Dharma and Karma in Open Universities:
A Commentary on the Work of V. S. Prasad

John S. Daniel

(Former Vice-Chancellor, UK Open University, 1990-2001)

Abstract

Prasad's (2018) identification of the disconnect between the social purposes that open universities proclaim and how well they fulfil them is a helpful lens through which to examine the current state of open universities. The successful approaches developed by the UK Open University in the late 1960s stimulated the creation of open universities the world over. These institutions expected to become the crest of a new wave of higher education. Some have indeed done well, but some have failed to take off, while others are experiencing difficulties after many years of successful operation. What are the implications of Prasad's analysis as they update themselves for a new era?

Dharma and *Karma* of Distance Learning

In his recent book on open and distance learning (ODL) in higher education in India, Prasad (2018, p.6) uses the Sanskrit words *dharma* and *karma* to distinguish between the 'principles that guide us to do the right things' (*dharma*) and present practices (*karma*). The two words are used in the secular sense of right conduct and actual practice. An important theme of his book is the disconnect that he perceives between *dharma* and *karma* in ODL in India and how it might be repaired. Similar disconnects can be observed in open universities elsewhere.

For Prasad, the essential elements of the *dharma* of ODL include:

- *An instrument for the democratisation of education.*
  This means opening access to all and allowing learners to manage their own learning. For example, open admission policies are based on the assumption that it is the exit standards, not the entry standards, that matter.

- *A means for social justice.*
  Distance education can offer opportunities to poor people and include geographies that would otherwise be excluded. It is a more inclusive form of education, notably for women for whom independent movement (e.g. to attend campus classes) is less possible.

- *A means for development.*
  'Learning for Sustainable Development' is the mission of the Commonwealth of Learning (Commonwealth of Learning, 2018). It helps governments expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using appropriate technologies, particularly those that support open and distance learning (ODL). ODL is used extensively in many countries for capacity building and the development of the skills and professional competence of the working population.

- *Mediating education with technology.*
  Although ODL systems are at different stages in their use of newer media, they are

being revolutionised by interactive technologies in general and open educational resources in particular.

- *Quality as an imperative.*
Quality is essential for achieving other elements of *dharma* in distance education. The quality of learning materials, student support services, student evaluation and administrative services are critical to system effectiveness and to ensuring legitimacy and credibility in a competitive environment. The visibility of ODL systems makes their quality more amenable to public scrutiny.

- *The teacher as a facilitator.*
The focus of teaching in ODL is facilitative rather than expositional. This makes the identity of academics in these systems more complex and inclusive, because there is often division of labour between the teaching functions of materials preparation and student support in particular.

- *The institution teaches.*
In conventional education the teacher teaches, whereas in distance education the institution teaches (Keegan, 1996). Good logistics along with good learning materials and good student support services are important requirements for a successful ODL system.

Prasad addresses the *karma* of distance education in the context of India, which he describes as "one system, many models". Since this description also applies to the global network of open universities, the trends that he observes in India have wider relevance. They include:

- *Large student numbers.*
The capacity to expand enrolments at low marginal cost is an important feature of distance education. China, as well as India, has distance teaching institutions with over one million students and they also number in the hundreds of thousands in open universities in various countries. An important question is how large can such systems grow before they become so difficult to manage that quality suffers.

- *Diversity of programmes.*
Almost any subject that is taught by conventional universities can be found in an open university somewhere. While subjects with a significant practical component require special arrangements, these can be designed and implemented to high quality standards. The former scepticism of professional associations about distance education is steadily receding because its flexibility enables institutions to offer skills development and professional development programmes to meet many needs of markets and employers. Short-duration specialised ODL programmes addressing the needs of particular employment categories are becoming very popular.

- *Involvement of the private sector.*
Major players in industry are using ODL for developing human resources, particularly in professional and vocational fields, while numerous private providers offer education and training programmes at a distance.

