# Open universities: reinventing, repurposing, and reimagining innovative futures

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## Abstract

Higher education is at a crossroads. Colleges and universities, including open universities, face a challenging period of change to thrive in a highly dynamic, competitive and digital higher education future. The unique innovations of scaling, massification and social access, whilst still essential and important for open universities, may not in themselves be sufficient to preserve and reposition open universities as major leaders in the emerging higher education ecosystem. Open university leaders will be confronted with immense challenges. How can open universities reinvent themselves as the most exciting organizational model to meet contemporary needs for new audiences in innovative ways? The game-changers for the next generation of open universities may be a renewed and/or new focus on 1) leadership, 2) expanding mega-universities, 3) repositioning open universities within the mainstream HE ecosystem, 4) new streamlined versions of open universities smaller in size, fewer students, niche research, and a mix of niche-focused degrees, certificates and micro-credentials, 5) a focused national mission and renewed partnerships, and 6) monitoring AI and digital technology developments in the sector and across society. Open universities play a key role in preserving democratic ideals and social justice. With a renewed commitment to a culture of innovation, agility and adaptation, the next generation of open universities can reinvent and repurpose themselves to thrive and empower the global higher education community.

## Keywords

open universities; leadership; market differentiation; innovation; digital technologies

# 1   Introduction

> How can open universities reinvent themselves
> as the most exciting organizational model to meet
> contemporary needs for new audiences in innovative
> ways? (Paul & Tait, 2019, p. iii).

Open universities, like most higher education institutions, are at a crossroads. Despite efforts to stave off major competition by traditional universities that have established online programs (dual-mode institutions) as new start-up, private sector online training providers, some observers have noted that open universities may have lost some focus on their core principle of innovation following the successes in the 1970s – 1990s (Tait, 2018; 2024). Today, the majority of open university leaders and advocates continue to embody the key strategies of mass access, scale, and openness (Daniel, 2019; Paul & Tait, 2019; Weller, 2017). Indeed, these founding principles remain vitally important in many higher education (HE) and open university contexts and yet perhaps these may be less dominant for the emerging HE global ecosystem (Nichols, 2020).

The keywords in the byline of the title above were chosen carefully. Reinvention, repurposing and reimagining (3Rs) reflect the author's conceptualization of how we might think about change, agility and adaptation by open universities in the future. As noted above, the winds of change characterized by uncertainty, digitalization, economic and market shifts; in concert with a global pandemic, increased competition, and new demands by students, employers and other key stakeholders (Olcott et al., 2023) have served as a catalyst for all colleges and universities to analyze and plan for the future.  What new innovations are needed?  What key affordances that worked well before need repurposing? And how do we bring creative and innovative ideas to the process of reinventing the new and repurposing the old?

A rich legacy of success in the past is no guarantee of a thriving future for open universities.  As Tait (2018, p. 20) noted: "We have seen enough of the potential for the restructuring of industries through the digital revolution to know that there is no guaranteed place for Open Universities in the landscape of higher education: it will have to be earned once again." The shifting demands of a changing and uncertain world, economic downturns, new technologies, funding reductions, and a global pandemic have created challenges for all tertiary institutions.

Open universities face immense challenges navigating their roles in the 21st century. Students want credentials that lead to jobs (not debt) (McGreal & Olcott, 2022). Competitors have raised their outreach and online games (Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait 2018, 2024). Credentials are potentially undergoing a revolutionary transformation and employers are demanding better skill alignment from universities for their graduates with organizational needs (Brown et al., 2021). Finally, government funding to higher education has generally continued to decline (McGreal et al., 2022; Nichols, 2024; Olcott et al., 2023).

Whilst there are still barriers to access for many students, particularly in developing countries, the past five decades have resulted in the exponential expansion of access across social classes, gender, and underserved minority and indigenous populations (Daniel, 2019; Tait, 2018, 2024). The catalytic impacts and advocacy embraced in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) called for governments by 2030 'to ensure equal access for women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university' (UNESCO, 2016). Lifelong learning, teacher training and tertiary education are seen as core values of the global education enterprise. Tait (2018) further notes that open universities may be more focused

towards serving students in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where many institutions are already at maximum enrolments.

Open universities have come under greater scrutiny from traditional academics, journalists, funding agencies or government policymakers on a host of issues, including poor quality, student attrition, declining enrolments, failed scaling and financial models, competitive impotency, and even radical claims these institutions are simply obsolete. Many of these observations have been noted and summarized in detail by the following leaders in Section 3 of this paper (e.g. Daniel, 2019; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Mishra & Kanwar, 2023; Olivier, 2023; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018, 2024; Weller, 2017).

