

Chapter XII

Open to People, Open with People: Ethical Issues in Open Learning

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ABSTRACT

The increasing multiculturalism in its society has recently encouraged the study of ethical dimensions in higher education in the UK. Distance and open learning has long had such a dimension, but this chapter will argue that ethical issues need to be reviewed in the light of recent developments. Three examples in distance education are taken: the increasing use of e-learning, dropout rates, and the development of methods of predicting student success. Some evidence suggests that e-learning may harm the openness of open learning given the numbers of educationally disadvantaged potential students which it will exclude. Dropout rates in distance education appear to be markedly higher than is conventional learning, which raises ethical issues of honesty and openness, and finally the use of methods in which a student's success can be predicted raises ethical issues about if and how that information should be communicated to that student. Considerable work has gone into the development of a discourse of medical ethics in response to modern developments in medicine. But this chapter suggests that medical models are inadequate to judge ethical issues in distance and open learning and it calls for the development of a similar discourse in the ethics of distance and open learning.

INTRODUCTION

There are signs of a renewed interest in ethics in UK higher education following concerns that various changes in society mean that judgements

about issues in higher education are becoming more difficult in various ways. For example, the increasing diversity of higher education in terms of ethnicity and status may mean that universities are no longer able to assume that staff and students

share similar value systems. One possible sign of this increasing concern is the recent attempt at Leeds University to build the discussion of ethics into 13 disciplines in the University through its Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Times Higher Education Supplement, September 30, 2005). The aim is to use a model of medical ethics and adapt it to other disciplines.

Another sign may be the recent publication of a booklet *Ethics Matters*, a joint project between the Council for Industry and Higher Education and the Institute of Business Ethics, which examines issues such as the extent to which universities can encourage free speech amid fears of extremism on campus (Times Higher Education Supplement, October 7, 2005).

Yet another sign, and one that is significant for distance learning, is the proposed appointment of a chair for a new ethics centre in the UK Open University. And perhaps this is all as it should be: if education is not itself ethically-based, then societies and institutions which depend on that education may themselves become unethically-based, with potentially disastrous consequences.

ETHICS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

It has indeed long been clear that open and distance learning attracts its fair share of ethical issues for practitioners. Gearhart (2001) suggests that the increasing use of information technology in distance education may actually enhance unethical behaviours because of the effects of “psychological distance,” when acts are carried out at a distance they feel less personal because the person acted on cannot be heard or seen in the exchange. Yet Visser (2001) noted that “a search of the literature including documentation on the World Wide Web reveals little explicit concern with ethical questions among the community of professionals in the area of distance education and open learning.”

Despite Visser’s comment, there have been some examinations of ethics in distance learning. Some early work by Reed and Sork (1990) suggests that ethical dilemmas in distance learning can arise in each of six areas:

1. Admission intake and retention of students: for example, dealing with issues around how fair an admissions process might be;
2. Programme and course marketing: for example, the temptation to put the “best face” on programmes when describing them in a course catalogue, or what Simpson (2004) calls the “recruitment vs. retention” tension;
3. Programme and course administration: for example, how far the institution’s various regulations are fair to both students and society as a whole as the ultimate customers of qualifications awarded by the institution;
4. Learner/facilitator interaction: for example, given that learning can expose the learner to difficult emotional situations, how far does the institution and its tutor have a duty to take some responsibility for the learner’s emotional state and offer support?;
5. Course development and presentation: for example, how far should course writers develop materials that reflect diversity rather than “pre-digested material that students are in danger of soaking up uncritically” (Cole, Coats, & Lentell, 1986). This is a concern shared by Tait (1989), who is concerned about the potential of distance learning to be undemocratic; and
6. Programme, course and learner evaluation: for example, what are the ethical issues in ensuring that assessment is fair to all interested parties (learners, employers, and society) as a whole?

