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Higher Education for the Future: Accelerating and Strengthening Innovation

**Where do open universities think they are going?**

Sir John Daniel

**Introduction**

Good afternoon to you all. It is a pleasure to share this session with Diana Laurillard, who done so much to advance both the theory and the practice of educational technology. And as a veteran learner of 20 FutureLearn courses – including one by Professor Laurillard – it’s always a privilege to hear Simon Nelson, who was a star turn at the ICDE World Conference in Online Learning in Toronto last week. I shall come back the ICDE conference in a moment.

It’s great to be back at the Open University where I spent the happiest eleven years of my career with a remarkable team of colleagues that included Diana. I first set foot on this campus 45 years ago when I spent three months here as an intern in 1972. Alongside my first academic job at the University of Montreal I studied for a part-time Masters in Educational Technology. The programme required an internship and in the early 1970s the world press was full of stories about a remarkable innovation in Britain called the Open University. Professor David Hawkrige, Director of the Institute of Educational Technology, kindly allowed me to do my internship here.

Those three months were a revelation. The scale, the use of media, the enthusiasm of students and the dedication of staff at all levels to supporting the students were inspiring. I saw the future of higher education and returned to Montreal no longer at ease in the old dispensation. Not long afterwards I joined Québec’s Télé-université, and later Athabasca University. Those three months at Milton Keynes in 1972 re-oriented my career.

Being the Vice-Chancellor of this Open University for the eleven years after 1990 was an immense privilege. It’s moving to be back.

My title is somewhat cheeky: *Where do open universities think they are going?* This UK Open University will be 50 years old in 2019 and many of the open universities that were created in its image from the 1970s onward also have respectable longevity.

Collectively they have changed the paradigms of higher education globally, notably by drawing attention to the learning needs of a wider and older range of people and by demonstrating that teaching in classrooms on campus is not the only way to reach them.

As a direct result, higher education systems have grown enormously. Most campus universities, now well aware of the pool of unserved learners, are acquiring skills in new ways of reaching them, notably through online programmes.

So, my question is: how should open universities dress now that the ‘conventional’ universities have stolen our clothes? Are we now the victims of our own success?

### **Acknowledgements to Ross Paul and Alan Tait**

I pay tribute to the work of two colleagues in addressing this topic.

Ross Paul succeeded me as vice-president of Athabasca University and then some years later as president of Laurentian University. Since retiring as president of the University of Windsor he has specialised in the study of university leadership and management. I have drawn inspiration from Ross’ paper: *Open Universities: A Storied Past but an Uncertain Future?* A first version was published in *Distance Education in China* and he is continuing to refine and extend it.

Alan Tait has been a dear colleague for many years, not just here at the OU, but also when we worked together to create the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) in the 1990s.

Alan has worked with me for the past year on a project that came to fruition only a few days ago and will provide the basis of my remarks today.

The 27<sup>th</sup> ICDE World Conference on Online Learning took place in Toronto last week. Those of you who attended will agree that it was an enormously successful event, not just because it attracted some 1,400 delegates, but also because the host, Contact North | Contact Nord did such a brilliant job on both the organisation and the content of the meeting. Maxim Jean-Louis, Contact North’s president, richly deserved the standing ovation that he received at the closing lunch.

### **Roundtable of Vice-Chancellors of Open Universities**

Over a year ago, when Maxim and I were discussing the ICDE conference and the new dynamics facing open universities, we decided that it would be valuable to bring executive heads of open universities together to discuss this issue. The result was one-day Roundtable of OU Executive Heads, convened by Contact North as a private session outside the structure of the ICDE conference itself.

The planning process itself taught us something about the current state of the open university world. Our preparations began in autumn 2016 with the identification of nearly 60 open universities on all continents. Invitations – and later reminders – were sent to the executive heads of these institutions in October 2016 and elicited 22 replies. We then worked with this subset of heads to identify the topics of most concern to them and to develop an appropriate agenda for the Roundtable meeting.

Thus, beginning in March this year, Professor Alan Tait interacted with the respondents by questionnaire and through telephone interviews. He distilled his findings into a 2,500-word text *‘Open Universities: the next phase’*, which was sent to the respondents before the Roundtable.

Nearly twenty executive heads had confirmed their attendance by September 2017, but in the event only nine of them were able to participate in the Roundtable in Toronto on October 16<sup>th</sup>. The others had to withdraw, some at the last minute, because of delays in obtaining visas or for various family, political or institutional reasons. We were very touched that your EADTU President, Rector Anja Oskamp, joined us for the day despite the imminent conference here.

Restricting attendance to executive heads and not accepting substitutes undoubtedly limited the number of open universities that could be represented. However, the heads welcomed this opportunity to hold candid discussions with their peers in private setting. A larger question is why more than half of the 50 so-called ‘open universities’ originally approached never replied at all despite reminders. My hypothesis is that some of these institutions really only exist on paper or are still in an early start-up phase.

The programme for the Roundtable was developed around the topics for which the executive heads had expressed most interest. Its format reflected their wish to spend the day interacting with each other.