- *The profit motive.*
  Because of their capacity to add enrolments at low marginal cost, ODL systems that charge tuition fees can generate significant surpluses once the break-even threshold is reached. Distance education in both private and public sectors therefore suffers from the temptation to skimp on learning materials, support services, evaluation systems and administrative arrangements in order to maximise profits.

- *Use of technology.*
  There is huge variety in the use of technology in ODL systems. Open universities in developing countries often apply technology in sophisticated ways to their admissions and administrative systems before they attempt to use it in the teaching function. One danger, related to the temptation to maximise profits, is to use technology to replace as many human interventions in the teaching process as possible, with likely loss of quality.

- *Quality and regulation.*
  Prasad's comments on quality assurance and regulation apply specifically to India. Practice in these two areas varies greatly around the world, but most open universities are subject to quality assurance regimes that are similar to those for conventional universities. The regulation of distance education varies widely by jurisdiction, from highly restrictive to very lax.

The disconnect between *Dharma* and *Karma* in distance education – how to address it

Prasad's analysis of the disconnect between *dharma* (principle) and *karma* (practice) in India – and how to mitigate it – also has broader relevance to open universities around the world. We particularly note the following:

- *Distortion of the goals of open and distance learning.*
  The tendency to chase the surpluses that distance education at scale readily generates can easily compromise the social goals of these systems. This is true in both the public and private sectors. Although dual-mode universities that teach both on campus and at a distance are particularly prone to use the surpluses issuing from their distance programmes to subsidise campus operations, open universities are not immune from the temptation to invest these 'profits' in activities with dubious direct benefit to their students.
  Prasad comments: "This amounts to gross violation of academic norms. The money making orientations in most of the cases result in compromise with quality. It is distressing to observe the attitude of some dual-mode universities which accept ODL students, but exhibit no sense of ownership or pride in them. Their usefulness is measured in terms of surplus generation. It is sickening to listen to some vice-chancellors boasting of their achievements in terms of surpluses generated through distance mode." He adds: "publicly identified for-profit institutions are preferable to the hypocrisy of publicly-funded institutions making money through ODL and using it for other purposes."

- *External constraints on the dharma of distance education.*
  The unethical practices mentioned above partly explain why some regulators have restrictive approaches to distance education programmes. In some jurisdictions, only programmes that are already in the curricula of conventional universities can be offered at distance. Such policies are misguided because they do not take into account the different target groups for distance programmes and the particular social needs to which they seek to respond. Open education is too often constrained by the rigidities of the conventional system, which defeats its purpose. Prasad calls distance education in India "an ineffectively over-regulated system".

- *Slow adoption of interactive technologies.*
  Interaction is the essence of education, but Prasad argues that the expansion of its use in developing countries like India is constrained by the attitudes of ODL institutions themselves as much as by delays in the roll-out of the technology needed to support interactive software.

- *Lack of professionalism in management and leadership.*
  Large open universities have as much in common with industrial enterprises as they do with campus universities. Too often this difference is not reflected in the leadership and management of these systems, which fail to meet the simple expectations of students: to receive their learning materials on time, to be able to call on professional student support and to have examinations conducted as scheduled.

- *The role of teachers in ODL.*
  Ambiguity in the definitions of the roles of teachers is a challenge for most open universities. Teachers' roles are equally important in distance learning and conventional systems, and may be more complex and difficult in distance education because of the use of multiple technologies for teaching and learning. We return to this issue in a later section but a final comment from Prasad is apposite: "there is a constant debate in ODL circles about the roles, responsibilities and relationships (of teachers) with others in the system. Teacher identity is not satisfactorily addressed in ODL systems. The relationships between the multiple players engaged in teaching and learning in ODL are constant sources of irritation. There is a feeling that teachers in ODL are engaged more in management activities than in academic activities. This may not be a satisfying situation for serious academics. The strengthening of ODL system management may relieve teachers from some of the administrative responsibilities and enable them to make meaningful academic contributions."

