

# Why Open Learning?

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## Abstract

*In the present climate of social and political accountability, education is facing an ever increasing demand for value for money. Value, in the quality of the education being offered and in the ease of access to this education. Employers are demanding graduates with generic and transferable skills, who have the ability to go on learning after graduation. New types of learners, with wide differences in background, learning styles, fields of interest and study habits, are enrolling in tertiary institutions. These modern students, a large proportion of whom are mature age, have a greater need for flexibility in the provision of their education. Academics, and the institutions that employ them, have to be prepared to meet these challenges. Open learning could provide the answer, it is both a process focusing on access to educational opportunities, and a philosophy of education which makes learning more student centred. However, adopting such a philosophy, requires commitment, motivation and flexibility at all levels of the university. This paper discusses the characteristics and benefits of open learning, the hazards and potential abuses that will be faced when institutions adopt its more open and flexible practices.*

## Introduction

Universities are facing increasing pressures to become self sufficient and cost effective. Students are being expected to pay for their tertiary education, and hence they demand more from their learning experience. Increasingly, accountability is the catch cry. Such demands may well see not only the adoption, but also the abuse of open learning by institutes of higher education. This paper is a discussion of open learning, its characteristics, the advantages it offers and the potential for its abuse.

## Open Learning - a philosophy of education

The term 'open learning' means all things to all men, so any preface to a discussion of the potential value of open learning in a tertiary institution must start with a clarification of what is meant by the term. In Australia, and overseas, the term open learning is often confused, and used synonymously, with the term 'distance education'. This may, in part, be due to the fact that in Australia, there is a long and established tradition of distance learning (also known as correspondence education, external

study or off-campus study), though the philosophy of open learning is a much less familiar concept. It may also be due to the high profile of the British Open University and other distance teaching institutions that have adopted some open practices and/or use names containing the adjective 'open' (Holmberg, 1989). In this article we prefer to use the definition used by Paine (1989, xi), which is to look at:

*...open learning as both a process which focuses on access to educational opportunities and a philosophy which makes learning more client and student centred. It is learning which allows the learner to choose how to learn, when to learn, where to learn and what to learn as far as possible within the resource constraints of any education and training provision.*

This means that not only is access to education made more equitable, allowing anyone the opportunity to start on the path to a qualification via higher education, but also that the learning experience itself is more flexible. Flexibility can be provided in -

- the course/subject entry and exit times,
- the mode of learning,
- the mode of attendance,
- the resources made available for learning,
- the pace of learning,
- the interaction between learners,
- the support provided for learners, and
- the methods of assessment.

Consequently, the term 'flexible learning' is often used in place of 'open learning' (Lewis, 1993) and the educational aim of 'student-centred' learning is also included under the umbrella term of 'open learning', as subscribers to this philosophy aim to help individuals take responsibility for their own learning. Their aim is for the student to become an expert learner - strategic, self-regulated and reflective (Ertmer and Newby, 1996).

## Higher education - pressures for change

Higher education, in Australia, as in many other parts of the world, is facing a period of great change. The impetus for change is coming from a variety of sources: from economic rationalists in government, looking for

an ever increasing cost effective delivery of educational products, and value for the public dollars; from industry and other employers; seeking graduates who are adaptable and autonomous workers with generic, transferable skills; and from recent advances in technology and academic research on teaching. Unfortunately, very often, the things tertiary institutions do are hard to measure or quantify. Research, often considered the *raison d'être* of tertiary institutions, is fast becoming a luxury as the dollar becomes harder to chase. Students are also critical of the quality of the undergraduate teaching and hence, the education they receive (McInnes, 1993). Society's perception of the social value of tertiary institutions is also changing. As education in Australia moves more to a 'user pays' philosophy, with a rise in fee paying courses and an increase in HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), the demand for value for money becomes more urgent. Value, not only in the quality of the education being offered, but also in the ease of access to this education. Institutes of higher education are also facing the challenges of large numbers of learners, each with differing educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and hence, foundations upon which the learning experience can be based (Candy et al., 1994). Institutions must provide access for new types of learners with wide differences in learning styles, fields of interest and study habits. The modern student, a large proportion of whom are of mature age, have a greater need for flexibility in the provision of their education, and recognition of their prior learning (Baldwin, 1991, Candy et al., 1994). Those in all levels of power, within tertiary institutions, need to formulate response strategies requiring the redirection of existing resources to ensure that the current challenges are met. According to Lewis (1993), changes that would allow a more flexible response to present challenges, include:-