What are the implications of these developments and critiques? Within the context of reinvention, repurposing, and reimagining, they may be catalysts for some open universities to consider a more streamlined structure with dedicated access niches where a blend of traditional and new credentials (degrees, certificates and skill-based micro-credentials) are aligned with national economic and workforce needs. Access will likely continue to be a core value of open universities, yet with greater institutional differentiation due to the 3Rs being employed by leaders.

At the same time, the immense contributions of open universities to HE access can be reconfigured in new ways that recognize the shifting needs of employers, governments, and students. Daniel (2019) notes astutely that there already exists extensive diversity in the scope, size, programs, and day-to-day operations of open universities across the globe. However, the general public, potential students and many politicians and policymakers increasingly view open universities as very similar with few unique attributes that differentiate these institutions from other open universities and traditional universities (Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018).

The purpose of this critical reflection paper is to examine what strategies and practices may be considered for reinventing, repurposing, and reimagining open universities for the future. The paper is divided into four main sections:

1. Section 1 introduces the need for change by open universities, and identifies some of the shifts in the HE environment and related challenges.

2. Section 2 provides a synopsis of open university affordances, innovations and selected challenges facing open universities and most HE institutions.

3. Section 3 brings together a synthesis of research covering diverse perspectives by key leaders in the field on the future of open universities.

4. Section 4 builds upon the conceptual framework of reinvention, repurposing, and reimagining open university futures and presents selected strategies that could be considered for rebuilding the next generation of open universities. The author also identifies three areas of inquiry for future research: 1) a taxonomy for different types of open universities, 2) developing the conceptual framework of reinvention, repurposing and reimagining open universities, and 3) the potential of global mega-university consortia.

This paper is presented as a *critical analysis* for examining potential future strategies for open universities. It draws upon empirical research, leadership commentaries and practices, and trends and shifts facing global HE. Although the focus of this paper is on open universities, many of the challenges discussed are endemic to traditional colleges and universities across the world. Reinvention, repurposing and reimagining provide an initial conceptual framework for how we might think about these changes to create the new, repurpose the old, and do this with creative, innovative and imaginative thinking.

## 2   Open universities: innovations, affordances and challenges

Indeed, the innovation and affordance history of open universities has been articulated by many scholars and leaders over the past fifty years. Without underscoring the 19th century founding by the University of London External Programme of outreach programmes and University of South Africa's later founding to address student barriers due to apartheid exclusion policies, a good place to start is the Open University's founding in the UK (OUUK) in 1969 (Crowther, 1969). Its mission stated (Open University, 2024):

> The Open University's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. We promote educational opportunity and social justice by high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership we seek to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open learning.

Daniel (1996; 2019) noted the central affordance of open mega-universities for providing competitive advantage was by scale, serving large numbers of students, resulting in lower operational and per-student costs. Daniel also accentuates the potential benefits of educational technologies by mega-universities and distance teaching institutions. Tait (2018, p. 4) goes on to identify five critical innovations that defined open universities as 'first-mover' advantages in the 1970s – 1990s:

1. vision and mission: the courage to advocate and operationalise the move from an elite to a mass HE system, with notions of openness and access;
2. innovation in learning and teaching: the admission of non-traditional student cohorts, usually people in employment or with family responsibilities, which demanded a new flexible student-centred practice;
3. innovation in technologies for learning: initially, this was based on innovative developments in instructional design, combined with TV and radio, and today with online teaching, peer learning, Open Educational Resources (OERs), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other online activities;
4. innovation in educational logistics: the development of industrial-style management of services to students in large numbers, of high quality, and with an industrial-style focus on scheduling; and
5. significant scale: breaking the mould of craft-based teaching to create university systems of hitherto unimagined scale.