Crosling and Webb (2002) suggest that ethical issues to be addressed may also include confidentiality, care when intervening between student and

tutor, and in drawing the line between work with student learning and therapeutic counseling.

ETHICAL MODELS FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Thus, there may be a range of ethical issues arising in distance education, raising the question of how such issues may be adequately addressed. Caffarella (1988) suggests that one way forward is to compile lists of learner's rights to define the ethical duties of an institution. Such rights might include:

- A clear indication of expectations of the course or programme;
- Reasonable access to the instructor and resources;
- Due process when challenging the judgements and actions of the teacher;
- Treatment with dignity and respect at all times; and
- A learning environment which is fair, safe and productive.

In writing about the UKOU "Student Charter" Simpson (1992) argues that such lists of rights also might encourage learners to be more assertive in requesting the help they need to study successfully. However, it is not clear how far such lists can be used to judge individual cases, as ethical dilemmas may often be "grounded in conflicting yet equally legitimate views of what is good or right" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Another way forward may be to look at different types of commitments concerned in ethical reasoning. Pratt (1998) suggests that in North America there are at least three types of commitment used to guide ethical reasoning: justice, caring, and duty.

1. Commitments to justice are those where fair and impartial consideration of rights and privilege are important.
2. Commitments to caring are where the prime consideration are relationships between people, and the care of individuals.
3. Commitments to duty means meeting legal requirements; the fair treatment of learners, responsible management of instruction and so forth, which may be especially important in a climate where litigation in education is becoming more common.

However, the problem with this perspective is that different commitments may lead to different ethical judgements, as we shall see.

PARTICULAR ETHICAL ISSUES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

To illustrate the kind of ethical dilemmas that can arise from developments in open and distance learning, this chapter will take three examples. One is the increasing use of e-learning in distance education, raising ethical issues around accessibility; the second centres around the issues of student dropout in online open and distance learning and; relating to that, the third is the recent development of systems for predicting student success in open learning, raising ethical issues around how that information is used.

E-Learning and Accessibility

The drive toward introducing e-learning into distance education appears to be increasing. More than 70% of the articles appearing in distance education journals recently are about aspects of e-learning, and the drive to put distance learning online appears almost unstoppable. One of the largest distance education providers, the

UK Open University, is intending to require its students to have computers with Internet access to be able to make full use of its facilities from 2007 onward.

Yet there are real issues about access to e-learning from educationally disadvantaged groups. In the UKOU at the time of writing, around 55% of the population have access to the Internet at home (National Statistics, 2006) and although that proportion is still growing, it is doing so recently at a slower rate than hitherto. Broadband access is increasingly necessary for effective use of the Internet and of that 55% just over half have broadband access. Thus, only 30% of the population have broadband Internet access at home. Crucially, such access is very largely concentrated among groups with high levels of education: Internet access among lower income (and therefore educationally underprivileged groups) is only one seventh that of higher income groups.

UKOU policy on Internet access is that students without home computers should have access via local libraries and government learning centres or Internet cafés. Yet it has carried out no research to assess how far this is possible. The little evidence available suggests that for many reasons—booking access, transport to centres, time availability at centres, firewalls and other technical issues—it is actually very difficult to study courses the length of OU standard undergraduate offerings without access at home (Driver, 2001).

Now the UK Open University had, as part of its original mission, an aim to be open to students without entry qualifications. Thus, it looks likely that the OU's policy decision will exclude large numbers of educationally disadvantaged students of the very kind that were included in its original mission to be open. This clearly falls into the first of Reed and Sork's (1990, *op. cit.*) ethical dilemmas of how to make access to higher education fair. On the face of it the policy would conflict, for different reasons, with all three of Pratt's

(1998, *op. cit.*) commitments used to guide ethical reasoning:

- commitments to justice: by further excluding the already socially excluded;
- commitments to care: by closing off a possible door of social mobility to members of society who are already likely to be suffering financial and health penalties from their lack of education; and
- commitments to duty: by failing to give value for tax-payers' contributions, which come largely from lower income groups who will be precisely those excluded.

