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Managing for Success: Learner Interaction and Independence

Chapter synopsis

The chapter focuses on the challenges students face in open-learning situations and on how their success can be measured. After an analysis of such traditional criteria as persistence and completion rates, the author argues for an approach driven by the principal value of developing independent learners. The disadvantages faced by distance educators in realizing this goal are examined, and the chapter concludes with an analysis of its implications for the respective roles of instructional design, course delivery and student-support services.

Only a few years ago, the very existence of open-learning institutions was considered a success. They provided unprecedented learning opportunities for a greater share of the populace, and enrolments grew much more quickly than had been anticipated. This pattern continues today in the developing world where the number of new open universities and the phenomenal numbers of students attending them are one of the most significant recent developments in higher education.

In more developed nations, however, these institutions are being subjected to considerably more scrutiny. The initial costs of establishing open universities are high, notably for course development, and governments are concerned about returns on their investments. Students, too, are becoming more discriminating consumers, and, whereas the initial intakes were grateful for the very existence of open-learning institutions, those in more recent intakes are concerned about high attrition rates and the difficulties of obtaining higher education in this way.

In response to such pressures for more accountability, it is important that institutional leaders develop clear criteria of success and tangible indicators with which to measure them, and that they ensure the development of a strong institutional ethos supported by management systems which ensure that these criteria are met.

In one sense, every course or programme completion is a success, given that most students in such institutions would not otherwise have had the opportunity to pursue a university education at all. From this perspective, it is not unreasonable to expect a higher attrition rate from open-learning institutions than from selective, campus-based ones. Nevertheless, especially in tighter fiscal climates, the funding sources for such institutions, mainly governments, are increasingly interested in and concerned about attrition and persistence indicators.

How then, in this environment, can one best measure the success of an open-learning institution?

Measures of success

There are a number of indicators available against which to evaluate open-learning institutions, the most common of which are:

- *completion rates*: the proportion of students who complete courses in which they are registered;
- *graduation rates*: the proportion of students who attain the formal academic credentials which they seek (although not necessarily from the initial institution);
- *persistence rates*: the proportion of students who take another course or courses after successfully completing the first one(s);
- *measures of cost efficiency and effectiveness*: the cost per course, per completion and per graduate.

Two other indicators, much more difficult to measure and yet nevertheless integral to the discussion below, are:

- *skill development*: the degree to which students develop their independent learning skills so that they can increasingly take responsibility for their own learning;
- *postgraduation performance*: the performance of graduates of open-learning programmes in subsequent education or employment.

These last two criteria of success measure aspects of the students' effectiveness as independent learners, a theme explored in some detail later in this chapter.

Perhaps the most frequently cited measure of success for open-learning institutions is the completion rate for courses delivered at a distance, especially given the variations in course-delivery modes across institutions. There is a growing body of research on this topic. One of the great difficulties is establishing what seems to be a reasonable rate of success, given that the institutions are typically nonselective (open admissions), that students may often proceed at their own pace, and that many of the entering students may derive what they wish from a particular course without necessarily completing all its assignments or a final examination. Nevertheless, within this sort of qualification, completion rates are the subject of considerable scrutiny among such institutions, and there is widespread agreement that they are too low (frequently less than 50 per cent of entrants complete their first course).

Cross-institutional comparison is extremely difficult, a point underlined very effectively by Shale,¹ who contrasts the different ways in which institutions calculate completion rates. He introduces the concept of 'nonstarters', students who enrol in a course but never subsequently participate in it. In an Athabasca University study conducted with 1978 and 1979 intakes, he found that fully half of the students were in this category.² He also pointed out the dramatic differences in course-completion rates if, on the one hand, one derived them from all students who originally enrolled in a course, or, on the other hand, computed them only after eliminating the nonstarters from the sample - in one case, the course-completion rate was 28.8 per cent for all who originally enrolled in a course, but 58.8 per cent if those classified as early withdrawals were removed from the calculations; in another, a completion rate of 70 per cent at the British Open University would be only 36 per cent if its initial screening mechanisms were taken into account.³ There is even a self-selecting aspect to the latter - some of the OU students have to wait over a year to gain admission, and many, presumably including those

who are less highly motivated, withdraw before their place becomes available, a fact which increases the proportion likely to succeed of those who do wait for a place.

