

**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION  
FOR OPEN LEARNING**

*The international research agenda: A call for  
partnership*

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### **THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA: A CALL FOR PARTNERSHIP**

The great Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, told the story of Haroun el Rashid, Caliph in Baghdad, sending an elephant to Charlemagne, ruler of what was to become France and Germany, in the year 800. Before Marco Polo, before extensive travel on the silk roads, even before the medieval wandering scholars, those pioneers of real rather than virtual student mobility, Eurasia was one. Cultural links and exchanges are nothing new. But the new opportunities for communication, among the drivers of globalisation, offer us new ways of international cooperation, as well as competition. In particular - at least from the standpoint of a researcher - they allow us to strengthen collaboration in research. And that research can, in its turn, help us solve some of our shared educational problems. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of those problems, to suggest something about a research agenda to help solve them, and to call for partners to work on them with us.

#### **Who are you?**

The International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL) was set up in 1995, is based in England, and is working in cooperation with partners around the world. Our long-term aim is to raise the quality of open and distance learning through the conduct, dissemination and application of good research. We are a non-government organisation, with charitable status, operating as a project of the Institute of Community Studies. We have close informal links with others working in distance education, including - locally in Cambridge - the Open University (who have provided an office for us), the National Extension College, and the International Extension College, and - internationally - with individual institutions, with a number of the international and funding agencies and, of particular importance, with the Commonwealth of Learning. But we are independent of all of them: our interest is in research, for the benefit of the international community, and not in recruiting students or demonstrating the strength of any one institution or any one approach.

Our starting point was different. Open and distance learning - or distance education - has expanded with dramatic speed in the last thirty years and research has not caught up. In our first year we reviewed existing research around the world and found many gaps in it. We noted 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 drew three conclusions from an examination of the research literature. First, it

is overwhelmingly concerned with details of the practice of open and distance learning and not with policy towards it. Much is descriptive rather than analytical. As a result, we are 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. ...Second the literature is predominantly about higher education and about industrialised rather than developing countries. ...Third, much literature on the comparative effectiveness of open and distance learning methods still suffers from a benefit of the doubt bias, identified by Carnoy and Levin (1975), consistently giving unconventional methods the benefit of the doubt in any equivocal findings.

(*ibid*: 18-19)

A recent American review 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)

Our aim is to fill in some of those gaps in the research, and seek to raise the quality of what is being done..

We have worked in both industrialised and developing countries and, since 1995 have:

Undertaken a feasibility study, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, on research needs in open and distance learning.

Carried out a two-year research project on cost effectiveness of open and distance learning within the European Union Socrates programme.

Worked on teacher education for the Commonwealth of Learning, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank.

Completed the first year of a two-year project on the use of distance education to support basic education, funded by CfBT educational services, a British educational charity.

Reviewed international practice on the training and rewarding of course writers in distance education, on behalf of the British Department for International Development(DFID).

Been commissioned by DFID in association with UNESCO to carry out a thematic study on the uses of new technologies to support basic education as part of the Education for All 2000 Assessment.

As managing editor, launched the first volume in the Commonwealth of Learning's annual *Review of distance education and open learning* and started work on the succeeding two volumes.

Reported on management structures for tertiary level open and distance learning for the Open Learning Foundation and the English government Department for Education and Employment.

### **What is the global research agenda?**

Of course it is huge, and there are different priorities in different parts of the world. And others will see the agenda differently. Our own programme of work concentrates on four areas. First is basic education where, through a group of projects, we are asking how far distance education can raise the quality of, and widen access to, basic education. While not the major focus of a university conference, the significance of the area is obvious. (Within the term basic education we would also include much nonformal education; there are vital research questions, for example, about the most effective strategies of public education in health and agriculture.) Next comes higher education, on which the latter part of this paper concentrates. Then, we have a continuing interest in teacher education, both for its role in supporting basic education and because it is a responsibility of many institutions of higher education. And, fourth, we are interested in the technologies, seeking the information that will enable educators to make sound decisions about the use of technology: the wrong decisions can be costly.

