

Models of Student Support within the University of London External System: Historical Development and Future Evolution

Richard Arnold (Richard.Arnold@lon.ac.uk)
University of London External System, United Kingdom
www.londonexternal.ac.uk

This paper is an expanded version of a contribution presented at the
Third EDEN Research Workshop, Oldenburg, Germany, 2004

Introduction

Through its External System, the University of London has an interesting if somewhat convoluted record of providing opportunities for students to obtain qualifications without having to be present in London. The University has a long history of providing access to people who might be broadly defined as "studying by distance learning", and it has encountered numerous problems in seeking (or sometimes declining) to provide support to these students. Different strategies have emerged during the various stages of the University's development, some of which have evolved and are still in operation today. As a result, the University of London External System provides a useful example of how an institution may operate different mechanisms of student assistance simultaneously. There now exists the potential for a wide ranging debate as to how the External System might move forward, and develop its student support provision in the future.

The following discussion deals with "student support" as a concept defined by academic issues - the provision of teaching and sometimes of learning materials to External Students. Student support is, of course, a much broader issue, encompassing a potentially wide range of advice and counselling services, from initial enquiries through to (and occasionally beyond) graduation, which need not necessarily or desirably be provided by academic staff. There is certainly a useful discussion to be had about all aspects of student support provided by the University of London, but this would be beyond the scope of this paper, which will be limited to the academic implications of the subject.

Historical Background

As Harte (1) notes, when the University of London received its first Charter, in November 1836, it represented a compromise between various facets of English society, religion, government, and educational establishment. London was only the third University to be established in England, as an alternative, rather than a rival, to the medieval institutions of Oxford and Cambridge. Its early glory was its waiver of any religious requirements for its graduates: for the first time in England, a University education was theoretically open to anyone, and entry was not dependent on adherence to the tenets of Anglicanism. The new University also matched the mood of the time; its market was the "middling rich" of a fast growing city, who would previously have been excluded from a university education on the basis of class, if not of creed. More than forty years later, London became the first British University to admit women to its degrees.

The University was originally chartered to define syllabuses, conduct examinations and award degrees. Its functions were deliberately constrained and did not include teaching, the responsibility for which was delegated to the two Colleges - King's and University College - which were initially constituted when the University was first founded. With its role thus restricted, the University did not have a large staff, and was not offered spacious premises. However, it grew rapidly in terms of the numbers of degrees awarded by affiliating with other institutions, particularly medical schools, which wished to prepare their students for the University of London degree. For the first two decades of the University's existence, students who wished to sit for its examinations needed to be issued with a certificate by one of these affiliated institutions. The pattern of affiliation was allied closely to the growing railway network, and, subsequently, to the expansion of Empire: a secondary Charter of 1850 allowed institutions throughout the British colonies to be recognised for the purposes of offering students for the London degree. A key turning point in the development of what would eventually be called "distance learning" came in 1858, when the requirement that candidates should present a certificate of study at an affiliated institution was retained in the case of medicine, but dropped for all other examinations. Effectively, this decision opened up the possibility of University access to students - at least, male students - from any location.

It is only fair to point out that the 1858 policy can be interpreted in differing ways. Within the current External System, the 1858 move is usually seen as the start point of a liberalising and progressive narrative - one which promoted educational accessibility in ways which were startlingly new at the time, and which anticipated twentieth century developments in open and flexible learning. However, the shift can also be seen as the abandonment of any pretence that the University was anything other than an examination board, and that the attempt to instigate a formal role for teaching as part of the University's core activities had failed. Allchin (2) argues that idea of certifying local institutions to deliver teaching for the University's degrees was not in itself a bad one, but that the fledgling University lacked the power and confidence to define, assert and enforce teaching standards. As a result, the levels of teaching support provided in the first twenty years of the University's existence were at best variable, and at worst lamentably dreadful. In this light, the move to drop the certificate requirement appears less an initiating act of educational liberalisation, and rather more a practical and defensive response to a failing strategy.

