'THIS DOOR IS ALARMED'
- 35 years of attempting to widen participation in the UKOU

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ABSTRACT

The UK Open University has been in the business of attempting to widen participation in higher education for 35 years. This article gives a brief history of widening participation in the OU, surveys some of the issues involved including a brief analysis of the costs and benefits, and reports on the successes and failures of a recent set of widening participation projects.

It concludes that whilst there have been some successes, the 'paradox of the title' means that the OU has not made the progress in widening participation that some of its founders had hoped. Nevertheless the OU remains the largest single institution in the UK encouraging entrance to higher education for students with low previous educational qualifications and its experience may be of interest to other institutions.

The OU's most important contribution to widening participation appears to be the production of access materials such as the 'Openings' courses although there is still scope for community-based projects. However the OU is currently moving towards a policy of requiring its students to have access to the Internet by 2007. Current evidence suggests that access by disadvantaged groups will consequently be greatly restricted to the point where the OU's widening participation mission may be effectively closed down and the OU will become 'just another university'.

KEYWORDS widening participation, educationally disadvantaged students, low previous educational qualifications, 'Openings' Courses, Open University, e-learning, retention, costs and benefits

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The history of widening participation in the OU

The Open University has played a unique role in British Higher Education for more than 35 years. It was originally set up with a specific purpose (amongst others) of widening access to university level education using the demotic media of television and radio – its original title was 'The University of the Air'. That title changed before it opened when it actually used the more orthodox medium of correspondence materials to convey the substance of its courses. But its key characteristic – that no entry qualifications were needed to get in – survived these early changes in the University and is still the unique feature of the OU today – although no longer wholly unquestioned within the organisation. The OU is now the largest University in the UK with nearly 200,000 part-time students studying nearly 500 courses at a distance.

However from the start there was an inherent contradiction in its philosophy. The Open University "had to be a university with no concessions" as its founder Jenny Lee remarked, "…I didn't believe we could get it through if we lowered our standards" (Lee, ca. 1970). This attitude engendered a dichotomy in the institution which is reflected in its name – what Halsey et al (1980) called 'the paradox in its title'. This paradox suggests that the Open University can be viewed as two institutions sharing, sometimes uncomfortably, the same premises. There is the 'Open' – all about welcoming low qualified students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, supporting them, demystifying university study, helping them overcome their previous educational experience and basically keeping students in. Then there is the 'University' – about academic standards, assessment comparability with other universities and sifting selected students out.

In the first few years of the University's existence this contradiction was not very apparent. There was a reservoir of well motivated and often well qualified students, many of them teachers, queuing to get in. Success rates amongst those early cohorts were high (overall graduation rates were around 60%) and although those rates subsequently began to drop amongst successive cohorts there seemed no particular cause for concern.

In the later 70's, however, the dichotomy between the University's two parts began to become clearer as less well-qualified applicants began to enter and retention rates began to drop faster. Overall retention (from entry to graduation) has always been difficult to measure in the OU but graduation rates fell to around 30% and it appeared that a third or more of the new students entering the OU in the late 70's and 80's did not get as far as submitting the first assignment.

This was the origin of the famous 'revolving door' analogy (Mackintosh and Woodley, 1975), with its image of a open door to new students that was, in fact, a revolving door which took in many students and promptly whirled them out again. A similar analogy (1978) was due to the then Director of the OU's Regional Tutorial Services David Grugeon – 'Educational Passchendaelism' with its image of thousands of soldiers thrown into No-Man's Land against the machine guns in the hope that some would get through to the other side. Woodley now

says that his analogy was unfair to revolving doors which play an important role in stopping people entering tall buildings from being blown over by strong draughts, (Woodley, 2005). Perhaps a better analogy might now be a door which has a sign saying 'This Door is Alarmed' and which deters potential students from entering at the outset.

Current UK government funding arrangements may have exacerbated the paradox of the title, particularly in recruitment. It makes financial sense for the university to recruit students who are more likely to be successful; such students will generate more income in terms of grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Consequently the University's Marketing Department may be tempted to recruit from students with, for example, a higher educational background. It is suspected by some observers that this is already the case - 'the University is targeting those student groups which are easier to retain' (the President of the Open University Students Association Ms J. Jones quoted in OU Academic Board Minutes, 1 December 2004).

