

# Open, Flexible Distance Learning: Then, & Now!

## Assessment 1

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### Why were the 1990s a 'boom' decade for the UK Open University?

Theme: Context & Quality.

#### Introduction

Launched by Royal Charter in 1969, the UK Open University (OUUK) celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1994 to national and international acclaim. With an enrolment of 150,000 students, it had become the largest university in the UK, whilst ranked in the top 5% of UK universities for the quality of its teaching. It had inspired the creation of similar institutions in other countries and by 1996 the world counted 11 distance teaching mega-universities, each with over 100,000 active students (Daniel, 1996).

The history of the OUUK in the 20th century divides neatly into three decades, each with a different vice-chancellor: Walter Perry (1969-80); John Horlock (1980-90) and John Daniel (1990-2001). We shall highlight key features of the first two decades before concentrating on the 1990s. In retrospect, the 1990s was the period when the OUUK seems to have enjoyed its greatest reputational and academic success. This assessment explores why the OUUK's impact and influence might have peaked in the 1990s and asks what lessons that period suggests for its future in the 21st century.

#### The OUUK from 1963 to 1990

The early history of the OUUK has been well documented. Walter Perry, the founding vice-chancellor captured its origins and early development in his book *The Open University* (Perry, 1977). OUUK history academic Daniel Weinbren revisited this period and commented on developments since the 1990s in *The Open University: A History* (Weinbren, 2015). Numerous books and publications have examined aspects of OUUK activities, including studies of its impact on students in *OU Women: Undoing Educational Obstacles*, (Lunneborg, 1994) as well as *OU Men: Work through Lifelong Learning* (Lunneborg, 1997) and the reflections of its staff in *Lifting it off the Page: An Oral Portrait of OU people* (Dalglish, 1995).

#### *Getting started: 1963-1980*

The idea of an open university was launched in 1963 in a speech by Harold Wilson, then leader of the UK Labour Party. He proposed creating a 'University of the Air', which would use broadcast radio and TV to offer access to higher education to much larger numbers than could then receive it. The idea received a generally hostile reception in the press and was not taken very seriously even within the Labour Party itself until it won an election with a tiny majority in 1964. In seeking a bigger majority through another election in 1966 its manifesto included the statement: *'We shall establish the University of the Air by using TV and radio and comparable facilities, high grade correspondence courses and new teaching techniques.*

*This open university will obviously extend the best teaching facilities and give everyone the opportunity to study for a full degree'* (Perry, 1977, p. 16).

Although Labour won this election with an increased majority, the UK economy was in a parlous state and it was not until September 1967 that Jennie Lee, the Minister of Arts leading the project, announced the appointment of a planning committee. Meanwhile, the initiative had been renamed *The Open University* to reflect its central purpose rather than the media it would use (Perry, 1977, p. 24).

Perry was appointed vice-chancellor in 1968 and began planning for the first intake of students, scheduled for 1971. Key decisions had to be made. How many students should it admit and what would be the criteria for admission? Politicians and government officials were still sceptical of the project. The Minister of Finance (Chancellor of the Exchequer) Roy Jenkins suggested starting with a pilot project of 5,000-10,000 students, but OUUK made a counterproposal of 25,000. Perry understood that economies of scale were essential for the university's political acceptance and that it would be bad optics if an institution calling itself 'open' could only take a small proportion of those applying. In 1970, following the election of a new Conservative government, the OUUK had to argue again with politicians about the numbers, but by then it had already received 43,000 applications and a first cohort of 25,000 was approved (Perry, 1977, p. 139).

There would be no academic requirements for admission and applicants were accepted based on 'first-come-first-served', with some moderation to ensure there were students in all regions of the UK. A third of the students in the first cohort were schoolteachers, which brought several benefits: they were assiduous students; their earlier diplomas gave them advance credits; and because of this, some graduated quickly. When the OUUK held its first degree ceremony in 1973 there were already 900 graduates. This event gave an extra fillip to the university's publicity and ensured that applications continued at a high level. By 1980 the OUUK had an enrolment of 90,000.

### *Ill winds: 1980-1990*

In creating the OUUK the Labour government had arranged for it to be funded directly by its Department of Education and Science (DES), rather than by the University Grants Commission (UGC), which funded the other UK universities and acted as a 'buffer body' between them and government. The government feared that these other institutions would use their influence on the UGC to strangle the OUUK at birth as an unwelcome competitor.