It has also been argued that the 1858 restructuring, and the removal of teaching from the University's agenda, had a deleterious effect on other attempts at promoting flexible learning in nineteenth century England. Marriott (3) sees this decision as a deliberate move on the part of the University to turn itself into a "huge machinery for examinations" which did nothing to address the basic lack of teaching resources in the country. Once established in this mode, a vested interest emerged on the part of London towards denying provincial institutions the power to award degrees in their own right. In this reading, the University of London appears as a "rigid and remote" examining power, which forced the formation, later in the century, of the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching, and the Association for Promoting a Teaching University for London. It is certainly the case that the complete separation of teaching from the process of examining caused fundamental philosophical and practical problems for the University, and led inevitably to profound disagreements as to its subsequent evolution.

In response to these points, two observations can be made. The first is that, although the concept of a

University without a teaching function was anathema to many contemporary commentators, a demand for this service evidently did exist. The University would not have survived in its mid nineteenth century form for as long as it did had there not been a market there for it to serve. It was clearly difficult for existing educational institutions to accept that a university degree could not be achieved without a period of residency. However, there remained a significant proportion of the population for whom such residency was an impossibility, and for whom the London route represented the only option for the attainment of a degree. If there was, as Marriott says, a certain amount of London-inspired disdain for the "philistinism" of provincial institutions, then there was equally a tendency on the part of the University's detractors towards academic snubbing of the "crammers" which emerged to teach for the London degree.

The second point is that, whatever the role of London within England, it quickly became and remained an important institution for overseas students seeking to obtain degrees. For the London Colleges, this was a problem. Allchin notes that King's and University College launched a petition for reform in 1887 which included the claim that "except for the situation of its headquarters, the University of London does not belong more to London, or to the London district, than to any other part of England or its Empire." For the University, this Imperial role was a source of pride and identity. It is in many ways still the case that the idea of London as a University in its own right becomes more important and meaningful with distance. Modern students are far more likely to identify with their School or College than with the University itself. For distance learning students, the conceptual simplicity of the University is usually preferable to the intricacies of the Collegiate network.

What can be said is that by 1858, different models of student support were already starting to emerge - though none were actually provided by the University itself, which remained restricted to defining syllabuses, organising examinations, and awarding degrees. Full time teaching in London was carried out at the Colleges, which were constituted as parts of the University but which did not themselves hold degree awarding status. Affiliated educational institutions outside London, and abroad, provided courses leading to the award of the University of London degree. After 1858, students had the option of preparing themselves for the degree, with or without seeking assistance from an affiliated institution. The relaxation of the affiliation rule in 1858 also offered scope for individual operators to provide their own routes for students to progress to a London qualification, and a number of private correspondence schools were opened on the basis of offering supervised preparation for the University's examinations (4).

Present Situation

Between 1960 and 1985 the number of External Students had dropped from 26,593 to 16,948, and a decision was taken in 1972 to cease the registration of such students via public educational institutions, and to limit the access provided to overseas students. There were moves to close the External System altogether, but the weight of its history within the University, and the idea that London had some form of special External "role" or "duty", won a reprieve. Since 1986, the External System has drawn heavily on the experience of the Open University, and has placed increased emphasis on providing support for learners on an individual basis. Around 33,000 External students are now registered with the University of London. During the same period, central control of teaching was relaxed considerably, with the Colleges developing a powerful role in organising - though not awarding - degrees (5). It might be argued that the name of the University of London now carries more weight with, and has more meaning for, its External Students, rather than for Internal Students who increasingly identify themselves with their Colleges. It is quite likely that some of the constituent Colleges aspire to, and may well achieve, degree awarding status in their own right.

Within the External System, the current situation with regard to student support, as defined above, demonstrates a broad difference between what might be termed models of "partial support" and of "full support". These terms are neither official nor exact, but they are useful shorthand indications of the kinds of provision for student support that are presently being made. Broadly speaking, the partial support model is more commonly used at undergraduate level, with postgraduate level qualifications veering more towards the full support option. Each approach has its own strengths, weaknesses, and unfulfilled potential.

