Table 6.1 Satisfaction with study centres in the OU UK

	Not satisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Very/extremely satisfied (%)
Convenient location	21.5	38.0	40.5
Adequate safe parking	14.6	41.2	44.2
Notices and directions clear	18.9	49.5	31.6
Maintenance of rooms	5.7	48.9	45.3
Friendly and helpful staff	9.3	47.7	43.0
Access to a quiet room before tutorials	26.1	59.1	14.8
Availability of refreshments	29.3	52.2	18.5
Location and cleanliness of toilets	7.5	58.3	34.2
Access to room for self-help group	25.2	58.5	16.3

It is always difficult to interpret such figures, but notwithstanding earlier comments, it does seem that most students find their study centre accommodation and location satisfactory, at least in their first year, where local tutorials are provided in most study centres. Students on Open University Committees often, rightly, complain about poor facilities, and regional staff do their best to ensure that, within the budgetary constraints, facilities are appropriate to the needs of adult learners. In the end, however, any extra cost of providing better accommodation would have to be transferred to the student and, given the choice, most students may prefer to see tuition fees kept in line with inflation rather than have better accommodation at a higher fee. Nevertheless, the coming of the University's Student Charter, which sets out the level of support and service the University is committed to providing for students, will certainly mean that more attention will need to be paid to complaints about poor quality study centre facilities. What is needed are more imaginative approaches by the University and its host institutions, and by national and local government to create the excellence of provision which is seen in mainland Europe without excessive cost or inaccessible and inappropriate environments. Unless this happens, the role of the study centre will not develop. As Gough (1980) reported after visiting the OU UK:

> *in the final analysis, the study centre is merely a convenient base for their [tutor-counsellors'] work. Indeed tutor-counsellors operate effectively in certain areas without such a base; this has always been the case in the north of Scotland and in the Western Isles. If this analysis is correct, then the tutor-counsellor is the vital element in the student support service of the Open University. Study centres are peripheral.*

Smith *et al.* (1985), in describing the Victorian Technical and Further Education network in Australia, note how the integration of off-campus students into a college, with full student rights and privileges, was more successful in their view than the Deakin University model, based on the OU UK, where study centres were based in other institutions. They suggested that the reasons such centres had not been successful in terms of student attendance was because:

> *students do not like to enter and use an 'alien' institution or that the host institutions were not motivated enough to be proactive in assisting Deakin students.*

The OU UK has resisted the model of greater integration with other providers, although in 1984 suggestions were made by the polytechnics that the OU should franchise its entire regional service to the polytechnic network. More recently, the University reviewed the possibilities of franchising some of its introductory courses to colleges of further education but decided there would be no advantage in this for its students.

Positive trends

An interesting contrast to the UK and Australia can be found in Slovenia, a small country of some two million people with a geographical area the same as Wales. Here there is already an established network of community centres and, in the past, lecturers from the University of Ljubljana travelled to these centres to give lectures and run tutorials of a similar nature to those on the main campus. With the development of distance education (Mills, 1995), through the Distance Education Co-ordination Point in the Faculty of Economics, part-time staff are now being employed locally to provide support for distance learning materials produced by central faculty. Tutorials will be held in the already existing network of community centres, which also provide a range of other services including general educational advice for a range of individuals and groups in the local community.

One of the most impressive institutional study centre networks is that of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) where over 350 study centres straddle the country, including 86 in Delhi. Although this is not a huge number of centres, given the size of the population and the geographical area

covered, the influence and support of the National Government enabled IGNOU to establish its study centres in other colleges, but in its own suite of rooms with its own administrative and support staff. Here students could immediately identify with IGNOU, and the staff of the host institution were able to see clearly what IGNOU was doing. The furniture, the staffing and the books in the library were standard and this, together with the IGNOU logo, gives the centres a really strong corporate image. Students are able to hand in assignments, meet tutors, attend tutorials, pay fees, get advice and counselling about future courses and above all meet each other. Here is a positive move towards establishing a real community of open and distance learners which manages to be both local and national.