### 2.1   Key innovations and affordances

During the past five decades, the innovations created through this openness to people, places, methods and ideas by open universities have produced remarkable affordances for higher education. Although beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the history and details of each, the following highlights some of the key contributions from open universities:

- massification of HE to expand access;
- open access and flexible options for student entry in programs, particularly part-time adult learners who are employed and have families;
- breaking down traditional elitist social, cultural, racial and economic barriers for marginalized groups and underserved populations;
- scaling strategy to serve large populations of students potentially leading to economic efficiencies for operational costs and lower per-student costs;

- team approach to learning design and materials production where lead faculty, learning designers, student service specialists, advisors, and assessment specialists work together;

- innovative uses of technology in the provision of content and student services;

- promotion and adoption of open content – OERs, Open education practices (OEPs), and MOOCS – and engagement by open universities in innovative partnerships for making content more accessible and nominally free. FutureLearn, its predecessor OpenLearn and the European MOOC Consortium (EMC) are examples of this engagement. It is important to recognize that many of these innovations were not solely created by open universities and many institutions, including dual-mode traditional institutions, have played an important part in their creation. Open universities have taken a role in advocating these across the HE ecosystem, but they are ubiquitous today in the broader HE ecosystem.

These advancements led to an accelerated opening up of education for the masses built around mega-universities (Daniel, 1996; 2019) and distance education as the most industrialized form of teaching and learning (Moore & Kearsley; Peters, 2004, 2010; Zawacki-Richter, 2024). Open universities expanded across the globe and soon became particularly relevant as a key strategy for developing countries to exponentially expand access for its citizens (e.g., IGNOU-India; Unisa – South Africa; Open University Indonesia; etc.) (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Olcott, 2024a, 2024b; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2008; UNESCO ITE, 2023).

## 2.2    Levelling the HE playing field

As we approached the millennium, it was soon apparent that the innovations and affordances created by open universities were a catalyst for traditional dual-mode institutions to embark upon a period of mass transformation, notably the expansion of programs by online delivery enabled by a modified model of the team approach of the OUUK  to materials and curricular design for distance learning (Tait, 2008). The higher education landscape was undergoing major shifts and traditional universities were on the cusp of major transformation (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Paul and Tait (2019) delineated significant affordances-innovations by open universities from (1970s – 1990s). Adaptable and agile organizations continually pursue a state of assessing innovation and embracing it as a constant, continuing core value for the future. Open universities were and are, in and of themselves, instruments of social justice with innovation.

In sum, open universities had made invaluable contributions to access driven by the core values of innovation, scaling, financial efficiencies and social justice. This was followed by a major shift and adoption of technology innovations by the mainstream and traditional dual-mode face-to-face institutions (Olcott, 2024a; 2024b). In retrospect, this online transformation by mainstream universities was a natural evolution of digital technologies and, to some degree, greater demands by students for faster, cheaper and more efficient access to HE (Paul & Tait, 2019).

## 2.3   Open universities under siege: why strategic reset?

We have covered many of the challenges facing open universities and discussed some of the critics' claims earlier in this section. Whilst it may seem fashionable for these critics to pose the question 'Where did open universities go wrong'? many critics frequently misunderstood . Some critics failed to highlight that all HE has faced major challenges and today are facing the prospects of a strategic reset for the future. Indeed, some of the critiques of open universities were partially justified.

Here are just a few:

- Open universities have become complacent after early successes and the core value of innovation and culture of innovation were diminished (Tait, 2024).

- Open universities are plagued by an identity crisis and mission ambiguity. Many stakeholder groups view open universities all the same despite clear differences amongst different open universities across the globe (Daniel, 2019).

- Resistance to change and outside criticisms. Open University staff are remarkably loyal and proud but often blinded and reluctant to monitor the external innovation landscape outside open universities bubble (Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2024).

- Delayed, yet not a catastrophic, transition from the print-based correspondence model to online delivery. Many open universities were slower to engage in this transformation and many have only made this transition recently. Online capacity is not a panacea for success but it is considered a normative part of doing business in today's higher education marketplace Olcott, 2024a).

- Accentuating their global missions whilst their primary mission and enrolments are national the majority of students are from the home country (Olcott 2024a, 2024b).

These are fair assessments and yet would these have collectively altered the transformation by dual mode traditional institutions going online? No, this shift was already well underway in the mid-1990s and ubiquitous at the millennium. Open universities and their delay in transitioning to online delivery, whilst a tactical error, was not a strategic blunder. As this transition has evolved, open universities have embraced online delivery as well as innovative uses of digital technologies for student services, research, and partnerships (Daniel, 2019; Tait, 2018; 2024; Weller, 2017) The truth remains that the levelling of the innovation landscape was due more to this shift by dual mode institutions than by open universities going to sleep at the wheel. Open universities' original successes were grounded in a clear understanding of their role and where they fit in the broader HE institutions ecosystem.