Early developments in widening participation

Thus even in the early years of the OU there was concern amongst some observers that it was becoming, and indeed had never stopped being, largely a vehicle for the already qualified and upwardly mobile to gain further qualifications. Whilst this was clearly a vital function some people felt that it should not be the only role for an 'open' university. In particular they felt that its courses were not radically different from those of conventional universities and were not suitable for students with very low previous educational qualifications (peq's) – GCSE's and lower.

This led to the establishment in 1976 of the Committee on Continuing Education (the 'Venables Committee') to enquire into the Open University's programme of courses. The Committee concluded (1977) that the University should promote openness by entering the field of community education, and 'access' materials were eventually developed which dealt with some of the essentials of human experience from birth and bringing up teenagers to death. There was still some ambivalence about the existence of these materials and they were designed to be standalone without any formal tuition. Attempts were made to use existing pre-natal and parental networks to link students in discussion groups but these were never systematised.

Concerns about how the OU might reach educationally underprivileged groups continued and small scale projects were occasionally undertaken. For example Jones (1976) in an internal OU paper 'Given Half a Chance' reported on a project based in Merseyside to recruit students in the Registrar General's Social Classes IV and V (semi and unskilled workers) from existing work and social groups directly onto the OU's Foundation course in social science. He found that attempts to recruit such groups were met with disinterest from employers, employees and trade unions alike and that dropout was high. Nevertheless despite the students' disadvantaged backgrounds there were several successes, and he found evidence for the importance of the cohesiveness of the student group and its relationship with the tutor. His report led to the development of group entry and guaranteed admission schemes in the OU which were designed to allow existing groups of people who might, for instance, already

be studying a continuing education course, to jump the entry queue and enrol as a group, sometimes with the same tutor as their previous course.

As Thorpe (1978) noted, such schemes suggested that the University's original purpose 'still had high priority with its members and external critics alike'. But nevertheless in essence the Open University was 'passively' open rather than 'actively' open – it was not proactive in seeking out educationally disadvantaged or working class students.

During the 80's and 90's bursts of small scale funding became sporadically available which were used to fund small scale access projects such as outreach and 'taster courses' (short courses offering a taste of Open University study – Brightwell, 1983) and other projects to recruit through the community. None could be shown to be conspicuously successful; indeed it was rare for them to be adequately evaluated and costed.

The most substantial effort to widen participation came in the mid-eighties when a number of successful bids were made to the Manpower Services Commission Community Programme (MSC CP). This UK Government programme sought to provide temporary employment and training to unemployed people. The OU used MSC CP funding to set up groups around the UK in which temporary workers drawn from the currently unemployed used the OU's Community courses to offer support to local groups of parents and others. Once again no thorough evaluations were carried out, but the sheer scale of the exercise and the fact that there were few costs to the OU made it one of the largest access projects ever under taken by the University. In particular the use of unemployed people to recruit to the OU's courses seemed to be especially effective in reaching out to otherwise educationally deprived communities. It appeared that the projects were beginning to have some effect when the Government wound down the whole MSC Programme.

Recent developments in widening participation in the OU – the 'Openings Programme'.

The pattern continued into the late 90's with a pattern of relatively short-lived projects with very modest funding, which were usually only about a year long and which were seldom evaluated in ways that made them models for future development. A partial exception to this was the 'Race Equality Project' run the Yorkshire Region of the OU between 1999 and 2002. This used traditional methods of community based outreach workers who made contact with local organisations and attempted to form partnerships with educational organisations of various kinds. Over a period of three years the workers were able to demonstrate a significant increase in the proportion of students recruited from ethnic minorities in the region of the order of 1 percentage point (from 3.3% to 4.4% in the Region compared with an increase from 5.1% to 5.3% in the OU nationally. The report made a number of recommendations for the mainstreaming of the project. However no costs were ever attached to the final report and it seemed likely that the net cost per ethnic minority student recruited was very high – there were about a dozen part-time workers on the project for up to three years.