Student Dropout in Online Open and Distance Learning

An often unacknowledged, yet centrally ethical issue in open learning, is its retention rates. So unacknowledged is this issue that it is very often quite difficult to find retention rates for different institutions. Institutions are also often quite secretive about their student dropout rates for marketing reasons, or do not publish distance student dropout rates separately from their full time students. But what evidence there is suggests that dropout rates in distance education are markedly higher than those in conventional higher education. For example, the UK Open University has dropout rates of around 45-50% for new students on their first course and around 65-70% to its first degree. These compare with an average of 20% dropout to a degree for full time UK universities, the range being from around 1% dropout for "Oxbridge" universities to 38% for the universities with much broader social intakes.

The reasons for the UKOU's higher dropout are often given as:

1. its open door policy, as no previous educational qualifications are required to enter

the university. This must be true to an extent as there are very clear links between dropout and previous educational qualification. Students with no previous educational qualification drop out at more than twice the rate of students with previous degree level qualification (55% dropout as against 20% dropout).

2. the belief that many students enter the UKOU with the intention of either just studying one topic and then leaving, or with the intervention of moving on the full-time higher education once they have obtained some UKOU credits to transfer. This is also clearly true, but because the UKOU does not collect statistics on the number of students who only intended to audit courses or transfer, this belief also acts as something of an excuse for not paying attention to dropout data.

Other distance education institutions may well have higher dropout rates, but as noted earlier, it is very difficult to get reliable comparative data. For example, the Korean National Open University, a distance university very similar to the UKOU in size, apparently has dropout rates of up to 90% to a degree. This is actually lower than it looks, as despite its name the KNOU only accepts high school graduates. If the UKOU did the same, it would have dropout rates of around 55% to its degree, still higher than the highest dropout in conventional higher education in the UK. To be fair to KNOU, its higher dropout rates are very probably due to the much lower resource that it is able to devote to student support, with only around 900 staff compared with the UKOU's 4500 staff (although some of those are devoted to full time research).

What, then, are the ethical issues involved in these probably markedly higher levels of student dropout in distance education as compared with conventional higher education? The most funda-

mental issues it seems to me are ones of honesty and openness with potential students, the ethics of commitments to both justice and care. Because no institution publicly announces its dropout rates when recruiting new students such publicity is equivalent to inviting people to put their money into an investment without saying just how risky that investment is. This is not a fanciful analogy; the risk of investing in distance higher education in the UK is higher than the risk of putting money into wildcat oil-well drilling (Simpson, 2004, op. cit.). In the UK a financial broker inviting such an investment without indicating that there was a considerable risk to that investment, would invite the attention of the UK Financial Services Authority. Indeed, there have been a number of cases where financial institutions have had to pay considerable compensation for "mis-selling" their products. No such compensation has yet been demanded of UK educational institutions, but there are signs that a more litigious approach to education is becoming more common as students are required to invest more up front in their education and it seems only a matter of time before the issue is tested in the courts.

Of course, no institution on its own is going to publicise its dropout rates in its recruitment material at the moment despite the strong ethical arguments for doing so. However, it is possible that they could be forced to do so by the UK Government in some way in the not very distant future, as potential students demand to know more about the very considerable investment they are having to make in their education. Some of the issues involved in making that data public are examined in the next section.