- the establishment of modularisation, focusing on exactly what will be taught, effectively increasing student choice,
- flexible timetabling, which accommodates a range of course structures, such as recurrent education, cooperative education, sandwich courses, part-time study, credit accumulation, individual study and experiential learning,
- credit accumulation/transfer schemes, which allow for recognition, accreditation and validation of students' prior learning,
- increased access to the learning resources,
- further development of the information technology base, with cooperation between institutions, enabling them to become highly organised, efficient and cost-effective, whilst throwing open access to students,

- provision of a network of flexible student support systems which should include counselling services, bridging, catch-up, remedial and study skills courses and,
- the development of the learning resources and experiences which cater for differing learning styles and are of the required scale.

Such provisions, should, in the long run, meet the requirements of cost-effectiveness, whilst dealing with the increased volume and type of learners. At the same time, they serve to enhance the quality of the individuals' learning experience, which will be of increasing importance as accountability becomes more entrenched. University administrators have an important role in establishing an academic environment in which good teaching is recognised, valued, fostered and rewarded. Excellence in teaching should be credited with equal importance and prestige to that of research and publication (Seldin, 1990). The role of the academic needs to be redefined in the light of changes that occur in an open learning environment, with appointment and promotion policies adjusted accordingly. These objectives should be stated, but also committed to action (Green, 1990).

*It cannot be stressed too greatly, the importance of leadership in bringing about actual change in the status of teaching as a worthwhile pursuit in institutions of higher education.* (Narveson, 1992, as cited in Ramsden et al., 1995).

One major problem for university administrators is to achieve a balance between the demands of quality and accountability, coming from within and beyond the institution, and providing for the needs of academic staff and the university (Lonsdale, 1993). These measures will require extra staff in most institutions plus some time, effort and motivation for the development of open attitudes amongst teaching staff (Johnson, 1990). If open learning is to become established, there needs to be an extensive program of staff development and re-education, without such direct support and active leadership, from the top levels of administration, momentum for the establishment of open learning, will be halted.

## Teaching - rewards for excellence?

In the 19th Century, Newman stated that a university was:

*...a place of teaching universal knowledge...[its object is] the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than its advancement. If its objects were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a university should have students"* (Newman, 1959; as cited in Ramsden et al., 1995).

During this century, however, resources have been steadily channelled away from the teaching role of academics into research. Traditionally, the promotion

route does little to recognise an academic's contribution to excellence in teaching, rather research is seen to be the factor that influences promotion decisions (Over, 1993; Seldin, 1990). Perhaps this is because research is more easily quantifiable, and seems to be less susceptible to subjective assessment. Why then, should academics devote so much of their time and energy to the development and enhancement of their teaching skills when, both here and around the world, the pressure is to perform research? Recently, there have been strong moves, both in North America and the United Kingdom, to develop initiatives that would enhance the profile of teaching in institutions of higher education (Laurillard, 1993), Australian institutions are not far behind in the push (AVCC, 1993; CQAHE, 1995). In order to raise both the status and value of teaching, it is first necessary to have some kind of understanding of what constitutes good practice. The CAUT commissioned report (Ramsden et al., 1995), 'Recognising and rewarding good teaching', lists seven qualities that researchers generally agree are essential to good teaching. Good teachers...

- (i) are themselves, good learners - resulting in teaching that is dynamic, reflective and constantly evolving, often as a result of advances in their own research,
- (ii) display enthusiasm for their subject and research activities, and the desire to share it with their students,
- (iii) recognise the importance of context and adapt their teaching accordingly,
- (iv) encourage deep learning approaches and are concerned with developing their students' critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and problem approach behaviours,
- (v) demonstrate an ability to transform and extend knowledge rather than merely transmitting it - "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman, 1987),
- (vi) set clear goals, use valid/appropriate assessment methods and provide high quality feedback to their students, and
- (vii) show respect for and interest in their students; encourage their independence and sustain high expectations of them.

