. As a result, more universities were created.

At about the same time, UKOU was established especially for adults. Jennie Lee, one of the government officials involved in the foundation of UKOU, envisioned an independent university which had no requirements for entrance qualifications (Perry, 1977, p. 13). Lee's ideas were accepted; enrolment as a student of the university was open to anyone as long as the registration fee was paid, irrespective of the student's educational qualifications and with no formal entrance requirement being imposed (Department of Education and Science of the UK, 1966, p. 6). However, it is unclear how exactly the process of open admission was developed and received approval. The principle is not found in any of Harold Wilson's speeches that disclose the plans for the establishment of UKOU, nor in any record of the principle having been put to Lee by any political person or organization. It is still uncertain how she came up with the idea of open admission, but it does seem to have been her own proposal.

Open admission may not be completely unique to open universities. Conventional universities such as the City University of New York introduced open admission in 1969 and then abolished it in 1999. However, open admission was generally considered an unacceptable concept for conventional universities. In considering its appropriateness, Brubacher (1977, pp. 61–73) discussed (a) who higher education should be for, (b) whether it is a right or privilege, (c) which should be put first between meritocracy and egalitarianism, and (d) eventually, whether open admission could be realized or not. The discussion emerged in the context of the popularization of higher education in the US at that time. Brubacher himself had doubts about the practicality of open admission and stressed the importance of academic talent, arguing that university admission should be prevented from becoming a "revolving door" policy that admits students as freshmen and then results in them failing and withdrawing almost immediately (Brubacher, 1977, p. 65). In other words, Brubacher's main concern about open admission was its potential impact on quality assurance.

Quality Assurance System for a New University Model

The ability of open universities to guarantee a certain level of quality education is directly related to the question of whether they can hold as much authority as conventional universities do, a question that has yet to be satisfactorily answered. When the idea for the establishment of UKOU was originally announced, British politicians and the mass media were doubtful about remote teaching and regarded it a "gimmick" or an "unrealistic idea" (Perry, 1977, p. 18, 33). Student Research Centre (1986, p. 14) wanted itself to be considered a "real university," not a correspondence college, with Keegan and Rumble (1982, p. 246) questioning if universities like UKOU are "genuine universities." Ramanujam (2017) argued that until 1995, open universities had major challenges with respect to being accepted by learners, society, and the job market on quality grounds, among other things. Perraton (2007, p. 207) insisted that there were two contesting views on open and distance learning. The first view held that the growth of open and distance

learning is something that has provided education to thousands, even millions, for whom it would otherwise not have been available; the second view is that open and distance learning is regarded, by students and ministries of education alike, as a second-rate system, which offers a shadow of education while withholding its real substance. It is difficult to determine whether or not open universities fully represent the values of a genuine university and a first-rate system, because this consideration extends to fundamental and complex questions, such as what is a university, exactly. What is more important here is the issue of what it is that generally allows institutions to be recognized as a genuine university. Surely, quality assurance must be one of the grounds of such recognition.

In order to consider the issue of quality assurance in open universities, the fact that their educational structure is fundamentally different from traditional universities has to be taken into account. Kerr (2001) suggests that three representative types of universities have existed thus far: the university, the modern university, and the multiversity. A university was proposed by Newman (2014), with Oxford constituting an example, as being isolated from secular society and focused on an educational, but not on a research, function. A modern university, as described by Flexner (1994), refers to a university, such as the University of Berlin, that emphasizes the importance of research and teaching at the same time. Finally, a multiversity, as defined by Kerr (2001), refers to a large-scale university, such as the University of California, that receives an enormous amount of research funding from government and national corporations. Flexner defines a modern university as an organism whose different parts all have a close relationship with one another (as cited in Kerr, 2001, p. 15). However, the multiversity differs a bit. While there are numerous communities within it, the relationship among them is weak. Instead, it is the pluralistic value of those communities that is respected. Kerr (2001) likened the different models to "a village with its priest," "a town-a one-industry town-with its intellectual oligarchy," and "a city of infinite variety" (p. 31).

Open universities are close to the concept of a university in the sense that most of them concentrate on the educational function. On the one hand, there are tens of thousands, to millions of students studying at such institutions and they constitute a number of communities as pluralism is naturally respected. In this respect, open universities may be similar to multiversities. However, open universities can also be seen as a fundamentally new type of university with less continuity compared to the relationships that exist among other university models. Peters (2001, pp. 110-111) suggested that the structure of distance education is characterized by industrialized form of learning and teaching, that is by (a) a division of labor, (b) mechanization, (c) standardization, (d) normalization, (e) formalization, (f) objectivization, (g) optimization, (h) mass production, and (i) consumption. Peters insisted that the concepts of the structure of industrialized teaching and learning was confirmed by the work of the distance teaching universities founded since the 1970s, above all the Open University (2001, p. 111). He argued that the educational structure of open universities targets a mass audience and has a technological basis, whereas the educational structure of conventional universities can be described as family-like, having small group structures, personal communication, and time-place-person ties (Keegan, 1996, p. 83).

Peters's theory developed into a debate about the Fordism strategy, the neo-Fordism strategy, and the post-Fordism strategy. The Fordism strategy was described as a fully-centralized, single-mode, national distance education provider, gaining greater economies of scale by offering courses to a mass market. The neo-Fordism strategy extended the Fordist system by allowing for much higher levels of flexibility and diversity. The post-Fordist strategy was characterized by high levels of all three variables: product innovation, process variability, and labor responsibility. As opposed to neo-Fordism and Fordism, it dispensed with a division of labor and rigid managerial control, and deliberately fostered a skilled and responsible workforce (Campion, 1995; Campion & Renne, 1992). These strategies can appear simultaneously, but the educational structure of open universities, at least, seems to be closest to the post-Fordism strategy. Open universities basically have a so-called headquarter-peripheral structure through having regional networks in addition to their headquarters.