So, is it possible to detect a pattern which suggests that study centres on the whole are not successful when they comprise no more than rented rooms in other institutions' premises? Are they more likely to be successful if they are either independently run and administered with permanent staff (albeit using others premises) as in IGNOU, or where there is a true partnership of different organisations involved in education, as in the Slovenian network and in one or two study centres in the OU UK (e.g. Wensum Lodge in Norwich, which is a thriving community adult centre)? The EuroStudyCentre development, where, for example, the OU UK shares some premises with the Fernuniversität in Germany, and the thinking taking place in South Africa with the development of Community Learning Centres, are other exciting developments. It is not surprising perhaps that students like it when OU UK regional centres are used as study centres. Here they clearly feel a greater sense of belonging to an institutional community. Just being tolerated in another institution, in rented rooms which may differ from week to week, and with staff and students not really integrated in the host institution, is very much second best.

A glimpse of the future of study centres in the OU UK

How and in what way will student learning and the role of study centres change? In the OU UK the main driver for change will undoubtedly be the rapid developments in communication technology. This will not only enable links to be made easily between different elements of the teaching system in ways which have not been possible before; it will also mean a new approach to the whole relationship between the student and the University.

Already in the OU UK, the increasing complexity and variety of study programmes—a trend likely to continue rapidly as the University faces increasing competition from others developing distance teaching programmes —and the need for greater flexibility, together with increased possibilities for

the accumulation and transfer of credit, has led to proposals to refocus much information provision, advice and guidance away from local part-time staff operating in the study centres towards the regional centres, where staff have computer links with students' records, tools to monitor individual and group progress, and up-to-date information on new courses, fees and credit ratings.

In the 'industrial' model of distance education (Peters, 1983) the economics of the system were characterised by high initial investment (in the production of high quality learning materials by a central 'production unit' or course team, the cost being amortised over the life of the course) and relatively low annual 'running costs' including, as a major element, learner support. In its version of this model, the OU UK stresses the importance of the mediation of study materials to the students by a local or relatively local tutor. The tutor supports students by marking correspondence assignments, by holding tutorials in the study centre, by providing general support and counselling and by being available on the telephone. The fact that a student can contact his or her tutor on a one-to-one basis by telephone at most times during the week is one of the real strengths of the system. Indeed many would argue, as Gough did in 1980, that this individual support is the essential element of the learner support system in distance education; on some courses now this support is being provided, along with group communication, by computer conferencing arrangements, which operate independently from any local base and do not rely on study centre facilities. It is not only the impact of the new communications technologies on learner support that will influence the future of study centres, but also their impact on the curriculum.

The OU UK has the largest number of students in any university in the UK; it also has a relatively restricted curriculum by comparison with other large universities. Students want a greater range of courses, especially at Master's level, and the University is moving to provide these. Clearly the larger the number of courses, the lower the number of students on each course (assuming an equilibrium is reached on the total number of students in the institution). This means that it will no longer be possible, even if we wished to do so, to provide 'local' or even regional tutorials for many of these increasingly specialist courses. It is possible to predict (and there are several examples already) that many courses will have, say, only 50 students or so per year nationally or even internationally, if the University is to broaden its curriculum dramatically. In such circumstances the local tutor will be replaced by the course writer, herself or himself mediating the course from any location by using computer conferencing, audio-graphics or perhaps video conferencing: an approach in principle not unlike that currently used in the University of South Africa where academic staff teach their own courses by correspondence and are available on the telephone to those students who choose and who have the resources to take advantage of this direct support. Indeed, increasingly,

students will be able to study distance learning courses from other distance teaching institutions, perhaps with support through the developing EuroStudyCentre network. It does not require much further development of this argument to see that the whole basis of the industrial model, with its course teams working together and its local support, will not be viable in the future except for very large population courses (normally of an introductory nature) which will not require much annual updating.