Nevertheless one spin-off from the project was an impetus given to the establishment of an 'Equal Opportunities' office in the OU which started to collect data on student origins in the OU, as a result of which the OU developed recruitment targets for various categories of students – ethnic minorities, low socio-economic groups, disabled, rurally isolated, and low previous educational qualifications. The first four groups in this list often overlap with low

previous educational qualifications group, so in this article 'very low peq' (less than GCSE) and 'low peq' (1 A level and lower) are taken as general measures of widening participation in the OU, a rough but useful simplification.

Meanwhile in the nineties a debate had been going on within the OU as to whether to enter the field of pre-undergraduate or 'level 0' courses, which might lead on to undergraduate study. For some years the University had produced a range of preparatory materials for new students registered on foundation undergraduate courses but had not entered the field of supported assessed pre-undergraduate courses. The Community Education courses, being about everyday topics and unsupported and un-assessed, were not seen as seriously contributing to preparation for the undergraduate programme. There was some controversy as to whether the University should be producing pre-undergraduate materials and indeed, in a typical 'paradox of the title' debate there was opposition from staff who thought that standards might be compromised if the University (unlike other UK Universities) was seen to be producing 'low level' courses.

The controversy was resolved in favour of setting up a Centre for Widening Participation which produced a range of 'Openings' courses, derived in part from existing undergraduate materials and counting for 10 to 15 credit points towards a degree (a full OU degree requires at least 300 credit points and most undergraduate courses are either 30 or 60 credit points spread over about 9 months). There are now about a dozen such courses on topics ranging from the arts, social science, maths, science and technology and costing £80 and up (there are some free places available). The courses are supported by tutors entirely by proactive phone contact supplemented in some cases by computer conferencing.

In many ways the results of the courses have been encouraging. They have grown steadily and have now recruited between 10000 - 11000 students a year for several years. They have done somewhat better at recruiting from low peq and 'not in paid work' target groups than the OU's Foundation courses and in subsequent participation in those courses, as measured by initial assignment submission rates – see Table 1.

	intake from low peq group	intake from 'not in paid work' group	participated in course	subsequently registered for an undergraduate course.
Openings courses	18%	30%	73%	53%
Foundation courses	9%	25%	68%	-

Table 1
Recruitment and progress on Openings and Foundation courses compared
(from Allen et al, 2000). (n for Openings = about 10,000,
n for Foundation courses = about 33,000)

In addition a follow up study found that former Openings students were more successful in passing their first undergraduate course than students entering directly. This was true both overall and for student with low peq's (Sutton, 2003) – see Table 2.

	passed first undergraduate course	
	all students	low peq students
ex-Openings students	58%	47%
non-Openings students	52%	36%

**Table 2 Progress of ex-Openings and non-Openings students
on undergraduate courses (n = about 33,000)**

These data do not strictly compare like with like since students taking Openings courses may well be better motivated or prepared than students entering directly onto undergraduate courses. Nevertheless the evidence suggests that these courses are an important part of the OU's strategy in increasing enrolment from educationally disadvantaged groups.

The OU's Widening Participation Projects 2000-2005

Staff committed to widening participation in the OU have continued to explore new ways of realising the Open University's educational mission. In the 'Widening Participation Project' begun in 2000, groups and individuals from the University were invited to submit bids against a budget of £450,000 for projects to encourage students from non-traditional educational backgrounds to enter the University. Despite the more than twenty five years that had elapsed since Thorpe's original recognition of the commitment of OU staff to its widening participation purpose, it was clear that there was still enthusiasm amongst many staff, especially in the OU's 13 Regions, and a substantial number of bids were received. Around a dozen were approved, falling into roughly three types:

1. *Gathering intelligence* – projects aimed at finding out more about widening participation issues such as:
- Academic literacy – understanding literacy and language issues facing ethnic minority students entering the OU.
- 'Mapping Project (West Midlands Region) – using mapping techniques to locate areas of low OU penetration in the population.
- 'Understanding diversity' – a study of the student population in the London Region to identify possible populations for targeting.
- 'Learning to Care' (East of England Region) – investigating potential students' and employers' perceptions of higher education in health and social care.

(It is noticeable that the gathering intelligence activities did not include any attempts at literature searches or surveys of work outside the OU. This may be an indication of the OU's self-perception of its uniqueness in British Higher Education. But it is certainly not obvious that the OU has nothing to learn from experience elsewhere).