## 3 Leadership perspectives and research on the future of open universities

### 3.1 Dharma versus Karma

Daniel (2019), drawing upon the work of Prasad's (2018) analysis of distance education in India, noted that the right intentions and aspirations of distance learning and those in practice in the current Zeitgeist were often divergent and misaligned. Prasad referred to the former as the *Dharma* and the latter as the *Karma* of distance learning. The Dharma included common assertions about distance learning, such as an instrument to democratize education, promote social justice, foster development and capacity building, using technology, focus on quality, teacher as facilitator and the institution as teacher. Karma, conversely, included large student numbers, diversity of programmes, private sector engagement, focus on profit, technology and quality and regulation. Although many of these accurately portrayed the current status of open universities and distance learning around the world, they were not completely misaligned and there were some overlaps between intentions and practice.

Daniel (2019) discussed some current challenges within the context of the 'Iron Triangle' of balancing access, quality and costs (Daniel et al., 2009). This axiom suggests that if you increase access significantly, you necessarily decrease academic quality and costs. Greater financial efficiencies are predicated on increasing the total number of students and reducing materials and

curricular costs. More students, however, make sustainable academic quality challenging. Conversely, reducing access or restricting access suggests higher costs and a greater focus on rigor and academic quality. Indeed, this selectivity is the foundation of selective admissions by traditional institutions – the axiom that if it is hard to secure admission then it must be good. This is not always the case in practice.

In deciphering Daniel's (2019) article, the author noted some relevant take-aways. First and foremost, the present landscape of HE is complex, competitive, rapidly changing and in flux for all institutions. Secondly, some of the core principles that have driven open universities work well under certain conditions and poorly in other contexts. For example, scaling up to thousands of students is predicated on enhancing access and producing financial efficiencies whilst accepting a designated quality level. Two observations are warranted here.

First, and as noted by Daniel (2019), the profit Karma often gets diverted to other priorities and hence financial efficiencies from scaling may be diminished. Secondly, gearing up to serve thousands of students may or may not have funding restrictions in terms of how the government funds institutions. There are many different funding models across open universities and higher education in general. Some institutions are funded based on the total number of students; others are funded based on Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) credit funding where a set number of credits (regardless of how many students) equals 1 FTE or 15 credits (Olcott, 2021).

Another example is the core value of access. The focus on expanding access is right, it is admirable, but it is also dependent upon being able to clearly articulate access for whom, to what, when and why (Nichols, 2024). The public and students are confused about what open universities do and tend to view all of them similarly despite their inherent diversity of missions (Daniel, 2019; Tait, 2018). In other words, high student numbers coupled with the advent of fees, reductions in funding for the dominant part-time student population of open universities result in the ultimate paradox. The very students open universities were created to serve that represent underserved socio-economic students, minority groups, and indigenous citizens are facing potential financial barriers to access again.

Despite these setbacks, open universities have made invaluable contributions to overall access to higher education. These gains further suggest that the next generation of open universities may be disproportionately focused on the developing world, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Tait, 2008; 2018; 2024). Again, the reader is reminded universities are under intense scrutiny and critique to change and this includes all HE institutions. Colleges and universities globally are all at the crossroads for the future.

What do other leaders and scholars write about the future of open universities? Mishra and Kanwar (2023) suggested five future directions for open universities. Firstly, literate learners in the 21st century must engage in learning, unlearning, and relearning. Secondly, open universities should be built on their massification and democratization legacies via digital innovations, including AI, to once again focus on access. Thirdly, the authors argue for greater collaboration with the labour market – this is common sense and is not optional. Fourthly, open universities should support environmental sustainability by greening the curriculum via distance and online learning. Lastly, Mishra and Kanwar (2023, p. 6) argued that open universities should emerge from the shadows and take their place at the table with 'parity of esteem' with campus institutions. They write: "The time has come for us to claim our rightful place as leaders in the education sector"(p. 6).

### 3.2 Enhanced academic quality and increased retention

Guri-Rosenblit (2019) suggested open universities must rethink their target market populations for the future. She also suggested that MOOCs and OERs may see greater expansion and that student services for online learning must be better. This is partially a consequence of many open universities' delayed transition from print-based correspondence models, where student services were low-end, to online learning where students expect services in fast, efficient and with real-time access. Guri-Rosenblit (2019), like Mishra and Kanwar (2023), alluded to the need for more partnerships and engagement with the private sector. Finally, she argued that better academic quality should be a high priority for all open universities.

