

**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION FOR
OPEN LEARNING**

*Collaboration and partnership in
strengthening institutional research*

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SEPTEMBER 1999

**AAOU99 Pre-conference Workshop at OUHK
Institutional Research in Open and Distance Learning
September 1999**

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A generation back, when Britain still saw its economy as heavily dependent on manufacturing, it spent more on research about glue than research about education. Current figures are difficult to find - and glue is less important to us - but research is still education's poor relation. Education is something you do, not a serious subject bristling with interesting problems that you research, like molecular biology or even the theoretical basis of financial derivatives. And open and distance learning, a style of learning and teaching that remains at the margins, attracting only between 5 and 15 per cent of students in higher education in many jurisdictions, has itself a quite narrow research tradition and literature. At the same time, as a growing area of education, attracting significant absolute numbers of students and making claims to governments of its legitimacy and for funding, it merits research. Perhaps it does so especially because of its difference from conventional institutions. Ordinary schools and colleges can manage without research, without much understanding of their internal processes. At the worst, if you are a classroom teacher, you can teach as you learned, copying the blackboard techniques, the rewards and punishments, even the textbooks, of your own teachers. Because of its difference, its unfamiliarity, those of us working in distance education may need more guidance from research than is the case in conventional education.

The International Research Foundation for Open Learning was set up to provide a mechanism for expanding and strengthening research. Our long-term aim is to raise the quality of open and distance learning through the conduct, dissemination and application of good research. The idea for the Foundation came from Michael Young, the English sociologist who gave the world the term 'meritocracy' and wrote the original plea for an open university (Young 1962). In a speech to celebrate the British Open University's 25th anniversary he argued that there was a reverse side to the positive achievements and prospects of the university:

A well-deserved assurance can easily become a rather smug over-assurance. The shared achievement, the solidarity, the team-spirit of the staff, can become self-congratulatory and inward looking... Nothing fails like success if it makes anyone think that any right formula has been, or ever will be found for open learning. The danger could be especially great if the OU thinks of itself as being part of the mainstream instead of being a different and essentially innovatory body. The OU

has always sought to be open as to ideas. Is it?... I will answer my own question by saying that, whatever view one adopts about it, at least it is surely worthwhile taking great trouble to ensure that this great institution does not follow the way of so many others and fossilise, go dead from within, get stifled by its own bureaucracy and ingrained habits of mind; to ensure that minds remain open; and to ensure that no possibilities are ever closed off just because they do not fit well with any of the conventional notions of what the OU is about. There are many ways of marrying counter-institution to institution, and I am only going to talk about one of them. The main point I want to make in the lecture is that if the next 25 years are to be as brilliant as the previous 25, or more so, research and reflection on open learning will need to be encouraged in a large way. I don't mean research in the academic disciplines represented in the Open University, but about open learning as a means of education. It is not just a question of being self-critical but of allowing a revolving core of people to have time to think, study and experiment in new practices. Discourse, dialogue, discussion, research are essential to all academic progress but with open learning a very special effort needs to be made to foster research into open learning itself.

My proposal is that a Research Foundation for Open Learning - a look-out tower for open learning - should be set up for the systematic study of crucial issues by scholars given time off on secondment and drawn within the OU central staff, the regional staff, other Open Universities and open learning institutions in other countries, like Deakin and Southern Queensland in Australia, Athabasca and Laurentian in Canada, UNISA in South Africa and Indira Gandhi in India, and also drawn from people who are quite outside open learning.

What IRFOL is and does

The International Research Foundation for Open Learning was set up as a response to that argument. We had initial funding from the Leverhulme Trust, and have been trying since 1995 to carry out the two jobs identified by Michael Young: to carry out research on open and distance learning and to cast a critical, reflective, eye on what is going on in the hope that open and distance learning will remain open to new ideas, methods and approaches. We are working as part of the Institute of Community Studies, a nonprofit social research agency with charitable status, and get guidance on our policy from an international steering group which meets quarterly by teleconference. The Commonwealth of Learning has provided us with some general support but for the most part we are funded by the research projects we undertake. We have no base budget.

Our first activity was to look at the existing research on open and distance learning where, in many parts of the world, we found that research had suffered because:

while most open and distance learning institutions are too busy running programmes to have time for research, many faculties of education are too busy researching conventional education (as well as doing their basic job of training educators) to be able to undertake research on open and distance learning. Those who are doing research tend to be isolated, may be struggling to fit their research

into the corners of a busy life, and often have limited research experience. All these factors threaten the quality of what they are doing:

(Perraton 1997: 13)

We went on to note that much - not of course all - existing research comes from quite narrow traditions. The literature is dominated by descriptive rather than analytical studies, and concentrates on open and distance learning at tertiary level in industrialised countries. We are therefore 'short of research to guide policy examining, without special pleading, what can be established about the strengths and weaknesses of open and distance learning and its likely outcomes.' (*ibid*: 18). A recent and thorough American review, done by researchers from outside the distance-education community and (for that reason perhaps?) criticised within it reached very similar conclusions:

It is important to emphasize that, despite the large volume of written material concentrating on distance education, **there is a relative paucity of true, original research dedicated to explaining or predicting phenomena related to distance education.** ... The most significant problem is that **the overall quality of the original research is questionable and thereby renders many of the findings inconclusive.**

(Phipps and Merisotis 1999: 2-3; emphasis in original)

Following our review of research, we set out on a series of individual research activities. All of these were designed to guide policy towards open and distance learning and they consisted mainly of reviews of experience of institutions working in the field. We have concentrated mainly on three areas of education: basic education, higher education and teacher education which is linked to the other two areas both as an input to basic education and because many universities are involved in teacher education in one way or another.