2. *Innovative methods* aimed at widening participation:

- 'Robofesta' (national) – raising awareness through robot competitions in schools.
- 'OU Talk' (East of England) – using internet chat rooms where potential students could raise issues with existing students, aimed at rurally isolated areas in East Anglia.

3. '*Reachout' projects* – projects which used a variety of methods such as local project and community workers to target specific populations such as:

- FE students in some London FE colleges.
- 'Get on Board' (South Region) – recruiting disabled students through events and contact with disability organisations.
- Recruitment of school students onto short courses (East Midlands).
- 'Increasing and understanding diversity' – mainly targeting ethnic minority students in the North West and Yorkshire through partnerships with IAG Services, Resource and Surestart Centres as well as using 'ambassadors' from ethnic minorities.
- 'Bridges to Learning' – partnerships with UNISON and other organisations to create pathways in the health and social care.
- 'Parent Education programme' (N. Ireland) targeting parents with primary school children.

The total spend on all projects was around £450,000 over three years.

Evaluation

Individual project evaluations were carried out and summaries produced under the headings of 'key findings' and 'recommendations and potential for mainstreaming' (Hart, 2005). The projects themselves appear to fall into several evaluation categories:

1. Projects which of their nature could not be evaluated because they had no clear output that could be measured. The 'Robofesta' project was an example where the only output was that it may have increased awareness of the OU and its opportunities to otherwise hard to reach groups. This is not to say that such projects are worthless: in a sense they are the 'product placement' of widening participation (product placement is the arrangement whereby products such as cars appear in films and TV productions without being specifically advertised. It is hard to estimate the effect of such placements but many companies still think them worthwhile as part of their advertising portfolio).

2. Projects which were unsuccessful for either external or internal reasons. The 'OU Talk' internet chat rooms project was an example of the former: despite substantial publicity attempts to interest enquirers in the online discussion forum it generated little interest or activity. The 'Recruitment of FE students in London' and the 'Learning to Care' projects were both vitiated to the point of failure by various external and internal factors; in the latter case these were often changes in staffing due to the temporary nature of the posts involved.

3. Projects where recruitment was not the aim. Most of the intelligence projects fell into this category and it remains to be seen how far they feed into any subsequent strategies. For example the Mapping project might allow the OU to pinpoint areas of

least penetration by the university but how that might be achieved and how far resources are available to follow up that information is not clear.

4. Projects where data was unclear but which may have had some success. Some of the Reachout projects fell into this category where data was usually insufficient to say more than that (again) 'they had raised awareness of the OU' in the community concerned.

5. Projects where there was clear evidence of some increased recruitment from targeted groups. These were again from the Reachout category, notably the 'Bridges to Learning', and the 'Increasing and understanding diversity' projects. In some cases it was possible to attach a very rough cost to the activity per student recruited. This was often very high – around £800 per student recruited. Such findings raise serious questions about the possibility of mainstreaming activities.

Conclusions from the Widening Participation Projects

Although clear evidence was hard to come by there were some key messages from the evaluation which may be of interest to conventional institutions. Most of these are taken from Hart (op cit) – some of the interpretations are the author's own.

1. Staffing.
Staffing needed to be continuous and dedicated and long term. It was clear from the reports that practically all the projects suffered from changes in staffing due to temporary and part-time contacts. Projects also suffered from a 'parachute effect' where staff are dropped into an area, undertake some short term work and then leave What is needed is sustained contact over lengthy periods – decades rather than years.

2. The need to start from where potential students are, rather than be provider led.
This raised both recruitment, curriculum and delivery issues:

(i) Recruitment material needs to address the question 'where do you want to go this year?' rather than the statement 'these are the courses we offer'. It would not be difficult for instance to offer a simple diagnostic service on the Web or in a leaflet that would allow a potential students to see routes to particular outcomes whether they were career or interest oriented and then estimate what their chances of reaching their goals through the OU might be. That might include the financial risk that they are taking set against the possible rewards that they might gain.

(ii) Curriculum issues need to be addressed in both in content, level and length. It is clear that even the OU's Openings courses can be intimidating in size. It may be that even shorter courses - 5, or even 2 point courses - might have been effective. Such courses might only consist of preview and feedback material. But production overheads in the OU are very high which makes it difficult to produce such brief resources. However it might be possible to produce 'taster' materials for Openings courses very much more cheaply.