It is worth distinguishing here between two kinds of interests in research - the institutional and the international. The answers to any immediate and particular research question - what is the most appropriate choice of teaching media for a given course and audience, familiar to the institution - are best found locally, at or near the institution. But many of these questions can be illuminated by international experience, and, symbiotically, local answers can feed into a useful global synthesis. There are, too, questions to which answers demand international exploration: how, for example, should we monitor or regulate cross-border enrolment? The need to think and act globally, as well as locally, is one of the justifications for our existence and our programme of work. And the pattern of collaboration, which we are trying to develop, rests on this justification. It explains why we are seeking to work with Asian open universities in the next phase of our work.

### **The Asian Open Universities**

It may be presumptuous for an outsider at your conference to seek to analyse your experience, especially as Asia has led the way in developing the idea and the practice of the open university. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of Asia's lead is not the numbers enrolled in open universities but an institutional statistic: there are open universities in five of the world's nine high population countries - the five that are in

Asia - and not in the other four. Latin America does not have institutions operating on the same kind of scale. Nor does Africa with the partial exception of the University of South Africa. When Tanzania was establishing its own open university, its planning team came to Asia to see what you were doing.

There is a significant distinction between the north and the south in the functions of open universities. Wei Runfang (1997) noted this in his comparison between the CRTVU in China and the British Open University. In Europe, North America, and to a lesser extent Australia, distance education has been used to extend education to audiences on the edge of the academic world. In Asia it is much more in the mainstream with distance education given a significant role in national policies of human resource development. The Government of India Planning Commission, for example, argued in 1992 that 'enrolment in the open university/distance education system is expected to increase from about 11.5 per cent of the total enrolment in higher education to about 16.5 per cent'; the five-year plan assumed that distance education would take up half of the planned expansion of higher education (Planning Commission 1992, vol I: 11, vol II: 294-5) While the expansion of tertiary-level distance education is a response to demand, and to policies of widening access, the economic argument for expanding tertiary education has been a major force in driving the expansion of open universities. Many of the open universities established between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, had explicit economic and developmental ends. China, India and Sri Lanka provide examples, and:

in Turkey, as the open university got under way, the largest single group of students were doing degrees in economics and business, presumably seen as contributing to economic development. The Payame Noor Open University in Iran seeks first to promote science and culture and then 'to provide skilled manpower in areas critical to national integration and development' (ICDL 1997). Its first courses were in chemistry, education, mathematics and Persian to be followed by biology and geology (NIME 1993: 117). The first objective of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand is 'to provide and promote university and professional education so as to enable the people to raise their educational standards in response to the needs of society' (Iam Chaya-Ngam 1987: 322).

(Perraton in press)

While there are important research questions about demand and access, the economic case for distance education prompts a single, crude, question: how well are open universities responding to the demands of governments that they should expand the educated workforce? And, a more complex one, can we find ways of strengthening what they are doing and so increasing their contribution to their host societies?

There are many obstacles to answering the first question. Any comparative analysis of success rates, or output rates, or cost per student or per graduate, means that we need to define a student, define the total enrolment, track the progress of cohorts of students, locate good comparative data; none of these are easy and institutional practice and definitions vary widely. Then we need to take account of the varied outputs of universities: some are mainly running first-degree programmes, others concentrating on a wider range of courses, from nonformal programmes that do not lead to qualification through secondary equivalence courses to postgraduate diplomas. If we want to look at costs we need to attribute them to these different sectors. Again, if we are interested in comparisons, we need to take account of the different backgrounds of different students; where the most successful school-leavers enter conventional universities and the others study, if at all, at an open university, comparisons between the two groups are not looking at like and like. (And we are short of good data on the outcomes of much conventional higher education.) There is one further obstacle: institutions have often been reluctant to publish data that, whatever the difficulties, would make comparative analysis possible. In summing up the outcomes of a seminar, held at the end of the 1993 AAOU conference, Ian Mugridge made the point: '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 costs per graduate' (Mugridge 1994: 121).