Shale's finding was of more than mathematical significance. It suggested that there were at least two kinds of students enrolling in the university - those who were quite comfortable and successful with independent modes of learning and a very significant group who apparently were completely unprepared for this environment. This matches Moore's observation of three types of adult learner in distance education - those whom he labels 'self-directed learners', those who are self-directed in pursuit of credentials only, and those who have an emotional need for dependence.⁴

Such a high 'non-start' rate at Athabasca focused university attention on why so many students abandoned their studies almost before beginning them, and a number of contributing factors were identified. It was not difficult to discover that far too many were poorly informed about what they were in for and had little awareness of how to cope with the quite typical difficulties faced by home-study students in time management and self-motivation. The difficulties included having to work independently without the support of fellow students, working in nonsupportive home environments, or simply lacking the basic skills (reading, writing, mathematical, and study skills) to cope with the quantity and levels of work expected.

As a result, the university invested more resources into student information and support services, including the development of more local services through a regional office network, special workshops in study skills and examination writing, literacy and numeracy testing and referrals, better course-information outlines (available on-line), local online admission and registration, in-person seminars and workshops, and better career counselling. Attention was also paid to the design of courses with low completion rates and to ensuring that first units, in particular, were clear, relatively easy and provided immediate feedback to the student. Finally, attempts were made to encourage Telephone tutors to be more active in initiating contacts with the student, especially those who seemed to be falling behind in the course, and Telephone quizzes administered by tutors were built into the design of many courses to ensure student-tutor interaction during the course.

In 1988, the focus was sharpened further by building specific and ambitious completion- and persistence-rate targets over a five-year period right into Athabasca's Strategic Academic Plan. This, in turn, directed energies towards a whole series of measures such as improving the quality of service, response time, course design, student-support services and modes of delivery. While this action had the desired result of refocusing university attention on the performance of its students, it was not without its pitfalls.

Faculty tend to be suspicious of anything which can be portrayed as undermining academic standards. Obviously, completion rates could be increased simply by making the courses easier or marking more generously on final examinations. Another factor was the self-paced nature of AU courses, for research evidence is quite conclusive that institutional pacing increases completion rates.⁵ However, the university's commitment to self-pacing is a deliberate one derived from the recognition that this 'open' dimension is critical to many of its students, who would otherwise be unable to follow a course which required them to stick to an imposed schedule. The completion-rate targets could also be achieved by an undue narrowing of focus; for example, by 'teaching to the examinations' and encouraging the sort of one-way rote learning to which distance learning is already so susceptible.

On balance, however, the decision was made to err on the side of paying too much attention to completion and persistence rates. It is all too easy to rationalize low completion rates away - 'What do you expect from open admissions?' or 'Our students aren't interested in course

completion - they are taking the courses for interest only and don't necessarily have to write the final exam to derive what they want from the course.' The latter assertion was a common response at Athabasca University until a survey showed clearly that student completions were falling far short of even their own expectations - at the moment of admission, students expected to complete many more courses than they actually did, suggesting a large gap between their original expectations and their actual AU experience.^{6*}

The commitment to measurable improvement in completion and persistence rates underlines the university's belief that the great majority of adult students are capable of successfully completing a university degree and that it has a responsibility to help them to achieve it.

While there has been a steady, if slow improvement in the university's completion rates over the past decade, it is very difficult to demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship among the many and complex variables which affect it. Brindley's study⁷ of attrition rates at the university provides an interesting perspective on this. Using a 'critical-incidents' technique whereby students identified factors which had facilitated or hindered their ability to complete a course, she found that course completers reported about the same number of 'hindering factors' (3.8) as did those who did not complete the course (3.7), and only a few more 'facilitating factors' (3.3 for completers to 2.5 reported by non-completers).⁸ Hence, she concluded that differences between success and failure had more to do with the students' ability to cope with problems than did variations in their learning environment. This is echoed in Brookfield's finding that independent learners considered problems encountered in study not as blocks to progress but as the focus for effort.⁹

This suggests that there are strong personal variables which transcend the levels of support the institution offers and which are critical to determining whether or not someone will drop out of a course. In other words, it was not that students who dropped out faced any more hindering factors than did successful student, -, but that they were not able to cope with them as effectively as were the latter. Rather than concluding from this that student-support services are less critical than previously imagined, however, it directs attention to a new role - identifying students less well prepared for independent study and helping them to learn 'coping strategies' with which to overcome the typical and common barriers faced by home-study students.

