



Open University Futures: Do We Need a Taxonomy for Defining Strategic Focus and Relevance?



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Scholarship of Integration

ABSTRACT

Open universities face an unprecedented future of uncertainty, competition, disruption, and mission ambiguity. Many institutions are considering a strategic reset and restructuring of their primary missions to become more responsive and agile in meeting the needs of employers, students, and funding reductions, as well as a competitive landscape dominated by online delivery and innovations in AI.

This article argues for the creation of a formal taxonomy for classifying different types of open universities. Stated more succinctly, the author argues that an open university taxonomy would provide greater mission clarity; realignment with societal, government and employer needs; reassessment of the institutional credential continuum; a catalyst for targeting key market niches within a national footprint; alternative funding and budgeting models; and improved academic quality. In conclusion, a taxonomy would serve as a vital catalyst for improving communication among open universities and leaders, expanding strategic thinking about market differentiation, and promoting innovations and partnerships that will benefit all open university stakeholders.

KEYWORDS:

leadership, open universities, strategic reset, mission ambiguity, market differentiation, scalability, openness

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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 (Tait, 2018, p. 20)

Open universities face an uncertain future characterised by increased competition, disruption, and mission ambiguity (Brown, 2023; Olcott, 2024; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018). Many institutions are considering a strategic reset and restructuring of their primary missions to become more responsive and agile to employer needs, student demands, funding reductions, and a competitive landscape dominated by online delivery and innovations in A.I. (Daniel, 2019; McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Nichols, 2024; Olcott 2024, 2024a; Paul & Tait, 2019).

Despite some general historical similarities, open universities are not the same. There is great diversity among global open institutions (Daniel, 2019). They do not offer identical programs, nor are all completely open to everyone, anytime and anywhere. Some employ digital technologies, while others rely on hybrid combinations of print and lower-end technologies. Some leaders are zealots for open content, while others are not. Furthermore, some leaders advocate openness as the quintessential attribute, while others do not. Some have developed a strong research capacity, while others have pursued a stronger focus on delivering academic programmes to underserved, lower socio-economic, and marginalised student groups. Perhaps most importantly, open universities operate within their own unique *national* political, social, cultural and educational context.

For example, Athabasca University, often referred to as 'Canada's Open University' and founded in 1970, has maintained a student enrolment of around 40,000 students for the past thirty years. Conversely, other open institutions, such as the OUUK, IGNOU, and Unisa, were considered mega, open, and distance teaching institutions with enrolments in the hundreds of thousands. Today, the OUUK serves approximately 180,000 students, Unisa nearly 400,000 and IGNOU well over 1 million students. The key point is simply that definitional inconsistencies create misperceptions among students, lawmakers, accreditors, funders, and employers about what open universities are, what they do, and how they do it (Paul & Tait, 2019; Author, 2024, 2024a).

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

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The purpose of this paper is to present the justification for an institutional taxonomy for open universities. The author argues that an open university taxonomy would provide:

1. A benefits continuum that would provide value-added benefits to all open universities, regardless of classification.
2. A clearer role and more substantial impact by open universities in the broader global HEI landscape.
3. Differentiate open universities from other mega-universities and dual-mode institutions that employ distance teaching and learning models.

An important clarification should be stated at the outset. The proposed taxonomy would not focus on all institutions that employ online and distance technology delivery. An essential catalyst for justifying a taxonomy is the response to widespread confusion about what constitutes an open university. A taxonomy that is inclusive of all distance teaching institutions is counterproductive to a taxonomy that clearly focuses on what open universities are. Why? Because the use of online and other distance delivery systems today is normative and ubiquitous in nearly all institutions. This taxonomy is specifically designed for open universities to refocus their mission, role, and scope in the eyes of key stakeholders, potential students, and key government and funding agencies. It should also be noted this paper is not proposing a ranking system to coincide with a taxonomy of open universities, despite both having an overlapping purpose. This paper argues that there is ample evidence and justification for a taxonomy of open universities.

Indeed, there have been some proposed frameworks for ranking distance teaching and/or online institutions (Times Higher Education (THE), 2023) and open universities within globally recognised systems (e.g., THE, QS, etc.). The three longest-established and most influential global rankings are those produced by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE) and Shanghai Ranking Consultancy (the Academic Ranking of World Universities; ARWU). At present, there is not a separate ranking system for open universities, although there have been some discussions over the years about creating a system.