Paul and Tait (2019) summarized the unique affordances-contributions of open universities and also provided in their Figure 1 (Page iii) an abbreviated SWOT analysis. The literature and research already covered in this article identified many of the weaknesses and threats facing open universities. However, Paul and Tait (2019) identified a few that were not covered. Open universities like many open and distance learning institutions, have high attrition and lower graduation rates (Mishra & Kanwar, 2023). Reputation and brand are not strong amongst the public and often staff at open universities, whilst the most loyal are equally the most resistant to change. The large student-staff ratio provokes extensive criticisms, sometimes not warranted, about quality. Paul and Tait (2019) also suggested governments may have grown tired with the open university model.

| Strengths | Opportunities |
|---|---|
| • Commitment to openness, flexibility, and access<br>• Capacity for large-scale provision<br>• Support for part-time students, working adults<br>• Commitment to technology-enhanced learning | • World-wide access to the Internet<br>• UN's sustainable development goals for major expansion of HE<br>• Use experience to develop quality assurance for mass HE systems<br>• Trends to international collaboration, open educational resources |
| **Weaknesses** | **Threats** |
| • Completion and graduation rates<br>• Reputation and brand<br>• Staff resistance to change<br>• Open university model based on very large student-to-staff ratio | • Burgeoning mainstream university<br>• Involvement in online and blended learning<br>• Governmental disenchantment with open university model<br>• Supreme value of elitist education<br>• MOOCs and other innovations from mainstream universities |

Figure 1: SWOT-analysis for open universities (Paul & Tait, 2019, p. iii)

### 3.3 Dual-mode institutional expansion of distance and online programs

Although Paul and Tait (2019) cited the threat from mainstream dual-mode universities going online, this author views this as a potential opportunity for the next generation of open universities to build new partnerships primarily in the research and faculty exchange areas given recruitment of students internationally by open universities has not been a priority. A notable

global partnership is UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) (http://www.ukieri.org/) between the UK and India to promote STEM research, science, and social science collaborations. Although their proven and successful model is not driven by open universities, the main point here is global partnerships in areas such as climate change, global migration, peace studies, and climate change are viable opportunities for open universities. Faculty exchanges could be developed amongst faculty from different open institutions and/or traditional institutions where open university faculty can spend a period of time at another institution. Again, online delivery globally has not been high and there is little evidence to suggest this will be the online focus in the future. Universities must address their needs at home before crossing other national boundaries. The data do not support global online delivery despite some institutions having enrolled international students.

### 3.4     Leadership

Paul and Tait (2019) suggested two priorities for leadership at all levels. First, they suggested open universities because of their inward focused national tendencies often are oblivious to external developments. They stated that leaders must become better advocates for the academic quality of open universities. There is a void in the public's view that links quality only to traditional, elite colleges and universities. In sum, academic quality and quality of student support services must be elevated to strengthen the overall reputation and brand of open universities.

Tait (2018) delineated the need for better leadership at all levels in the future of open universities. He suggested transformational leadership is needed where new leaders can create the organizational culture conditions for an innovation environment for open universities.

Daniel (2019) and Paul (2024) made a subtle and yet critical leadership point. Leaders simply cannot control everything. Major shifts and trends occur, and institutions must have the agility and adaptive capacity to respond. This point is essential because these shifts are often the reasons why the most powerful affordances of scaling, financial efficiencies, academic quality and student services face immense challenges for open universities.

### 3.5     Who are we open for?

Nichols (2024) argued that open universities should be ever 'open-ing' and that the future is more access, greater availability, sustainability, inclusivity and scalability. He suggested that access and scaling will remain critical for open university futures and he raises some timely and invaluable questions. The most important one is: *Who are we open for?* Nichols noted that there are many groups all educational institutions could serve, but of course institutions cannot engage in all activities. There needs to be a mission, academic and research focus. Nichols goes on to frame some key questions around design solutions. He asked how we achieve convergence with differentiation, also interpreted as consistency with diversification. These questions deserve further exploration in the future.

### 3.6     Personalized learning for the masses

Jung (2024) argued that the future of open universities is personalizing learning for all students. She does not explain precisely where the staff time and money will come for open university staff to do this at institutions with over 50,000 students. Indeed, Jung's advocacy for this is invaluable for the quality of student experiences and hence we should explore how we can progress this, even in small doses. Is this an area for AI in the future? This is certainly one avenue of inquiry that may be valuable for increasing personalized learning. Personalizing education for each student has been problematic for many decades precisely because resources (fiscal and human)

cannot justify this approach. Ask any special needs teacher who must provide each student an individualized educational plan (IEP) about time and money necessary to do this for these students. However, good things often start with small steps it is critical to explore all future options to enhance the total student experience in all institutions.

