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Introduction

For nearly 160 years, the United Kingdom (UK) has provided Higher Education (HE) opportunities to students learning at a distance. The University of London (UoL), founded in 1826, was the first University to offer truly distance teaching from 1858, when the residential requirements previously in place for Universities were abandoned. Over a hundred years later in 1969, The Open University UK (OU), still the UK's only single-mode distance teaching institution, received its Royal Charter.

However, the picture in the UK is not straightforward. The UK's four countries (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) share some aspects of regulation and quality assurance but have differences in terms of funding arrangements and accountability. For example, the UK's Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA 2012) covers all four countries, but Scotland has devolved responsibilities for its implementation which have led to distinctive features in its Quality Enhancement Framework. HE funding is also distributed through different national assemblies and funding councils.

The overall UK picture is of online, distance and e-learning (ODEL) gaining increasing respect and acceptance. There have also been substantial changes over the century and a half. These have been particularly important from the 1970s with the immediate success of the OU, from the 1990s with the growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and from the 1990s onwards with major changes in Government funding for tuition and part-time students.

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The History of UK Distance and Online Education

In 1859 the weekly periodical *All The Year Round* described the recently available UoL External Programme as “The English People’s University” through its revolutionary provision of distance learning opportunities for the “young shoemaker in his garret” (Kenyon Jones 2008, p. 21). Students could pay the registration fee and prepare themselves to sit UoL examinations in whatever way they chose. Many studied in isolation or with private tuition, but increasingly from the 1880s through correspondence colleges which provided a range of support services, including exam preparation (ibid. pp. 163–4). The absence of residential requirements was not the only unusual feature of UoL external study: from 1878 for the first time in the UK, University degrees were open to women.

External study was also available overseas, particularly within the then British Colonies. In 1864 Mauritius received special permission to hold UoL exams and by 1882 there were 17 ‘colonial’ centres rising to 53 in 29 countries in 1943. By 2008 there were students or alumni in 180 of the world’s 192 countries (Kenyon Jones, p. 48). Initially the impetus for these developments may have been the “imperial mission” of UoL; The Council for External Studies in 1910, for example argued that:

The far-reaching and imperial character of the work at present conducted by the External Side of the University of London, the wide range of subjects... and the high standards... constitute it a national necessity which cannot be replaced by any other education system. (Kenyon Jones 2008, p. 193)

While there were inherent inequalities in the lack of support for learners, UoL’s External Programme provided widely available opportunity and an exemplar for curriculum design and quality assurance unheard of in distance education at the time (Tait 2008). Only in the 1960s did internal students begin to outnumber external students in the University. UoL’s International Programmes (formerly External Studies) still has a global mission to provide high quality education to students across the world.

The opportunities provided by the OU from 1971 immediately appealed to large numbers who had been unable to study at higher level. Many of these were teachers seeking to gain a degree for what was becoming a graduate profession, but many others were attracted by the OU’s mission: “open as to people, places, methods and ideas” and especially to the OU’s unique lack of entry requirements at undergraduate level.

The OU also pioneered entirely new methods of teaching and learning at a distance, many of which have been adopted world-wide. Multi-media course materials included high quality printed teaching units, radio programmes, TV programmes (broadcast originally at peak viewing times) and Home Experiment Kits for those studying science subjects. In addition, there was a comprehensive network of student support established through 13 Regional Centres which appointed local tutors and support staff and organised local tutorials, exam centres and degree ceremonies.

The development of online resources within the OU since the 1990s has had a major impact on some of the original teaching and support structures. In particular, various functions that were distributed are now being centralised. In November 2015 the OU's Council supported the closure of seven of the 10 English regional centres; one had already been closed, and the remaining two have changed their function. From 2018, the OU works mainly through three national centres in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast and the central campus in Milton Keynes.

In Scotland, the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) provides a relatively recent example of undergraduate flexible learning, enabling students to gain degrees solely through online learning since 1995. UHI offers a spectrum of courses ranging from fully on-campus to fully online and has a particular mission to “provide access to all members of the region's community to new forms of education opportunity... [whose members are] geographically spread and often located in small and demographically scattered rural island communities” (Smith and Macdonald 2015, p. 24). UHI provides both Further Education (FE) and HE and is delivered by a network of thirteen academic partners spread across the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire. This is an area of some 17,000 square miles, over one sixth of the UK's land mass. The geographical range “was a primary driver of the adoption of blended learning” for UHI (Panciroli et al. 2015, p. 39). Although many programmes are campus-based, or combine online with Video Conferencing or face-to-face teaching, UHI's online courses can be accessed entirely through the internet. Approximately 15% of UHI students currently study on fully online programmes.