(iii) Delivery of both materials and support have not hitherto been generally problematic in the OU's widening participation effort. The OU's correspondence materials are widely

admired for their quality and are deliverable to any UK address giving it an advantage over institutions which have to rely on attendance at the institution. Similarly student support by correspondence and phone and email can reach most learners reasonably easily. There are however issues about how that support is offered since there is considerable emphasis in the OU on reactive support, i.e. support that responds to student initiated contact. The author has argued elsewhere (Simpson, 2006), quoting Anderson, that "students who need help the most refer themselves the least"; i.e. to be effective, support needs to be offered proactively, individually and interactively, especially to vulnerable students and that such support can also be cost-effective – see '*4. Estimating costs*' below.

All these issues however are very much affected by the OU's decision to require students to have access to the Internet from 2007, a decision which has profound consequences for its widening participation strategy – see '*Conclusions*' below.

3. Collaboration with other organisations.
Collaboration can be effective, but as noted earlier generally the best organisations to collaborate with are those with aims which can be met by educational activities in their remits – such as trade unions, Surestart and so on. Using other kinds of organisations does not work well unless the proposed collaboration addresses the 'What's in it for me?' factor - organisations must be able to see a direct pay-off for themselves as a result of their participation. It is possible that that factor might be partly financial - for instance, as an experiment it might even be worth offering a commission fee for each student recruited.

But working with other organisations will always be a difficult option for the OU. Collaboration with local schools and FE colleges for example is likely to require far too much resource to do anything other than raise awareness of the OU as a possible alternative to conventional study. In attempting to work locally across the country the OU is effectively competing with the combined marketing budgets of all the HE providers in the UK, clearly a very difficult task. Working with national organisations may be more effective especially where this releases resources available to partnerships such as the AimHigher projects. It is not clear how effective such partnerships are however; the evaluation of AimHigher scheduled for 2005-6 may clarify that.

This does not rule out local collaboration where such collaboration releases resources that would otherwise be unavailable. But to make such collaboration possible there may need to be pump-priming funding together with substantially increased Regional autonomy to follow up opportunities as they arise without needing to refer back to the Centre for permission at every stage.

4. Estimating costs.
 Financial appraisals must be part of any activity as costs clearly affect mainstreaming possibilities. Some progress has been made in the OU in cost benefit analyses of student support. For example the author has suggested elsewhere (Simpson, 2005) that student support activities aimed at increasing student retention can have a positive cost-benefit ratio for students, institutions and governments. In the case of the OU investing in proactive support can have a cost-benefit ratio of up to 400%, so every pound invested in

proactive student support can bring in £4 in increased government grant and savings on recruitment. No such work has yet been undertaken in the OU on the cost-benefits of widening participation. While a few projects in this report have given some estimate of costs, no attempt have been made to estimate corresponding benefits and it seems that mainstreaming of local efforts are likely to be beyond the OU's own internal resources unless such estimates can be made.

5. The role of marketing.
The paradox of the title is nowhere more manifest than in the marketing area. Recruiting marketing staff to the University from commercial backgrounds (as is its custom) may have many advantages, but also means importing staff with mindsets where marketing is chiefly about identifying the most likely purchasers of a product and targeting a sales effort on them. In a sense widening participation is an attempt to target the least likely purchasers of the product and may require a change in mindset. At the very least widening participation needs to be discussed with marketing experts to see if it requires a different marketing approach.

6. The Openings Programme.
Findings suggest that the OU's Openings Programme is generally more successful than community projects and attracts more target students than the OU's general undergraduate courses. It is even more successful when proactive tuition can be enhanced or face to face elements can be incorporated for particular groups.

Despite the difficulties and relative lack of success of these projects it must be remembered that the OU is still perhaps the largest single institution dedicated to widening participation in the UK. Around 10,000 students take 'Openings' courses each year of whom 4000 are from low peq groups. On foundation courses about 38% of its 33,000 entry each year are low peq students. That represents about 16,500 students a year entering higher education who would probably otherwise not get through the door of university study. This compares with around 40,000 students on FE/HE access courses in the whole of the rest of the sector.

