In 1957, a fire at the Windscale nuclear power plant in the UK released a large amount of radiation into the atmosphere. In an effort to create a new, clean image, the plant was renamed Sellafield in 1981. Something similar took place in Vancouver the following year, when the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) became the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). Although the arguments for changing the name included the view that the phrase *correspondence education* did not do justice to the new multi-media approaches that were being introduced at that time, it was also the case that the phrase “had unfortunate associations with dubious courses advertised on packets of matches” (Daniel 2007).

Well, *distance learning* has been succeeded by *open learning, open and distance learning, supported open learning, flexible learning, blended learning, e-learning, mobile learning*, and so on. But call it what you will, we all know deep down that we are talking second-best. *Real* education is about sitting in a comfy chair with a glass of sherry in dialogue with your personal tutor. If things get really tough, then you might have to share the experience with others in a lecture theatre, but that is as far as it goes. Anything else is “learning at the back door” (Wedemeyer 1981).

Wedemeyer began his seminal work on the subject by arguing that Jonathan Swift, in his early satire *A Tale of a Tub*, anticipated today’s worldwide yearning for learning: “For to enter the palace of Learning at the Great Gate, requires an expense of time and forms; therefore men of much haste and little ceremony are content to get in by the back door” (quoted in Wedemeyer 1981, 18). The “back door” approach that Swift referred to was the quick method of becoming a scholar “without the fatigue of reading or of thinking”—something that was achieved by dropping book titles
into the conversation and by merely studying a book’s index (see Swift 1704, section VII).

Swiftian back doors still exist today. You can buy bogus qualifications from institutions that exist only in name, for example. However, the back door that I see, as did Wedemeyer, is the very opposite of Swift’s. It is the second-chance, and arguably second-rate, “tradesman’s” entrance for people who have not had easy or privileged “front door” access to education. It requires an enormous investment of time and the filling out of numerous forms, and can be very costly. It can have very low chances of success and doesn’t necessarily lead to personal or economic gains.

My task now is to take a second (and rather contrarian) look at what is happening in one arena of (allegedly) flexible practice, the UK Open University (OU; www.open.ac.uk). I’ll cover some origins, ask why adults take part-time studies, look at opening iron triangles, and then ask what happened when iron met high tech. In short, what is the evidence today for greater flexibility at the OU? Is the back door really open? And what may be next for the OU? Three decades at the OU have conditioned my thinking.

EARLY DAYS

The basic methodological framework of open distance learning (ODL) can be traced back at least to the first century and St. Paul’s epistles (Daniel, West, and Mackintosh 2006). Paul used the technologies of “calligraphy” (writing), “despatch carriers” (post persons), and “oral exposition” (speech), in that order, to spread the ideas of Christianity to new churches. Sadly, no evaluation data in the shape of feedback forms, learner portfolios, drop-out questionnaires, and so on, survive from this period. However, if we take the subsequent spread of Christianity as our outcome measure, then this could indeed be “the most successful and durable application of open and distance learning ever undertaken” (Daniel, West, and Mackintosh 2006).

So, after this initial triumph, where did it all go wrong? Let’s leap forward over a thousand years to the true advent of “first-generation” distance education known as “The Correspondence Model” (Taylor 1995).
Holmberg (2005) notes an example in the *Boston Gazette* of 1728, where Caleb Phillips, a teacher of the new method of shorthand, was seeking students for lessons to be sent weekly. However, everybody agrees that things really kicked off in the nineteenth century, when distance education was made possible by the spread of cheap, efficient postal services and was made desirable by the Industrial Revolution’s demand for trained workers. Private enterprise saw an opportunity for profit.

At the very least, I refer to organizations that made their profit like Colman’s Mustard did (Colman’s allegedly made money because people always put more mustard on their plate than they can eat). While the course material might be satisfactory and the accreditation legitimate, correspondence colleges got their fees from students in the full knowledge that most would drop out. Colleges would not have to pay staff to mark their work.

At the worst, we are talking about completely bogus institutions, such as the fictitious St. Ambrose’s College, Oxford, in Graham Greene’s (1970) short story “When Greek Meets Greek.” The proprietor announces that “degree-diplomas will be granted at the end of three terms instead of the usual three years. . . . Nobody will ever fail” (146). When his daughter complains that it won’t catch anybody but saps, he replies, “There are plenty of saps” (146). I had always assumed that by sap, Greene meant a foolish person who is easily tricked or cheated. However, my dictionary indicates another meaning: “a plodding student.” Either way, they provide the customers for the flexible-learning trade.

