



OPEN UNIVERSITIES: A REVOLUTION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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Learning can no longer be viewed as a ritual that one engages in during only the early part of one's life.

—UNESCO¹

ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

During the second half of the 20th century, “open universities” have revolutionized lifelong learning in many countries. These institutions were inspired by democratization, growing demands for tertiary education, technological developments well suited to mass education, and the human resource needs of modernizing societies.²

At most open universities, a substantial portion of the students are seeking regular university degrees, and another significant portion are engaged in lifelong learning, advancing their knowledge and skills for occupational, family, and personal purposes. Open universities generally are distinguished from traditional universities in at least three ways:

- They are *open* to a broad segment of the population; usually serving those from social groups that previously had not access to higher education and sometimes admitting students regardless of their prior educational credentials.
- They are *open* in the courses they offer, usually including traditional college courses, career-development courses, and personal growth courses.
- They are *open* to different times and places of study; sometimes the time and place is determined entirely by the student.³

Open universities have based their instruction on self-study printed materials, often called “correspondence materials” because they are sent through the mail system. They include texts, study guides, and workbooks. These printed materials often are supplemented with small laboratory kits for science courses, periodic face-to-face instruction in geographically dispersed study centers, and some course delivery and instructor-student communication through telecommunications technologies—radio, telephone, television, and video.⁴ The Internet and the World Wide Web are being adopted by some for instructional and promotional purposes, but access

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by these means is still impossible for most citizens in developing countries.

Open universities have been a great success, by several indicators, in most countries where they have been established. More than a dozen have total enrollments in excess of 100,000 students, and their costs are generally one-half to one-third those of the traditional universities in the same country. In addition, several have evidence of high-quality instruction.⁵

EXAMPLES OF OPEN UNIVERSITIES

The following are examples of the lifelong education programs provided by open universities. The information is taken from Sir John Daniel's *Mega Universities & Knowledge Media* and Keith Harry's *Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning*, unless otherwise indicated.⁶

China TV University

China TV University is the largest university in the world, with a total enrollment of 850,000 in 1994. The system includes a central unit that develops and produces course materials, 44 provincial units that also develop and produce such materials, 1,550 Education Centers at the county or company level, and 30,000 tutorial groups. The Education Centers have pressured the system to provide more job training, courses of local interest, and continuing education. Although China TV University serves mostly urban residents, there are plans to broadcast some of its programs more widely, and 20 million farmers reportedly already have received “intermediate education of a practical interest” through an associated unit. (For more information about China TV University, see <http://www.crtvu.edu.cn>.)

Indira Gandhi National Open University

India has the second-largest higher education system in the world. By 1980, 20 Indian universities offered correspondence courses, but most were considered to be of low quality. Indira Gandhi University was established to provide high-quality distance education and coordinate standards for tertiary distance education throughout India. From the beginning, it was planned that only one-third of the students would be in degree programs, and the rest would be in shorter programs directly related to employment. The programs of study include computer education, nursing, agriculture, food and nutrition, creative writing, and child care. The university has been able to secure only 90 minutes of nationally broadcast television each week and no radio coverage, so instruction is mostly by printed materials and required periodic attendance in 229 study centers located primarily in urban areas. Despite those

constraints, and competition from seven other state open universities, Indira Gandhi University had 162,540 registered students 1998. In the late 1990s, the University began establishing high-capacity telecommunications links with 16 regional centers and, later, some of the study centers. Satellite communications systems are also in use now. (For more information about Indira Gandhi University, see <http://www.ignou.org/index.htm>.)

Sukhothai Thammanthirat Open University

Sukhothai Thammanthirat Open University (Thailand) is committed to lifelong education, expansion of educational opportunities for secondary school graduates, and personnel development. It provides academic degree programs, short training programs, and individual courses. About 300,000 students are enrolled in the nondegree programs, and three-fourths of the students are from rural areas. The university combines printed materials with 1,100 30-minute television broadcasts annually and 150 20-minute radio programs each week. It also makes extensive use of physical facilities scattered throughout the country. It operates 87 Regional and Provincial Study Centers for the orientation of new students, tutorials, and examinations. It has Special Study Centers in government agencies, such as hospitals, regional agricultural offices, and government offices that have laboratory and other facilities needed for the study. It also has eighty Corners located in provincial libraries that provide library and education media support for students. Telephone communication between students and instructors is common. The University hopes to expand its services with cable television and satellite television broadcasts accompanied by two-way audio links. (For more information about Sukhothai Thammanthirat Open University, see www.stou.ac.th/eng.)

