Introduction
In setting down these comments on The Open University, which I have had the privilege of experiencing during the past twenty years, I have been stimulated to do so by a desire to bring to the attention of the general public the positive aspects of The Open University as a distance learning institution.
An alternative way of coping with the problem is through developmental testing. This is one of the functions of the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) and involves the use of a small group of students who work through the learning materials to ascertain how effective they are. On the basis of such information, the course design may be adapted, or may be subjected to modification, sometimes of a drastic nature. Although this approach is both practical and commendable for the written materials, it is very difficult to apply to TV programmes where changes are often too expensive to be considered. This is unfortunate for developmental testing seems essential in a situation where courses are being produced without any form of student involvement.

The Role of the Institute of Educational Technology

Developmental testing is only one aspect of IET's work. In many ways, the role it plays is comparable to that of the various Staff Development Centres and Units found in Australian universities. As my own interest lies in this area of teaching, I have become increasingly disenchanted with the tasks of reading and commenting upon the efforts of their colleagues. Their interest in the BBC programmes and the computer-marked assignments also weakens considerably as their efforts are, naturally enough, focused on completing their own material. Time pressure, then, often precludes the extensive writing of units which, on theoretical grounds, is considered so desirable. As such, many academics writing correspondence material are unprepared to answer student questions and are ignorant of the very existence of their own units, let alone the attitude to the production of materials which such units are designed to foster.

There are other course production problems too. Basically these are a function of the necessity for Open University courses to be taught at a distance, rather than face-to-face. As the academics writing correspondence material are unavailable to answer student questions and to clarify the processes that are essential for their proper understanding, the student's comments are often ignored. Yet these comments occupy the largest group of IET academic staff. Ideally, every course team has an IET academic advisor who acts as a facilitator, who will provide advice on the clarification of course objectives, the structuring of the learning materials to more effectively achieve objectives, and the design of assessment procedures. Practice does not always reflect the ideal and as the total number of OU courses has increased, IET has had to reduce the staff resources to service them all. Being spread too thinly in this way, indeed, they are unable to provide assistance to three or four course teams at the same time, and are obviously unable to devote the time needed for the detailed, precise, analysis of the materials produced by the course teams. What is now occurring with increased frequency is for IET staff to concentrate on problems common to more than one course team, assessment policy for example, and to reduce the number of teams to which they contribute.

This trend is not altogether unacceptable to the rest of the academic staff. Although the initial role played by IET seemed to be greatly appreciated, as the Open University has grown and the number of its courses increased, many academics see little use for its services. Once an academic has gone through one course team experience with an IET advisor, he is often disposed to dismiss all other courses. He believes that IET design principles and needs no further guidance in such matters. He may be right, of course, but from my observations I would seriously doubt it. The parallel with Australian universities is strong, the problems encountered in this way being very similar in nature. Basically, the situation is that Staff Development Centres, whose role is primarily that of assisting academics to establish better learning conditions for their students, are often in a position of offering help to people who see no need for such help. This is the big question really: is there a need in universities for staff development?

Many academics would answer this question in the negative. They already know how to teach well, and require no one else to offer further suggestions. Some of the lecturers who react in this way may be quite correct. Others may not be so accurate in their estimation of their own teaching ability. Fundamentally, I think this issue of acceptance or non-acceptance of help from Staff Development Centres is really one of openness. Are academics willing to accept the notion that they, too, can continue to learn about the teaching process? As the ancient Chinese proverb puts it:

He who is dissatisfied with himself will grow; he who is not sure of his correctness will learn many things.

However, to return to the IET at the Open University, as I mentioned earlier, their role is not purely advisory but is also one of providing empirical data bearing on the conditions under which learning at a distance may be optimized. This involves considerable research of the students themselves, their methods and their interests. As measured by the work being done. Providing a facilitative learning environment through constant improvement of the correspondence material and its accompanying media, and through efforts to upgrade tutorial and counselling services as well, can only be considered as an improvement. The more one is impressed with the work being done, the more important the role of the Institute of Educational Technology becomes. Improving the quality of instruction is a very open, honest and professional way of learning what is right for one's students. Whether or not this attitude is considered as a sign of slackening is a matter for debate. Business enterprises are increasingly disenchanted with the work of others. Where this system does not succeed, it seems to me that there is a need for another one. This is where the IET pool of expertise and expertise would be invaluable to staff members is being questioned, not only by their colleagues, but by the academic community as a whole. Is it possible that the academic community, as a whole, has reacted to this situation by thinking that it can do just as well on its own? This is a question that I believe is being asked of us in the context of the Open University. The IET pool of expertise is probably the best one available anywhere and its size is constantly growing.

Conclusion

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, I write as an outsider to the Open University environment and my comments are necessarily biased by my own background in traditional universities. Perhaps I exaggerate both the strengths and the weaknesses of the IET system I found in the methods of teaching and university level courses at a distance. However, taking a general view, I was very impressed with the work being done. Providing a facilitative learning environment through constant improvement of the correspondence material and its accompanying media, and through efforts to upgrade tutorial and counselling services as well, can only be considered as an improvement. The more one is impressed with the work being done, the more important the role of the Institute of Educational Technology becomes. Improving the quality of instruction is a very open, honest and professional way of learning what is right for one's students. Whether or not this attitude is considered as a sign of slackening is a matter for debate. Business enterprises are increasingly disenchanted with the work of others. Where this system does not succeed, it seems to me that there is a need for another one. This is where the IET pool of expertise and expertise would be invaluable to staff members is being questioned, not only by their colleagues, but by the academic community as a whole. Is it possible that the academic community, as a whole, has reacted to this situation by thinking that it can do just as well on its own? This is a question that I believe is being asked of us in the context of the Open University. The IET pool of expertise is probably the best one available anywhere and its size is constantly growing.

REFERENCES