*An effective institutional studies unit is invaluable in confronting the myths which every university develops. It can sometimes be very threatening, notably when it contradicts the senior manager's own misconceptions, but it is ultimately a key tool in keeping abreast of what is happening in the institution and as an objective check against internal perceptions of reality.

Towards a new measure of success: developing independent learners¹⁰

Standard completion and persistence rates are useful measures of an open university's productivity, but, it is argued below, the higher-order achievement of producing independent, self-directed learners is ultimately a more important criterion of institutional success. Given how little we still know about how people learn, and the difficulties faced by educators in even the most ideal learning environments in encouraging learner autonomy and independence, why

should this be a central goal of open-learning institutions? There are a number of reasons for this position:

- The concept is central to the philosophy of open learning and adult education; this is, the importance of developing (as opposed to merely serving) 'self-actualized' learners.¹¹
- Whereas initially, open-learning institutions provided opportunities for independent learners who lacked the formal qualifications or availability to attend conventional colleges and universities, they are increasingly serving a broader cross-section of the population, including many who would not previously have contemplated independent learning. This is even more the case in the developing world, where distance education has become a primary response to mass demands for higher education and mainly serves the 18-24 year-old age group.¹²
- There is an economic argument, on the assumption that relatively autonomous learners make fewer demands for instructional support and services than do more dependent students. They may complete courses and programmes more quickly and require less tutorial and counselling help. If the ideal student is one who ultimately outgrows his or her teacher, the ideal open university is one which breeds students who no longer require its support.
- Tait¹³ has expressed concern about the susceptibility of distance education to totalitarian control, with some institutions being established deliberately to avoid creating conventional campuses, which are seen as breeding grounds for student radicalism. This gives additional meaning to Chesterton's¹⁴ emphasis on the continuing responsibility of distance educators to pay close attention to the values and assumptions which their courses transmit, to find ways to give students more curriculum control, and to induce them to challenge what they learn.
- Most fundamentally in a 'knowledge' society, one that is constantly facing discontinuous change, all educational institutions have a responsibility to induce learners to challenge the nature of knowledge, to question and requestion everything they 'learn', and to strive for the ideals of reflection and *praxis* set out by writers like Paulo Friere.¹⁵ For an excellent series of articles in this domain, the reader is referred to the recent book edited by Terry Evans and Daryl Nation, *Critical Reflections on Distance Education*.¹⁶

The concept of an independent learner is not an absolute one, but a notion that graduates should be more 'self-sufficient' learners than they were at the point of entry. It involves changes in personal values (openness to new ideas and to rethinking current beliefs) and attitudes (self-motivation), as well as the development of new skills (time management, study skills, problem conceptualization, critical and lateral thinking, and research and library skills). A quest never completely fulfilled, it is a process central to the concepts of open learning and lifelong education.

By contrast, the dependent learner is more likely to want to be told what to learn and how to learn it and less apt to go beyond the minimum demands of a particular assignment to challenge its usefulness or to apply what has been learned more broadly or personally. The essential difference, following Dewey and Whitehead and as discussed by Boot and Hodgson,¹⁷ is between knowledge as a process and knowledge as a commodity. This point has been underlined by Mary Thorpe:

We should begin from the assumption that course Materials are not the course; rather that the course is an annual process of interaction between students, the Materials and the tutors and that, in this sense, tutors and students 'produce' courses as well as course teams.¹⁸

Until recently, open universities have been catering primarily to a population not otherwise served by formal educational institutions. Previously, many strong-willed people with a capacity for independent learning were denied access to college or university by rigid entrance requirements, costs, time constraints and enrolment quotas, all of which have been reduced or eliminated by the advent of open universities. Such individuals have been well served by these innovative institutions, but the latter have also benefited from such self-directed students who have succeeded while making minimal demands for guidance and service.

The principal argument here is that much of the success of open learning institutions has been the product of independent learners who would succeed in almost any system. If they are truly to live up to the potential suggested by their ideals, and especially as they are confronted with new groups of students less well prepared for independent study, open-learning institutions must improve their capacity to develop independent learners, a criterion much more difficult to measure than course completion or graduation rates.