These examples from some of the undergraduate ODeL providers in the UK indicate their differences in scope and mission; UoL aims for a global impact, the OU retains its mission for social justice, still largely in the UK and UHI focuses particularly on geographically remote students in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. All three institutions also have active research departments, perhaps most notably the OU's Institute of Educational Technology (IET) which is still the only UK HE research department solely concerned with ODeL.

Developments in ODeL from the 1990s transformed distance teaching in the UK in two main ways. Firstly through the introduction of online platforms for administrative and student support and the provision of some teaching resources which have now been adopted by all UK HEIs. Online support in these areas varies, but can enable learners to access teaching materials and recorded lectures online, undertake all administrative matters, and engage with fellow students, and in some cases tutors/lecturers, via forums, email and messaging boards. Secondly, while there are still universities like Oxbridge that emphasise the importance of face-to-face contact, there are increasing numbers of modules or courses, particularly at Masters level which are taught exclusively online or at a distance.

In 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) commissioned a study to provide a broad overview of UK HE ODeL—defined as “any course, at any HE academic level, delivered to students at a distance from the host institution, which had a significant component delivered online” (White et al. 2010, p. 10). The findings were significant: the vast majority of ODeL provision was at postgraduate level; much of it was developed at departmental level on an ad hoc

basis; most could be described as continuing professional development; and there was no reliable or accurate information available about provision of ODeL “much of which remains hidden in labyrinthine institutional websites” (White et al. 2010, p. 1). However, the data collected “identified over 2600 HE level online and distance learning courses offered by, or on behalf of, UK HE and FE institutions”. These included:

- 1,528 courses offered by 113 HE and FE institutions; of which 510 were identified as being delivered online (including blended learning);
- 952 courses offered by the Open University; of which 600 were dependent on the web and a further 95 were delivered fully online;
- 175 courses offered in partnership with commercial partners (White et al. 2010 p. 12).

With the exception of a few Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), UoL and the OU, ODeL provision still remains largely at postgraduate level and involves relatively small numbers, although there is increasing institutional support for new developments. The University of Edinburgh, for example, offers 67 fully online postgraduate degrees which do not require any campus attendance. There are no exams—technology has enabled a check on the online footprint of a student to ensure authorship of essays and dissertations, and degrees can be awarded through a Second Life online ceremony. The University of Leicester offers over 60 postgraduate courses, most of them part-time. Many other Universities offer ODeL for post-graduate niche markets; for example the University of Belfast offers Pharmacy, Cardiff University offers Medical Education. These courses generally attract relatively low numbers, often around 20 or fewer students.

There have also been notable failures, for example the UK e-University which was established in 2001 as a single vehicle for the delivery of UK universities’ HE programmes over the internet, but was wound up in 2004 by Hefce “having spent £50 million of public money but having succeeded only in attracting 900 students” (House of Commons 2005, p. 3). This failure was attributed to a number of factors: an approach that was supply-driven rather than demand-led, an inability to form partnerships between the public and private sectors, insufficient market research, too much concentration on e-learning platforms, and “an over-confident presumption about the scale of the demand for wholly internet-based e-learning”(House of Commons 2005, p. 3). In 2002 *Scottish Knowledge* had also closed. This had involved 13 Scottish Universities and eight colleges and had aimed to make a major impact on the global online education market (Smith and Macdonald 2015).

Funding

Most UK ODeL is delivered through government-funded Universities. Before 1992, these, and specialist HEIs were funded through one UK-wide Universities Funding Council; the one exception being the OU, which was funded directly from the Depart-

ment of Education and Science (DES). The UK Further and Higher Education Act 1992 had a major impact—some of which was to create a more unified HE system; for example:

- Former polytechnics became universities
- The OU became part of mainstream higher education funding
- The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) were created with oversight of all HEI provision in the UK.

However, separate funding councils were created for England, Scotland and Wales, and later for Northern Ireland, all with devolved powers for funding HE in their countries. These have gained increased importance since the creation of three national assemblies in 1998.