Finally, this paper does not propose specific detailed parameters and criteria for an open university taxonomy, but rather asks whether a classification system would provide a benefits continuum worth the time and effort to create this framework. A few performance indicators or descriptors may, however, speak to some of the metrics that could be considered in classifying open universities as a starting point.

PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION FOR AN OPEN UNIVERSITY TAXONOMY

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Despite government oversight agencies, funders, and even potential students view most open universities as very similar (Paul & Tait, 2019). Differentiation is absent, and most lump open universities in one big group. This failure to tell a consistent open university story about its diversity and purposes leaves open university leaders asking how we can change these misperceptions and/or lack of understanding about our institutions (Kanwar & Mishra, 2023; Paul & Tait, 2019). How can we better educate the public, potential students, potential faculty, and potential partners about who we are, what we do, and why it matters? A taxonomy, first and foremost, can alleviate this mission ambiguity, resulting in a clear, well-defined sector of higher education that accentuates the different types of open institutions.

Nichols (2024) raised some key questions about open universities. Who are they open for? Open for what? He suggested open universities should be ever 'open-ing' and that the future is more access, greater availability, sustainability, inclusivity and scalability. Conversely, Olcott (2024), while agreeing with some of these assertions, makes the case that many open universities in the future will need to be more focused, smaller, and streamlined, with a blend of traditional credentials and new skill-based micro-credentials, as well as fast-track pathways from school or university to work. Both of these perspectives on open universities have valid points; however, unless there is a clear pivot to clarify the basic parameters of what constitutes an open university, confusion will continue among the public, potential students, and key stakeholders.

Candidly, the profession of open and distance education has been plagued by definitional chaos for most of its recent history. We utilise distance, open, flexible, online, and hybrid approaches, and we embrace buzzwords around technology that surpass those of any other profession. This creates confusion, conflicting research results, and frustration and indifference among key stakeholder groups.

Both perspectives above have valid justifications. For example, many large mega-universities are open institutions (OUUK, Unisa, IGNOU, and many others); many that are distance teaching institutions are quasi-open; and many that are both open and distance teaching institutions still have an important access mission. However, one must ask: Is openness enough? Is the access axiom sufficient, and can increasing the number of students lead to consistent academic quality, sustainability, and alignment with employer needs and expectations among funders and accreditors? Many stakeholders have a vested interest in the next generation of universities, particularly open universities. Let us look at the benefits of an open university taxonomy.

What affordances/metrics might be included in classifying different types of open universities? The following is simply intended to highlight possible variables that might start the global dialogue and collaborative sharing. Some

of these were informally identified by leaders at global open universities in conversations with the author.

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Size of institution (total students)	Openness index/metrics
Delivery footprint	Credentials continuum
Fees and Tuition	Primary technologies
Global ranking	Research standing
Digital capability (% online)	Innovation index
Partnerships	Regulatory policies
Student Services	Global delivery

This is an informal snapshot of foundational elements of an open university taxonomy, and it is not intended to be all-inclusive. It serves as a catalyst for the reader to consider what additional attributes might be included in a taxonomy. Indeed, at different institutions, the affordances and characteristics will be different.

OPEN UNIVERSITY TAXONOMY BENEFITS

An abbreviated history of open universities, particularly from 1970 through the mid-1990s will help the reader understand the current context of open universities. This is often considered the 'golden era' of development, innovation and impacts (Moore & Kearsley, 2021; Olcott, 2024). During this period, we see the move towards mass education, innovations in teaching and learning, scalable approaches for reducing costs and serving masses of students; flexible starting and enrolment policies and practices; and finally gradual adoption of evolving technologies to support the predominant print-based models of open education (Daniel, 1996, 2019, 2023; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). And then the world changed for open universities.

As we crossed the millennium, traditional dual-mode institutions began to expand rapidly, especially in the online learning space. Many open universities became complacent, and their core value of innovation diminished (Tait, 2024). Increasingly, students, funders, accrediting agencies, and the broader government oversight agencies all viewed open universities as very similar. The fact was that there was an identity crisis defined by mission ambiguity (Daniel, 2019; Olcott, 2024). More perplexing, there was an increasing resistance to change among key open universities and their staff in the external landscape that was happening outside the open university bubble. Open university staff are remarkable and talented with a loyalty that focuses on their affordances and less on the challenges emerging around the institution (Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2024).

