

FORTY YEARS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL (OUI) – CONCLUSIONS ABOUT SUCCESS AND DROPOUT RATES

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Abstract

On 1976 the OUI opened its gates with five courses and 2,267 students. Today, the 47,000 students which register yearly can choose among more than 600 courses. Over 50,000 students have graduated over the years, about 45,000 with BA and 5,000 with MA. My paper will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the Distance Learning method and of the OUI policy of Open Admission, which enables anyone to register with no prior education records or tests of any kind. Some conclusions about success and dropout rates at a Distant Education system with an Open Admission policy are presented and discussed.

Key words: *distance education, distance learning, Open University of Israel*

1. HISTORY

In 1970 Yigal Alon, Minister of Education and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, initiated the foundation of The Open University of Israel (OUI), in order to make higher education available and accessible for unprivileged groups in the society, which till then could not have proper opportunities to study in the existing universities. On 1976 the OUI opened its gates, supported by The Rothschild Foundation, with five courses and 2,267 students. The courses were:

1. Introduction to Mathematics.
2. Introduction to Biology.
3. A preliminary course in natural sciences (chemistry and physics).
4. Introduction to Earth Sciences.
5. An introductory Course to Jewish History of the 1st century AD.

Today, the 47,000 students which register yearly to the OUI can choose among more than 600 courses in a variety of fields, for example: History, Philosophy, Judaic Studies, Literature, Language, Art, Education, Psychology, Management, Economics, Sociology, Political Science, Communication, Mathematics, Computer Science, Physics, Chemistry and Biology. Over 50,000 students have graduated over the years, about 45,000 with bachelor's degrees and approximately 5,000 with master's degrees. All the courses are in Hebrew, with selected courses also available in Russian and Arabic.

2. COURSES AND DEGREES

A typical course is based on self-study from books which usually were written especially for the OUI. For each course there are tutors which assist the students through the phone, e-mail and internet site. Every three or four weeks there is a group meeting in a learning-center venue close to the residence of the student. During the course the student has to submit to the tutors several written works, according to a strict timetable. This timetable ensures that all the students of the course are progressing at the same pace through the learning material.

There are two regular semesters and a shorter summer semester. At the end of the course there is a final exam which is conducted, at the same date and hour, at test-centers across the country. Some courses include lab work or field trips. There are seminar courses in which the student is required to prepare a project and present its summary, which typically includes 50 to 100 pages. The minimal requirement for a B.A. or B.Sc. degree is 108 academic credits. A regular course awards 6 credits, but

there are smaller courses of 4 or 3 credits. All courses last one semester regardless of their credit extent.

The student can choose a flexible-program degree, e.g. – a general degree in Natural Sciences, or a degree in Humanities and Social Sciences. There are also a variety of degrees which concentrate in a specific subject, such as mathematics, history, psychology, computer science and economics. There are degrees that combine two different disciplines such as economics and management or sociology and education. Both the single major and the double major degrees offer a certain flexibility since there are optional or elective courses besides a list of compulsory or required courses. Generally the flexibility and choice are as wide as possible in order to allow the student to build himself a curriculum which mostly suits his or her interests and needs. The average period required to accomplish a B.A. or B.Sc. degree in the OUI is between 4 to 5 years.

In the early years of its existence there was a debate at the OUI concerning the nature and level of the courses. The dispute was mainly between two basic concepts. According to one opinion, because of the open admission policy, which enables anyone to register with no prior education or screening tests, and since many of the registrants were pensioners or adults with no High School Diploma, the average student would not be able to meet the requirements of regular academic courses. Therefore, the courses should be written as popular science textbooks intended for a general audience, and provide a general overview of the subject matter rather than a profound academic analysis. Had this approach been accepted, the OUI would become a kind of popular university, which offers a general education degree, not standing in the undergraduate standards of regular universities.

According to the second approach, the lacking education of some of the students may require them to take introductory courses, which bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and the requirements of the real academic courses. However, the next courses they take should be strictly academic and should bring the student to a university degree which is equivalent to the degree of other universities in Israel.

Formally, the second approach won the battle. The OUI degrees are equivalent to regular academic degrees. They are recognized by the Council for Higher Education in Israel and by universities in Israel and abroad. Many graduates continue their studies towards M.A. degrees at the OUI or towards M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in academic institutions all over the world. Several professors in universities in Israel and in other countries have starts their academic studies at the OUI. However, the first approach hasn't been entirely eradicated. Student who wish to study according to a more lenient curriculum can have their way. They can choose a collection of introductory courses, as long as they have a minimal number of "advanced courses" which are equivalent to third-year courses in regular universities. In each of the main discipline (natural sciences, humanities and social sciences) there are some interdisciplinary advanced courses which fit a broader-scope curriculum.

3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

The advantages of the distance learning method for the individual student, compared to conventional frontal lectures, are:

1. The student can study nearly anywhere, whether the source of learning is printer material or recorded lectures, digital material or internet sites (Geri, Gafni & Winer 2014). One can study at home or on a vacation, at one's desk or while travelling by a train or an airplane, during the day or at evening hours after work.
2. Despite the strict timetable, the student can control his rate of progress by deciding how much courses to study in parallel, and how many hours to study every day.
3. The self-learning method enables the students to thoroughly investigate elaborate points which evade notice in a frontal lecture. They can also stop and look for other references during their study, which scarcely can be done in a usual classroom.

4. The students get used to self-learning and thus acquire an ability which might be quite valuable for them in their future career.
5. It allows the student to combine learning towards an academic degree with other activities, such as work or parenthood.