The issue has been given a lot of attention in the literature of distance education and open learning, notably by Brookfield,¹⁹ Burge,²⁰ Gibbs,²¹ Higgs,²² Inglis,²³ Kelly and Shapcott,²⁴ Moore,²⁵ Morgan,²⁶ and Wickett,²⁷ but there is very little substantial evidence to date that products of such institutions are more autonomous, independent or self-directed as learners than they were at the point of entry. Before too much is made of this, however, it is pertinent to look at such attempts in supposedly more advantaged domains.

On conventional university campuses, students may or may not be encouraged to develop their independent learning skills. All too commonly, education is treated as the dissemination and repetition-on-demand of a fixed, unchanging entity called 'knowledge'. This is most prevalent where students sit in large lecture halls, take broad survey courses examined mainly by multiple-choice tests, or learn to 'case' (ie learn to predict) examination questions and are rewarded for regurgitating lecture notes on the finals.

On the other hand, on-campus students may be encouraged to move quite dramatically along the dependent-independent continuum. An inspiring lecturer, a stimulating discussion or reading, or, as is so often the case, serendipitous exposure to the ideas of fellow students may motivate the student to pursue a particular issue in depth, way beyond the demands of a course. This, in turn, will require the development of research skills and may inspire new interests which change the way the student looks at the world. For on-campus students, the interactive atmosphere and freedom of full-time study may be very stimulating in changing their attitudes towards and capacity for learning.

Do open universities do more to promote independent learners than campus-based ones? Other than providing more opportunities for adult and part-time learners, they may do less, notably where their primary mode of delivery is through home study and distance education. For example:

- As Chesterton²⁸ has observed, the separation of teacher and learner and the production of prepackaged materials in distance education shifts the focus of curriculum decision-making away from the students and more towards the institution and its staff. This is supported by Millard²⁹ in a critique of what he sees to be a tendency at the British Open

University to take decisions for administrative convenience rather than educational effectiveness.

- The prepackaged course materials, especially if handsomely printed and bound, may carry undue authority for many students, who are consequently less apt to challenge what they have learned.³⁰
- Because they are highly visible to academic peers as well as to students, courses tend to be overly heavy in content. This may also encourage students to focus on digesting the content rather than on its meaning and application.
- Courses tend to be built around prescribed and supplementary reference materials. While this is logical for and helpful to isolated home-study students, it does not encourage them to search out their own sources or to develop library skills.
- A centrally produced package of course materials 'cannot admit of the infinite variety of advice and support that is demanded by learners'³¹ and makes little provision for their individual differences in backgrounds, needs and learning styles.
- While most open universities provide access to tutors and even seminars in support of home-study courses, students usually lack the immediacy of feedback that comes from more regular and concentrated interaction with other students and staff, and hence are less apt to develop the inclination to challenge or question what they need. Harris³² has been a particularly effective critic of the student passivity which can follow undue reliance on prepackaged materials.

In attempts to overcome these weaknesses by emulating support offered on traditional campuses, many open universities have added a wide range of services and delivery modes which provide increased interaction with staff and other students. However, because so little is known about how people learn and because of the overwhelming influence of personal, as opposed to institutional, factors on a student's performance,³³ the result is often a roulette game, an expensive hit-or-miss approach with marginal impact on completion rates and increased costs per student.

Before pursuing the problem of how an open university can develop independent learners, it is important to look more directly at the problem students face in coping with the demands of open learning.

Open-university students and the problems they face

At least until recently, demographic profiles of students in open learning institutions have been remarkably consistent. Whether part-time or full-time, they are working adults and homemakers, the majority aged between 25 and 40.³⁴ While much has been written about the 'self-actualized' adult learner,³⁵ many are returning to formal education for the first time in years, often with negative previous experiences. I have written elsewhere³⁶ about the 'myth' of the self-actualized learner, and the large number of students who do not cope effectively with the demands for independence, time management and self-direction posed by open learning.

If open universities are to be successful in developing independent learning, they must do a great deal more than has usually been done to address that objective. Too often, their policies and practices have worked actively against it. One example is the way in which such institutions are usually promoted, stressing convenience and flexibility rather than the

difficulties faced by most students. Responding to such slogans as 'stay home and go to university' or 'give yourself credit', many who have finally mustered up the courage to enrol after some years' absence from formal education find themselves totally unprepared for its demands. While one cannot expect an institution to say, 'earn your degree the slow and painful way', it is important that incoming students are made fully aware of the challenges they will face.

