The Open University, United Kingdom

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The British Open University has been a leader in non-traditional higher education for years and has influenced the development of distance learning programs in many countries including America. The origins of the open university movement generally and the British Open University specifically can be traced to the University of London. The University of London began conducting examinations and the offering of degrees to external students in 1836. This paved the way for the growth of private correspondence colleges that prepared students for the University of London's examinations and enabled them to study independently for a degree without enrolling in the university. Described in an internal history document as the "world's first successful distance teaching university" (British Open University, 2004, p. 1), its origin can be traced to a university of the air proposal that gained support in the early 1960s. By the 1970s the university was up and running, planning on 25,000 students per year. At the end of the 1970s, the British Open University had over 70,000 students, and currently has more than 180,000 students. The stated purpose of the university was to break the so-called link between excellence and exclusivity.

The extension movement emerged in the 1870s, and by 1884 its leaders were pressing for a part-time nonresident institution operating with academic credits in England (Rumble & Harry, 1982). The influence of this older institution was seen internationally, particularly in New Zealand and South Africa. The University of South Africa in 1946 began offering correspondence courses, and in 1951 was reconstituted to provide degree courses for external students only. Since then, numerous open universities have developed around the world with very large student bases.

More recently, what has become known as the open university movement has been a leading force in the spread of distance education worldwide. The foundation of the international open university movement in the 1970s stemmed from a concern for greater access to higher education. The overall political motivation to develop such institutions has been a general populist desire to provide broad access to higher education.

Certainly this motivation of the open university movement to provide access fits well in American higher education, particularly for public institutions.

As one of the most successful nontraditional institutions with a research component, the British Open University has become a major contributor to both administrative and pedagogical literature in the field. Eisenstadt and Vincent (2000) claim that the success of the Open University is based on high-quality content, student support, effective logistics, and a strong research base. Their method of teaching relies heavily on prepared materials and a tutor system. The printed text has been the principal teaching medium in most Open University courses, although this is changing somewhat with the increased use of the Internet and computer. Each student at the university studies at home using teaching materials delivered primarily by mail using a variety of media. For each course, the student is assigned a local tutor who normally makes contact by telephone, mail, and e-mail to help with queries related to the academic materials. Students may also attend local face-to-face tutorials run by their tutors, and they may choose to form self-help groups with other students.

According to Petre, Carswell, Price, and Thomas (2000), the mainstays of the teaching at the British Open University are the tutor-marked assignment (TMA) and the discussion sessions. Tutor notes, including a marking scheme, are provided to the tutor in order to ensure assessment quality. Marked assignments are monitored regularly for consistency and quality. Discussion sessions known as tutorials are crucial in establishing student networks and self-help groups. Tutorials provide alternative perspectives and explanations, structure, and incentives, and facilitate learning from other students' questions as well as bringing overall social contact with other students. Additionally, asynchronous group work online is set up by subscription or by problem choice by the students.

What is known at the British Open University as open and distance learning (ODL) is said to be different from correspondence instruction by the use of

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multiple media and the use of small-group and individual student support (Mills, 1999). The emphasis on tutor and individual student interaction is meant to compensate for the lack of face-to-face lectures at the British Open University. The tutorial system of Oxford and Cambridge is combined with ODL so that individual students receive detailed written reactions to their work. This has been a key element of the Open University pedagogical approach.

The British Open University has emphasized the problem-based learning format that is intended to challenge learners to discover what they know and apply that knowledge to finding methods of solving problems. Additionally, the problem-based learning format attempts to give students increasingly difficult problems supported by helpful hints and Socratic-style interaction (Chambers, 1999). The phrases flexible learning and flexible delivery used by the British Open University reflect an intention to increase learners' access and control over particular teaching and learning environments (Kirkpatrick & Jakupec, 1999). This flexibility often requires more sophisticated activities and technologies, as well as student services such as technical backup and support structures.

In addition to the tutorial model, the British Open University focuses on media-rich experiences that involved video in the early days, and now simulation models and graphically sophisticated animations (Eisenstadt & Vincent, 2000). This media-rich approach derives from what Eisenstadt and Vincent claim is a constructivist approach at the British Open University, what they describe as a belief in the importance of learners creating their own content. This kind of customization attempt while reaching very large audiences is what is different in this so-called mega-university. Eisenstadt and Vincent do not believe in delivering courses entirely on the Web, a view that is at least partly reflective of the general British Open University attitude toward online courses. Furthermore, rather than dismissing traditional media such as television, they appreciate the use of traditional media in educational environments. The British Open University prefers to describe its method as supported open learning rather than distance learning to emphasize the tutorial and support structure for individualized learning.

In a speech, John Daniel (2000), the head of the British Open University, argued that distance education represents two traditions: individual learning and group teaching. He sees the advantage of distance

learning in the ability to offer individual learning opportunities, which is what the British Open University does. Conversely, videoconferencing misses out on an opportunity to offer individual learning by requiring students to meet in groups with an instructor. Daniel believes that group teaching in videoconferencing environments leads to the loss of opportunity to address the needs of access, cost, and flexibility. Daniel argues that this emphasis on group classroom learning in America in particular is a result of valuing teaching over learning. With videoconferencing, the interactive value goes sharply down as student numbers go up. Conversely, this is not the case in individual learning environments where additional students do not affect the number or quality of individual interactions, according to Daniel. Consequently, Daniel claims quite provocatively that the "holy grail" of education has been found in distance education because we now have a delivery system where more students create better, not worse, educational experiences.

Certainly, the British Open University has not operated in isolation in developing these approaches to nontraditional education. Nevertheless, the British Open University in both boldness of approach and high goals stands out internationally.

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