A second ethical issue is around how much effort any institution is prepared to put in to decrease its student dropout. This seems a clear example of the ethics due to commitments to care but it is too large a topic to be dealt with here: the reader is referred to the books by Simpson in the recommended reading list "*Supporting Students*

in *Online Open and Distance Learning*” and *“Student Retention in Online Open and Distance Learning”*

PREDICTIVE METHODS IN OPEN LEARNING

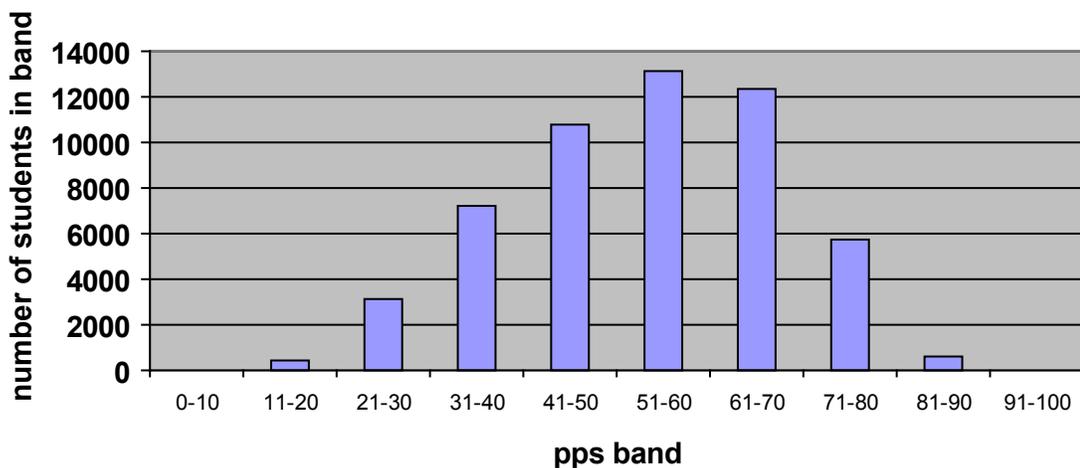
As noted earlier, the UK Open University is an “open learning” institution; there are no qualifications required for entry. This is not a dead letter: some 10,000 students enter the UKOU every year without the standard entry qualification for conventional higher education in the UK. Of these students about 5,000 pass their first course, making the OU the biggest single widening participation institution in the UK. Such an open entry policy relieves the institution of moral dilemmas to do with the fairness and equal opportunities of admissions procedures, but introduces new issues to do with advice to students applying for entry as to their chances of success, which are

Reed and Sork’s (1990, op. cit.) first category of ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas are becoming more acute with the development of new and more accurate statistical methods of predicting that success, such as those now being used in the UKOU and elsewhere.

Along with other open entry institutions, the UKOU has always had simple algorithms which attempt to predict the chances of success of new students entering the institution. Such algorithms relied on advisers looking at student application forms and making rough pass or fail predictions largely on the basis of the student’s previous educational qualifications and socio-economic status, sometimes even taking into account subjective perceptions such as the applicant’s handwriting in the days when forms were completed by hand.

Recent developments have improved the accuracy of prediction enormously by using a statistical “binary logistic regression” method (Simpson, 2006). The method, developed by Woodman (1999), allows a “predicted probability

Figure 1. The number of students in each predicted probability of success (pps) 10% bands in the UKOU in 2004 ($n = 5334$)



of success” (pps) to be attached to every new student entering the OU derived from their known characteristics, such as previous education, age, sex, socio-economic status, ethnic category and course applied for. The calculation is derived from the previous year’s students’ results, and, principally because the number of students involved is very large (35,000 a year), successive evaluations have shown the predictions to be accurate for any particular group of students to within 0.5% (This of course is different from the accuracy of prediction for an individual student, which we shall return to).

As the UKOU is an open entry institution the range of predictions is very wide. In 2004, they varied from a predicted probability of success of 83% (typically for a white, middle-aged woman, with conventional university entry qualifications, studying an arts course), to 9% (typically for a young, unemployed black man with few qualifications, studying a maths course). The distribution of probabilities between those extremes is a slightly skewed near normal curve (see Figure 1).

The use of such statistical methods to predict student success is not particularly new: logistic regression analysis has been used in the U.S. for a number of years in higher education institutions (Mager, 2003) for retention purposes and in the UK to set benchmarks in various situations. However, its use in open learning gives rise to two particular ethical issues, targeting support on students and frankness with students.