### 3.7 Protecting scalable access

These observations by the leaders and scholars are insightful and illuminate many of the same challenges and potential opportunities for open universities in the future. Although past successes and their foundations deserve our assessment recognizing they may not be a comprehensive strategy for the future (Xiao, 2024), it seems essential that open universities preserve their focus on access, technology, and scalability with potential financial efficiencies. We must also recognize these will face challenges for different types of open universities, external shifts, and changing parameters for institutional funding.

Daniel (2019) and Paul (2024) accentuated the fact that leaders cannot control many trends, shifts, and market changes. Access, scaling, and financial efficiencies are still invaluable core values of open universities. Conversely, shifts in funding by governments, increased competition, and new demands amongst HE's many stakeholders often have negative impacts on these core values and operational and financial processes. We need a new vision for open universities in the future that preserves founding principles that are still value-added and work in today's HE institutions ecosystem. By merging these with an agile and adaptable infusion of new approaches aligned with the needs of society, employers, students, national economic and workforce agendas and indelibly with democratic and social justice ideals, open universities can reposition themselves as equal and essential partners for the future with employers, sister institutions, governments, and all their stakeholders.

## 4 Renewing a culture of innovation: next generation open university strategies

Indeed, this paper was not intended to delineate a comprehensive panacea for 'reinventing' the next generation of open universities. The complexity of the higher education ecosystem and the diversity of global open universities (Daniel, 2019) suggest that mission, context, and unique political, economic, social, and cultural norms within a nation must be considered seriously. At the same time, mass access and scaling, whilst critical strategies for many open universities may not align with the needs of society, employers, governments and students in *some contexts*. Access and scaling approaches are important under the right conditions. Moreover, we should never underscore Daniel (2019) and Paul's (2024) subtle reminder that open university leaders must lead with the knowledge that there are many things out of their control that can impact the best laid plans and proven strategies.

In other contexts, they are not optimum approaches given our earlier discussion about funding limitations, diversion of profits, and greater demands for credentials by students that lead to career pathways and jobs. Degrees and certificates are still important but may be the only starting point for the future student's educational portfolio.

### 4.1 Leadership

First and foremost, open university leaders must renew a commitment to creating a culture of innovation as the core value of the institution (Brown, 2023; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2008, 2018, 2024). This was the cornerstone of most of the remarkable affordances created during the foundational period 1970 – 1995. Secondly, leaders must resolve any mission ambiguity to clearly

advocate what open universities do, how they do it, and their primary role in the HE ecosystem. Paul & Tait (2029) and Tait (2018) suggest that future open universities must tell the open university story and value proposition better so that key stakeholders clearly understand the critical role and position these institutions play in the HE system.

## 4.2     Mega-universities and global consortia

Without underscoring that access alone may not be enough to sustain the future position and essential role of open universities, this does not mean access is not critical and essential to the social justice and democratic ideals of HE. We retain this focus for the mega-universities – and scale down for more streamlined, focused open university models. The large mega-universities are value-added institutions that will continue to play a major role in serving learners in the developing world – Africa, Asia and Latin America in particular. The reasons are twofold. Institutions in these regions are basically full, including existing open institutions. University of South Africa (Unisa) primarily serves 400,000 students in South Africa, and Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU) serves over 1.7 million students in India. Secondly, the massive growth of access in support of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 has created access channels in developed countries. The recent announcement of the Open University of Europe (Open University of Catalonia, 2024) may be a first step towards future consortia of mega-universities and greater collaboration amongst global open universities (Tait, 2018, 2024).

## 4.3     Repositioned within the mainstream HE ecosystem

Open universities are sometimes faced with mission ambiguity where they take on too many activities which in turn fragment institutional goals. Student enrolments are declining (Olivier, 2023) and students and policy makers have adopted an almost indifferent view of open universities (Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018). Students, in many instances, view them as similar where market or program differentiation is virtually nonexistent.  Daniel (2019) reminds us that there is great diversity amongst global open universities. Leaders often advocate everything and anything 'open' and yet send confusing signals to the public and policy makers just exactly where and what open universities do in the broader higher education landscape. This requires a renewed dedication to mission clarity and better storytelling by open university leaders (Tait, 2018). What is the benefits continuum for open universities? Do different stakeholders have different expectations of open universities? Whilst there are no guarantees for open universities in the future and no institution is indispensable to the sector, open universities must better articulate their value-added role in the higher education spectrum and what unique affordances they bring to the game.