These seven qualities also underpin the philosophy of open learning. If all academics aspired to such heights, a learning experience tailored to each student's needs would be inevitable and moreover would provide satisfaction to the teacher. The flexibility that is demanded of higher education by the modern student develops as the institution's philosophy becomes more learner centred. Such learner centred initiatives are taking place at the

level of the individual academic, but these innovations will not survive if the individual moves on, and the innovation has not become institutionalised (Lublin and Prosser, 1994). However, tertiary institutions are changing. In the near future, as well as the intrinsic rewards gained from working in a stimulating atmosphere, from contact with students and the sense that they are contributing to their overall growth and development (Ramsden et al., 1995), there should soon be extrinsic rewards, in the form of academic promotion, for pursuing academic excellence in teaching.

## **Generic and transferable skills - the new role of the teacher**

In the present climate of social and political accountability, there is a focus on the quality of graduates and their progression rates through institutes of higher education. Degree courses, whose assessment strategies require students to learn by rote and reiterate the course material, which do not require the student to interact with the material, construct a personal meaning about it or even to understand the discipline, are resulting in poor learning outcomes (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Fraser, 1996; Watkins, 1983). This traditional approach does not take into account modern theories of education, the individual needs of the learner nor his/her prior learning experience. In many disciplines, the body of knowledge related to it, is growing at an exponential rate. No longer is it possible, or even desirable, that an individual have a complete knowledge base, rather it is preferable that he/she have an understanding of the concepts and principles of the discipline, have the ability to apply this understanding to novel situations and the wherewithal to seek out the information that is needed. Our society continues to increase in complexity, graduates will need to be equipped to cope with rapid change in technology and to enter careers that may not yet be envisaged, with a change in professions being commonplace.

To produce graduates equipped for the workplace, it is essential that educators teach in ways that encourage the learner to engage in deep or meaningful learning which, may be built upon in the later years of their course, and also be transferred to the workplace, as demanded by employers. '...employers in business and industry want their graduates to come equipped with a range of transferable, generic skills. These include the ability to go on learning, to adapt to new circumstances and, in the case of employment, to acquire industry-specific or even firm-specific knowledge and skill' (Candy et al., 1994, p65). Boyer (1990) stresses the importance of enhancement of students' capacity to continue learning after their formal education is finished. 'Change is needed in the methods of teaching and learning to accommodate adult learners and to provide the long-range needs of the learning society' (Cross, 1987, p99).

However, academics in higher education are not necessarily appointed as a result of a strong background in teaching despite the expectation that they will fulfil such a role with excellence. University teaching has remained relatively unexamined, there being no pre-service or in-service requirement of new academic staff to study or be formally qualified in teaching (Lublin and Prosser, 1994). It is apparent that many academics teach as they were taught themselves, very often with a traditional didactic approach (Fraser, 1996). Such an approach does not take into account the differing learning styles of different types of students, effective teaching must do so. The new role of the teacher is to be '...increasingly less the carrier of information, but more and more the tutor who stimulates and promotes a communication process between himself and the student and between the student and the learning materials.' University teachers should '...not be the ones who transmit other people's knowledge to others, but the ones who engage with the students in a critical assessment of knowledge bases to establish their truthfulness and applicability' (Van Enckevort and Leibbrandt, 1988, p54). The focus will be on the students' learning, not on the instructors' teaching. The "syllabus" is likely to move from being a set of lecture notes to a set of learning materials made up of print, cassettes, disks and computer programs. Class contact hours would cease to be the major determinant of an academic workload. The teacher is then released from being the sole source of information transmission and can become more a learning manager, able to pay more attention to the creative development and delivery of education (Johnson, 1990).

### **Lifelong learners - learning how to learn**

Educators must be aware of the skills they wish graduating students to master. Each skill may be discipline specific, but generic skills such as autonomous learning are of vital importance and applicable in a wide variety of likely workplaces that graduates may enter. Graduates may no longer be able to work in their area of expertise, they are now required to be life-long learners, ready to face the rapidly changing society of the next century. A recent NBEET commissioned report, recommends that 'lifelong learning skills should form part of the core of any and every undergraduate degree, and that its emphasis should be spelled out in course aims and objectives' (Candy et al., 1994, p66). Most students do not develop lifelong learning strategies unless they receive training in how to do so. Metacognitive skills can be learned in the same way that other skills are learned, through extensive practice, followed by feedback (Derry and Murphy, 1986). 'Expertise in learning, as in any other domain, can only be expected to develop from many years of actually performing the necessary metacognitive

and regulatory skills in the context of meaningful learning activities' (Ertmer and Newby, 1996, p21).

