

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 5 of the book,
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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author.

Overview
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The traditional structures of education are based on the artisan or cottage industry principles of a single relationship and personal communication between the teacher (provider and guide) and student (learner). However, for the most part, large scale systems of ODL are very different. These large scale systems have introduced the practices of classical management theory with division of labour and specialisation. Thus the student learning experience is a product of a number of inputs from specialist staff. This is the case in The Open University which I use for this case study.

The original structures of The Open University which were set up in 1970 were based on what were seen at that time to be appropriate divisions of labour:

- central academic units produced course content;
- an Operations Unit organised this content into actual materials (print and home experimental kits) and arranged for its distribution to students and tutors;
- a partnership with the BBC developed radio and television programmes;
- an Institute of Educational Technology combined advice on educational technology and institutional research;
- a central Administration carried out most “processing” of students, including fee collection and maintenance of records (Registry);
- a system of Regional Offices and Study Centres (Regional Tutorial Services) embraced some amorphous links with the community and was responsible for local support for students and the part-time staff who were “the face of the University” to its students;
- a specialist Data Processing unit was responsible for a computerised basic record system.

Some major elements of this initial policy decision have stood the test of time. However, the concept of holistic “student support services” and the assumption of information technologies in every home have strained other elements to breaking point and proved difficult to resolve in the decision making and management structures of the institution.

Here I cover the progress which the institution has made in understanding firstly the importance of student record systems and up to date information for all staff who support students and secondly the opportunities offered by these systems as a mechanism in their own right for proactive student support.

In order to track progress in such a large scale system, a comprehensive computerised record system is required. When the Open University began to admit students in 1970 to its first year of study in 1971, it recorded student and tutor information on a mainframe computer which required its own special environment as well as specialist staff for dealing with input and output. The physical output was in the form of computer print-outs which were dispatched to offices at the University’s Headquarters at Milton Keynes and to its then 11 Regional Centres throughout the UK. Printing and distribution meant that the information

contained in the print-outs could be up to 6 weeks old when it was being used. And this fact in itself restricted the value of information and advice which could be given by staff to applicants and students who made contact with the University.

In the first year, the recording of information was relatively simple. Each student was taking one or two courses and, by definition, there were no historical records. In subsequent years the complete student record expanded to include not only current courses but also previous courses, course results etc. Such information was unwieldy for a single print-out and so a variety of print-outs were produced. Those with current information on the students' courses and grades were produced regularly. Those where the information changed less frequently were produced less regularly. And so, a member of staff using these print-outs to respond to students might well have some contradictory information on two print-outs about the same student.

In the late 1970s, with developments in technology, plans were made for a revision of the record system which would allow Open University staff throughout the UK to access student up to date records through local terminals. This new system was known as SRNew (Student Records New). For each of its courses the Open University offers teaching and support to its students through a cadre of part-time staff who provide the "face of the University" to its students, marking their assignments, teaching face-to-face or nowadays through a variety of electronic means and providing a range of advice in relation to the study of the particular course which they tutor. SRNew soon also covered the records of these part-time staff.

SRNew banished the old world of unwieldy print-outs with their out of date information and provided a far superior tool for the Open University's full-time staff who dealt with those students. But it was also, and more importantly in the longer term, a relational database in which the primary element was a unique composite record for every student. Much of the earlier print-out information had focused on records of students by course. Once you knew the student's course, you could find the record of the individual student. But the information available in a Regional Centre related only to the students in the geographical area of the UK for which that Regional Centre was responsible. SRNew was based on the holistic student record rather than records of students by course, location etc. Every Regional Centre had access to every student record and could deal with any student's questions. And an MI system allowed a considerable number of selections to be made by course, location, special situation, tutor etc., when this was needed.

But perhaps the most important aspect of SRNew was a significant move away from the rigid division of labour with which the University began. Although the technical aspects of SRNew and its distribution were carried out by the staff of Management Services Division, the Registry and Regional Tutorial Services were responsible for providing the user requirements. The University had by this time several years of experience of student support and needs. The new system recognised this. The change of name from "Data Processing" to Management Services" was not just cosmetic. It represented a new way of working. But this new way of working was not defined in any University policy decisions. It happened because a handful of influential people in the three units recognised that it was the best way forward. And perhaps much more importantly, it did not appear to change the "balance of power" in any of the units and thus require structural and therefore political decisions. But that appearance of "no change" was indeed more apparent than real, as we will see shortly.

In the course of the 1970s the University had relied extensively on its part-time staff to support its students locally. In 1976 the University had introduced a system of tutor-counsellors. Undergraduate students entering the University at that time had to do so through one of its 5 Foundation Courses. Tutor-counsellors were the students' tutors on those courses, marking assignments and having the opportunity to meet them at local tutorials in one of the University's c.300 Study Centres. When students progressed beyond the Foundation courses,

they would meet other specialist tutors. But their original tutor-counsellor would provide a local continuity of support for them. And so the tutor-counsellors were provided with fairly regular updates on the records of their students – effectively regular print-outs to them of their group of students. This continued under SRNew.