Essentially, one is dealing with organizations that are self-interested and profit seeking, and the tool of their trade is part-time study. Let’s face it, the term *part-time* is rarely used in a positive sense. Whereas *full-time* suggests complete dedication, 100 percent effort, 24/7, and so on, *part-time* smacks of half-heartedness and lack of commitment.

**WHY DO ADULTS TAKE PART-TIME STUDIES?**

We should probably start with Confucius, who, in the words of one translator, said in the *Analects*: “It is not easy to find someone who is able to learn for even the space of three years without a thought given to official

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salary” (Confucius, trans. Slingerland, 2003, 372). Apparently, Confucius was bemoaning the fact that people were studying only in order to get better jobs in the Chinese civil service. However, the ancient wisdom resonated well with the Robbins report in the UK (Committee on Higher Education 1963) and with Halsey, Heath, and Ridge’s 1980 study of educational and social mobility: both reports quote it. My recent studies of OU students confirm that vocational reasons tend to predominate.

But why do some adults participate and not others? Hopper and Osborn (1975, 13) saw the education system “primarily in terms of society’s attempt to solve the fundamental problems of social selection.” This solution is attempted through “the deployment of the population at certain phases of the life cycle into those educational routes which will prepare them for, and lead them to, those segments of the labour market for which they have been judged most appropriate” (19). Hopper and Osborn argue that if the system is operating efficiently, then formal education is likely to stop with entry to the labour market.

The early intakes at the OU included many thousands of certificated teachers who had been “selected” to go to grammar schools, but then “rejected” since they had gone to teacher training colleges rather than universities. Through the introduction of credit transfer, the OU provided this group with a relatively quick route to both degree and promotion.

If you are in a meritocratic system and you are at the bottom of the status hierarchy, you may be able to accept that low position, but it’s more comfortable to think that (a) you are better than that and (b) there is a way out of it. Distance education has, for many decades, provided one possible pathway to that dream. This is well illustrated in the iconic American novel The Grapes of Wrath, when a truck driver tells his hitchhiker: “Yeah! A guy got to get ahead. Why, I’m thinking of takin’ one of them correspondence school courses. Mechanical engineering. It’s easy. Just study a few easy lessons at home. I’m thinking of it. Then I won’t drive no truck. Then I’ll tell other guys to drive trucks” (Steinbeck 1940, 12). The truck driver is espousing the American dream: that through participation in the dominant society and culture of the United States, one is able to prosper. We never hear what becomes of the truck driver, but if those correspondence lessons turned out to be quite difficult or the expected pay-off was not forthcoming, he could be labelled a sap.
Many have claimed that flexibility, under the name of distance education, began its current version with the opening of the OU in 1969. Let’s look at what has happened there. To help our thinking, I’ll use an easy evaluative tool—Daniel, West, and Mackintosh’s notion of the “iron triangle,” with its three criteria for educational systems: wide accessibility, good quality, and low cost.

Our general point is that if you try to improve one side of this triangle your action usually changes the other two sides in undesirable ways. For this reason we refer to it as the iron triangle. It has been a straitjacket on the expansion of education throughout history.

The revolutionary feature of educational technology in general—and of open and distance learning and ICTs in particular—is that it can break open the iron triangle. You can increase access, improve quality and cut costs—all at the same time. This is because of the economies of scale and consistency of quality that come with using media. (Daniel, West, and Mackintosh 2006)

So in its forty years of teaching, what has the OU achieved? What has happened to flexibility since 1969? While many tout the positives of this flexible form of education, there are also some negative aspects of distance education when we look at accessibility, quality, and costs.

**Wide Accessibility**
The OU has clearly brought opportunities to millions of learners, but which learners and what opportunities?

OU students tend to be reasonably qualified on entry. One-third already hold a previous higher qualification. Another third hold qualifications that would get them into a conventional university. Forty-five percent of the OU’s first intake were teachers. Since then, there has been a decline in the enrolment of teachers but little increase among the lowest socio-economic groups.

Retention rates are low. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (2009) estimated the OU graduation rate to be 20 percent. They
note that this figure may be a little harsh, as many students never intended to study for a degree. However, the fact remains that only 40 percent of new students in a given year go on to take a course in the second year—and the progress rates are much worse among students whose previous educational qualifications were relatively weak.

**Good Quality**

Few would dispute the quality of OU teaching. The courses are developed over long time periods by highly qualified course teams and support staff: the process is often referred to as the Rolls Royce model of course production. The tutors who mark assignments, run local tutorials, deal with student problems, and so on are well regarded by the students. Course quality is reflected in the fact that the OU regularly wins out over conventional universities in the annual UK National Student Survey (www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/).