Targeting Support on Students

The main reason for developing the predicted probability of success system in the UKOU was to allow the targeting of limited resources on students most likely to need them, those with low pps’s. The resource was used to make proactive phone calls to new students starting with the lowest pps’s and working up the list until funding ran out (roughly half the total number of new students were contacted). The calls lasted

on average about 10 minutes and the content was largely aimed at enhancing the student’s integration with the institution and their motivation, using support models derived from the field of positive psychology (Simpson, 2006). Given the simplicity of the strategy it met with reasonable success, improving student retention by up to 5% against a control group with identical pps’s (Simpson, 2004).

In addition, it was possible to show that in the particular financial environment of the UKOU where government grants are linked to the number of students completing a course, that the return on the investment—the extra grant generated by increased retention divided by the cost of the call—was of the order of 450% (Simpson, 2005); that is, for every £1 invested in proactive phone calling the institution received £4.50 back in increased government grants (there were also savings on re-recruitment costs). This finding meant that it was decided that the programme should be extended in 2005 to all 33,000 new UKOU students.

However, as noted earlier, available funding only allowed about half of those students to be phoned (roughly up to a 54% pps level) and two particular concerns were expressed by OU staff:

1. questions of which pps bands to target. Some staff argued that it was best to target the middle-band pps groups, those with (say) 40-70% predicted probability of success, the argument being that because the chances of lower groups were very small it was a waste of resources to offer them extra support. While this might seem reasonable from the institutional point of view in making the best use of limited resources, this argument was undermined when a detailed analysis of the retention figures found that with the exception of the very lowest pps groups (<15%) the increase in retention was much the same for all pps bands (the increase for the very

lowest pps bands was smaller than the other bands, but this may be partly because the numbers at such low values are very small and the statistics not so reliable).

2. the ethics of offering higher levels of support to some students, especially given the arbitrariness of the cut-off point above which the extra support was not offered. This seemed less of an ethical obstacle as the UKOU had a long history of targeting support on particular groups, such as the disabled, and that targeting support on students deemed to be most likely to drop out had been going on since the days of the “At Risk” project (Thorpe, 1988), which had used UKOU tutors to target support on students they thought likely to withdraw. Nevertheless, there was disquiet at the way that funding appeared to drive the number of students targeted. This was justified to some extent by the nature of the data. It was found that if the predictive system was used to simply predict pass or fail, then it was most accurate at the level where 56% of the students were predicted to fail. Thus, a target of the contact of 56% of students was set with at least some statistical justification (however tenuous) and attention could be turned to the attainment of this target within the resources available.

Openness with Students

The second ethical concern appears to be more serious but has not been addressed in the UKOU or elsewhere, as far as I can discover. Given that the predicted probability of success is an individual piece of data attached to an individual student, how far is it ethical to tell them what his or her predicted probability of success on their chosen course is (as distinct from telling them the average dropout rate for all students on that course or programme, as discussed earlier)? There can be no question as to a student’s right to know that

data, as it is held on a computer database and, as such, the UK’s Data Protection Act applies (students have the right to all the data about them held on computer records unless there are very good reasons for withholding it). However, a student would have to know that the data exists in order to request it, and although the existence of the data is not secret it is not (yet) widely known.

The argument for not making the data known to students is that doing so might have adverse effects on them. A simple thought experiment would suggest that to phone a student (or worse, to write to them) and say (even among other things and heavily caveated) that they have (for instance) only a 25% chance of passing their course, might well demoralise that student into immediate dropout. It would also be unfair. While for large groups of students the predictions are highly accurate, for individual students there is a large inaccuracy involved. The greatest of these is due to lack of input data; some students do not give full details about themselves on application forms, resulting in their pps being wrong. For example, they might not declare a particular qualification which would raise their pps. Giving a student an inaccurate piece of information would certainly be unethical, but to understand the limitations of the data would require a level of statistical expertise that most students are unlikely to possess. And of course the prediction takes no account of imponderable qualities such as motivation and resilience and personal circumstances that can make all the difference to a student’s progress.