The mass adoption of online delivery by open university competitors, especially dual-mode institutions, has disrupted and transformed the entire HEI landscape (Olcott, 2024; Tait, 2024). Open universities, basking in past glories, continued to use print with a gradual transition to online platforms. The fact is, we have major open universities that have only recently (2020 – 2025) transitioned their capacity to fully online delivery.

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Whilst this slow transition by open universities was not necessarily catastrophic, it prevented open university leadership from seeing that online delivery would not be a competitive advantage – it would become the most normative attribute of higher education delivery. For student populations, effective marketing requires bringing together many appealing features that, when combined, will attract students far more effectively than just online efforts.

Cost, flexibility, scheduling, multiple academic session curations, top-level faculty and student support services, and regular upgrades of technological infrastructure (Kotter, 2012; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Open university leaders will argue they have these, but they have not told this story often and consistently enough – they assume their stakeholders are on the same page as them (Olcott 2024, 2024a; Paul & Tait, 2019;

The problem with being successful, innovative and yet insular is that institutions and their advocates (staff, faculty, support personnel) begin to believe that everyone across the profession is singing the same song, advocating the same affordances, and in this instance that open content, open source, open research and open universities in general are understood, admired, and emulated across the globe. This fallacy is a misrepresentation that often assumes others will follow you when, in fact, your competitors have moved on and are defining a new wave of business practices. We have faced similar challenges in the often-assumed support for openness and open content (Mishra, 2023).

Additional issues have arisen for open universities following this recent mission crisis. Kanwar & Mishra (2023) and Guri-Rosenblit (2019) emphasise the need for open universities to rebuild their relationships with the private sector and government agencies. Equally apparent is that the historic values of access and openness are not sufficient to drive open university futures. As Nichols (2024) reminded us, what does this mean – open to whom? Open to what?

Funding agencies have reduced allocations to open universities, and fees have become common for many of these institutions, creating a paradoxical situation where they become too expensive for the very underserved and marginalised students they were created to serve (Olcott, 2024; Tait, 2024).

Scalability is admirable but only works when there is unlimited funding for massification (Olcott, 2024). Those days are gone and alternative funding is critical; massive, unmanaged growth will create more problems than opportunities among open institutions.

Lastly, open university leaders, like all HEI leaders, simply cannot control all external decisions that impact their institutions (Daniel, 2019; Paul, 2024). Shifting policies around funding, student eligibility, quality assurance, and accreditation often create unforeseen barriers for leaders that they have little to no control over. Academic quality remains problematic for open universities and distance teaching universities; justified or not,, the perception still tends to suggest lower quality among online and open providers.

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This backdrop of the HEI landscape for open universities is often confusing and chaotic. Mission ambiguity, unprecedented competition, funding challenges, stakeholder indifference and confusion, lack of market differentiation, over-reliance on access and openness rhetoric all suggest it is time for a major strategic reset of open universities 2.0. Indeed, that time is now.

What are the potential benefits of an open university classification/taxonomy?

1) Who Are We? Mission clarity-reputation-prestige-rankings (Olcott, 2024).

The issue of mission ambiguity arises from stakeholders having different perspectives on the institution than those of institutional leaders and staff. In other words, there is a misalignment, and your key stakeholders see you differently than you see yourself. This misalignment leads to confusion and indifference among core stakeholders – students, funders, accreditors, employers, and faculty recruitment – and empowers your competitors, who tell their story better than you do. This means a vision that is clear about where your open university is striving to be in the next 3-5 years; a mission that clearly consistently tells stakeholders what you do, how you do it, and the outcome KPIs; and finally core values that define what is important to your institution that benefits students, faculty, the community, oversight agencies, employers, partners, and even the national Zeitgeist.

2) Telling Our Story Consistently & Better: Market positioning and differentiation (Paul & Tait, 2019).