Given the difficulties, it is not surprising that we are short of hard data to answer the first question. Some available figures are shown in table 1. An examination of the literature on which it is based, and of the figures, leads to four immediate conclusions. First, completion rates for full degree programmes are often below 20 per cent. Second, much dropout occurs in students' initial courses; once they are over that hurdle they are more likely to complete their courses. Third, there is a marked difference between the figures for

**Table 1 Completion and graduation rates at some open universities**

| Institution  | Type of course                      | Date             | Enrolment    | Graduation     | Pass or completion rate % <sup>a</sup> | Conventional university rate |
|--|-------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------|--|------------------------------|
| <i>Bangladesh</i><br>Open University <sup>b</sup>            | Cert. in English                    | 1996             | 7,333        | 3,841          | 48                                     | n/a                          |
|  | BEd                                 | 1996             | 11,195       | 5,401          | 52                                     |                              |
| <i>China</i><br>RTVUs <sup>c</sup>                           | Equivalent to junior college degree | 1996-7           | 197,100 p.a. | 187,900        | 70-80                                  | n/a                          |
| <i>India</i><br>BRAOU <sup>d</sup>                           | First degree                        | 1991-2           |              |                | 23                                     | 55-60%                       |
|  | BRAOU <sup>e</sup>                  | BA               | 1993-4       | 30,000         | 3,500                                  |                              |
| IGNOU <sup>d</sup>   | First degree                        | 1991-2           |              |                | 23                                     |                              |
| IGNOU <sup>f</sup>   | Management programmes               | 1987-93          | 44,731       | 17,708         | 40                                     |                              |
|  | Diploma progs                       | 1987-93          | 5,015        | 853            | 17                                     |                              |
|  | Cert. in food and nutrition         | 1987-93          | 19,213       | 3,740          | 20                                     |                              |
| YCMOU <sup>d</sup>   | First degree                        | 1991-2           |              |                | 34                                     | 55-60%                       |
| <i>Indonesia</i><br>Universitas Terbuka <sup>g</sup>         | Two-year degree                     | 1984-8           | 65,000       | 443            | 1                                      | n/a                          |
|  | First degree                        | 1984-90          |              |                | 5                                      |                              |
| <i>South Korea</i><br>KACU <sup>h</sup>                      | Two year degree                     | 1977-85          | 10,837       | 3,684          | 34                                     | n/a                          |
|  |                                     | 1980-8           | 17,104       | 5,150          | 30                                     |                              |
|  | Five year degree                    | 1981-91          | 28,266       | 4,111          | 15                                     | n/a                          |
|  |                                     | 1983-91          | 35,698       | 3,511          | 10                                     |                              |
| <i>Pakistan</i><br>Allama Iqbal Open University <sup>l</sup> | BA                                  | 1981-6           | 53,697       | 15,895         | 30 <sup>j</sup>                        | n/a                          |
|  | MBA                                 | 1986             | 600          | 277            | 46                                     | n/a                          |
| <i>Thailand</i><br>STOU <sup>k</sup>                         | Two-year degree programme           | 1980-2           | 82,139       | 9,594          | 12                                     | 85%                          |
|  | STOU <sup>l</sup>                   | Two year prog.   | } 1980-7     | 50-80,000 p.a. | 25                                     | 85%                          |
|  |                                     | Three year prog. |              |                | 38                                     |                              |
|  |                                     | Four year prog.  |              |                | 20                                     |                              |
|  |                                     | n/a <sup>m</sup> |              |                | 15                                     |                              |
|  |                                     | 1984-91          |              | 17             |  |                              |

Source: Perraton forthcoming: table 5.4

Notes. a Rate is for graduation or certification except where shown; b. Rumble 1999: 174; c Ding 1999: 180-2; d. Ansari 1994: 83; e. Fielden *et al.* n.d.: 96 (including both the 2500 who had graduated and a further 1000 who were expected to); f. Fielden *et al.* n.d. 63; g. Wilson 1991: 261 and Belawati 1998: 82; h. Kim 1992: 61-5; i. Sargant *et al.* 1989. Figures for BA are the total shown in their table 2. j. Figures apparently relate to single courses of which students had to take eight to graduate. k. Wichit 1985: 11-13; l. Smith n.d. : 160; m. Belawati 1998: 82

CRTVU, where students are studying more or less full-time but through a non-conventional method, and those of most institutions where students work part-time. Fourth, full, first-degree programmes, tend to have lower completion rates than shorter courses or ones at either higher or lower levels.