Experience has suggested that such students tend to blame themselves rather than the university for their failures. Fage and Mills³⁷ have noted that Open University students seldom complain if they are not happy with a course, while I have observed the same tendency at Athabasca University.³⁸ This reinforces the notion that developing an adult student's self-confidence is the first challenge for an open university. This has implications for such services as the registrar's office and student services, normally the first contact points for students; for the training of course tutors; for the design of foundation or introductory courses; and for student information and orientation services.

One of the biggest problems faced by first-time students in such an environment is the absence of peers. While this is a serious academic problem, given the importance of interaction and being exposed to different perspectives on issues, it is even more fundamental a concern in terms of student persistence.

On a university campus, if a new student finds a lecture incomprehensible or boring, he or she can check this perception immediately with fellow students. It is easy to forget how reassuring and supportive it is to learn that others found the material or the lecturer just as difficult to understand as we did. If there is no one else to talk to, students will be more apt to blame themselves, assume that they are 'just not up' to that level of work, and drop out without sharing their concerns. This is a major challenge when students are separated from the institution and from each other by what Moore calls 'transactional distance'.³⁹ Open universities thus have a responsibility to do whatever they can to put students in contact with each other, and to allow them success which they can build upon as they gain confidence in their own ability to do university-level work.

One variable which appears to be useful in determining success is that of choice - whether or not the student actively chooses an open-learning institution over conventional alternatives. At Athabasca University, there has been a rural/urban dimension to this. Many urban students actively select AU over campus-based alternatives because they prefer the independence and flexibility it offers, whereas most rural students have no other choice if they are not prepared or cannot afford to move to the nearest university town.

AU's experience has been that rural students are more demanding of social interaction - they are more apt to want a professor in the classroom, and to debate issues with their peers. If they cannot have this on a regular basis in their own community, they at least want teleconferenced seminars or computer conferencing - anything which will offer them an alternative to trying to work through the materials in isolation. This experience is apparently replicated in Yugoslavia, where Krajnc found great differences between those who *chose* to study at a distance and those who had no other option.⁴⁰ The latter had a more negative view of distance education, much less readiness to adapt to new methods of learning, and a greater tendency to seek interaction and socialization.⁴¹

Krajnc argues that the development of initial student expectations for independent and self-directed learning will contribute considerably to positive outcomes even in isolated rural settings.⁴² She also notes the irony that, while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group

most apt to choose distance education courses (out of the false impression that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones).⁴³

Finally, Krajnc makes an interesting distinction between 'extroverted' and 'introverted' learners, as distinguished by their desire for and effectiveness in social interaction and 'functioning in front of others', concluding that:

Both extreme sub-groups of learners (those with extremely low sociability and those with extremely high sociability) do not function favourably in distance education in social isolation.⁴⁴

In other words, the extreme extroverts require more social interaction than independent learning offers, while the extreme introverts require the stimulation and motivation which interactive learning situations provide. This is an interesting response to Masson's hypothesis that distance education is better suited to introverts than to extroverts.⁴⁵

In summary, with more and more students with different needs and learning styles enrolling, it is incumbent upon open-learning institutions to do more than merely provide access to higher education.

Institutional responses to student concerns: a critical perspective

Institutions have responded to the needs of part-time adult learners in three major areas - instructional design, course-delivery systems and Student-support services. One major difficulty is that these have usually been addressed in a piecemeal fashion, often by separate functional departments in the university - an instructional-design/course-development unit; a tutorial-services/course-delivery or presentation unit; and a student-services unit. One of the important functions of a strong strategic plan (discussed in Chapter 10) is to integrate these services into a comprehensive and coherent whole focusing on the needs of the student.

INSTRUCTIONAL-SYSTEMS DESIGN

In the 'industrial' model of course production, which has been the dominant approach in distance education, instructional designers are an integral part of a course team. Usually behaviourist in training, their function is to ensure that the materials are broken down into learning units with clear objectives and subobjectives, with students often proceeding on a 'mastery-learning model' until each unit has been completed. The more extreme practitioners of this art have even suggested an ideal of 'teacher-proof' courses, ones so well designed that students are better off without the assistance of a teacher or tutor.