Distance learning has its disadvantages as well, compared to conventional teaching (Guri-Rosenblit 2017). Here are some of them.

1. The student access to personal consulting with teachers and tutors is limited compared to conventional universities.
2. The interaction with other students is less straightforward and the student might from time to time feel lonely and isolated.
3. Self-learning demands a high degree of self-discipline and the persistence to go on despite difficulties and misreading. Not every potential student have the strengths and abilities needed for such mission.
4. Student must be more active and independent than in regular institutions.

To conclude, distance learning is not suitable for everyone. It can work for students who have the right levels of willpower and self-discipline, and who have the patience and drive to study independently, from a book or a computer. It is especially suitable for those who have difficulties in keeping up with a frontal lecture. It is not suitable for those who tend to postpone their duties and to students who need a human teacher in front of them in order to digest the imparted material.

4. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE OPEN ADMISSION POLICY

From its beginning The OUI has conducted a policy of open admission for adult students (above the age of 18) who wish to study towards a bachelor's degree. Thus, potential students who believe they have what it takes to succeed in academic studies may enroll at the OUI without prove themselves through actual coursework. No prior scholastic records or achievement tests of any kind are required for admission.

The admission policy for Master's Degree is less flexible. One has to present a B.A. degree with a minimum grade average in order to enroll in a master's degree program at the OUI. There is a special admission policy for high school students: They must undergo an admissions screening process to ensure that they have the skills and maturity to cope successfully with the OUI's challenging academic coursework. However, since most of the OUI students are undergraduate adults, most of our students began their studies with no formal process of screening or tests of any kind.

This open admission policy has its merits and drawbacks. The big advantage of that policy is that it makes higher education accessible to everyone. The real test is the first course – if you do well on your first course you have good chances to go on until the end. Thus, people who weren't privileged enough to gain access to proper education at their youth, but have the ability to study, can endeavor to achieve academic education at the OUI. In the other universities many of them would either be rejected because they lack a high school diploma, or admitted but fail due to the swift pace of learning.

5. SUCCESS AND DROPOUT RATES

The main disadvantage of the open admission is the high dropout rate. Since anyone can enroll to any course (provided that the course has no prerequisites) students which haven't the right background and experience, or lack the minimal learning skills and work habits, can take courses which are beyond their capacity, and drop out or fail in the final exam. Due to the open admission, about half of the students fail to get credit points on their first course. Most of them leave the OUI without trying to restudy the course or take an alternative course. About 50% do get credit on their first course, but about half of them do not continue to study at the OUI or take only one or two more courses. Thus, out

of 100 new enrollees, only about 25 go on with their studies after 1–3 courses. If we check how many reach the finish line and graduate, the figures are even smaller. In a typical year there are about 40,000 students, while the graduates in all areas of study total to about 4,000. That means that only 10 out of the 100 that began their studies actually received the academic degree.

On the face of it, these figures seem to indicate the failure of the open admission policy, since only a small minority of the students manage to bring their degree program into completion. Indeed great efforts were done in the OUI in order to explore the reasons for the dropout and to improve the success rates. However, a careful examination discovered some interesting facts which proved the situation to be less disastrous than initially thought.

1. The dropout during the first courses is directly link to the open admission policy. Many potential students wish to inspect their aptitude for academic education, while many of them do not conform to the academic curriculum at this stage of their life. In order to considerably reduce the dropout at this stage we have to either lower the first courses level, or to change the open admission policy. If there is no willingness to do either, we have to accept the high dropout rates.
2. Many of those who quit after successfully finishing several courses, haven't planned to complete an academic degree in the first place. They just wanted to study several courses – or even only one or two courses – in a subject which interests them. Some of them already have academic degree so they do not need the academic points and they even don't care to take the final exam.
3. Some of our students, high school pupils in particular, take several OUI courses and then register to another university and complete their degree there.

Following these findings several steps have been take (Levy & Ramim 2015; Silber-Varod, Eshet-Alkalai & Geri 2016).

1. It was decided to maintain the high level of the courses along with the open admission, despite the high rate of dropout.
2. Academic consultation for new students before they choose their first course was improved and became obligatory, in order to ensure that the first course would suit as far as possible the capabilities of each student. This improved a little the success in the first course.
3. There is a questionnaire in which the student is asked on each semester whether the study is aimed at getting an academic degree. Students who are studying for a degree receive exemption from tuition fees in their last undergraduate courses. It is now possible to distinguish between true dropouts and people who originally did not want to accomplish a degree.
4. Students who have stopped studying after finishing more than half of the courses needed for a degree, are contacted by an academic consultant in order to encourage them to go on.
5. Agreements were signed with other universities on "transition channels" in which students begin their studies at the OUI, and after accumulating an amount of courses equivalent to the first year, they can continue their studies at another university for two more years, and receives the degree from that university.

6. CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING SUCCESS AND DROPOUT RATES

The above mentioned steps did not changed the basic figures considerably, but they did change our interpretation about them. The present interpretation is as follows. About half the new students drop out during the first course or after 1-3 courses because the courses are too difficult for them or do not meet their expectations. Another 25 percent do not continue beyond 1-3 courses, however they have reached their goal, which is to acquire knowledge they consider important (e.g. computer workers who want to specialize in a specific field). Ten percent of those who has began their studies finish their degree at the OUI. Most of the remaining 15%, which have not completed a degree at the OUI, affirmed that they have attained their goal: some of them continued their studies in other universities and some learned the amount of courses that gave them the information that was important for them.

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