In such circumstances questions have to be asked about the design of the curriculum and the overall learner support system, including the role of study centres. It is inconceivable that the OU UK can carry on with a single model designed over 25 years ago (think what this would mean if we were talking about motor cars!). The design needs a radical overhaul such that the power of new technology is harnessed to help all its students and not simply those with sufficient resources to benefit from it. What has happened so far has been piecemeal. Several courses have employed different approaches to computer conferencing, some designing the course such that a computer and modem is essential to study, whereas others require the use of computer facilities as part of the course. In the latter case, it is possible for students to rent time on a PC in a local study centre if necessary in order to complete a particular piece of work or an assignment. This piecemeal approach, with individual faculties adopting different policies and practices (and different software), cannot continue. It has led to situations that are confusing and inexplicable to the general public and to students. For example, the new Technology Foundation Course, a large population introductory course, has, as an integral part of its design, the use of a computer and communications modem using SoftArc FirstClass™ software. There is an immediate opportunity for students to be in contact with the academic staff who have written the courses and with all other students and tutors. At first sight this seems to be a real step forward, providing easy links between student and course author; between student and academic expert. It looks certain that this will dramatically affect the balance of study patterns and learning relationships in a distance teaching institution, and change the role of the study centre and also of part-time tutors and counsellors, and the regionally-based academic staff who are responsible for the management of the part-time tutors.

This first-year course, with its week-long summer school and its computer and modem requirements, is likely to cost the student a substantial sum of money, and although there are loan schemes and financial assistance, it is already clear that the cost of the course is a bar to access for many people, especially women.

In contrast, the Faculty of Mathematics and Computing has taken a radical approach to the way in which it introduces students to mathematics, and has completely rethought its strategy for teaching at introductory level, with the

consequence that far more women are applying for a new 200-hours course which has neither summer school nor a requirement to purchase a computer, but a simple, cheap, battery-run graphics calculator which is sent to all students and included within the standard course fee.

Clearly there are a number of options facing the University as it reflects on the impact of the new technologies in the design of its curriculum and its learner support patterns for the future.

A possible way forward

In an article written in 1979, Bradford, then Chairman of an OU UK Study Centre Review Group, concluded that *'personal relationships are indeed the raison d'être of study centres'*. Is this still the case? Undoubtedly, at the time, Bradford understood personal relationships to be face-to-face regular links between students and tutors and of students with each other. To what extent can personal relationships be established through computer-mediated communication without provoking the reaction of Kuno in E.M. Forster's (1913) fantasy 'The Machine Stops', written as a reaction against what he called 'the earlier heavens of H.G. Wells'?

> *'I want to see you, not through the machine,' said Kuno, 'I want to speak to you not through the wearisome machine.' 'Oh hush!' said his mother, vaguely shocked, 'You must not say anything against the machine'.*

The answers to some of these questions will be institution- and country-specific. Even in a world where many people will have at their fingertips all the information and communications possibilities necessary for any educational purpose, there will still be a need for the support and friendship of other people, the humour, the smiles, the concerns, the human contact, in addition to what can be provided through the 'machine' and through the written word. Such opportunities might indeed be provided through the development of Community Learning Centres shared by many institutions and governed by the local communities, as are being planned in some areas of South Africa and which operate already in Slovenia.

The computer communications revolution will dramatically affect teaching and learning; we must make sure it affects our local and academic communities in a completely positive way, by providing an additional learning tool which complements rather than replaces the face-to-face contact which student and tutors consistently find so valuable. We may not be able to predict the future of study centres, but we should at least be trying now to invent it!

EuroStudyCentres are a major development in Europe. The question to be addressed is whether they, like the listening and viewing centres which were the origins of the OU UK study centres, are merely a passing phase until all students have all necessary communication links and data in their own home, or whether local access to such facilities outside the home will become critically important as one of the future key elements in student support and as an opportunity for students to meet face-to-face and support each other.

Distance education is at the forefront of increasing access to education at all levels across the world. The introduction of new technology to support teaching and learning must help to increase access to all and must not be another barrier for some. This is the great challenge.

As for study centres, as students demand a wider curriculum and more opportunities to take courses from other institutions, perhaps in other countries, it will be increasingly difficult to provide local or even regional tutorial support. For example, with imagination and some extra resource, the OU UK could decide that its study centres (perhaps renamed local centres) should be re-engineered to focus more on providing advice and guidance to enquirers and preparatory support for all students, whilst continuing to act as the base for tutors on introductory courses and others where the density of students allows. Such centres would have a critical role in local public relations and in the recruitment of students and would be the genuine local face of the Open University.

