

# United Kingdom—Commentary



**Alan Tait**

I am grateful for the opportunity to add a commentary to Anne Gaskell's very effective summary account of open, distance and e-learning in the UK. First of all, looking backwards so to speak, it is remarkable what a significant contribution major UK theorists have made to this field. The UK can claim Michael Moore, who was born and educated in the UK, and who worked at the Open University until his departure for Pennsylvania State University, whose seminal theory of transactional distance from 1971 is still cited. Similarly, the then Brit Tony Bates spent the first half of his career at the Open University where he invented the field of media and distance education, before leaving for British Columbia. We can also add Greville Rumble, who was the first scholar to examine the economics of distance education, and John Daniel, who like Moore and Bates was born and educated in the UK and spent more than a decade in leadership of the Open University. Daniel was the first to identify the crucial poles of interaction and independence in student behaviours, and went on to name and examine the phenomenon of the mega-universities. And no picture of distance education in the UK would be complete without recognition of the activist Michael Young, who invented the term 'open university' in 1962, and who set up the National Extension College which pioneered innovative practices that were influential on Open Universities everywhere. And still today the UK is producing major theorists in open education such as Martin Weller, and in learning analytics Bart Rientjes, both based at the Open University (the latter Dutch by nationality, it must be conceded). So the UK has made and continues to make a significant contribution to foundational thinking and practice, far above its size and significance in the world.

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In terms of institutional development, as Anne Gaskell observes, the Open University as a model has been hugely influential. The development of single mode distance teaching universities around the world would not have taken place without the UK Open University to look to. Whether that has been simply the positive thing that it was thought to be by international funding organisations and national governments elsewhere is now much more open to question. So I would add a more cautionary note about this success story, as I would suggest in retrospect that the spread of the Open University model through the 1970's–1990's like many knowledge transfer processes did not take account of the social and cultural factors that made it successful in the UK. In reality, although not yet honestly or openly yet acknowledged it proved to be more challenging in other countries where other models for providing large scale higher education might have been preferable. The record of quality and student achievement in many open universities is not in truth what their founders hoped for, and it seems difficult to know how to turn this around at this stage with lack of public respect linked to poor management and funding problems. It would equally be possible to make a critique in Europe where a number of Open Universities have gone backwards or never really taken off, as well as in poorer countries. So the Open University as a global ed tech solution to scale, access and quality, which was thought to be the singular contribution of the Open University UK, can IN FACT be much more critically assessed than in former decades.

If I turn to the future I think the UK, by no means uniquely, is seeing the stability of the terminology and the field of action of open, distance and e-learning being undermined. After more than 20 years of the digital revolution technology on the campus is beginning to offer both flexibility—the core offer of ODL—and pedagogic innovation with technology enhanced learning. All campuses, more or less, have learning management systems with elements, some very sophisticated, of the curriculum available digitally, videoed lectures online for recall, assignments submitted and returned online, and email communication with the lecturer the norm. MOOCs are being studied by campus based students. Secondly, open education with its multiple dimensions of open data, open publishing, open access of libraries, open educational resources, MOOCs, and so on is by no means the province only or even primarily of the Open University, or of programmes of Open and Distance Learning. So, the very terminology of distance and e-learning may be in process of being replaced by technology enhanced learning and by open education. The challenge in some ways remains as it always has been: how to provide post-secondary education at scale with quality at a price that is affordable, and with the flexibility to permit people to come in and out during their lifetimes. The challenges of the digital revolution are reshaping provision in ways however that may make the distinctiveness of the field of distance education no longer tenable.

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