Conclusions for the future of widening participation in the OU

1. How different is the OU?
Attempts to widen participation in the OU may have to be different to those in conventional universities. Whilst both kinds of institution may target widening participation groups, the need of conventional institutions is principally to identify and enhance applications from potential students who have a reasonable chance of progress. Such institutions can accept students without conventional entry qualifications but still need evidence of an ability to benefit. So far the evidence suggests that increasing entry from non-traditionally qualified groups substantially increases subsequent dropout rates (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2005) which implies that universities are either not selecting sufficiently accurately or, more probably, are not supporting students post entry sufficiently well. Conventional institutions also have a hinterland and can concentrate their efforts in a particular geographical area – for example by partnerships with local schools and colleges. This is not an easy option for the OU as a national organisation.

Thus the challenge to the OU is somewhat different to conventional universities in that the policy of open entry apparently relieves the University of the need to select potentially successful students. That however places a different responsibility on the University. It does not, for example, relieve the University of the necessity to support students both at the entry point and subsequently. At the entry point it has been argued elsewhere (Simpson, 2005:2 op cit) that the university needs to be far more upfront about the financial risks of study, since high dropout rates mean that the chances of students with low peq's recouping their investment in course fees by increased earnings after graduation, are currently less than if they invested in wildcat oil drilling. The university has to understand the necessity and effectiveness of proactively supporting students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Simpson, 2003).

Indeed it can be argued that in widening participation there needs to be an educational equivalent of doctors' Hippocratic Oath which advocates that doctors should at least aim to do no harm. (A similar oath was proposed for scientists by the geneticist Sir John Sulston in 2001). In higher education this would suggest that having encouraged a student to enter a university, the institution then has to do its best to ensure that if that student then fails or withdraws, they are not left with their self-esteem or future permanently impaired as a result. The OU does not attempt to do this in any systematic way. It does survey all its new students who dropout each year (Student Statistics Team OU, 2004) and fortunately there is not much evidence from that survey that students dropping out see the experience as entirely negative. But responses to this survey are comparatively low and students who have suffered blows to their self-esteem may be least likely to respond.

2. Different, or just another University? – the E-learning threat.
In the discussion above there is one very particular threat to the OU's widening participation strategy that has not been discussed. As noted earlier the OU will require all its students to be online from 2007 and is already introducing substantial elements of e-learning into its courses. Yet e-learning may work against widening participation by reintroducing 'situational barriers' (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982) in the way of potential students. Whilst home access to the Internet has been growing for several years it has slowed recently, leaving more than 40% of the population unconnected. Furthermore this 40% is largely concentrated amongst educationally disadvantaged groups - use of the Internet amongst lower socio-economic groups in the population is less than one seventh of that of higher groups. Current policy in the OU is that students without Internet access at home can use libraries or learning centres. But what little evidence there is suggests that this does not work for OU courses (Driver, 2005) and no other research into the implications of e-learning and widening participation has been conducted by the OU.

Neither is there evidence of the popularity of e-learning with students. The recent failure of the E-University due to its failure to recruit students is one piece of evidence of the opposite, along with findings by Selwyn et al (2005) that e-learning was not popular with educationally disadvantaged groups. And, as already noted, in this study the one OU Widening Participation project involving online access ('OU Talk') failed to make any impact at all.

Finally there are concerns (Simpson, 2005:1) that student retention on e-learning courses is no better and is often worse than on conventional distance courses.

Certainly the UK government is currently placing a lot of faith in e-learning as a mechanism for promoting access to education. But a joint NIACE/OU research project 'Overcoming Social Exclusion through E-learning' is currently looking at this issue but has found little evidence of any widening participation effects of e-learning as yet.

The OU has invested upwards of £30m in e-learning in the last few years, but for the moment from a widening participation viewpoint e-learning may still be 'a technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education feeding off its host' (Noble 2002). Thus if the OU is to resist the pull of the 'University' at the expense of the 'Open' and not to become 'just another university', it must keep trying to resolve the paradox of the title in favour of its mission to widen participation. It must certainly resist the lure of e-learning until its implications are clearer. The door is still alarmed but the alarm can still be switched off – at least from time to time.

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