Universidad Nacional Abierta

Universidad Nacional Abierta (Venezuela), Venezuela's answer to the rising social demand for higher education and the scarcity of study opportunities for adults, focuses on providing high-quality education and serving working individuals. It also attempts to spur innovation in individualized and self-directed learning. The programs are organized into five sections: Introductory Courses, General Studies, Professional Studies, Postgraduate Studies, and Continuing Education. The goal of the continuing education section is to elevate the level of knowledge of the general population in specific disciplines of science, technology, and culture. Instruction is by printed correspondence materials, audiovisual media, and face-to-face instruction at 21 regional study centers. (For more information about Universidad Nacional Abierta, see www.una.edu.ve.)

University of South Africa

The University of South Africa has been open to all races since before and throughout the apartheid era. In 1995, it had 130,000 students, 47% of whom are black and 40% are white. More than 80% are employed, and the average age is 31. Almost a third of the students are schoolteachers. Applicants who have not completed high school are admitted conditionally and are restricted in the number of courses that they can take during the first year. There are more than 2,000 course modules; most are developed by individual instructors, but some courses are being developed by teams. Instruction is primarily by texts and printed study guides, sometimes supplemented by audiocassettes and some radio broadcasts. Instructors and students communicate by mail and telephone. The limited numbers of face-to-face tutorials, staffed by part-timers, are being expanded. The University of South Africa's most famous graduate is Nelson Mandela, who studied while jailed. (For more information about University of South Africa, see www.unisa.ac.za.)

CHINA'S UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

With the increase of the elderly population and the compulsory retirement system in the last two decades, China has been facing a big challenge in meeting the needs of the elderly in learning. Various forms of education and learning programs have been developed for seniors all over the country, and the University of the Third Age (UTA) has been the most successful program in promoting lifelong learning in that country. However, existing UTAs can hardly meet the increasing demand, so the use of new technology, such as remote teaching and the Internet, has been explored to make learning accessible to more elderly.

The Development of UTAs in China

The first UTA in China was established in Shangdong Province in 1983. Since then, the UTA concept has been accepted widely, and UTAs have spread throughout China. Statistics show that the number of UTAs in China had reached 16,676 by the end of 1999, and more than 1.38 million seniors were studying at them.

The programs for lifelong learning, especially the development of UTAs, have been supported and encouraged by the Chinese government. The Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Legal Rights and Interests of the Elderly, passed by the Chinese National People's Congress in 1996, stipulates that the elderly have the right to continuing education, and the State will develop education of the elderly and encourage the establishment and operation of various kinds of UTAs. In 1994, 10 of the ministries of

the Chinese central government jointly worked out the National Seven Year Development Plan of the Work on Aging, which mobilizes and requires local governments to devise a development plan to educate the elderly.

To promote the development of UTAs in China, the China Association of Universities for the Aged (CAUA), a network organization, was established in 1988. It now has 207 member UTAs. CAUA publishes a magazine on lifelong learning, which provides guidance to Chinese UTAs, and it has set up a research group on the development of textbooks for UTAs.

Most of the UTAs are established, financed, and operated by government, but some are set up by the private sector. For instance, of the 207 members of CAUA, 26 were established by the private sector. Some of the privately operated UTAs also receive financial assistance from the government. Normally, a UTA is different and separate from an ordinary university: it has its own classrooms, and the courses offered are designed with the interests and demands of the senior students in mind. Popular courses include calligraphy, painting, literature, cooking, gardening, health care, music, dancing, and computers. In rural areas, the courses primarily teach the technology needed in agriculture.