Therefore, apart from Alan Tait’s short presentation of his overview, *‘Open Universities: the next phase’*, the day was wholly devoted to sessions during

which the participants could interact with each other. Every executive head present got the chance to work with every other head in the course of the day.

No formal record was kept of the meeting, which took place under the Chatham House Rule that participants were free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s) should be revealed. Today, therefore, I shall only mention institutions by name where something is a matter of public record. What follows are my impressions of the trends. They have not yet been refined by feedback from Alan Tait or the participants.

I shall structure my remarks around the six session topics.

### **Are missions evolving?**

First, are the missions of open universities evolving? All agreed that open universities have made openness and access a mainstream concern across higher education generally, although in some countries conventional HEIs are still doing little to address this. The OUs continue to extend their missions in an incremental manner, notably using technology to make registration, study and feedback more convenient.

Two OUs, Wawasan in Malaysia and OU Hong Kong, now have full-time on-campus students alongside their distance offerings. In Hong Kong, the numbers on campus (9,000) almost equal those studying at a distance. Teaching on campus brings these OUs to the attention of a wider population of parents of young people.

The formal identification of tertiary education in the new UN Sustainable Development Goals has legitimised the goal of serving wider populations. The challenge is that most of the tens of millions of new students will be in Asia and Africa, where the OUs are already under significant enrolment pressure.

Is there a limit to how large an OU can become without losing effectiveness? Are OUs becoming complacent once they become mega-universities? Should they be more ambitious?

### **How are demographics changing?**

Second, how are OU student demographics shifting? We found that they are changing in different ways – a few towards older students, but mostly towards younger students, although not necessarily to school leavers. However, many of these younger students are not coming to OUs for undergraduate degrees but for graduate certificates and diplomas that can be an asset in the workplace.

### **How do OUs compete to win?**

Third, how do OUs compete to win? Which technologies hold most promise? Some of the OUs at the Roundtable now teach entirely online, whereas most outside the West use printed materials.

All have plans to increase their online teaching, but IT is proving most useful in the administrative and student support functions. OUs using paper for teaching now have IT systems for admissions and the processing of assignments. By speeding up processes these have positive impacts on student progression and retention, while also reducing corruption. The general view was that focussing technological innovation too much on pedagogy misses more promising opportunities for its use.

### **What are the implications of operating at scale?**

Fourth, a session aimed at sharing experiences of mastering the use of technology at scale revealed exceptions to the general correlation between an OU's enrolments and the size of its national population. While most of the mega-universities (100,000+ enrolments) are in large population countries (e.g. India, China, Nigeria) some countries with populations over 100 million (e.g. Philippines) have fewer enrolments in their OUs than those serving much smaller populations in Canada.

I was led to wonder whether some of the smaller OUs have handicapped themselves by adopting too fully the division of labour and specialisation of functions characteristic of the industrial model of the larger OUs.

It was surprising to find that, with the spectacular exception of the UKOU and its creation of FutureLearn, the OUs generally have not engaged much with MOOCs.

### **Are there opportunities for collaboration and partnerships among OUs?**

Fifth, most of the OUs at the Roundtable already have the partnerships they need. There is, for example, extensive course sharing between the state OUs in India. However, partnerships need close attention and management, even when the original agreements are clear. One OU that is itself formally a private institution has had some bad experiences in trying to collaborate with private sector organisations. The challenges of partnerships are several times greater when they are offshore.

### **How does an OU blend flexibility, quality and scale effectively?**

Sixth, flexibility is good, but so are effective regulations. In the Netherlands, the OU has improved its completion and retention rates dramatically simply by tightening up the regulations about start dates and completion deadlines. It is necessary to put reasonable obligations on students in order to make them give some priority to their studies.

A refrain throughout the Roundtable was that whereas most of the OUs felt that the quality of their teaching and support was at least as good as that of the conventional HEIs in their jurisdictions, they – or ODL generally – still had a poor reputation with the public. Some heads felt that using the term ‘distance education’ – and even the term ‘open’ was not helpful.

### **How do OUs relate to their governments?**

Whilst there was no session at the Roundtable on government relations, this vital aspect of OU management came up repeatedly. Most OUs have been the darling of their government at some stage in their development, but it is impossible to retain this status for decades as governments and their political ideologies change. Success in this vital relationship comes, not surprisingly, from trying to use the considerable power and reach of the OU to help government achieve its education and training goals. This will often mean shifting the focus of the academic staff, in particular, to new aims. The smaller OUs have special challenges and both the Canadian OUs have lived through near-death experiences, emphasising the absolute importance of nurturing the link between an OU and its government’s priorities.

### **So where do OUs think they are going?**

Distilling the conclusions of the Roundtable through interaction with the participants will take a while because the event only happened last week. For now, I conclude with three observations.

First, open universities are a very diverse reality. The descriptor ‘open’ conceals great variations in size, mission and pedagogy.

Second, whether the terms ‘open’ and ‘distance’ are helpful or not, the open universities are proud of what they are doing to open up higher education and bring it to new places.

Third, without underestimating the challenges of the wrenching changes that the OUs feel they must make for the future, they are confident that they have the right values and vision for the times.