On the whole, undergraduate distance learning students of the University of London are catered for through the partial support model. They register directly with the University, and receive an introductory package, including a student handbook, and a study guide for each unit that they are planning to undertake. They are usually required to purchase the relevant textbooks separately. They also have the option of buying teaching from any local institution which offers to provide teaching which leads to the relevant University of London qualification. Currently, around 75% of undergraduate students - about 19,000 in total - choose to attend supportive courses run by 118 institutions, in 31 different countries.

A minority of these institutions engage in formal contracts with the University of London External System, which involve written agreements and inspections of services and resources. Arrangements of this kind, particularly in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, are well developed, and have proved effective in delivering local teaching support to large groups of students. However, linkages between the majority of local institutions and the University are looser; in most cases, there is no formal system of contracting, and no fees are paid to the University by the organisations concerned. The University takes no responsibility for the quality of teaching provided in these informal circumstances, and does not necessarily endorse the institutions which offer support for its degrees - but neither does it dissuade students from purchasing this form of additional local assistance.

Though the administrative mechanisms have somewhat altered, and a basic minimum of study materials is now provided, there are clear reminders, in the principles of this system of student support, of the traditions of the External System stretching back to the nineteenth century. There are parallels between, for example, the London School of University Studies (www.londev.co.za), presently based in Johannesburg, and the nineteenth century University Correspondence College "perhaps best described as a successful crammer" (6). The option of purchasing local support is undeniably still very popular. It allows students the chance to participate in face to face teaching sessions, and to be part of a group, without having to come to London in order to do so. It is also considerably cheaper than models which are based on the supply of learning materials in full and the provision of support on a remote basis. This model does not represent distance learning in the "purest" sense of the term, in that students are tied to a fixed location, although not to London. There are potential quality control risks over local teaching, and, as in the nineteenth century, there remains a certain amount of academic elitism, which holds that teaching performed outside London by institutions which are not universities, cannot be considered to be equal to the service delivered on campus. Whilst the persistence and popularity of this model certainly point to some underlying strengths, there must be reservations as to whether a methodology essentially rooted in the nineteenth century can long endure in the twenty-first.

Most of postgraduate qualifications delivered via the University of London External System make use of a separate "full support" model. Students are usually provided with all or most of the materials which they will need to complete their Systems, and they will not normally be required to purchase additional textbooks or other items. Tutorial support is provided at a distance, either by post, e-mail, or via a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which has been developed and which is currently being rolled out. The VLE links to the University's Online Library, which allows access to a number of online journals, and also hosts a student to student network which allows for academic and social conversation between course participants.

This mode of delivery is geared more appropriately to the needs of individuals who travel frequently, who live in places where no local teaching is available, or who are not able to attend face to face classes on a regular basis. The provision of support in this way allows for some increase in flexibility, in terms of when and where students study, and does not restrict participants to particular location. The disadvantages include an increasing dependence on technological connectivity, which may not always be available to all potential students; a reported tendency towards feelings of isolation on the part of students who are studying very much on their own; and, perhaps most critically, the increased expense of this style of presentation. The first two problems can usually be diminished, if not resolved altogether, by co-ordination and advice provided by the External System. The third issue, however, is fixed. The University's postgraduate qualifications, provided on a full support basis, will cost students on average around seven to ten times as much as the undergraduate degrees and diplomas.

In some ways, this dual system of cost/delivery makes sense in terms of the age structure of the London External System students. Undergraduates will usually be younger, and in employment terms will probably be at the beginning of their careers. They are likely to be living with their parents, will have fewer resources to expend on studying, and will probably not have acquired the discipline and dedication that is needed for individual self-directed study. Whilst they will have to find additional fees to pay for local support, these costs are far less than those that would be levied if the University itself was to provide direct support for these Systems. Postgraduate students, on the other hand, tend to be more experienced professionals, who have already gained university qualifications. They are less frequently interested in face to face participation, and are better placed to meet the fees required for qualifications supported directly by the External System. In terms of the average student "life cycle" there is an inherent logic in the way the two modes of support are structured and costed.