Whatever its limitations, and these are explored further below, instructional design has been an important component in the success of distance education. Home study is difficult enough for students without their being confronted with badly written or poorly designed courses or thick textbooks which they are supposed to read and understand on their own. Moreover, university academics, knowing that their courses are going to be open to public scrutiny, may overload their courses, both in terms of volume and level of academic work, to ensure their academic credibility with professional peers, and it is very useful to have an instructional designer and editor there to check this tendency and to serve as student advocates in the

preparation of course materials (even though they seldom have direct contact with the students themselves).

In practice, while course-team interaction can be very stimulating and productive, it is also time-consuming and may sometimes produce bad compromises rather than a good resolution of the inevitable conflicts that arise among any group of academics. There is also the danger noted by Farnes⁴⁶ that the course-team experience may be more stimulating and exciting than the actual course which results so that it is the staff rather than the students who derive the most benefit from the exercise.

The concept of a teacher-proof course also ignores the different needs of different groups of learners. A teacher or tutor is there to mediate between the course and the learner, to help the latter to adapt and apply materials to his or her own purposes and contexts. In their deliberations on the design of the Dutch Open University, Chang et al advocated a number of interactive learning systems to compensate for the limitations of written instruction.⁴⁷

With its emphasis on measurable objectives and mastery learning, instructional-systems design has also proven to be an effective approach to computer-assisted learning and to in-service training. It appears to be particularly well suited to teaching specific procedures, physical tasks or sequential concepts, and there are many examples of its successful adaptation. However, central as it has been to the development of distance education, there is increasing concern about the theoretical basis for this approach and its impact on student learning. One of the most important and well-researched critiques, emanating from Britain's Open University, which pioneered approaches to instruction developed by educational technologists, is that of David Harris.⁴⁸

Harris wonders whether the actual practice of open learning is as open as is usually supposed. He associates the instructional designer's process of simplifying, clarifying and organizing the text with 'closing' it as well, resulting in a 'hidden curriculum' which arises from the 'unstated but powerful and often highly conventional expectations of pupils or colleagues in practice'.⁴⁹ He urges educators to look at openness not just in abstract terms, but in micropolitical ones - what actually happens? How do learners use the materials? Who has the power?⁵⁰

The Open University has attempted to counter the worst excesses of a 'teachist' approach to education through its strong regional networks; foundation courses, which look at personal as well as intellectual development; and compulsory summer-school sessions, which provide the sorts of interaction, personal support and challenges to rote learning which otherwise might be missing. Current ICDE president David Sewart, through both his writings⁵¹ and his actions as director of Regional Academic Services, has been a major force in these developments.

More recently, the Evans and Nation book, *Critical Reflections on Distance Education*,⁵² goes much further in challenging the dominant place of what the editors term the 'instructional technologist' approach to distance education. In their 'critical reflections', the editors are concerned that students are treated passively as 'objects' in such systems, and that these systems impose bureaucratic structures on 'teachers' which severely limit their ability to induce students to take responsibility for and to challenge their own learning.

The separation of teacher and student, the disempowerment of students from making decisions about their own learning, the requirements of production schedules, postal dispatches and the many other aspects of working education, spin an intricate web around the teacher in distance education.⁵³

Evans and Nation and their colleagues have produced a refreshing and extremely welcome volume in its concern for the quality of the learning experience of distance students and its candour in confronting the challenges and problems this mode of education faces.

Even where criticism of educational technological approaches has been less focused, almost all institutions using these techniques have tried to compensate for them by offering more interactive modes of instruction and support alongside the basic course package. Perhaps the most notable has been the use of Telephone and face-to-face tutors to assist students in coping with the demands of centrally prepared home-study courses, although, as discussed immediately below, there are often severe limitations on the tutor's authority, and there can be much confusion about his or her role *vis-à-vis* the built-in instructional design. It should also be admitted that the motivation for supplementing and complementing course packages has come more from concerns about high student-attrition rates than intrinsic commitments to developing independent and self-directed learners.

COURSE-DELIVERY SYSTEMS

While thoroughly and slickly prepared course materials did much to promote distance learning in the early days, it was quickly evident that many part-time adult students needed a lot more personal and academic support than that provided by the traditional correspondence mode of delivery. Students who had not engaged in formal learning for some time, many of whom had doubts about their own learning abilities, were expected to be strongly self-motivated, to have excellent time-management and study skills and to perform a great deal of reading and writing in their own time with a minimum of guidance and feedback.