## 4.4     Streamlined open university models – mixed degrees, certificates and micro-credentials

Are open universities of the future, excluding mega-universities, going to be characterized by fewer programs serving fewer students with greater emphasis on quality and service? Open universities must build upon traditional flexibility and innovation for open access and enrollment to align high-demand credentials with national workforce and economic development needs (Olcott, 2024a; 2024b). Precision-focused access should replace mass access and be replaced by targeted degrees and skill-based micro-credentials. Lifelong learning across the lifespan infers students can take a diverse range of credentials for their portfolios and that they do not have to start with formal degrees and/or certificates. In many countries, students need a job first to begin their career and HE portfolio. Revamped and streamlined open universities can create new pathways to work and students, in the spirit of lifelong learning, return later for degree completion, specialized certificates, and professional development.

At first glance, some may argue that more streamlined open universities, serving fewer students, and reframing the institution's credential mix may appear contradictory to mass access, scaling, and financial efficiencies. Some may argue these are antithetical to the very core tenants of open. This would be true if the market and landscape were constant, except that the emerging ecosystem is fluid and in flux. These shifts have been covered in detail earlier in this paper, and a few just to remind the reader were increased competition, demands by students and employers for school-to-work credentials that lead to jobs, continuing funding cuts to HE globally, and challenges about maintaining quality and reducing attrition in open universities and distance teaching programs. Adapting our institutions to meet these major shifts and trends is not contradictory if open universities want to solidify their roles and positions as key players in the higher education ecosystem. Nichols (2024) already reminded us that we must continually ask – access to what and access for whom? Perhaps there is actually a concept that we would term 'better access' that provides greater options to students and employers and aligns more closely with national workforce and economic goals.

## 4.5    National mission footprint

Nearly all open universities' primary enrolment footprint is within their home nation (Daniel, 2019; Olcott 2024a; 2024b). Universities have had the capacity for 'Going Global' for the past two decades with digital online learning. This global push has not happened and likely will not happen in the future. Why? First, advocating global endeavors means leaders have to justify this to all stakeholders. If institutional and stakeholder needs at home are lacking, it will be difficult to advocate effectively for global partnerships. This does not mean open universities should stay clear of partnership and market opportunities. It does suggest that these partnerships should have potential to bring benefits to the institution and its stakeholders. Moreover, although political regimes come and go, open universities of the future must put in the time to rebuild and establish better working partnerships with state agencies, external funders, corporate donors, alumni and the public. Leaders may want to continually ask this question: What does my open university have to do to be considered a value-added instrument of the national experience?

## 4.6    Monitoring AI and digital technologies

The past year has seen the exponential growth of Generative AI across all sectors. And although attempting to predict the diverse and unique ways AI may be employed in universities, it is essential for open university leaders to monitor these developments on the research front as well as talk to peer leaders at other institutions. Moreover, leaders can open conversations at their campus with faculty, staff and key stakeholders about AI. How are we using AI applications currently? What are the challenges both technologically and ethically with these tools? What types of policies do we need for the management of AI in our university? In sum, astute open university leaders may need to frame AI as one opportunity to revitalize a culture of innovation. A good first step would be for the institutional leadership team to create a sense of urgency rather than panic. The institutional AI culture can evolve together by listening to everyone's voices and concerns. It is a reasonable probability that the reinvention, repurposing and reimagining of various aspects of open universities will be influenced by AI developments.

## 4.7    Future Research

Access to HE has made considerable progress in Europe and North America, making open universities less attractive in major markets such as the U.S., Canada and other developed countries (Daniel, 2019; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Tait, 2018). Open universities and distance mega-universities may be more essential for access in Asia, Latin America and Africa in the future.

Despite the diversity of global open universities (Daniel, 2019), there is no formal classification system or taxonomy for different types of open universities. There have been many discussions about ranking affordance indicators for open universities, comparing quality indicators (UNESCO, 2023). There are classifications such as the Carnegie Classification in the U.S. and the European Classification of Higher Education Institutions, as well as other systems examining quality indicators and criteria for online universities (Pozzi et al., 2019). The Times Higher Education, in concert with its current ranking systems, announced in November 2023 a new ranking system for online learning, but not exclusively for open university rankings (THE, 2023). There is some comparative research on different attributes of open universities, but we still lack an institutional classification system. Perhaps this could help providers, students, employers, accreditors, state funders, and the public differentiate open universities at a time when *differentiation* will be imperative for positioning institutions in the emerging HE institutions ecosystem.