In England HE funding is allocated by the Department for Education and distributed through Hefce, in Scotland through the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), in Wales through the Higher Education Funding Council of Wales (HEFCW), and in Northern Ireland through the Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI).

Until 1998, full-time campus-based students at all UK HEIs did not have to pay for tuition and could apply for maintenance grants. In 1998, means-tested tuition fees were introduced, initially UK-wide, but now devolved to the separate funding councils, and grants were converted into loans. However, these measures did not apply to part-time distance or online learners, who had to pay their own fees and were not eligible for grants, or loans when introduced.

Measures introduced since 1998 in England have had a major impact. In 2004 means-tested government grants became available for part-time students for the first time. However, in 2007 the government phased out support for any student studying for a qualification that was equivalent to or lower than a qualification they had previously gained, and this particularly affected the OU and Birkbeck College, UoL, both of which had large numbers of mature students aiming to change career: “The number of Britons starting part-time undergraduate degrees fell by 40 per cent between 2010–2013” (Weinbren 2015, p. 170).

From 2010, part-time students became eligible for student loans on the same basis as full-time students, but teaching budgets to all Universities were cut by 80%, and the government formally withdrew all funding for the arts, humanities and social sciences. This again has had a major impact in terms of rising fees: the OU now (March 2018) has variable fees across the four nations but charges £5728 for a full-time equivalent year for a B.A. or B.Sc. (Hons) in England. This may compare favourably with the 2018 government cap on full-time student tuition fees (£9250—currently under review) but is still considerably higher than earlier fees. In Scotland, however, the tuition fees for academic year 2017–18 are £1820 for a full-time first degree for eligible students (SFC 2017). Scottish HE students are in general funded more generously than English HE students. Students on UoL International Programmes have always been entirely self-funded.

Funding and costs for all distance and online HE in the UK are therefore largely dependent on the policies of UK Government and national Funding Councils.

ODeL and UK HE Provision

With the exception of UoL International Programmes and the OU, government-funded ODeL is mostly located within campus-based, residential HEIs and so is treated on equal terms with other HEIs in relation to QA and devolved funding arrangements.

However, there are some exceptions. There is a relatively limited number of private HE providers which include the University of Buckingham, the only private University in the UK; BPP University, the first publicly owned company in the UK which obtained degree awarding powers in 2007 and is dedicated solely to business and the professions; and Pearson College where courses are designed, developed and delivered by industry. All of these can include online and distance elements but are not primarily ODeL providers.

Even though ODeL providers are well recognised among HEIs, UK University “League tables” often do not include the OU because many of the questions are related to campus-based facilities. *The Guardian’s* League tables, for example, include 121 Universities but not the OU. This can give a skewed vision of UK HE—and especially ODeL—provision, despite the fact that the OU is included in the UK’s National Student Survey (NSS <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/>). However, these surveys may not always accurately convey the experience or achievements of ODeL students and it has been argued that revised surveys should be developed (Ashby et al. 2011).

The Popularity of ODeL? Student Enrolments

Student enrolments in ODeL over 150 years have related mainly to social context and governmental funding. The UoL’s External Programme, for example, saw marked increases in registrations during World War Two as the only available possibility of study for many; numbers rose from about 10,000 in 1939 to over 16,000 in 1945 (Kenyon Jones p. 86). In 2007 over 41,000 students were studying with the London External Programme, only 12% of whom were based in the UK (Kenyon Jones 2008, p. 48).

The OU enrolled its first students in 1971 when 41,000 people applied to study for undergraduate degrees, 32,287 were offered a place and 24,220 accepted. Student numbers were capped by the government at the time because of limits on funding: “Over the next decade OU student numbers grew in line, not with applications but with funding of places” (Weinbren 2015, p. 167). By 1980 there were 61,000 undergraduates and by 1990 over 72,622 (*ibid.* p. 168). With the relaxation of the government cap on student numbers, the OU grew substantially, reaching a peak of over 260,000 students by 2010–11.

Enrolments on ODeL programmes remain difficult to assess. However, there are some indications and trends available.

ODeL has always been attractive to students who want to study part time, either because they have other commitments, jobs, families, caring responsibilities; or for

other reasons, for example finance, disability, service in the Armed Forces, prison sentence. The most recent UK statistics show that the number of part-time students in the UK has dropped substantially since University fees were raised. In 2010–2011 there were 824,000 part-time students; and this had dropped by 21% in 2012–13 when full-time annual fees rose from £3600 to £9000 and has continued declining ever since—so that numbers of part-time students had reduced by almost a third to 570,000 in 2014–15 (HESA 2016) (Fig. 1).