Another way to examine this ethical dilemma is to compare it with the much more serious dilemma faced by doctors when a patient asks about the success rate of the operation they are about to undergo. But the doctors’ answers, however difficult, are not likely to affect the outcome for the patient, nor are they in any way a personal criticism of that patient. Thus, models drawn from medical ethics may not necessarily be helpful in considering ethical issues in education. Using Pratt’s distinction (1998, *op. cit.*) between ethics

of judgment, caring and duty, it might be argued that judgement and duty ethics would suggest that students should be told clearly when their chances of success are small, whereas caring ethics might suggest that the students self-esteem is a priority and that data should be withheld.

PREDICTING STUDENT SUCCESS— IS RESEARCH THE ANSWER?

Clearly, one way to determine what would happen if students were told up front what their chances of success were would be to undertake comparative research. For example, it might be possible to evaluate the progress of two groups of students, only one of which knew their predicted probability of success, and the other acting as a control. But another ethical issue then arises. The researcher will either have to choose a random experimental group in which case the objection of possible demoralisation is sustained for that group, or the researcher would have to ask for volunteers who are happy to be told their pps, in which case they are not a true random sample.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THE PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS IN CONVENTIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Are there ways, then, in which students could come into possession of the knowledge of their predicted probability of success but in ways to be both confidential and nonthreatening? One way might be to mediate the data through an interview with a tutor. This is the approach taken by Napier University (Johnston, 2001) which uses a questionnaire which is derived from their logistic regression analysis so that it gives reasonably reliable results. This questionnaire is completed with the help of a guidance tutor who

can then help the student consider what action to take as a result. The introduction and part of the questionnaire is given below as an example, together with the scoring system and Guidance Tutor Notes (Simpson, 2005, op. cit.). There were 14 questions in all.

Introduction

Napier University wants all students to be successful and to enjoy and benefit from their studies. Inevitably, some people will do better than others and this is in part because of factors which are known to affect student performance in the first year of a degree programme. Based on these factors, as part of a general programme for promoting excellence, Napier has devised a short questionnaire with the following objectives:

- to make you aware of the issues that affect student performance;
- to allow you to think about how many of them apply to you, and thus your strengths and weaknesses ; and
- to point to actions you can undertake to improve things for yourself.

Each answer you give to the questions in the questionnaire is scored for its likely effect on successfully completing the first year. The higher the score, the more characteristics you exhibit which are known to contribute to student success. **It is important to remember that many students with low scores still go on to complete their first year successfully and so a low score does not mean that you will not progress to the second year.** Similarly, having a high score does not guarantee success and so it is important not be complacent. It is also important to realise that this questionnaire measures only some of the factors known to affect student success. There are lots of factors which influence progression which cannot yet be measured, including motivation, compatibility and determination.

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This questionnaire should be completed in the presence of your Guidance Tutor, First Year Tutor or Programme Leader, who, if necessary, will help you devise a plan of action to help you successfully complete the year. Remember that there are lots of places within the university that can provide help and support, and academic staff want you to succeed just as much as you do.

The Napier Questionnaire

<u>Score</u>	<u>Questions</u>
	1. How old were you at the beginning of October? 18 years or less œ 19 to 23 years œ 24 or more years œ
	2. If you have “Highers” (<i>a Scottish educational qualification</i>), how many do you have? (If you have both Highers and “A” Levels (<i>an English qualification</i>) then calculate 1 “A” Level = 2 Highers and select the nearest category below) 1-2 œ 3 œ 4-5 œ 6 or more œ
	3. If you have “A” Levels (and no Highers), how many A Levels do you have? 1 œ 2 œ 3 œ 4 or more œ
	4. What type of accommodation do you stay in? At home œ Napier-owned accommodation œ Private accommodation sharing with other students only œ Other œ
	5. If you have a job during term-time, for how many hours are you normally employed each week? None œ 1-10 hrs œ 11-15 hrs œ 16+hrs œ