Vision – mission – values! If you can tell your institutional story better and more consistently than your competitors, then you can accentuate your institution's core benefits for stakeholders and solidify your market position, differentiating your institution from your competitors. Conversely, if your story changes, different actors within the institution emphasise different attributes, then confusion prevails among your key stakeholders and customers. They will look elsewhere for their HEI institution. And again, online delivery does not make your institution unique or differentiate you from your competitors. The whole world is online in 2025.

3) Academic Quality is not Optional (Kanwar & Mishra, 2023; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019).

Massification, scaling, and openness sound good in speeches and articles. In practice, however, they inherently mean that more is not necessarily easier or better. Because massification is predicated on serving hundreds of thousands of students, this inherently places disproportionate stress on faculty

workloads, maintaining high-quality support services, technological infrastructure, and upholding high standards of academic quality. The reality is that the institution is constantly playing a game of catch-up, just trying to keep its head above water. This ultimately has a detrimental effect on staff and faculty morale.

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What does a classification system have to do with quality and assessment? Stakeholders are not naive, and they look at your 'story' and the numbers you report to serve, as well as the rhetoric around access and openness. These data just does not convince them to attend an open university. Many will opt for smaller, more reputable institutions. Institutional leaders have to systematically set realistic total enrolments that, in fact, can be served effectively. Whilst the argument that poorer students in developing countries have to take what is available and affordable, the reality is that this does not go unnoticed amongst the broader global HE community. The truth is, there is not one good leader on the planet who would argue that serving more students, regardless of quality and lack of services, is a metric worth pursuing. More students do not result in better programmes. *An institutional story that consistently identifies quality as a key indicator attracts the attention of stakeholders and strengthens a broader respect, image and reputation for open universities in general.*

4) Leverage national and global partnership opportunities.

The geographic footprint for nearly all open universities is *national*. Despite the rhetoric about global online capacity and digitalisation, the fact is that most open universities serve predominantly students in their own country. In some instances, open institutions will spin marketing data and make statements that they we serve students from over 100 countries worldwide, failing to mention that their total online enrolment outside the country is 140 students (Olcott, 2024).

Going global is one of the most complex endeavours for even the best institutions. This does not mean there are not excellent global partnerships among many open universities, but these are primarily based on faculty exchanges and research collaborations. Remember, open universities are not recruiting international students to a campus like nearly all dual-mode institutions and even some large distance teaching institutions.

Why would a taxonomy be relevant here? Because it would provide an invaluable repository of different types of open university national partnerships within the context of a national footprint. Open universities could learn from one another about the various types of partnerships they have. All universities, including open universities, have a bigger challenge when considering going global. Leaders and advocates must justify why offering an online MBA in China is more important than serving students in-country and/or partnering with local businesses and industries. Advocating for global ventures or (misadventures) when your faculty have not received salary increases in five years, student support services are lacking for home students, and infrastructure, digital tools, and training need upgrading can lead to resentment and morale issues (Paul & Tate, 2019).

5) Reframe the institutional credentialing continuum for key market niches.

Kanwar & Mishra (2023) and Guri-Rosenblit (2019) emphasise the need for open universities to rebuild partnerships with the government and the private sector. They also suggest that open universities must reassess their credentials continuum (degrees, certificates, short courses, micro-credentials) and how these align with market needs and employer demands. Moreover, it requires open university leaders to decide whether they really support the true spirit of Lifelong Learning (LLL). If the profession truly supports LLL, then it should not matter if the student starts their career with micro-credentials, a certificate following a fast-track school-to-work pathway. This means leaders must re-examine the historic preference of advising students to earn a degree first and then pursue other short-term credentials later. This has not worked, despite the preference for degrees – students complete a degree but then struggle to find a job, and even if they do, it is seldom in their major area of study. Add their debt burden to the scenario, and the pursuit of a degree first may be very poor advice for first-year university students, particularly in developing countries where unemployment rates are often disproportionately high for young adults.

The underlying core characteristic of any advocacy policy for lifelong learning is that learners can obtain further training and education at any time throughout their lifespan. Indeed, we either support this fundamental core element of LLL, or it is simply convenient rhetoric that does a disservice to the learner.