Numbers of part-time students have continued to drop, by as much as 56% in the five years to 2017, and this has been attributed to the lack of government support for part-time students (The Guardian 2017).

Not all part-time students will be online or distance learners—although 76% of the OU’s students have worked full or part-time during their studies—and there will be many other students who are carers and study part-time. However, the OU has been particularly badly affected. In 2016, The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) reported that the OU’s latest accounts “show that it ran up a £7.2 million deficit in 2014–15, on the back of a £16.9 million shortfall the year before. This came as the total number of students signed up for OU courses fell by 13,449 (7.2%) year-on-year, to 173,889. From a high of 260,119 learners in 2009–10, the OU has now shed a third of its enrolment in the space of six years” (THES 2016a).

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) includes data about all HE students by HE provider, level of study, mode of study and domicile and the data is not encouraging for the OU (Fig. 2).

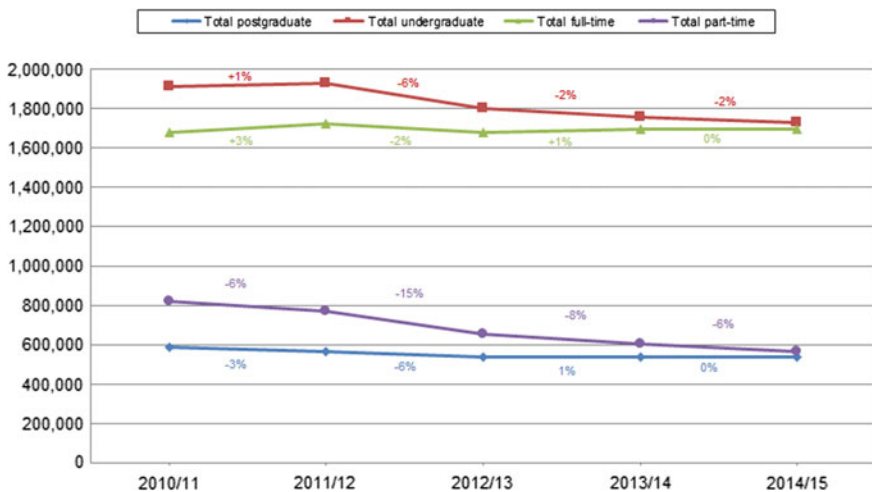


Fig. 1 UK HE student enrolments by level of study and mode of study. Source HESA (2016) Statistical First Release, 2014–15

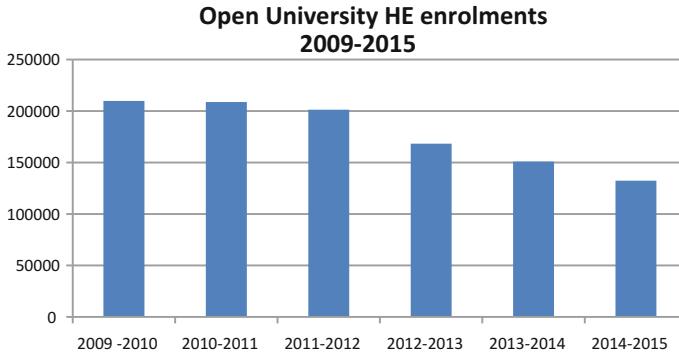


Fig. 2 Open University HE Enrolments 2009–2015. *Source* HESA (2016)

Quality Assurance

One measure of the changing acceptance and respect accorded to OdeL in the UK is that the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is now entrusted with assuring quality and standards across all accredited UK higher education programmes, wherever, and in whatever medium they are studied. The QAA is independent of government and HEIs and acts in the public interest; this has ensured that HE ODeL is regarded as a reputable medium of delivery.

The forerunner to the QAA, the Higher Education Quality Council, HEQC, had been established in 1993 to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the quality of HE in the UK by undertaking quality audits and providing good practice guidelines. These Guidelines did not apply, and were not always relevant to, distance education at the time, but the OU adapted them to satisfy funding bodies and to ensure its own QA approaches.