In response, mainly because of very low completion rates among first time students, universities have developed much more sophisticated and extensive support services and further enhancements to the basic course-delivery model. In more densely populated areas, such as Europe, open universities have offered regular in-person tutorials at regional or local centres (the British Open University has 13 regional centres, each of which is served by from 10 to 20 'study' centres, most within 50 miles of the majority of its students). In more sparsely populated regions, such as in Canada and Australia, in-person seminars have been supplemented by Telephone tutoring, seminars linking various groups by Telephone via a teleconferencing 'bridge', and various models of computer-assisted learning.

Moreover, universities are increasingly patterning their course delivery to the needs of special groups. At Athabasca, for instance, onsite full-time teaching, with strong local counselling and advising support, is offered in several native study centres to respond to the particular needs of the local culture in each case. A similar scheme is in operation in a number of federal penitentiaries. In providing upgrading and degree and certificate programmes to employees of major corporations, the university often offers classes on site in the company with students pursuing the Materials in their own time at home.

A recent and exciting innovation, in process at Athabasca and at the Open University of British Columbia, is the 'capstone' programme, whereby university courses, still relying on the basic course packages, are offered on college campuses to allow graduates of the two-year 'university transfer' programmes in the colleges to complete their university degree while staying in their own community. The courses are taught, often by the community-college instructors themselves, with the support of such local facilities as the registrar's office, library and student-services units. The university retains control of quality by hiring the instructors,

monitoring the curriculum through its course packages, and setting and marking the final examinations. While not 'distance education' in its purest sense, this is a progressive step towards the achievement of the goals of open learning, as many of the students would otherwise have to leave their community to attend university even if they could secure a place in a campus-based institution in another town, they probably could not afford the additional living expenses.

Again, the idea is an excellent one but its implementation poses a number of issues for management. In fact, the quality-control measures cited above pose a number of contradictions between the dual needs of central control and local adaptation.

As noted above, instructional designers tend to design the courses so that they stand on their own. In this conception, a tutor's role is merely to assist the student to understand the basic design of the course and to work through it, primarily independently. In practice, however, universities tend to hire well-qualified tutors (usually with at least a master's degree in the relevant discipline) to protect their academic integrity. The result is often an instructor who is too well-qualified to serve merely as a facilitating agent. A good tutor will want to adapt the Materials to local needs, to introduce new Materials and to 'teach' the students in ways not originally envisioned by the course design. This can cause problems, both for the implementation of the course and for the role of the tutor.

This problem is exacerbated by the common tendency of such institutions to set independently marked central examinations. An understandable practice, given concerns about academic standards in such a loose and widespread organization, this can be extremely frustrating for tutors and students alike if the final examination doesn't reflect local issues or a particular slant on the course offered by the tutor. One solution is to give the tutors some control over final examination questions, and hence to encourage rather than frustrate their attempts to make the Materials meaningful to the local student group.

Research by Bagley and Challis⁵⁴ underlines the difficulties faced by tutors in open-learning systems. If the courses are very flexible, and students are self-paced and start at different times, the tutor must be able to respond to questions on all aspects of the course at any given moment (as opposed to the university lecturer who can prepare for each individual class knowing that all students are at the same point in the course). They found that faculty participating in open-learning schemes frequently had difficulty in adjusting to threats to the control they were used to in the classroom - control over content, over pacing and, to a considerable degree, over what and how the student learns. They found role confusion and ambivalence towards the whole question of student autonomy.

A particular dimension of this conflict was that between the teacher's commitment to the notion of the self-actualized adult student who takes full responsibility for his or her learning and a natural feeling of responsibility for the student's success or failure. Open-learning institutions are always having to make compromises on this score, sometimes for fiscal reasons and sometimes in recognition that even (or especially?) adult students need support and direction if they are to succeed.

As Bagley and Challis express it:

It is, on the surface, much easier to grant adult students the right to autonomy but if that student is entering, or re-entering, the learning situation with trepidation and perhaps with some learning difficulties, the conscientious teacher is likely to feel no less concern.⁵⁵

Athabasca University confronted this problem recently in tightening up what had been a very liberal policy enabling students to suspend study for extensive periods without cost or penalty. This had been cited as a keystone of the university's flexibility in ensuring that such student problems as a temporary illness, responsibilities to an employer for a conference or short-term project, or a farmer's need to bring in the harvest did not prevent the student from pursuing the course. On the other side of the ledger, this practice was tying up a lot of resources, notably tutors thus not available to other students, and it was found that very few students who suspended study ever completed the course. Hence, it was replaced by a policy which allowed students to extend studies for three months for an additional fee, although there was also unofficial provision for exceptions under compelling circumstances.