The post-Fordism strategy represented the fundamental difference of educational structures between open and traditional universities. It also gave rise to a different kind of a quality assurance method between both types of universities. Fallis (2007) stated that the university has always been a "place" (p. 219). Traditional universities never seem to have considered the fact that they could be validated without this sense of place. Even if they were able to choose to not be based in certain places, they could not have existed without having proper physical locations; traditional universities would have been unable to guarantee the quality of being a university if they left their campuses for other locations, whether a town or a city. The physical existence of traditional universities may be likened to points on a map, while the structure of open universities would be geometric planes. In short, traditional universities have physical campuses which consist of administrative, educational, research, and student facilities. Universities are where faculty, students, and administrative staff gather, and where educational, research, administrative, and even residential and commercial functions operate within or around their grounds.

On the other hand, open universities do not require all of these facilities nor do university members come together in the same place. Instead, these functions are dispersed to regional offices and each individual student. Educational resources are delivered to each student directly, and lectures are given through various media. Regional offices are set up in certain areas as decided by each open university, with each office being responsible for teaching and managing the students living in a particular area. An open university is dispersed and its separated elements—students, regional offices, and headquarters—exist as a number of points. These points form a gigantic and imaginary plane, wherein the media becomes a line. The media acts as a bridge between each student and the university, however, the media does not take any responsibility for quality assurance. Instead, the responsibilities of assuring quality are divided up among the different elements other than the headquarters. Each regional office plays a role in assuring quality through contact with their students, such as through face-to-face tutorials, counselling, and assignments. Depending on the exact policy of each open university, regional offices may provide facilities such as community spaces, libraries, and computer rooms just as traditional universities do. Furthermore, individual students also factor into ensuring open universities' authoritativeness as they need to be more deeply involved in their learning (e.g., by creating learning environments for themselves, and managing

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effective study plans and methods independently) significantly more so than students of traditional universities. In this structure, a plane is not generated but a number of points can be connected over any great distance as long as a line reaches students. Distinct from conventional universities, this shared responsibility structure is a decisive feature of open universities. Meanwhile, this structure can also describe that open universities operate on the basis of the same principle as the World Wide Web, as a myriad of components is connected to each other to form a single network. From this perspective, open universities can be conceptualized as a networked university.

In addition, acknowledging this non-physical-based network as constituting an authoritative university is necessary in order to successfully characterize an open university. This feature reveals the significance of media technology, which is not only a tool for open access as described above, but it may be that media itself is where an open university is located. In other words, an open university is a university embedded in media. Due to their willingness to embrace media technology—starting 50 years ago with TV and radio broadcasting and currently using the Internet and application-based modes—open universities may be defined within the media itself as opposed to traditional and physical bricks-and-mortar schemes.

Conclusion

Open access and open admission have often been listed as what defines open universities. Tait (2008, p. 85) used the term open universities to explain "innovative distance-teaching higher education institutions that have used distance in radical ways to improve openness." It seems common to link open universities with the word innovative. However, if there is something truly innovative about open universities, it would be the application of open admission to higher education, rather than adopting the latest media technology. Open access developed alongside the higher education sector and reached its apex with the emergence of open universities. It cannot be characterized as being exclusive to them. Thus, the essence of open universities is that they have an open admission policy as independent institutions of higher education, as well as a distinctive quality assurance system, which is comprised of the headquarters, regional offices, and even students, who share responsibilities for its quality. This system enables open universities to adopt an open admission policy at the higher education level. Both the policy and the system are rarely found at conventional universities and therefore can be seen as aspects that make open universities unique.

There remains much to consider beyond the scope of this paper. First, the procedure of forming the open university model and of accepting open universities in each society have not yet been fully revealed. Keegan and Rumble (1982, p. 243) stated that all non-traditional educational structures are characterized by fragility. According to them, open universities may never have held the same authority as conventional universities do in our societies, which may explain why they have had issues with being recognized as being authoritative, as mentioned above. To dispel those concerns, further research need to be done from the perspective of the more traditional ideas of what constitutes a university. Furthermore, the complex dynamics that surround open universities, such as society, politics, and even media development, should

be considered in future studies. Second, the distinct identity of open universities may offer implications for the entire higher education sector. Kim (1994, p. 147) observed that in times of less developed typography, the dissemination of textbooks was restricted so that teachers and students naturally gathered together in one place to create the medieval universities. On that basis, Kim insisted that universities may not need to exist in the information age, since personal research and the delivery of knowledge can now be done through highly developed information media. Nowadays, not only open universities, but also traditional universities are adopting advanced media technology competitively and, whether intentionally not, traditional universities are partially emulating open universities. Their development of online courses, such as the massive open online courses (MOOCs), looks analogous with the structure of a networked university, with the difference being that they build the majority of their virtual regional offices on the Internet. This is a system that assures the quality of distance education, and consists of a collaboration of the online and offline learning environment as seen in open universities. In that sense, it can be considered that open universities have been sent to the front line in the battle to change higher education. Therefore, it will be important to take note of how technological developments will change open universities in the future (i.e., whether they remain as a digital content provider or not). Not only does it offer clues to understanding the changing meaning of universities or even degrees, but also suggests a direction for the future of traditional universities in the information age.

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