This direct link to government, however, became a liability when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of a Conservative government in 1979 and remained in power until 1990. Her government squeezed funding to all UK universities, but Keith Joseph, her education minister, took a special interest in the OUUK, claiming to detect Marxist bias in its course texts, which he was rumoured to read in bed.

Although feeling somewhat under siege politically, the university continued to develop steadily. Student numbers reached 100,000, it added the new disciplines of Business and Health/Social Services and celebrated the OUUK's 100,000th graduate in 1990.

## **The OUUK in the 1990s**

### *The 1992 Higher Education Reforms*

Thatcher resigned in 1990 and the successor government under PM John Major took a more constructive interest in universities. A review of the OUUK was instituted, ostensibly to advise on whether it should enrol more students. This turned out to be a feint, for the review's real purpose was to advise government on positioning the OUUK, now the UK's largest university, in the major restructuring of higher education planned for 1992. Its major reforms were to end the 'binary divide' between universities and polytechnics and to decentralise the administration of higher education (HE) to the UK's home countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (UK Government, 1992). Remaining outside this new structure was clearly not an option, so the OUUK engaged deeply in the discussions shaping the reforms.

Concerning the binary system, the OUUK was unique in having a foot on either side of the divide. Created under a Royal Charter, it was grouped with the 'old' universities and was a member of their Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, yet because of its size and focus on part-time students it had much in common with the Polytechnic sector. This meant that it held discussions with the funding councils for both the old universities and the polytechnics and even played an informal role in mediating conflicts about the new names being proposed for former polytechnics located in cities with existing universities, (e.g. Sheffield).

The OUUK taught students in all parts of the UK, so the decentralisation of HE administration to the home countries posed a special challenge. The immediate solution was to declare that the OUUK would be eligible to receive funds from each country's HE bodies (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), but the English funding council would support it until the new system was operational.

These discussions also provided a forum for the OUUK to argue successfully for two important provisions in the new arrangements: a common funding formula for all institutions; and common quality assessment processes. The resulting provisions were in place for most of the rest of the decade and provided stable and helpful frameworks for the OUUK's operations. Until 1992, its annual funding had been a DES grant set by the minister and administered under the restrictions of 'treasury annuality', which allowed only very small annual deficits or surpluses (£100,000). The new funding formula steered more funds to institutions that could teach more students at lower costs and removed the annuality restrictions, which enabled the OUUK to build up financial reserves for the first time. The introduction of an assessment system for the quality of teaching in each discipline saw the OUUK rise to 5th place, one above Oxford, in national rankings.

The new legislation also gave the OUUK a greater role within the overall HE system. Prior to 1992 the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) had been the degree-awarding body for the polytechnics. Believing its elimination was necessary for the polytechnics' new status as degree-awarding universities to be credible, the government shut down the CNAA. However, this left some fifty other institutions (colleges, etc.) that had awarded degrees

through the CNAA but were not given their own degree-awarding status in the reforms. Most were not eager to fall into the arms of any of their local degree-awarding HE institutions.

The solution was for the OUUK, which after decentralisation was effectively the UK's only national university, to take over this CNAA function by creating OU Validation Services for these institutions. For the rest of the decade, it operated this function much as the CNAA had done, by drawing academic assessors from the whole national pool rather than from the OUUK alone. A Validation Board was established with eminent members from all over the country and became an important discussion forum for UK HE generally.

The 1992 HE reforms changed the OUUK in several important ways. First, it provided a predictable and favourable funding regime, which allowed for rational planning and the accumulation of financial reserves. Second, it placed the OUUK firmly within the governing frameworks of HE in each of the UK's home countries. Third, it legitimised research activity at the OUUK, which could now bid competitively for research funds in a transparent manner and be part of national research assessment exercises.

#### *Taking advantage of the reforms*

The OUUK moved determinedly to take advantage of the favourable environment that the 1992 HE Reform Act had created. Pro-Vice-Chancellor Geoff Peters created and managed a planning process that earned plaudits from the English funding council, both for its transparency and for bringing together both bottom-up and top-down approaches. The funding formula encouraged growth, with the result that OUUK student numbers increased from 100,000 in 1989 to 185,000 in 1999.

Academic developments were guided by the OUUK Senate. Its membership of 995 (in 1990) included a substantial number of students and part-time tutors alongside all permanent academic staff. It met in-person three times a year, chaired by the vice-chancellor. Outsiders ridiculed its size, but during the 1990s it served the university well. Reaching decisions might take longer, but the wide buy-in from the community speeded their implementation. Because of the geographic distribution of OUUK staff and students, meetings rarely attracted more than 300 members, with students and part-time tutors being the most assiduous participants. Helped by the benign funding environment, meetings were rarely contentious. Motions from the student body usually passed, as did proposals to align the OUUK with government initiatives, such as supporting its introduction of Foundation Courses, taking over the function of the CNAA, and becoming an awarding body for national vocational qualifications.

