Chapter 19
Open Universities Australia:
The Evolution of Open Access and Online Education Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the history of, and future directions for, higher education studies undertaken through Open Universities Australia (OUA), Australia's unique higher education conduit. Founded to provide open access to units that allow individuals to undertake individual units or achieve qualifications from leading Australian universities, and supported by a federal government student loans scheme, OUA's experience and future plans provide significant insight into the potential and pitfalls of the technological innovation in both higher education distance, and increasingly, on-campus, teaching and learning. The need for an ongoing emphasis on innovation, adaptability, and cooperation in an extraordinarily rapidly changing environment is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

The early foundations of Open Universities Australia (OUA) are grounded in traditional distance education–with OUA's early beginnings being overlaid with a media centred approach through a specifically developed series of television programs. Since these early inceptions, OUA has grown to be Australia's largest online higher education provider. Initially founded with the key support of the Australian government, OUA acts as a broker of higher education units for seven shareholder universities (Curtin University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and University of South Australia) and eleven other public and private education and training providers. Offering more

than 1,200 units and 131 qualifications from these universities, OUA delivers an extensive range of study options in arts and humanities, business, law and justice, education, science and engineering, health, and information technology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Since its inception in 1993, OUA has had over 144,000 students with its growth in new enrolments at over 25 percent between 2007–09, and higher growth of 28 percent in 2010.

The roots of OUA's success are embedded in its unique model and emphasis on digital technologies. OUA's achievements can also be attributed to the rationale underpinning OUA's initiation alongside the company's early experiences as part of an Australian Government initiated TV Open Learning Project (TVOLP), and the ongoing work and evolution to establish a viable business model for both OUA, and the academic provider institutions. In collaboration with its providers, the OUA model has led the way in the transition of distance Australian higher education from a predominately print based delivery approach, to an approach that encompasses the (global) online delivery of study materials and ability to digitally access a wide range of learning materials, research materials and libraries. OUA has fostered online student centred interactive learning, along with the educationally sound use of multimedia, development of technologies for learning focus, and responsiveness to student demand for innovative new technologies. OUA, with its partners, continues to innovate and respond to demand by exploring, testing and developing new resources that further teaching and learning capabilities and evolve with the emergence of new technologies. The story of OUA outlined here, demonstrates how OUA has achieved its success, as well as the factors influencing its evolution.

THE OUA MODEL

With only a few exceptions, most of Open Universities Australia (OUA)'s students study off-campus. There are no prerequisites for enrolment in OUA's first-year undergraduate units. Undergraduate level units, when successfully completed, are credited towards a range of qualifications (i.e., Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Behavioural Studies, Certificate of Journalism, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Technology, Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Science). Each undergraduate degree is made up of twenty-four units. Students who complete the required units for a particular qualification are able to apply to take out a degree and, if they wish, formally graduate with other students at their awarding university. Postgraduate offerings generally comprise units from a single provider and include a range of qualifications from the Graduate Diploma in Extractive Metallurgy, Master of International Relations, Master of Information Technology Project Management, Graduate Diploma of Education, MBA, Graduate Certificate in Linguistics, among others. Students are able to study from all around Australia, as well as internationally–including places as far flung as Antarctica, Timor Leste, the United Kingdom or South America. Many OUA students are in full-time work and consequently have conflicting demands on their time. Roughly two-thirds of the students are female and the majority of students are in the 18–29 age group taking the arts and social science courses, while business and education courses also have significant cohorts.

Students may be in prisons, have special needs, or be studying through special arrangements with their employers, additionally, students may

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