In 1999, the QAA produced draft guidelines specifically for distance education which aimed “to provide advice, mainly to campus-based institutions, about what needs to be considered when assuring the quality and academic standards of programmes provided through distance learning” (Mills 1999, p. 83). The revised version in 2010 noted that technology-enhanced learning was now embedded in all forms of Higher Education, “whether campus-based, delivered through a collaborative arrangement or through modes of flexible and distributed learning” (QAA 2010, p. 16). It also notes that:

Recent developments in learning that uses information and communications technologies ('e-learning'), have given rise in some quarters to the belief that this approach requires an entirely separate and distinct form of quality assurance. While it is true that some technical aspects of e-modes of learning do require particular ways of meeting specific challenges, it is nonetheless also the case that most of the questions that need to be asked, and answered, about academic management are common to both e-learning and other FDL methods, and may be considered under the headings of delivery, support and assessment. (QAA 2010, p. 58)

The QAA is responsible for publishing and maintaining the UK *Quality Code for Higher Education*, conducting evidence-based external review of higher education providers and advising government on applications for degree awarding powers and the right to be called a University. The *Quality Code* covers all four nations of the UK and all international locations where UK Higher Education is provided. Its aim is to “to safeguard the academic standards of UK higher education; to assure the quality of the learning opportunities that UK higher education offers to students; to promote continuous and systematic improvement in UK higher education; [and] to ensure that information about UK higher education is publicly available.” (QAA 2012, p. 1) HE review of providers and programmes, in whatever medium they are delivered, is conducted by external peer reviewers, including students (QAA 2016).

Although largely delivered by UK HEIs and mainly at HE level, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are not covered by the Quality Code: “UK universities and other awarding organisations are responsible for the quality of all the courses they offer. Since MOOCs are typically non-credit bearing and have no particular entry requirements, they are not formally scrutinised during QAA review” (QAA 2014).

What Are the Issues? What Is the Future?

Four main challenges for the future of traditional ODeL in the UK reviewed here are:

- The increasing convergence of distance and campus-based HE
- Student numbers and Government funding in the UK
- Retention rates in ODeL
- Informal learning.

In addition, changing political contexts for the UK in its relationship with the EU and the rest of the world may impact on ODeL.

As early as 1999, Tait and Mills wrote of the convergence of distance and conventional education: “We see in fact such sharp erosion of the distinction between distance education and innovative learning strategies based on the new information communication technologies (ICTs), that the continued existence of the distance education tradition must now be in question” (Tait and Mills 1999, p. 2). Tait has since argued that distance learning as a separate mode of provision is now debatable: all HEIs now use ICTs to support or deliver learning at a distance; flexible provision is the norm. What distinguishes HEIs is their mission, not their location and provision on campus or at a distance (Tait 2016).

Flexible provision is certainly increasingly available for formal teaching and learning programmes across the UK, but with the exception of UoL, the OU and UHI is mainly at Masters level. In the future, perhaps all UK HEIs will move further into undergraduate ODeL provision, as modules within a campus-based degree, or as the sole mode of delivery. If this happens, there will be increasing competition for the OU, the UK's sole single-mode ODeL provider, which has already seen a dramatic decrease in student numbers. One issue for the future is whether single-mode distance teaching institutions can survive. Will the OU's open access mission enable it to maintain student numbers and funding?

Additional challenges relate to government policies towards ODeL and HE generally. The withdrawal of funding from Arts and Social Sciences subjects was introduced in 2010 but with delayed implementation. The full impact of this policy is only now being felt in terms of increased fees. The resulting drop in part-time student numbers affects the OU already and may affect all ODeL in the future.

Student drop-out is also of key importance, particularly for the students concerned, but also for HE providers. Student retention has always been an issue for ODeL, which generally has lower rates than campus-based study, but becomes even more important when UK HE funding is increasingly limited and depends on successful student completion. Statistics are not easy to uncover, but HESA's data on non-continuation of part-time first-degree students two years after their year of entry are revealing. In 2011–12, only 2.3% of the University of Durham students had left HE compared with 43.6 percent of the OU's students. The OU's non-continuation rates were still comparable with those of Plymouth (42.9%) and Sheffield (44.4%), and do not take account of the OU's open entry policies (HESA 2013). However, these figures do not include those who leave within 50 days of beginning to study and as Simpson demonstrated for the OU in 2004, nearly 13% left before course start, and some 36% before the first assignment (usually within the 50 days of HESA data) (Simpson 2004, p. 83).