We can take the analysis a bit further. The Asian open universities have been dramatically successful in terms of establishing themselves as a significant part of national education systems. In not much more than two decades they have set up the machinery - in the broadest sense of the term - for developing materials, supporting students, and undertaking a wide range of different educational functions. With that achievement, the figures suggest that it should now be possible to build on what has already been done and significantly raise university effectiveness. For the graduation figures present a set of challenges to government policy-makers, to institutions, to the research community, and to students. For policy makers, they suggest that some universities, at least in their degree programmes, are making only a limited contribution to programmes of national human resource development. That contribution may be relatively costly. If, for example an open university teaches students at a cost one-third of that of conventional institutions, but has a completion rate that is only one-quarter of the comparator, then its cost per graduate will be greater. For institutions, the graduation rates take us back to the second of my two questions: how can we improve performance? For researchers, there is a practical question: how can well planned research help performance? For open university students, there is a personal challenge; modest success rates may pile further disappointment on those who often started from a position of disadvantage. Poor performance may compound disadvantage

### **What is to be done?**

Despite the limitations of the research on distance education, identified above, there is an increasing body of conventional wisdom, at the level of generalisation more often than theory, about good practice in open and distance learning. There are, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as in the north, models of good practice in terms of system design, of the choice and use of technologies, of student support, and of the development of materials. At the International Research Foundation for Open Learning we are interested in working with colleagues in Asia and Africa to explore how we can apply good practice. Our aim is twofold. First, we want to encourage research within institutions which is seeking to explore how institutional practice can be strengthened, perhaps most often through action research that aims at incremental improvements in how a department or institution is teaching or supporting students. Of course if we can help in that research, we want to do so, but most of the skills to undertake it are there within the institutions. Second, in the interest of the international community, we want to link, monitor and report on the continuing programme of the research so that we can all learn from scattered research projects. Our aim is to add international value to local and national activities. Out of all this we therefore see two ends. One end is strengthened performance within individual institutions. The other is the international development, sharing and publication of solidly based research findings to guide good practice. (One of the gaps in the literature - as the recent American review already cited demonstrates - is the shortage of research-based guides to good practice.) To do this, we have begun discussions with a number of universities, in Asia and in Africa, but are still looking for more partners.

At this point, my paper becomes deliberately and necessarily vague. We do not yet have specific answers to the question: 'what kind of research project are you looking at?' because our discussions with our potential partners are taking place later this year, after the date this paper has to be submitted. Nor do we have that handbook of good practice, although perhaps together we will in due course be able to develop one. The definition of issues to be examined is for the institutions concerned and not for IRFOL. We have, ourselves, continuing interests in a number of policy issues that face many of the institutions with which we have been in touch over the last few years: about cost effectiveness (where we still lack enough good data) about fee policy (of central importance wherever educational budgets are squeezed and where good teaching practice and equity pull in opposite directions) and about regulation, or consumer protection, of cross-border enrolment (of growing importance as virtual universities offer virtual or real promises and threats.) But, within this part of our research programme, our sole criteria are that the research should be designed to help strengthen the practice of individual institutions and that, through systematic and shared planning of a set of modest research activities, they should also be of international and comparative interest. We assume, at this point, that we may look at the effect on students of variables in the design of teaching systems, in the presentation of course material, in the recruitment and counselling of new students, in materials design and in the support that can be offered to students. We know that, in all these areas, there is a degree of consensus about good practice but need, individually and collectively, to investigate just how measures to improve

practice, that are all likely to have cost implications, feed through into something that is helpful for our students. As we develop the research programme sharper questions will be defined, and others identified, so that we move from these generalities to hard, researchable, issues that mesh with the priorities of our partners. What is fixed is the belief that, through cooperation, the sum of a set of individual bits of research can be greater than the sum of the parts. Our international understanding of distance education needs to be informed and strengthened by an integrated programme of institutional research, within individual open universities.

The purpose of this paper, and of my attendance at the conference, is to seek partners with whom we can work on the programme.

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