A second area of future research may be to further develop the conceptual framework introduced in this paper and to identify specific elements of reinvention, repurposing and reimagining (culture of innovation). What must be created anew? What systems and operational components may be more amenable to retaining but repurposing? Finally, what defines an embedded culture of innovation for open universities?

A third area of research that is inherently complex and yet fascinating to explore is the feasibility of mega-university consortia partnerships to be a catalyst for increased access globally, particularly in many developing countries where tertiary institutions are running at their limit. Can mega-universities and digital technologies be leveraged in ways to create more than access institutions, but rather as mega-access consortia?

## 5  Summary and conclusion

The central theme of this paper focused on the need for reinvention, repurposing and reimagining open universities. The access mission, whilst still valid and important, may not be sufficient solely to preserve and position open universities in the emerging HE ecosystem. This paper is not a comprehensive panacea for the next iteration of open universities. Rather, it is intended to be a catalyst for new thinking, new models, new approaches, and renewal of the primacy of innovation as the core value of open university futures (Tait, 2018, 2024).

This paper also examined affordances and critical assessments of open universities. The best strategy going forward is to focus on the future. Although open universities delayed their transition to online delivery, this was not catastrophic. Dual-mode institutions have made their share of poor decisions, and we are all now at the crossroads. The future is about moving forward, preserving the best of the earlier affordances of open universities, which will vary across different open institutions and contexts. What has become crystal clear is there is no going back. The model successes of the 1970s – 1990s are gone, and we cannot go back (Xiao, 2024).

Mega-universities and large open universities may retain most of their original affordances and competitive advantages as articulated nearly three decades ago by Sir John Daniel at the OUUK (Daniel, 1996). The mega institutions will be invaluable for broader access in many developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Tait, 2018, 2024). Leaders and researchers in this review covered the range of challenges facing open universities.  These included student attrition, academic quality, the decline in state funding, mission and role ambiguity, competition from new providers and traditional dual-mode institutions, fragmented relationships with home governments and stakeholders, and leadership imperatives for open universities. Conversely,

many of the observations and commentaries by these leaders in the Section 3 summary laid the framework for the potential strategies presented in Section 4.

Recognizing the diversity of open universities across the globe, there is no silver bullet model or strategy that will guarantee a thriving future for open universities. This paper suggests the next generation open universities consider these strategies: 1) a renewed leadership focus, 2) expanding mega-universities; 3) repositioning open universities within the mainstream HE ecosystem, 4) streamlined versions of open universities that are smaller in size, fewer students, with niche research, and a mix of niche focused degrees, certificates and micro-credentials, 5) a focused national mission with better partnerships, and 6) monitoring AI and digital technology developments in the sector and society. At the heart of all of these must be a revitalized and renewed commitment to innovation. Innovation is not a part-time endeavor. It is essential for maintaining and sustaining a culture of innovation across the organization.

The author identified three areas of future research that may contribute to open universities. First, the creation of a formal global taxonomy of open universities that differentiates different types of open universities on commonly established affordances plus unique attributes for a type of open university.

A second area of research is developing the reinvention, repurposing, and reimagining conceptual framework, particularly identifying what should be created (new), what existing affordances need modification and/or repurposing, and creative and innovative thinking that supports all of these. This could also guide planning and change strategies by the institutional leadership team.

Finally, is there a place in the future global HE ecosystem for a mega-university consortium that targets developing countries and underserved student populations and employs digital technologies in innovative ways as part of a value-added partnership? It is exciting to think about these kinds of innovations for access, gender equity, equality, and democracy.

Open universities have opened the doors to HE for millions of underserved, marginalized and socially excluded citizens across the globe. Moreover, open universities, like most universities in free societies, have been the gatekeepers of democratic ideals and social justice. One of the remarkable legacies of open universities has been their willingness to not only engage with controversial and politically volatile issues but to seek solutions, fight injustices, and search for new ways to serve the majority. Traditional university leaders may benefit by taking a leaf from the notebooks of these open university leaders. With a renewed commitment to a culture of innovation, agility and adaptation, the next generation of open universities can reinvent and repurpose themselves to thrive and empower the global higher education community.

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