There are many ways that an educator can plan his/her teaching, with a learner-centred perspective that encourages deep learning. Biggs (1989) lists four key elements of the learning experience that do so:

- (i) motivational context; whereby the students experience a 'need to know',
- (ii) learner activity; in which the students are actively learning, thereby making more connections between past learning and new concepts,
- (iii) interaction with others; by using group strategies, such as peer tutoring, autonomous student groups and tutorials, we provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning and manipulate ideas with others (Gibbs, 1992) and reflect upon their learning, and
- (iv) a well structured and integrated knowledge base.

Some activities which provide such meaningful learning opportunities, are listed in Table 1 (next page). There is no one teaching and learning scheme that suits all students, but by providing an array of learning experiences, we are more likely to accommodate most learning styles.

### **Assessment - the hidden curriculum**

Student centred learning activities that foster deep learning require innovative assessment strategies. 'There is little point in having a programme of study which is intended to promote a deep approach to student learning if the assessment of that programme encourages a surface approach' (Davies, 1994, p114). Traditional assessment and reporting aims to produce a single mark or symbol which intends to indicate at least three things:- the extent to which the learned material was mastered or understood; the level at which certain skills were performed; and the degree to which certain attitudes were displayed (Potterton, 1994). Many such assessment methods assess different outcomes to those desired by student-centred education. It is common for conventional assessment to test, for example, 'the ability to recall information or to tackle familiar forms of academic problems' (Gibbs, 1995, p 2). A deep learning approach would test 'the ability to identify and tackle new and unfamiliar 'real world' problems'. Examination systems that result in students cramming and rote learning are followed by rapid forgetting (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991). If students are rewarded, via summative assessment, for surface learning approaches, such as reproducing the content of a lecture, then many will focus on such learning techniques and no others. A major assessment goal should be to increase the size and complexity of assignments and minimise what can be achieved by

**Table 1: Some alternative learning techniques and procedures that encourage deep learning.**

Technique/ Procedure	Advantages	References
Concept mapping, Vee diagrams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ metacognitive development</li> <li>◆ constructed knowledge; information assimilation</li> <li>◆ recognition of prior learning</li> <li>◆ concept integration into existing cognitive structure</li> <li>◆ autonomous learning</li> </ul>	Fraser, 1996; Lehman et al., 1985; Novak, 1990, 1991; Novak and Gowin, 1984;
Inquiry and problem based learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ metacognitive development - lifelong learning skills</li> <li>◆ small group collaboration; interactive learning, problem resolution</li> <li>◆ cognitive dissonance, generic reasoning process development</li> <li>◆ knowledge and process assimilation</li> </ul>	Boud and Feletti, 1991; Creedy et al., 1992; Feletti, 1993; Norman and Schmidt, 1992;
Group/Team work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ transferable skills - cooperative behaviour, interpersonal skills, risk taking</li> <li>◆ cognitive dissonance</li> <li>◆ problem solving, active learning</li> </ul>	Heller and Hollabaugh, 1992; Heller et al., 1992; Renshaw, 1992;
Collaborative learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ group work skills</li> <li>◆ data/information sharing</li> <li>◆ problem based inquiry</li> </ul>	Johnson et al., 1991; Kadel and Keehner, 1994; Kaye, 1991; Klemm, 1994; Van den Brande, 1993;
Computer aided learning and multimedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ autonomous learning - exploratory, experimental</li> <li>◆ simulation scenarios - active and reactive exploration and learning</li> <li>◆ learner modelling - monitoring/tutoring/remedial facilities</li> <li>◆ self-paced, non-threatening, uniquely tailored learning environment</li> </ul>	Cosgrove, 1994; Fjelstadt, 1991; Kozma, 1991; Marchionini, 1990; Navassardian et al., 1995; Van den Brande, 1993;
Diaries, logs and reflective journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ assimilation/development of concepts, make connections</li> <li>◆ critical thinking; communication skills</li> <li>◆ self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-awareness</li> <li>◆ personal meanings - learning experience</li> </ul>	Ballantyne and Packer, 1995; Day, 1994; Hettich, 1990;
Self, peer and group assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ critical, appraisal skills development</li> <li>◆ trust, collegiality development, "partners in learning", faculty expectations understood</li> <li>◆ increased technical ability, rapid feedback</li> </ul>	Boud, 1986; Scott and Watson, 1994;