We have two main projects on basic education under way at present. First, with funding from CfBT, my colleague Dr Palitha Edirisingha is looking at the working methods and outcomes of a group of institutions raising the quality of basic education and widening access to it. We have, for example, visited the National Open School of India, the Department for Non-Formal Education in Thailand, and the OLSET Radio Education project in South Africa. We are at present also carrying out a review for the international agencies who are looking at the world's progress towards education for all and the Dakar conference next year, ten years after the Jomtien conference. We are trying to answer the question 'how far can communication technologies raise the quality of basic education and extend it to the many millions who are at present outside school?'

In teacher education we have carried out reviews of experience as an input to the Asian Development Bank meeting in Thailand three years ago and looked at similar issues for the World Bank meeting on global knowledge in 1997. With a group at the World Bank I have since been exploring ways in which distance education may support teacher training and other areas of education within Africa.

On our higher education agenda we have looked at two issues that are of major concern to dual-mode institutions but also of some interest to open universities around the world: ways of training and rewarding writers of course material. The British Department for International Development funded the work and will shortly publish the report. (Perraton, H., Creed, C. (1999) *Distance Education Practice: Training and Rewarding Authors*, Department for International Development, London.) Within England, where plans for expanding tertiary education may demand new patterns of cooperation between institutions, we have carried out a review of structures for open and distance learning and for collaboration between institutions. And, reflecting a continuing concern with the economics of open and distance learning and with its outcomes, we have done a study for the European Commission of the cost-effectiveness of open and distance learning within European institutions of secondary and tertiary education.

All this has been planned as comparative research, in which our detachment, as a research agency with no students and no axes to grind, has been an advantage. It has also enabled us to undertake work for the Commonwealth of Learning as managing editor of their Annual Review of Distance Education and Open Learning. The first volume Harry, K (ed) (1999) *Higher education through open and distance learning* Routledge, London is published; the second volume, on basic education, will follow next year. We are planning a third volume now. My own book, *Open and distance learning in the developing world* (Perraton, in press) benefits from our comparative research.

Institutional and international research

There is often said to be a tension between internal and external research and evaluation. The external researcher tends to be too remote to understand the problem and the internal researcher too close to it to be detached. If we are to fulfil our mandate of interacting with those running open and distance learning, and providing the critical view that will stop them becoming ossified and bureaucratic, then we need to balance this detachment with an involvement with real problems and people who are grappling with them. This has led us to develop plans for an international programme of research that will involve us with open universities in activities that are both institutional and international, both local and informed, by a process of international cooperation. The aim is to have a group of people, working on institutional research projects, at a number of different universities, in a way that feeds into an international programme. We have had initial discussions and contacts with the Indira Gandhi National Open University and the Open University of Hong Kong here, and other institutions in Africa, and want, over the next two months, to move ahead with a cooperative programme of research. We are now actively seeking other partners who can work with us in the design and execution of this programme.

It rests on five principles.

Five working principles

First the programme of research is designed to produce results that will be useful and applicable within the institutions concerned. Thus, our starting point is that it will address issues concerning ways of raising the quality and increasing the effectiveness of open and distance learning. Its purpose is to do that within each participating institution but, through an exchange of experience and findings, to inform the international community generally about what works and what does not work.

Second it rests on agreement between partners. The agenda for the research, and individual research proposals, arise from the institutions and are not imposed by ourselves or any other external agency.

Third, we are assuming that each institution will be able to meet the costs of its own research activities with only the costs for coordination, exchange and possibly dissemination being met from outside. Thus we hope that the programme will be more sustainable than attempts at inter-institutional cooperation that are essentially dependent on external funding.

Fourth, the programme will include elements of training which in some cases may play a predominant role in the design and execution of a particular research project. Many dual-mode institutions, for example, have numbers of middle-level staff, who would like and ought to be involved in research on open and distance learning but lack the necessary skills to do so. Within the programme we plan to develop training materials and support that can be used on an international basis.

Fifth, from the outset we will address questions of dissemination and seek the simplest and most effective means of exchanging information between participants. At present, through the traditional mechanisms of publication through refereed journals, and through the newer use of the internet, it is not too difficult to publicise research findings. We will use those mechanisms. But we want also to develop a system of exchange whereby researchers can learn about work parallel to their own at the gestation and planning stage. Our ideal will be to develop mechanisms in which an individual researcher, within a particular institution, will be a member both of the local community of that institution and of a wider community of researchers addressing similar issues in other institutions. New communication technologies are on our side here; the speed at which they are changing means that we would not wish to over-specify the details of plans for dissemination and exchange of information.