But under SRNew it was now the case that full-time staff throughout the UK who were involved in supporting students had instant access to the immediately current records of all students. Tutor-counsellors only had print-outs which were by definition out of date by the time they received them in the mail. So, perhaps not surprisingly, the 1980s saw the appearance for the first time in one or two Regional Centres of a reactive and proactive student support system which made use of this current information through full-time staff. This involved an increasingly experienced group of student support staff who not only responded to student requests with the latest information but also identified for proactive support particular groups of students who appeared from the records to be having some difficulties. SRNew was introducing a change in the balance. The Open University's full-time staff now had at their disposal far better information than the tutor-counsellors. To this equation can be added the fact that the ability of part-time tutor-counsellors to comprehend the rapidly extending needs of an increasingly diverse student body was beginning to pose problems midway through the 1980s. It was not too difficult to image where the students would direct their questions when this became clear. But it would take many years for this to be worked through as a policy decision and for the contracts of tutor-counsellors to be changed.

And there were other potential changes from SRNew, perhaps of even more significance. Input to the original student record system had to be through a central batch input system at Milton Keynes. Changes in a student's record had to be authenticated through a small controlling group. What had not been recognised by senior management was that SRNew offered the potential for a significant change in the Registry and Regional Tutorial Services. It had now become technically possible that, for example, a change of address, the admission of students and the creation of their records could be carried out not just by the Registry in Milton Keynes but by staff anywhere in the UK through terminal access to the record system.

A paper written in 1977 put forward such a proposal. In operational terms the paper was in fact suggesting a change in the "balance of power" between the Registry and Regional Tutorial Services. It was challenging in a very significant way the original decisions on the division of labour. Perhaps not surprisingly the suggestions met with considerable opposition. Taken to its ultimate conclusion this would remove any boundary lines between the two units, effectively requiring them to be managed as a single entity. In fact this was what eventually happened. But only in 1997 was the final political decision taken when Student Services was created from a combination of the two original units.

Today and with the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see this decision as inevitable. But it is worthwhile charting two themes which eventually led up to that decision.

Firstly the 1980s saw the publication by Open University staff, particularly the regional staff, of a number of analyses of student support services, some theoretical, some practical. From this developed a complete reconsideration of the staff development programme for tutor-counsellors and tutors but also an extension of staff development as a coherent programme amongst the full-time staff who provided day to day support to student through telephone and correspondence. The increasing value of these staff in Regional Centres was becoming recognised. By the early 1990s a formal advisory service had been instituted in all Regional Centres throughout the UK and this was extended in three locations to cover evenings and weekends as telephone enquiries became the chosen method of approach for students. All of this demonstrated a latent student need. If there was a good support service available across extended hours and instantly through a telephone system, students would recognise it and use

it and a six-fold increase was registered in the 6 years up to 2002. Clearly staff were thinking about models of student support and adapting to perceived student need.

Secondly, if a student were to telephone a Regional Centre with a change of address, nobody could gainsay the fact that it was best that this should be actioned immediately by the person receiving the call rather than written down and sent to the University's central operation for input. And so, little by little the terminals which were put in for SRNew in the early 1980s as read only devices began to be used for input. By the late 1980s the path of change was clear to all. The original division of labour between large parts of the former Registry and Regional Tutorial Services was untenable. But some fortresses, notably the admission and registration of students, still remained in the political stalemate of management decision making. It took the appearance and decision of a new Vice Chancellor, unencumbered by the political infighting of the previous decade, to permit admission and registration of students by staff in Regional Centres in the early 1990s. And even then this applied only to new students, with continuing students still being registered centrally.

By the early 1990s the SRNew record system was in need of replacement and work began on the comprehensive student and tutor record systems known as CIRCE (Corporate and Individual Records for Customers and Enquirers) which was put in place in 1996. It is interesting to look through the "think tank" papers associated with this development and see how much of the future was being foretold only to be disbelieved by the most senior management or shelved as a bridge too far. Suggestions were made that all part-time staff should have access on-line from home to their own student records (thus putting them on a par with the full-time staff in the Universities offices). There was a suggestion that students would access their own records and make appropriate changes, such as change of address, as well as booking their own courses. All of these, of course, were now seen more clearly to be a challenge to the balance of power. Even more heretical and challenging voices questioned the validity of continuing to support students through Regional Centres with a geographical responsibility. Why should it not be the case that at times of increasing specialisation of courses, some regions should take a national responsibility for students rather than each region looking after "its own" students who lived within its geographical boundaries? This latter suggestion of course posed questions on the future size and shape of regions and even their purpose.

The University had no means of taking decisions of such magnitude. These were questions which took great leaps forward from the progress in the 1980s arising from the creation of SRNew. Then there had been change but change in a geological time scale compared to what was now being suggested for the future. It is easy to see how, given the management structure of The Open University, heads were buried in the sand and CICE was developed with none of these features. The year after CIRCE came into operation only 20% of Open University students had access to the internet. 5 years later, by 2002, that figure had risen to 70%. During 2002 56% of students interacted with The Open University on-line and 50% used e-mail for a communication with The Open University. Before the end of the 1990s the suggestions of the "think tank" papers no longer appeared excessively futuristic. Fortunately the creation of Student Services by an amalgamation of the two distinct earlier units in 1997 and the enthusiastic development of the OUTIS project by staff at all levels have allowed the University to recover from an inauspicious start and to maintain its position as leader in the provision of support services to students as was demonstrated at the recent ICDE World Conference in Bangkok.

If there are lessons to be learnt from this, undoubtedly the first of these is the need for a holistic student based approach in which services and record keeping are completely integrated. That might seem a very simple and obvious statement but it is one with which The Open University found difficulties and one which still presents enormous problems in other large scale institutions today. The second lesson of course relates to structures and

management. There is an understandable wish to try to run large scale higher education ODL systems in the manner of traditional universities as far as possible. There is little evidence that this can work. Perhaps large scale ODL institutions could learn much from the evolving models of service industries.

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