The Use of New Technology

In 1998, a TV UTA was opened in Zhe Jiang Province with the joint efforts of the Committee on Aging, the Personnel Department, the Trade Union, the Financial Department, the Labor Department, and the Administrative Department on Radio and TV of Zhe Jiang Province. Zhe Jiang TV UTA has more than 10 courses, including medicine, health care, calligraphy, painting, literature, history, psychology, and science and technology. In addition, courses may be added or adjusted according to the interests and demands of the elderly. The TV UTA program is offered from 8:30 to 9:20 A.M. every Friday; there are two classes of 25 minutes each. The same TV UTA program is rebroadcast every Saturday. The examination is conducted in the form of a written test or by discussion among the students. Students receive diplomas after they have completed eight courses. Zhe Jiang TV UTA has branches in 22 cities and counties in the province where the elderly can register.

With the development of the Internet, Shanghai TV UTA opened an online UTA in 1999 in cooperation with the Shanghai TV Station. Although it is the only online UTA in China, and most elderly people do not have access to the Internet, it represents the new development trend. This new technology is expected to make lifelong learning more easily accessible to the elderly. (For more on Shanghai online UTA, see www.ol.com.cn or www.shtvu.edu.cn.)

THE FUTURE: PROMISE AND PITFALLS

As a result of population growth and modernization, the need for accessible lifelong formal education is swelling worldwide. Open universities have several advantages in meeting these needs.

- > They have a broader reach through their respective countries than any other institution of higher education.
- > Many of their degree courses can serve double duty as lifelong learning for adults who have not earned a university degree, and as a way to broaden or update expertise for those who have such a degree.
- > By the very fact that they are universities, they convey status to the students, including those who are not engaged in degree programs. It has been noted that adult formal education is often undertaken partly to gain self-esteem and impress others.⁷
- > Open universities' costs are generally modest for the level and quality of training provided.

What will the future bring? The following are three scenarios by which spreading computer and telecommunications technologies may affect open universities and their lifelong learners. None of them is assured, but all are possible.

- > *Scenario 1:* Open universities' growing use of telecommunications networks to deliver course content and communicate with students improves the quality and timeliness of the instruction. The instruction will be more graphic, engaging, up-to-date, and interactive, and open universities will thrive. Popular sentiment will require continuing print materials for those without access to telephone systems, but those materials will suffer from neglect, and the digital divide will widen temporarily. Then, probably before 2010, satellite wireless Web and US\$200 solar-powered downlink/uplink computers will bring access to the remotest villages of developing countries. Each will have at least one shared station. Open universities will use the graphics and audio capabilities of the Web to create courses for those without literacy skills.
- > *Scenario 2:* Open universities will put some of their courses, particularly those aimed at professionals, on the World Wide Web. Citizens in one country occasionally will enroll in a course from another country. Initially, differing languages will limit their options, but within a decade, automatic translators probably will overcome that barrier. This will be a boon for individual learners, enhance knowledge transfer between countries, and foster international understanding. It will also be an opportunity for enterprising open universities to expand their services and earn foreign revenues, as the UK Open University is attempting to do with its entry into

European and U.S. markets. Conversely, it might mean the death of some open universities that fail to compete successfully for students.

- *Scenario 3:* Artificial intelligence will be used to create computerized adaptive tutors that optimize instruction for each individual learner, taking into account his or her interests, learning styles, prior knowledge, and progress through the course content. These tutors could enhance the progress of nontraditional learners and those with learning disabilities, while simultaneously reducing the costs of instruction.

Open universities probably will go down in the history books as one of the most important educational innovations of the 20th century. They have provided unprecedented access to a broad range of degree programs and lifelong learning opportunities; they have instilled hope and made it a reality; they have helped to preserve national cultures and introduced progress; and they have become popular national resources.

In all likelihood, rapidly spreading ICTs will expand open universities' capabilities further to provide lifelong learning opportunities,⁸ except for those institutions that may be undermined by the technology.

ENDNOTES

¹ UNESCO (December 20, 1999). Learning without Frontiers. Available at: www.unesco.org/education/lwf.

² Harry, K. (1999). *Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning*. London: Routledge.

³ Jenkins, J. (1993). Distance Education for Small Countries. In K.M. (ed.). *Policy, Planning and Management of Education in Small States*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: www.worldbank.org.

⁴ Daniel, J.S. (1999). *Mega-Universities & Knowledge Media*. London: Kogan Page Limited.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Harry, op cit.; Daniel, op cit.

⁷ Tough, A. (1979). *The Adult's Learning Projects*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

⁸ Lockwood, F. (ed.) (1995). *Open and Distance Learning Today*. London: Routledge.