We make two observations on Prasad's analysis of the disconnect between *dharma* (principle) and *karma* (practice) in ODL in India. First, this disconnect is not peculiar to India, although the sheer size of India's ODL sector throws up more examples of it. Second, it is ironic that some open universities appear to be struggling at a time when the wider higher education systems that surround them are beginning to copy their missions (*dharma)*. This is a new phenomenon. Until recently conventional universities did not espouse the democratisation of higher education and social justice as their goals – save in occasional rhetorical flourishes in the convocation speeches of their vice-chancellors!

While it is encouraging to see the wider higher education sector espousing inclusiveness, most of its institutions are far less prepared than open universities, both philosophically and practically, to follow this orientation. What should open universities do to recover their pre-eminence in implementing this contemporary agenda, as expressed, for example, in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2018)?

Four keys to success for open university futures

Our summary of Prasad's analysis of the disconnect between the *dharma* and *karma* in ODL suggests that open universities need to focus on four areas if they are to consolidate and retain their leadership. It is not a coincidence that these four areas relate closely to the four elements of mission that Lord Geoffrey Crowther, founding chancellor of the UK Open University (UKOU), articulated at its inauguration in 1969. He said that the vision of the institution was to be 'open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and open as to ideas (Crowther, (1969).

Open to People: democratisation, social justice, development

During the most intense period for the creation of open universities in the 1970s and 1980s policy makers across the world sought to increase access to higher education from a low base. Using open and distance learning for this purpose was an attractive option. But fashions change. Even though the number of students in university education globally has climbed steadily since those times – and rapid growth promises to continue – new approaches to higher learning have become less newsworthy.

One might say that the empire has struck back! A few hundred research universities, representing much less than 10% of the global student body, receive a totally disproportionate level of press coverage. They do this through the ruse of encouraging the publication of a variety of rankings or 'league tables' and try to create news from them when an institution climbs from 437th to 429th place!

Open universities – and all universities that are truly committed to democratisation, social justice and national development – must fight back. The United Nations has given them a good weapon. The UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 limited their scope to basic education, but the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also target higher education: "by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education" (United Nations, 2018).

Commitment to the achievement of the SDGs must be more than rhetorical. By 2015, the target date for the MDGs, great progress had been made in getting children through primary school, but much less in enabling them to complete a secondary education. This means that there will be millions of young and not-so-young people legitimately seeking higher education, but without a solid basis of secondary schooling. They have the capacity to succeed, but only with good counselling, tutoring and mentoring, to which universities serving this huge clientele must give priority. Today the watchword must be 'access to success' not merely 'access to study'.

Open to Places: extending reach through interactive technology

Open universities have often done a good job in implementing modern information technology to improve their administrative processes, notably the management of admissions. Most students can now apply and register online. In large parts of the world, however, they have far fewer opportunities to study their learning materials and submit their assignments online. This is partly because reliable and inexpensive online technology, although spreading fast, has not yet reached many communities. It is also partly because most open universities are large teaching and learning systems, so switching over from paper-based teaching to online learning is not a trivial administrative and management challenge.

But open universities must grasp this nettle. Many conventional universities are ramping up their online offerings rapidly, challenging open universities to move deliberately, effectively and quickly if they are to retain their leadership in ODL. There are many resources to help them do so, from Bates (2017) magisterial e-book *Teaching in a Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning,* to the excellent series *Online Learning News* from Contact North (2018).

Using online technologies not only enables institutions to reach all parts of their jurisdictions on an equitable basis but also, by speeding up the feedback that is such an essential factor in ODL, to improve student learning and performance across the board.

Open to Methods: organising for online pedagogy

Transforming an open university from paper-based teaching to online learning is less a technological challenge than an organisational one. Each institution will install the particular electronic networks that suit its country's IT and communications infrastructure. All institutions, however, will have similar challenges in training their academic and administrative staff to teach and support students online.