The research programme is still at the planning stage and inputs, from this seminar are of particular value to us. The following is therefore a sketch of the number of ways in which we might move ahead, based mainly upon discussions held at Indira Gandhi National Open University in the second week of September.

Framework and research issues

Our starting point there was that open universities, especially in Asia, are now a well-established and legitimate part of the education service. (Asia is ahead of the rest of the world: Africa has the long established University of South Africa and two new open universities, only recently getting under way, in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. There are open universities in Latin America, but on a much smaller scale than those in Asia, and probably with a more modest record of success. Results from the work that is generated in Asia will be of wide international significance.) The discussions at IGNOU enabled us to propose a framework for research, to identify one set of issues that are peculiarly international, and to propose a number of topics that relate to IGNOU's major concerns, that may well be reflected in other open universities.

The framework is provided both by the new legitimacy of open universities and by the need, that now faces us, to raise the quality and effectiveness of their work. Many of us, within open universities and outside, are concerned to raise the successful completion rate and aware that, if we are to continue to generate funding and political support, we need to look both at outcome measures and at strengthening our outcome record. A major task for the research programme, therefore, is to seek to identify ways of strengthening student support, designing teaching materials, and applying technology to education, in order to strengthen what we are doing.

There are two prerequisites for this. The first is to fill out our understanding of the effectiveness of existing methods. This is to echo a comment made by Ian Mugridge in his report on a seminar that followed the AAOU conference, here in Hong Kong, six years ago: 'if open universities are to advocate a different funding structure or to bid for more funds, they will also need to make their case by producing fuller data than have usually been available on completion rates and cost per graduate.' (Mugridge 1994:121). The other prerequisite is firmly in the domain of comparative research: we propose to carry out a meta-study of what is already known about the contribution of student support, materials design, and technology choice to outcomes. We are, therefore, looking for partners in Asia to work with us on the Asian literature in this area.

Having established a framework for research, it is possible to distinguish issues that lie at opposite ends of the local and international continuum. At the international end, there are concerns about globalisation: do virtual universities offer an opening up of the world's intellectual resources or unfair competition between the north and the south? How can we protect the learner in the imperfect market in which global, cross-frontier, enrolment will operate? How, if at all, should student support be provided in a global learning system? What kind of alliances, on what sort of terms, will reward rather than punish institutions and learners in the south? These topics are creeping on to the agenda of rich country universities. The British Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, for example, is at present carrying out a review of virtual universities; major financial concerns are looking to an expansion of private sector activities. While these issues did not feature strongly in most of the discussions I had at IGNOU, they are of major

potential significance to policymakers and lend themselves to an approach that is both local and international.

Perhaps, despite the publicity about virtual and global enrolment, these are tomorrow's issues rather than today's. Among today's issues four came up repeatedly in discussion at IGNOU. These are on top of the general concern about variables that are likely to effect the quality and effectiveness of programmes touched on above.

Two of those issues concern the use of open and distance learning for particular audiences. Whereas we have well-developed systems, applied with a measure of similarity and success across the continents, for degree and diploma programmes, we are less assured and perhaps have less experience in methods appropriate for extension and non-formal education. We need to find appropriate ways of reaching audiences seeking basic, secondary and non-formal education where open universities have a responsibility in this area. Similarly, there are demands for research on appropriate methods of teacher education. While we have good evidence of the effectiveness of teacher education at a distance, we still need to find out more about ways of linking teacher education with regular programmes of support for teachers. We need, too, to look harder at ways of teaching skills, both in order to guide our own practice and to provide a basis for our negotiation with government agencies concerned with the employment of teachers. We need to take account here both of the more conventional approaches to teacher education at a distance and the use of new technologies such as interactive video-technology with which India is already experimenting (Maheshwari and Raina 1998).

The third issue takes us back to outcomes. Internationally we know too little about what happens to the students of open universities after they have graduated (again there is a useful recent study from IGNOU on this - Gaba n.d.) but our practice and international understanding would be guided if we knew more about the benefits that students derive from open learning.

Finally, questions of language are important for distance education in India as in many other countries. We need to consider strategies that are appropriate for learners in a second language and, where facility in an international language is an important product or by-product of education, to ensure that students learning at a distance are not at a disadvantage as compared with those learning conventionally.

This identification of a set of targets is not intended as a shopping list, or to narrow or prescribe the area that might be covered in research programmes. It is too, a broad list of topics and as the research programme develops the biggest intellectual challenge will be to refine the research questions being addressed and the methods to be used. The programme will have a compelling strength if we can enable teams of researchers in varied institutions, to address similar issues in different circumstances. Stimulating that kind of activity, and learning from it, is the purpose of our research programme and of this paper.

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