

**Rethinking the relevance of higher education.
Which models could best respond to the needs of 21st century society?**

E21 Symposium:

Algonquin College; La Cité; Carleton University; Université d'Ottawa

The Overriding Imperative: Open Higher Education

Sir John Daniel

Chancellor; Acsenda School of Management, Vancouver

(Research Associate: Contact North | Contact Nord)

It is a pleasure to join you for this symposium. I am honoured to be on the programme with much younger colleagues of longstanding like Stephen Murgatroyd and Stephen Downes. I speak to you from Paris, where I am dealing with some personal affairs that have been in abeyance for the last eighteen months. Travelling internationally is now stressful. Despite having been fully vaccinated in Canada months ago, I will have undergone five covid tests in recent weeks by the time I fly home to Vancouver tomorrow. Given the error rate of these tests, one always worries that the next one might be a showstopper!

Heureusement, j'ai reçu mon *pass sanitaire* pour l'union européenne deux jours avant de commencer à voyager ici en France. Ce *pass sanitaire*, qui est arrivé après une attente de trois semaines, certifie que l'union européenne accepte nos certificats de vaccination canadiens. Il est requis pour loger dans les hôtels, voyager en train, visiter les musées et entrer dans les grands magasins. Si vous envisagez d'aller à l'union européenne, je vous conseille de ne pas quitter le Canada sans l'obtenir.

While I absolutely accept that controlling the spread of covid-19 is vital, these constraints on international travel are still a shock. During my 50-year career in open and distance learning I have been to 124 countries, including many that have recently been on various travel red lists. Today I could not carry out the duties that I had at UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning without spending much of my time in quarantine or self-isolation. And that is without mentioning countries like Afghanistan, China, Ethiopia and even the United States, to which travel has lost its appeal for other reasons.

Over these 50 years in open and distance learning I came to take openness and globalisation for granted. I am distressed that openness and globalisation are no longer granted and cannot be taken.

So today I shall focus on openness. For five decades my professional identity has been associated with open distance learning or ODL - even my e-mail address includes it.

My task, quoting the brief that Farbod Karimi has given me, is to 'present the role of industry and institutions of learning before turning it over to Andrew Newman of KPMG, Kenneth Chapman of Desire2Learn, and Gabrielle Kolotinsky of Carleton University for comment'. So here goes!

Our symposium topic is, *Rethinking the relevance of higher education. Which models could best respond to the needs of 21st century society?* and I have titled these remarks, *The Overriding Imperative: Open Higher Education*.

Why have I chosen that title?

Covid-19 has created major upheavals at all levels of education. It may take years to repair the damage to children's education caused by K-through-12 school closures, even in countries like Canada. The pandemic has shown conclusively that, except for occasional activities at the upper levels of high school, online learning is not effective for the generality of children.

But our symposium is about higher education so I shall focus there. When we look at the impact of the pandemic on colleges and universities through the lens of distance learning, there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that the sudden transition to emergency online teaching, which occurred in March 2020, obliged millions of students and faculty to learn about online teaching methods. I observed this process from the privileged vantage point of chancellor of the Acsenda School of Management in Vancouver and was very impressed at how well everyone coped with the change. At the time we thought that this challenge would be behind us by last Christmas, but as the months went by Acsenda - and most higher education institutions - had to dig in for the long haul and make more substantial adjustments, notably by paying more attention to asynchronous distance learning.

The bad news is that many of these millions of learners and teachers concluded that emergency remote teaching was all there was to distance learning. Here I shall stress only one aspect of the long tradition of distance learning that is forgotten in this perspective - which is openness. We are in danger of replacing *open distance learning* with *closed remote teaching*.

Openness must be central to any model of higher education that claims to meet the needs of 21st century society. Historically distance learning has been the primary exemplar and driver of the principle of openness in higher education. The stimulus for distance learning has, in turn, been the emergence of new technologies.

In the mid-19th century, the combination of printing and railways created postal services and saw the birth of correspondence education. Although a few universities, like Queen's in Canada, offered some correspondence courses, for a century correspondence education was run by commercial enterprises and attracted learners seeking to upgrade their job skills in areas like bookkeeping and shorthand.

In the mid-20th century distance learning at scale erupted into higher education with the creation of the UK Open University. First known as the *University of the Air* because radio and TV broadcasts were part of its teaching strategy, it was renamed *The Open University* when given its royal charter in 1969. Its most radical innovation was not creating a huge multi-media distance learning system, impressive though that was, but the removal of any academic requirements for admission. Students enrolled based on 'first come, first served' up to the capacity that the OU could handle in any one year. It became the UK's largest university within two years and during my own tenure as vice-chancellor, from 1990-2001, enrolments rose from 100,000 to 200,000.

I pause to note that the Open University was created against the backdrop of the almost universal opposition of the UK's existing universities, the media, and the political classes.

They were hostile to the idea of a university that used modern media for teaching and considered the abolition of entry requirements to be the end of civilisation as they knew it

The OU only happened because of the enthusiasm of prime minister Harold Wilson and minister Jennie Lee. Today its teaching-learning model receives high student satisfaction ratings, and its graduates are popular with employers. It produces the UK's third highest number of graduates employed by the world's largest tech companies, exceeded only by Oxford and Cambridge, and claims more CEOs than any other UK university. This is what a comprehensive open access university can achieve.

My final example of new technologies stimulating distance learning is MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), which Stephen Murgatroyd mentioned this morning. They are a 21st century example of conducting distance education at scale for a global audience. The number of MOOC learners worldwide was estimated at 180 million in 2020. They were studying some 16,000 MOOCs offered by nearly 1,000 universities. One-third of all learners who ever registered on a MOOC platform did so in 2020, which was evidence of a pandemic-induced surge of interest in free online learning.

The Open University saw the number of visitors to its OpenLearn website of 1,000 free courses jump from 8.9 to 13.6 million between 2019 and 2020. Surveys showed that one in seven UK adults started an online course during the pandemic.

My point is that open access, as in these examples, must be central to any model of higher education that claims to respond to the needs of 21st century society. This is implicit in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, which enjoin us to: '*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*', and to '*ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.*'

These goals embrace hundreds of millions of people. We will not reach them if we limit online learning to the smallish groups that are formally enrolled in our institutions - what I referred to earlier as *closed remote teaching*. What we need is *open distance learning*. Individuals, not institutions, should decide what they need to learn. Meeting the assessment requirements during their chosen courses should be the criterion for progressing, not some *ab initio* selection process.

As the Open University puts it: 'our approach at the OU is non-selective. We see our task as helping applicants to decide whether they want to select us, and whether they are ready for studying, by offering hundreds of free 'try before you buy' courses, diagnostic assessments, personal advice, and access courses that are also free for many students. Our approach is 'you decide'. In his earlier intervention Stephen Downes expressed strong support for such open access policies. So far, since the OU received its Royal Charter in 1969, two million learners studying modules, certificates, diplomas, degrees, higher apprenticeships, master's degrees and doctorates have made that choice.

That's a model for higher education in 21st century society. As everything in our lives becomes increasingly digitally enabled at a lower and lower cost, as the affordability of campus and residential higher education is increasingly questioned, and as its infrastructure

adds to the carbon footprint of human activity, open distance learning is a model for a fairer and greener future too.

I look forward to comments from Andrew, Kenneth and Gabrielle.