#### *Knowledge Media*

Meanwhile, the components of the OUUK's multi-media distance learning system were evolving as it remained a leader in the use of educational technology in HE. Alongside the work of its Institute for Educational Technology where, for example, Tony Bates (1995) had pioneered research on the student use of media, the Human Cognition Research Lab (HCRL) and the Multi-Media Enabling Technologies Group (METG) were also doing ground-breaking work. The HCRL's Marc Eisenstadt (1995) coined the term '*Knowledge Media*' for the convergence of computing, telecommunications and the learning sciences. He and others

argued that the knowledge media would radically change the relationship between people and knowledge.

If true, this convergence was clearly very important for the OUUK's future, which depended on maintaining a top academic reputation whilst leading in the application of technology in HE. To reinforce the university's position the vice-chancellor presented a paper to Council and Senate early in 1995. Entitled *'INSTILL: Integrate New Systems and Technologies into Lifelong Learning'*, it proposed allocating £10 million from reserves to various projects that would advance the use of the knowledge media across the university. One initiative was the creation of a Knowledge Media Institute (KMi), based on the merger of HRCL and METG and the addition of other interested researchers.

Meanwhile the OUUK was encouraging its students to use computers in their studies, either in local study centres or by acquiring computers at home. At first the student association resisted, arguing that unless everyone could have such equipment, no-one should be required to use it. However, this resistance wilted after the university provided computers to the members of the student executive and they discovered how useful they were - not least for goading the university into addressing issues that students flagged to them!

As a result, number of OUUK students working online grew steadily: from 5,000 in 1995 and 17,000 in 1996 to over 100,000 by the year 2000. During that period KMi quickly emerged as a leading centre for research on the use of the internet in education, attracting very substantial funds from the European Union in subsequent years.

During the 1990s the OUUK also expanded its activities overseas, although it proved very difficult to plan these in a systematic way. By 2000 there were 30,000 students outside the UK, including 10,000 in Russia and Central/Eastern Europe studying OU Business courses translated into their own languages. The university was holding examinations in 111 centres and had formal collaborations in 23 countries.

Notable among these collaborations was the US Open University (USOU), which was the first new not-for-profit university created in America in the 21st century. However, the OUUK closed the USOU in 2002 because it could not see a path to its viability (Meyer, 2006). The explanation given by Meyer also helps to explain why the OUUK had difficulty sustaining, into the 21st century, the success within the UK that it had enjoyed in the 1990s: *'The OUUK spent USD27-28 million on the USOU while experiencing a downturn of its own. The worldwide economy was slowing, competition was increasing from other providers of distance education in the UK, and funding had been cut by the British government. These factors increased financial pressure on the USOU, which was considered an experiment that had yet to meet its potential as a revenue generator'* (Meyer, 2006).

### **The OUUK in the 21st century**

This assessment focuses on the OUUK in the 1990s, so the period since 2000 is beyond its purview. However, to answer our title question: 'Why were the 1990s a 'boom' decade for the UK Open University?', we make a general observation.

In retrospect, the main contrast between the 1990s and the period 2001-25 was the stability enjoyed by both the OUUK and the UK government in the last decade of the 20th century, compared to instability experienced by both in the 21st century.

The UK had only two PMs in the 1990s, Major and Blair, who both had stable and consistent policies for HE. The OUUK's vice-chancellor was in office for the whole decade.

Since 2000, the UK has had eight PMs (Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Johnson, Truss, Sunak and Starmer) and their governments' erratic HE policies have reflected this churn. In this period the OUUK has had five substantive VCs and two interim VCs: Gourley (2002-09), Bean (2009-15), Horrocks (2015-18), Kellett (interim 2018-19), Blackman (2019-24), Fraser (interim 2024-25) and Phoenix (2025-). Whereas the OUUK's first three VCs each served for at least a decade, the average tenure of its VCs in this century is less than four years, if interim appointments are included.

A decade of stable university leadership and predictable government policies created a more favourable context for the development of the OUUK than the brisk turnover of governance and management that it has experienced in this century.

Sadly, HE worldwide is now undergoing a similar experience of operating in a world where the post WWII international framework of agreements and institutions is coming unstuck. This era will be particularly difficult for mega-universities, given their size and interdependence on other actors in their jurisdictions.

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