memorising or reproducing content (Exley and Gibbs, 1994). It must be remembered that learning may well be improved by adopting student centred approaches but 'this may not become apparent in results from conventional assessment methods' (Gibbs, 1995, p2). The assessment strategy to be used must be given as much attention as is given to the learning experience being established. Wherever possible, students should be involved in the assessment process, as this helps them to develop the ability to make judgments, in particular about themselves and their work (Brown et. al., 1994). The ability to judge one's own performance is an extremely important skill, and one that is all but ignored in most degree courses. Strategies such as allowing students to see marked examples of good and bad work, the use of peer-assessment and self-assessment comment sheets are all useful in enabling students to practise such skills.

### Student opinion of open learning strategies

A final, but vital, variable that needs to be considered when trying to establish an open learning environment is student opinion of flexible teaching and learning. Few higher education institutions have developed open and formal recognition of student opinion of teacher innova-

tions (Clark, 1994). There are few opportunities during the development of a new course for open discussion between students and staff. The student community is, by its very nature, transitory and hence often less powerful than academic staff. However, the role of students in open learning is as active participants, whose opinions and recommendations are listened to and given credence. Students have the right to choose and in so doing they must have the right to express opinions about the choices given them. As Clark (1994) says, a close developmental relationship needs to be established between staff and students in which there is honest discussion of teaching delivery and strategies for learning. Any course development must not only meet the objectives of how students learn but also take into account the students' motivations, priorities and preferences. Staff must be willing to take the risk of leaving the learning in the hands of the learner, and become a partner and helpmate in such an enterprise.

As the student body is both diverse and dynamic, it would be expected that student responses to flexible learning initiatives would also be diverse. However, common complaints and suggestions from the student body can be identified (Clark, 1994; Moss, 1991). When presented with new ways of teaching, students often

need to develop new and unfamiliar learning techniques. Not only should this skills shortage be acknowledged, but they must be given the opportunities to develop these skills (Moss, 1991, p37). Traditionally, students are taught note-taking and information gathering skills, now it is necessary to include such study skills as group work and presentation. It must be remembered that, although we seek to develop the students' ability to be independent learners, the tutor does not become obsolete, rather he/she must be the supportive and motivating influence in the development of the students' autonomy. The learner requires immediate and continual feedback about his/her progress which results, not only in a sense of achievement but also provides a validation of the learning strategy adopted by the student (Clark, 1994). At the beginning of their career in university, students may lack the discipline to benefit from the freedom to study when and where they choose (Moss, 1991). Thus, the tutor needs to be aware of the individual learning needs of each student and be prepared to help with the students management of their learning. Indeed, the individual learner may be more intimately affected by the person or persons directly facilitating his/her learning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a lecturer who is interested in embracing the philosophy of open learning has to be highly motivated. It requires considerable commitment of both time and energy. If the individual is stimulated to adopt practices of student centred education and innovative approaches to student learning, it is essential that the institution offers its financial, physical and moral support for this undertaking. Policies need to be either amended or put into place which incorporate the concept of good teaching, innovations need to be institutionalised (Lublin and Prosser, 1994) and the old issue of Intellectual Property revisited.

Administrators must be wary of abusing both the philosophy of open learning and the trust of their staff. In these times, where economic pressures are being brought to bear on higher education institutions, it is easy for administrators to do so. It is possible to state that their aim is to increase access to learning resources, thereby meeting the learners' needs, when in fact, the focus is on cheaper delivery whilst competing for students. If such a path is followed, the institution will become second rate whilst sacrificing staff in the process. Even now, academics are overloaded with teaching responsibilities, giving them little time to become scholars in research or teaching (Boyer, 1990). Teaching and research are central aspects of academic culture, and they can be mutually beneficial, the former being enhanced by the acquisition of new knowledge. However, it is possible that by bowing too completely to economic pressures, we will

produce two classes of academics: those doing research and those committed to teaching excellence. This will inevitably result in divisions and factions among staff. Such a divided campus would not be beneficial to the students and will sound the death knell to open learning.

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