The most exciting and imaginative leap forward for the OU UK would be to equip and staff such local centres to provide computer, audio and video communications, perhaps along the developing lines of EuroStudyCentres, or Contact North in Ontario (Sam Shaw, 1995), in an environment conducive to adult study and with access up to 12 hours per day at the weekend and during week-day evenings. Many of the colleges which house existing OU study centres have suites of computers linked to the Internet which are largely unused in the evenings and at weekends. Some colleges are now also linking up by video to enable their own courses to run where there are too few students in any one college; and yet hardly any use is made of these facilities by OU students. If such facilities were made available to the Open University, students studying courses for which local or regional tuition was logistically impossible would be able to link up with each other and their specialist tutor, perhaps in the presence of a general facilitator, without having to purchase their own computing equipment, at least in the first instance. The combination of the availability of telematic and video links with students, tutors and course writers across the country, together with face-to-face meetings with other local students, tutors and counsellors, would again encourage students to use their local study centres more, and in doing so they would meet other students, albeit often studying different courses and in different faculties, thus counter-

balancing the potential isolation resulting from studying solely from a home base.

REFERENCES

Bradford, M. (1979) Study centres: The background to the current policy review, *Teaching at a Distance*, 16 (Milton Keynes, The Open University).

Castro, A.S., Livingston, K.T. & Northcott, P.H. (1985) *An Australian casebook of study centres in distance education*, Deakin Open Education Monographs No. 1 (Victoria, Australia, Deakin University).

Forster, E.M. (1913) *The machine stops*. In Barnes, D.R. & Egford, R.F. *Twentieth century short stories* (London, Harrap).

Fung, P., Calder, J. & Monteiro, B. (1994) Monitoring of student satisfaction. A report on completion of pilot research, *Student Research Centre Report 90* (The Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, Milton Keynes).

Gough, J.E. (1980) *The use of study centres in four distance education systems* (Victoria, Australia, Deakin University).

Heap, B. & Hibbert, A. (1995) Technology foresight: The institute's view, *Biologist*, **42** (4) (London, Institute of Biology).

International Centre for Distance Learning Database (1995) (The Open University, Milton Keynes).

Lopez, A.C. (1993) Prospects of distance teaching in a Europe without frontiers. Internal paper (Madrid, Universidad Nacional a Distancia).

Mills, A.R. (1995) Unpublished report of Slovenian distance education plans.

Open University (1981) *Learning from television* (The Open University and The British Broadcasting Corporation, Milton Keynes).

Peters, O. (1983) Distance education and industrial production: A comparative interpretation in outline. In Sewart, D., Keegan, D. & Holmberg, B. (Eds.) *Distance education: International perspectives* (Beckenham, Croom Helm/St Martin's Press).

Pronk, N. (1994) A transnational network: The development of EuroStudyCentres. In Palank, F. & Pronk, N. (Eds.) *EuroStudyCentres* (Vienna, Zeitschrift für Hochschuldidaktik, Österreichischer Studien Verlag).

Sam Shaw, W.A. (1995) Contact North/Contact Nord: On the leading edge of distance education. In Sewart, D. (Ed.) *One world, many voices: Quality in open and distance learning*, Vol. 1, 17th World Conference for Distance Education (Milton Keynes, International Council for Distance Education and The Open University).

Smith, P., Scorgie, B. & Edge, D. (1985) Past development and an emerging possible future for Victorian distance education. In Castro, A.S., Livingstone, K.T. & Northcott, P.H. *An Australian casebook of study centres in distance education*, Deakin Open Education Monographs No. 1 (Victoria, Australia, Deakin University).

Tejero, L. & Moreno, J.M. (1994) UNED Study Centre Network. In Palank, F. & Pronk, N. (Eds.) *EuroStudyCentres* (Vienna, Zeitschrift für Hochschuldidaktik, Österreichischer Studien Verlag).