STUDENT-SUPPORT SERVICES

The persistence of high attrition rates, despite revisions in course design and delivery, has led many researchers to identify 'personal' (as opposed to 'institutional') factors as essential to understanding why students have difficulty in pursuing education at a distance. Continuing high attrition, despite improvements in support services, has led to a greater emphasis on pre-admission services, which are intended to evaluate readiness of the student to learn via home study without renegeing on the institution's commitment to open admissions. Hence, while students are not denied access to the institution, a lot more attention is paid to what they will need in order to succeed, to prevent the open door from being a revolving one.⁵⁶

Imaginative and effective orientation, information, and counselling and advising programmes have been developed which enable students to test their basic skills, motivation and intentions against the provision of and demands made by distance-education programmes. These pre-admission programmes have met with considerable success, but they introduce new costs, may not be universally accessible, and, being more in the affective domain, may not have as much political support within the university as do more 'cerebral' matters such as academic programmes or more money for research.

An institution's commitment to strong student services is critical to the fundamental value of opening up access to a university education. It is one of the critical tests of the extent to which resource allocation and decision-making are based on a value-driven approach or a more political one, as described in my contribution to the 1988 ICDE Conference in OSLO.⁵⁷

To succeed in an independent-study environment, a student needs to be very clear about his or her learning objectives; to have effective reading, writing, study and time-management skills; and to have a strong sense of self and the motivation requisite to overcoming the inevitable barriers to success such as competing priorities, lack of interaction with peers and a less than ideal environment for study. The ultimate challenge is not only to provide such services when students need them, but to develop each student's capacity to look after his or her own learning needs.

As institutions committed to lifelong learning, open universities must do more than provide access and support. In every day, in every way, they must be passionate advocates of lifelong learning and do everything they can to help their students develop the attitudes and skills which will maximize their opportunities for it.

The development of independent learning as a fundamental institutional value

In this chapter, the case for the development of independent learning as a fundamental institutional value and hence as a measure of its success has been advocated. This is not to suggest that such indicators as completion and persistence rates and costs per completion or cost per graduate should be abandoned, for both institutions and governments will always need such basic data to assess their effectiveness. Instead, the call here is for a higher-order objective, one which will provide leadership for all levels and types of education.

The dice may be loaded against the development of independent learners, but this is no excuse not to pursue this ideal thoroughly and aggressively. The starting point is to instil this commitment as a value fundamental to the direction and management of the institution and hence to address a number of key issues from this perspective.

Moore⁵⁸ has offered an interesting starting point, offering three major implications of such a commitment - training tutors and course writers in self-directed learning, offering student-support services on a demand-only basis, and decoupling the teaching function from the accreditation function. Morrison⁵⁹ has taken up the latter point and challenged the whole notion of university accreditation in looking to the future of postsecondary education.

Evans and Nation⁶⁰ have criticized the instructional industrialists for their failure to recognize and encourage the autonomy of adults in their own learning, and decried the conservative and passive nature of our institutions:

Distance education uses its textual, curricular and pedagogical processes to marginalize and dissolve the self-directedness of people's learning, and confines them to a system of learning which reflects and aids the reproduction of the ideological and structural conditions of society.⁶¹

Whether or not these perspectives and objectives, are realistic and feasible, they are stimulating challenges to the whole way we view and evaluate our open universities. As a process, they combat smugness and complacency and force those of us working in such institutions to question what we take for granted, to live up to our ideals, and to provide the kinds of learning institutions which not only meet the needs of incoming students but also challenge them to develop themselves in ways they had never previously envisioned. In the process, it is inevitable that the same thing will happen to us, the staff members of such institutions.

Whether or not we choose to try to measure the extent to which our graduates have become independent learners, our institutions are being judged informally on this basis every day - by graduate schools and by employers who are still not very knowledgeable about what open learning institutions are and how to evaluate their products. In the short run, we are doing well, because our earlier graduates were, almost by definition, already independent learners, but the real proof is in what happens from now on as we attract more and more traditional learners, many just out of secondary school.

Notes

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3. Ibid, pp 115, 117.
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