Score Sheet for Questionnaire

- | | |
|------------------|--------|
| 1. Age group | Points |
| 18 years or less | 0 |

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 19 to 23 years | 2 |
| 24 or more years | 11 |
| 2. Number of Highers (or Highers and A Levels) | Points |
| 1-2 | 2 |
| 3 | 7 |
| 4-5 | 8 |
| 6 or more | 14 |
| 3. Number of “A” Levels (no Highers) | Points |
| 1 | 2 |
| 2 | 7 |
| 3 | 8 |
| 4 or more | 14 |
| 4. Accommodation | Points |
| At home | 0 |
| Napier | 7 |
| Private | 0 |
| Other | 4 |
| 5. Hrs of employment | Points |
| None | 8 |
| 1-10 hrs | 11 |
| 11-15 hrs | 6 |
| 16+hrs | 0 |

Advice to Guidance Tutors

- Students should give their informed consent before beginning the diagnostic test.
- The self-assessment is used as a focus for discussion and, where the score is low, that the outcome should be a personal plan for reducing risk linked to pointers to help sources (e.g., Student Services, Student Association, academic staff members, etc.).
- Those students with low scores are reminded that many students with low scores are still successful and that the purpose of the exercise is to both inform them where problems may exist and to encourage them to be proactive in seeking out help. A low score does not imply that there is no hope, but merely that the hurdles are perhaps a little higher.

- The test should be used with all students on the programme and not just those considered to be “at risk.”
- The Guidance Tutor should retain the completed tests, so that students do not go on to administer the test to their friends.

The students complete the questionnaire by themselves and their score is then mediated by the guidance tutor. The tutor is told that students with scores up to 40 tend to progress at a rate of 35%, those with between 41-53 at a rate of 65% and those with a score of 54 or more at a rate of 90%.

Thus, the process is very open, and it is interesting that there is a clear emphasis on the ethics of the process exemplified in the first rule about the student giving informed consent to the process.

SELF ASSESSMENT OF SUCCESS IN DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING

Replicating this process in distance and open learning may be more difficult. While it may be possible to individually interview students in small scale systems, in mass institutions like the UKOU with 33,000 new students every year it becomes much harder. The cost of interviewing itself might be in excess of £1m pa. Are there ways, then, of providing some kind of unmediated self-assessment? It is certainly possible to provide self-assessment quizzes which are statistically-based. The example below is based on the Woodman (1999, op. cit.) statistical method described earlier.

HOW GOOD ARE YOUR CHANCES OF PASSING?

Everyone who starts with the OU has a chance of succeeding. Of course you’ll need commit-

ment, time and energy. And a sense of humour will help!

There are also factors in your background which we know may affect your performance in your first year. This questionnaire is designed to help you:

- become aware of the factors which may affect your performance;
- to identify factors which might apply to you particularly; and
- to point to actions which you might be able to take on some of the factors to improve your chances of success.

Start with a score of 60 points. Answer each question in turn and add or subtract a point score as you go along.

	Initial Score : 60 points
1. Are you male or female? Male : Subtract 5 Female: No change	Revised Score: points
2. How old are you? Under 30 : Subtract 13 Age 30 or above : No change	Revised Score: points
3. What level is this course? Level 1: Add 23 Level 2 : Add 11 Other: No change	Revised Score: points
4. What Faculty is this course? Arts: Add 16 Social Science or Languages: Add 8 Education or Health and Social Welfare: Add 7 Maths: Add 6 Science: Subtract 3 Technology: Add 1 Other: No change	Revised Score: points