These points highlight issues for ODeL in the UK and UK HE generally, for example the dependence on government funding. Will UK HEIs be able to find additional sources of funding for ODeL if necessary? Student satisfaction is also of key importance: how far is ODeL regarded by students as a satisfactory experience compared to campus-based HEI study? The OU previously had very high scores in the Student Satisfaction Survey and remains in the top third of UK Universities (THES 2016b), but has removed much of the locally-based support originally considered essential. For the UHI “86% of students were ‘quite’ or ‘very satisfied’ with teaching that used ICT, compared with 93% for ‘traditional’ methods. Expectation played a role” (Panciroli et al. 2015, p. 41).

MOOCs are also having a major impact. UoL, in partnership with Coursera since 2013, had over one million enrolments on 21 MOOCs delivered from 2014–16. They then tracked over 600 MOOC students who had gone on to register on UOL International Programmes. Financially, this was very beneficial to the University. The start-up costs for their MOOCs averaged about £40,000 for a 5–6 week MOOC, while 600 full-time enrolments for three years provided about £3 million. Overall it was calculated that this provided an income of about £880,000 pa (Kerrison 2016).

If this conversion rate from MOOC learner to registered student is replicated across other HEIs who provide MOOCs, the future of HE ODeL in the UK looks promising. The OU-led *FutureLearn*, a partnership between many HEIs, had nearly 6.3 million learners by 2017, and over two million have signed up to the University of Edinburgh's MOOCs. But how far do informal learners want to sign up to fully paid-up formal programmes.

The availability of Open Educational Resources (OERs) is also having an impact. The OU's *Youtube* provides a wide range of videos and broadcasts for free; *Open-Learn* offers free uncertificated online learning which has reached over 23 million people. These informal learning opportunities provide examples of further challenges and opportunities for the future. Can informal learning at HE level be recognised and accredited within the formal structures of UK HE? Will enough students learning informally convert to registered students and so provide an economic model for the future?

Conclusion

Over 150 years, the reputation of ODeL has moved from a minor and a rather suspect form of study to a major and well accepted mode of learning. UoL External Study (now International Programmes) and the OU pioneered successful distance study, and their impact has been substantial. The OU in particular demonstrated openly how it was possible to maintain high quality teaching and learning and provide better learner support than was available at the time at some conventional universities.

Evidence for the increased recognition of ODeL study can be seen in some key areas:

- Integration within the HE sector: all current legislation in the UK treats accredited programmes in online and distance education in the same way as any other HE provision. Quality Assurance for online distance education, for example, is the same as for all other HEIs.
- Academic Quality: the open availability of all the OU's teaching materials from its first course presentation, when all other UK University teaching was (in effect) behind closed doors, could be said to have provided other Universities with benchmarks for teaching and learning.
- Student satisfaction: the OU was one of the most highly ranked Universities in the UK for "general student satisfaction" for many years after the inception of the UK NSS in 2005. By 2016, after which when many questions changed, the OU had dropped to 35th out of 160, but this remains a high rating for ODeL (THES 2016b). The tables also now include specialist medical and other Institutes which mainly cater for low numbers of postgraduate students, and so do not reflect satisfaction levels with large undergraduate providers.
- Student Employability: distance and online qualifications gained from the OU are generally regarded as good as (or sometime better than) conventional study.

Indeed some employers prefer students who have studied online or at a distance. A multinational IT and management consultancy particularly valued the ability of OU students to work at a distance: “So having the ability to think about planning things remotely, working with people who are not perhaps based in the same office, that can be a really useful skill to have...people who have genuinely thought about their career... and look for a career change, that really shows good focus, good motivation and they’re the kind of people that we’re looking for” (Intranet page on the OU UK’s Careers Website).

A number of factors have had a major impact on the development of ODeL in the UK. Many of these are, or were, politically motivated. UoL’s distance degree programmes may originally have had an imperial element but many other people, including women and Nelson Mandela, benefitted. The social justice commitment of the UK’s Labour government in the 1960s to open up higher education to all led to the foundation of the Open University.

A commitment to imperial mission, social justice, regional/national autonomy and (of course) economic advantage have all played their part in the development of ODeL in the UK and governmental funding and regulatory agencies have had a major impact on developments. The effect of these has varied. However, there remains great enthusiasm at institutional and student level for increasing flexibility in teaching and learner support. The challenge is to meet student expectations within government funding, institutional constraints and a pedagogically appropriate framework for teaching and learning at a distance.

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