The default mechanism or path of least resistance in facing this challenge will be to revert to the cottage industry teaching methods of conventional universities. Instead, institutions going electronic must carry over into this new world the working methods that yielded economies – and quality – of scale when they taught through printed materials. The revolution that technology can bring to education was captured nearly 50 years ago by Wedemeyer (1974) when he wrote:
"As an operating principle the system is capable, after reaching a critical minimum of aggregation, of accommodating increased numbers of learners without a *commensurate* increase in the cost of the basic learning experiences: i.e. costs must not be directly and rigidly volume sensitive. After reaching the necessary level of aggregation, unit costs should show a diminishing relationship to total system costs."

Open universities will not succeed in contributing to the attainment of the SDGs unless they can reap the economies of scale that allow them to expand student numbers, without loss of quality, and to operate at low costs. The publications of Bates (2107) and Contact North (2018) cited above can be most helpful in this regard.

Open to Ideas: teaching new subjects and teaching old subjects in new ways

These are times of rapid – often disquieting – change. The international systems, such as the United Nations, created after World War II to avoid its repetition are breaking down. The

products of these systems, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) no longer command the respect or even the lip service that they once did. Democracy is in retreat (The Economist, 2018).

A common analysis of the contemporary context holds that the crucial political division is no longer between left and right, but rather between open and closed. Some societies are closing themselves in, the UK's Brexit and the USA's changing visa policies being obvious examples. The international mobility of students, which has been increasing rapidly for years, now risks decreasing as such barriers go up. The expulsion of the Central European University from Hungary (Human Rights Watch, 2018) is a particularly clear example of a country closing itself in.

Although distance teaching can in principle be used for indoctrination as much as for liberal education, most open universities have developed their curricula and courses in a liberal spirit. The natural home for open universities is at the 'open' end of the 'open-closed' spectrum.

If the current trend towards greater restrictions on intellectual freedom continues, open universities will have an important opportunity to open up their curricula in new ways. This could mean everything from new employment-related courses to exploring fresh paradigms for teaching traditional subjects. Lord Walter Perry, the founding vice-chancellor of the UKOU, considered that its most important innovation was the development of courses by teams of academics and specialists. The team course-creation process often nurtures original thinking about the teaching of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary courses, while at the same time preventing the unidimensional thinking that is possible in courses taught by single individuals.

Conclusion

Prasad's identification of the danger of divergence between the *dharma* and the *karma* of open and distance learning has provided a useful way of thinking about the future of open universities. We have blended Prasad's thinking with the four elements of the founding vision of the UK Open University to suggest ways in which open universities can discharge their missions in a contemporary context that is very different from the world into which they were born.

References

Bates, A. W. (2017). Teaching in a Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning. BC Campus. https://opentextbc.ca/teachinginadigitalage/

Commonwealth of Learning (2018). Strategic Plan 2015-21. Vancouver. https://www.col.org/programmes/our-strategy. Accessed 2018-10-22

Contact North (2018). Online Learning News. https://teachonline.ca/about-us/newsroom/past-newsletters

Crowther, Geoffrey (1969). This is the Open University. https://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/pdf/script/script:5747089b4a53f

Human Rights Watch (2018). Central European University forced to leave Hungary. December 4. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/04/central-european-university-forced-leave-hungary

Keegan, Desmond (1996). *Foundations of Distance Education,* Psychology Press.

Prasad, V.S. (2018). *Higher Education and Open Distance Learning Trajectory in India: Reflections of an Insider.* Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University OER Repository, Hyderabad, India. www.braouvidyagani.in. Accessed 2018-07-02

The Economist (2016). The new political divide. July 30. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/07/30/the-new-political-divide

The Economist (2018). Democracy continues its disturbing retreat. January 31. https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/01/31/democracy-continues-its-disturbing-retreat

United Nations (1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

United Nations (2018). Sustainable Development Goals. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300 Accessed 2018-10-22

Wedemeyer, Charles A. (1974). Characteristics of open learning systems, in *Open Learning Systems.* Washington, DC: National Association of Educational Broadcasters.