

Session 7: Workshop 2

Title: Partnerships in distance learning: the genesis of the United States Open University

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Introduction:

Thirty years of success had made the UK Open University (OU) the world's leading large-scale provider of higher education at a distance. Over these years, a number of other institutions have come into being, or developed, in partnership with the OU thereby benefiting from its reputation and experience. Such partnerships have commonly fitted one of the following four models:

- the OU has helped countries establish new open universities (e.g. the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India; the Arab Open University)
- it has provided ready-made courses to other universities (eg, Open University of Hong Kong)
- it has worked with local partners to provide whole programmes, studied for OU credit, in order to expand the capacity for higher education in a particular country quickly and inexpensively (e.g. in Bulgaria, Hungary, India, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Slovakia).
- conventional universities, especially in the USA, have linked with the OU to acquire the expertise to launch their own distance education programmes.

Experience with this last type of partnership in the late 1990s persuaded the OU to create a US Open University in order to facilitate greater efficiencies and effectiveness. The USOU was formally created in 1998 and began operations in 2000 using a blend of courses and programmes sourced both from the OU and from North American universities. The OU's two main objectives in pursuing this path were first to create a quality open university structure in the US and second to gain financial return. The ultimate long-term goal was to try and create, over the years, a network of like-minded institutions.

The lessons learned from our partnerships:

1. Commitment from the top is a necessary, but not a sufficient pre-condition. It was essential, if progress was to be made, that the institutional heads maintained a strong

personal involvement, urging on their colleagues, keeping in contact with each other and consciously creating proper structures and incentives at the operational level. Commitment is not enough on its own

2. The most secure incentive for commitment from the top is the prospect of clear benefits to the institution if the venture succeeds. It is important, moreover, that the perception of those benefits be widely shared in the institution; and that the benefits are seen to be reciprocal between the partners. The concept of mutual benefit is of key importance.
3. It is best to begin by setting down the objectives and benefits of the venture in writing and translating them into written agreements between the institutions.
4. It is vital to 'knock at the right door' and to deal with the operating hierarchy, not the ancillary units.
5. Distance learning projects need project management and clear lines of authority need to be identified.
6. Other essential ingredients include: "buy-in" from academic staff, the commitment of individuals on both sides, and mutual institutional respect. The best way to deliver this was to have as many players as possible visit the Open University early on in the project. Such visits remove doubt about the feasibility of distance learning and provide reassurance about the academic quality of what is proposed. A second important tactic is to hold intensive workshops for those involved on both sides at regular intervals. The greatest operational difference between distance teaching and classroom teaching is the teamwork that distance teaching demands. It can take a little time for some academics to become accustomed to this.
7. It is important to be as open and honest as possible with each other. This applies particularly if one partner is receiving external funds for the project.

Conclusions:

The overall conclusion was that if the OU was serious about working in the USA, even in partnership, it needed to be a US university with US staff and US accreditation. It was decided that in the highly developed and sophisticated US higher education system the OU could make its most effective contribution through the establishment of an independent American university that shared the goals and values of the UK Open University. Three other factors reinforced this approach:

- much as the OU liked its US partner universities, it did not wish to be entirely dependent on them for its presence in the USA
- the USA is a more litigious environment than the UK and the OU wanted to protect itself from that
- many US corporations will only pay tuition fees for courses and institutions that are US accredited

Thus the Open University set up the United States Open University as a 501 (c) 3 non-profit corporation registered in Delaware and licensed as an institution of higher education in that state. Its legal status is as a private university which has close links

with the UK Open University. It brings to the US the values of a public university - and this is one of its unusual features. As the USOU mission statement declares, it is "Open as to people (we seek to reduce all major barriers to higher education and works to accommodate students from every background and level of preparation), open as to time (students may study whenever it fits their schedule), and open to the world (we are opening up an international academic community to students and faculty".

The USOU is now going through the American accreditation processes (at both the regional and national levels) and hopes to gain accreditation later in 2001. Student recruitment will remain difficult until then. Meanwhile, the few hundred students already enrolled are studying a range of upper division and graduate courses adapted from the UKOU and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.