However, high-quality teaching does not mean easy learning. To achieve appropriate standards, learners are expected to study fourteen hours a week for thirty-two weeks to pass an entry-level sixty-credit foundation course. The core of each course is the correspondence text written specifically for that course. Students spend almost all of their time reading these texts and completing assignments based on them. Television and radio programs are rarely used as essential teaching material and are broadcast at increasingly anti-social times. Face-to-face tutorials are voluntary, and many students prefer more time with their texts to the travel time and unknown benefits of a tutorial session.

**Low Cost**

In the early years, the OU stood outside the university funding system, receiving its money directly from government. Researchers calculated that the OU could produce graduates at a fraction of the cost of conventional universities. This expectation was disputed by other economists, but the argument has lapsed because the OU, like other universities, is now funded by the Higher Education Funding Councils. As such, it receives as much teaching support per full-time-equivalent student as any other institution. By this definition, it is not cheap.
Employer-paid tuition, benefiting both the student and the OU, happens for only one in seven students. Furthermore, around one in four new students does not have to pay fees because he or she is in receipt of “benefits” or has a very low income. For this latter group, the cost is low for the individual but high for the system because these students require more institutional support. (People in this group also drop out more.)

**WHEN IRON MEETS NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

The OU is now totally committed to what Taylor (1995) termed “the flexible learning model,” which involves computer-mediated communication and interactive multi-media. So we stand on the threshold of a new fourth generation of distance education—the e-generation, with all the tantalizing promises of Web 2.0, Web 3.0... Web N.0! As Taylor (among others) points out, “it is crucial to realise that the use of a range of instructional media does not automatically enhance the quality of teaching and learning” (3). Nor do media necessarily increase access or reduce costs (Bates 2005). So let me run my contrarian eye over today’s happenings.

First, let us consider the justification for even moving in this direction. Will Swann (2007), the OU’s director of students, argues that moving to more and higher media is a necessity for students: “No-one can credibly graduate now without the skills to access, filter and contribute to the global database of knowledge and networks. If ICT is a condition for economic success, then it must be an entitlement for students.” Allied to that argument is the view that the university must move with the times. It is assumed that nobody, and especially young “screenagers,” would be attracted to a university that is not using the latest hi-tech media. Others hope that the addition of new media will lead to improvements in teaching and learning. Certainly technologies have long been promoted as the way forward in education, even as “disruptive” influences (Sharples 2002), because they seem to offer the potential for pedagogic innovation or a catalyst for change. Such assumptions are reflected in the rhetoric associated with e-learning policy directives internationally, but others argue that they are not reflected in actual changes in practice (Conole 2007).
What is the evidence for greater flexibility? Is the pursuit of flexible education merely a cynical attempt to reduce teaching costs? And what impact does flexibility have on our efforts to break open that iron triangle of accessibility, quality, and cost?

*Wide Accessibility*

On the face of it, e-learning makes courses available globally, but one has to consider the digital divide: the differences between those with and without access to current technologies. Even in a prosperous country such as the UK, barely half of all households have broadband access. In 2007, of households with incomes in the lowest 10 percent, only 17 percent had an Internet connection (Swann 2007). As Johnson, Macdonald, and Brabazon (2008) suggest, digitization in tertiary education is reinforcing what advanced education has always been, throughout its history—a haven for the wealthy and the advantaged. My observational research, however, suggests that almost everybody in the UK has a letterbox.

*Good Quality*

Is e-learning delivering high-quality learning? Eisenstadt (2007), an OU pioneer of e-learning, found himself condemning it: “I was objecting to decades of false promises and research that had high intellectual merit but had either failed to deliver in the real world, or alternatively delivered, but made for an awful experience.” As Eisenstadt saw it, most e-learning had people sitting in front of a computer screen while studying some content, which he considered a pretty awful way to learn. He felt that a promising way forward was provided by open educational resources and social software. Indeed, the terms Web 2.0 and e-learning 2.0 have become synonymous with a more interactive, peer-generated, and collaborative Internet. Many argue (e.g., Anderson 2009) that the new tools are resulting in a fundamental shift in the way students learn, consume, and produce new artifacts.

And, indeed, new OU courses now come replete with forums, blogs, wikis, and so on, to stimulate reflection, collaboration, communities of practice, and the creation and ownership of content. Eisenstadt worries about whether this cognitive/constructivist learner-centric paradigm will be accepted by the performance- and metrics-driven educational system.
Personally, I worry more about whether it will be accepted by the time-poor mature students who want to be told what they need to know in order to pass the course with minimum time and effort. Early data suggest that at least retention rates for online courses are similar to those for other courses.