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<p>5. What is the credit rating of this course? 15pts (4 hours study per week): Subtract 23 30pts (8 hours study per week): Subtract 9 60pts (16 hours study per week): No change</p>	<p>Revised Score: points</p>
<p>6. How many courses are you taking in total this year? 1 course : Add 5 2 or more courses : No change</p>	<p>Revised Score: points</p>
<p>7. What are your current highest educational qualifications? Degree or equivalent : Add 17 School - Advanced level: Add 12 School - Ordinary level: No change None: Subtract 21 Other : No change</p>	<p>Revised Score: points</p>
<p>8. How would you classify your occupation? Working- professional occupation : Add 10 Working- other occupation : Add 5 Not working or other: No change</p>	<p>Revised Score: points</p>
	<p>Final Score : Points</p>

How Did You Score?

- 100 or above: The outlook is very bright for you. You'll undoubtedly have your share of challenges but you should be able to get things off to a good start.
- 75 to 99: This will be a challenge you've taken on and it will be useful to see if you

can increase your point score in some way. For example, do think about changing to a lower level course just for the first year; you can step up the pace later on. If you are taking more than one course, then again do think of switching to just one.

- Under 75: You'll still be able to succeed, but if you can increase your score that would really improve your chances. You may not want to change sex (!) but you could change your course, increase your current educational qualifications by taking a short course of some kind—the "Openings" courses are ideal—and so forth.

A text like this could be made available to potential students as a self-diagnostic tool by mail or over the Internet. Such students could take the test completely privately, thereby giving them feedback on their chances but hopefully in such a way as not to demoralise them unduly or publicly, or appear to be some kind of entrance exam in an open entry system.

This particular draft questionnaire has not been piloted yet so its possible effect on students and their progress is not known. The text probably needs further development to try and make it clear that the scoring, although based on proper statistical data, is only very approximate and that motivation and effort count for a very great deal in successful study. But it does represent a way forward that may be worth investigating further.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is likely that there are many issues in distance education which could and should be judged ethically. The two specific case studies here suggest

- moves into e-learning by open learning institutions can be in conflict with all of

the three types of ethical commitment (to justice, care and duty) unless considerable research is undertaken into issues of access to computing.

- open entry institutions may need to find a way of informing intending students what their chances of success are, because at least two out of three types of ethical commitment suggest that this is a requirement for an ethical open entry policy.

Some of the other issues in distance education that need to be addressed ethically might be:

1. E-learning: and in particular the overall effects of the development of e-learning in distance education, especially on the developing world. Will the current emphasis on e-learning simply increase the “digital divide” that currently exists between the developed and developing world?
2. Retention: and in particular institutional attitudes to student retention in distance education. Is it really ethical for distance education institutions to accept dropout rates of 50% or more as part of the natural order of things? There is disturbing evidence in the UK that students dropping out of full time higher education have higher levels of depression, unemployment and physical ill-health than either graduates or young people who never went to university. We do not know the effects of dropping out of distance education, given that (for example) every year the UKOU produces more dropout students than successful ones, there is surely an urgent need for ethical research here.
3. Focusing support on vulnerable students (as outlined previously in this article). In effect this is what is called “Affirmative action” in the U.S., which continues to be controversial there. Given limited resource to support students, what are the ethical is-

ssues involved in targeting that resource on particular groups of students?

4. Students who raise moral issues. Like many other open learning institutions, the UKOU has a number of students in prisons; more than 1,400 in 2006. Some of those students are in prison for particularly abhorrent crimes and on occasion it has been known for tutors to refuse to meet them when they learn of those crimes. What are the ethical issues in such situations?

All these case studies and examples suggest that, at the moment, the ethics of distance education are in a relatively undeveloped condition. The field of medical ethics is in a much more advanced state of maturity, although the systems developed for medical ethics are not necessarily appropriate for education generally or for distance education in particular. Yet it may be as important that decisions in distance education are taken in as ethical a manner as those in medicine. It is therefore urgent that distance education institutions begin to study how ethics can be applied to their decision-making in a rapidly changing and challenging world.

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