6) Diversify funding sources – cut costs and enrolments – or both

Scalability works provided there is unlimited funding for open university students (Olcott 2024). Conversely, when fees are implemented in conjunction with government policies to fund part-time or second-degree students (students who have a degree but want to change careers), and funding agencies make general funding cuts to all university operating budgets across the sector, the flawed sustainability of scaling becomes evident. Without signalling out open institutions that have faced this scenario or similar variations, the future suggests that unlimited funding is a luxury of the past. This means open universities have to pursue other options. What are these?

First, mass increases in student enrolment, regardless of advocacy rhetoric for scaling, access, and openness, will be very challenging for nearly all open universities. Common sense suggests that workloads, academic quality, infrastructure maintenance and upgrades, high-quality student and faculty support services, and, in some instances, specific administrative support will not be sustainable, and certainly not at high-quality levels.

Open universities either secure alternative sources of funding from external sources, such as corporations and foundations, or increase student fees to pay for services or streamline the overall institution. Otherwise, institutions may need to serve fewer students with higher quality. Unlimited students with ad hoc, unmanaged growth will only create additional stresses and pressures on the institution, its staff, its quality, and its reputation within the higher

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education ecosystem. Morale will diminish, and attracting top faculty, staff, and students will become problematic.

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A taxonomy would also bring tangible, practical benefits to open universities, providing a repository where open universities can access and share best practices, address common issues, and explore improved communications and collaboration amongst open universities. The potential benchmarking inherent to institutions embedded within the taxonomy can lead to research collaboration, AI innovations, and a renewed focus on academic quality.

DELIMITATIONS OF A TAXONOMY

Thirty years ago, arguing for the creation of a taxonomy or basic classification of different types of open universities would probably not have attracted much support. There were fewer open universities, and most of them were generally doing quite well. Regrettably, these institutions often failed to exercise due diligence in planning when times were good and operations were going well. In 2025, the HEI landscape is in a state of constant flux and change, marked by higher levels of uncertainty, competition, and complexity (Brown, 2023; Olcott, 2024).

Is it worthwhile to invest time and effort in creating a taxonomy for open universities? A fair question. The author argues that it is worthwhile to invest time in this endeavour and that the benefits outweigh the limitations. Indeed, an institution and/or association would need to take the lead in creating the taxonomy, and it would have to be inclusive, meaning that open universities globally would need to be participants.

As previously argued, a taxonomy would provide greater mission clarity, realignment with societal, government and employer needs; reassessment of the institutional credential continuum; targeting key market niches within a national footprint; exploring alternative funding and budgeting models; and strengthening academic quality.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that a taxonomy for open universities would provide significant benefits, collectively enhancing and positioning open universities for a clear and impactful role in the future higher education ecosystem. Key benefits summarised earlier include:

1. Mission clarity and enhancing open universities' reputational status globally.
2. Core foundational components to tell our story better for potential students and key stakeholders to understand. Increasing market presence and differentiation in the HE landscape.
3. Strengthen the academic quality of open education.

4. Serve as a catalyst for defining the service footprint of open universities as primarily national and in-country.
5. Diversity and refine the credentials continuum for a stronger blend of degrees with micro-credentials and skills-based certifications.
6. Provide a collective voice for diversifying and pursuing alternative funding sources.

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Open university leadership would have to be open to sharing policies, practices, innovations, and more with their peer institutions. Many open universities have a long history of sharing their business and educational practices. The team approach to course design and materials development has served as a model for other open universities. This approach has also been a catalyst for modified versions of the team approach amongst many dual-mode universities worldwide.

There will be institutions and leaders who will choose not to collaborate. They will argue they don't have any problems, and this sharing will not benefit their institution. Some leaders may opt to explore going global, despite the complexity and barriers that make scaling online in global markets more practical for research collaborations, faculty exchanges, and broader social issues, such as the digital divide, refugee retraining, and the UN Development Goals, among others. In conclusion, this paper argued that an open universities taxonomy would provide:

Indeed, a well-crafted taxonomy for open universities could provide unique opportunities for the open university ecosystem, institutions and leaders. The challenges facing higher education today are immense. This ecosystem has created a unique opportunity for a global reset by open universities. In conclusion, an Open University taxonomy would serve as a vital catalyst for enhancing communication among open universities and their leaders, expanding strategic thinking about market differentiation, and promoting new innovations and partnerships that benefit all open university stakeholders.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

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