In a recent blog, Frederick Toates (2009), a psychology professor at the OU, urges caution about going digital and questions the quality of e-learning in a more human-oriented way. He grieves for the potential loss of the book. Eschewing its more often-mentioned qualities, such as its transportability, its lack of batteries, its ability to store pencilled notes, its availability after the course has finished, and so on, he goes for its iconic status: “Many students find that there is something very special about holding a book in their hands and the physical characteristics of the book form a strong association with its contents.” He also calls attention to an increasing ergonomic and physiological problem: “As more and more work places involve people sitting much of the day in front of a screen, I have serious reservations about the wisdom of them spending their studying time also in front of a screen.”

Toates argues for real (as in contiguous and synchronous), as opposed to virtual, human contact: “The value of human contact should not be underestimated. This is why people travel large distances and at considerable cost to visit relatives and friends, when they could so much more easily be contacted through email or Skype.” He might also have mentioned the dizzying effect on new learners when they are suddenly faced with instant online access to the world’s knowledge and research (and must therefore contemplate the possibilities and costs of plagiarism).

Low Cost
Costing distance education is a notoriously complex task. I asked Sir John Daniel in 1998 why there had been so little research into the costs of online distance learning. Was it because it was so difficult or because people did not like the answers? His answer was “Both!” I asked Dr. Greville Rumble, a world expert in the costs of ODL, whether ODL was cheap. “It depends,” he answered. However, it seems to be widely agreed that developing a high-quality e-learning experience costs at least as much as an equivalent “second-generation” experience (Taylor 1995). Furthermore, a lot of the
costs are being passed on to the learner, including the cost of a computer and Internet connection and of printing out the course materials, which most students choose to do.

**WHAT’S NEXT FOR FLEXIBILITY? MORE SAPS?**

The OU currently teaches around 250,000 learners per year. In my view, it has succeeded, in part, because it has attracted large numbers of people who are offered the possibility of self-improvement yet who, it turns out, have relatively little chance of succeeding—the “saps” in my title. This “sap production” has involved four strategies.

1. **Being open to all.** Anybody can enter the university regardless of entry qualifications. Some counselling might be offered, but many begin without a full appreciation of the starting level, the study hours required, and the years to degree completion. They will certainly not know how low their chances are if, say, they have no qualifications and are attempting a science subject.

2. **Offering a highly polished product.** The students who leave are rarely critical of the university or the teaching materials. They tend to blame themselves or their lack of time, while recommending the experience to others.

3. **Publicizing success stories.** The case studies that are carefully seeded in the national and local press show that it is possible for the determined individual from a humble background to succeed.

4. **Providing unobtrusive exit routes for those who leave.** People can, and often do, enter the OU without telling their friends and work colleagues. There is no loss of face if they decide to give up their studies. As new students, they even get a significant fee rebate if they withdraw during the first three months.

Is this current OU model of flexibility sustainable? Will there always be plenty of saps to feed it? Well, as Niels Bohr, or possibly Yogi Berra, once said, “Prediction is hard—especially about the future,” but I make a few observations:
• Demand can be kept up almost indefinitely as long as you give the marketing people enough money. The OU has to recruit some eighty thousand new students every year in order to maintain its overall student numbers.
• The OU will consider providing other services and courses and will explore other markets to tap into.
• Some societal forces will probably deflate demand, including the high proportion of school-leavers who now enter higher education; this will result in a smaller pool for the OU. Also, a recent government decision not to subsidize people taking a course at an equal or lower level to the qualification they already hold will have a negative impact.
• Some economic forces may inflate demand, including the financial recession and the proposed rise in fees at conventional universities.
• As long as we have a hierarchical and apparently meritocratic society, people will continue to try to get ahead through further study.
• Targeting those with lower qualifications fits the OU ethos of openness but brings costs in terms of higher support costs and lower retention rates.

MOVING FORWARD

The image of the swan—serenely gliding across the surface, yet thrashing its legs furiously below the surface—appears to fit the OU at the moment. To build and sustain a twenty-first-century university based on flexible learning, the university will have to be flexible itself. It may even need to be more flexible in its interpretation of its founders’ original dreams and philosophy.

As we reflect on our respective institutions, our current offerings, and our future as twenty-first-century universities and beyond, we might ask ourselves these questions:

• Will the “iron triangle” (Daniel, Webster, and Macintosh 2006), with its three criteria of wide accessibility, good quality, and low cost, guide our reflections and actions as we move into the fifth generation of open and distance learning?

“Plenty of Saps”
• Will mechanisms be in place that promote critical assessments of the levels to which flexibility is sustainable in these challenging, competitive times?

• Will our future institutions be more willing to act in ways that reduce the gullibility factor, that stress the warning “Caveat emptor: let the buyer beware”?

And as a result, will we find ourselves proudly touting a shortage of saps?

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