However, there are also some problems with both models of student support. To begin with, the partial support version leaves around 6,300 students - about 25% of the total number - studying on their own, without access to online resources and direct tutorial assistance, and lacking the option of local support. It is easy to understand how students who fall into this category might well regard themselves as being disadvantaged, and to feel that they are competing at examinations with people who have been better supported during their studies. If the growth of the partial support approach is made conditional upon the availability of local institutions, then there are always going to be geographical restrictions imposed. Such institutions are usually found in urban areas where the potential market is of sufficient size to justify the offering of supportive courses. Rural regions are vulnerable to exclusion from this model, as are large potential markets - such as North, Central and South America - where the concept of local institutions supporting the London External System has not really taken root. Additionally, it is the case that by no means all local institutions will support all the available qualifications: tuition for some degrees is restricted to a small number of countries. Equally, as mentioned previously, there are possible quality problems in relation to the provision of local support. The University of London has no control over, and can take no responsibility for, the activities of most local institutions. The University also has no direct power to prevent any particular organisation from offering to prepare students for the University's examinations, or from using the London name and logo in marketing activities. Finally, another potential threat is that a low cost model of this kind is fairly straightforward to replicate. Other universities would have little difficulty in identifying and targeting institutions which are involved with the London External System, and if an educational product were introduced which was perceived as being superior, or cheaper, then important core markets could be eroded very quickly.

The full support model has been run with reasonable success since 1987, when it began life as the "Independent Guided Study scheme". It represented a conscious attempt to break with the traditions of the External System and to engage more readily with modern advances in distance learning techniques. Its costs have generally been around the mid-market level, and, overall, the fees for postgraduate qualifications that are provided via this method have not been out of line with those of competitors. The more recent move towards the delivery of courses via a Virtual Learning Environment has, however, involved substantial development costs, which will eventually have to be reflected in the fees charged to students. And warnings may be sounding: a recently completed Master's degree which sought to position itself as a premium product, charging a top of the range fee, has struggled to recruit enough students to justify its initial development budget. There is a danger that in responding to the perceived demands of potential students for cutting-edge technological delivery, the full support model may end up either by pricing itself out of any realistic market, or by operating on margins which prove to be unsustainable.

Future Developments

The policy options for future development for student support thus range between these two strategic visions. One approach favours a more traditional low cost/low input model, allowing the possibility of additional local support for groups of students. The other view encompasses a more technologically oriented portfolio of "products", which requires a significant level of advance investment and higher charges to students. Both scenarios have their strengths. For the moment, there is effectively an element of cross-subsidy, in that it is the proceeds from the larger, mainly undergraduate Systems that are largely being used to fund the development of the fully supported postgraduate qualifications, which are inherently more expensive to develop, and less profitable to run. This makes some intuitive sense in terms of long term planning, in that the technology-led model may well be the key to future markets, even if it is not an immediately reliable source of income. However, it is not currently clear whether this is a deliberate policy or an ad hoc response to circumstances - nor is it plain how this process is intended to evolve in the future. One tactical difficulty may be that funds are not necessarily being channelled back to support the growth and development of the undergraduate programmes. If resources are devoted solely to the postgraduate model, which may not be in a position to generate return profits in the near future, then there is a risk that the reserves available for further development may diminish. But there is equally a danger that if insufficient investment is made in new developments, the External System as a whole would then be vulnerable if there were to be any significant contraction in its core markets.

Ideally, an entirely flexible programme would allow each student the option of following courses in whatever support mode was suitable for his or her own needs. This would require the majority of qualifications to be offered in both modes, with students choosing whether they wished to purchase

support locally or directly from London. Extending the idealisation still further, students would be able to switch between the two modes, or even participate in both simultaneously, depending on their own particular circumstances. If the idea were pushed to its extremes, people would also have the option of completing some portion of their studies as full time students in London, if their own circumstances permitted them to do so.

Described this bluntly, this hybrid model would be both extremely complicated to administer and heavily expensive to develop. However, if this ultimate objective is distilled down to its basic principles, some useful lines of guidance emerge. The key components of this approach are flexibility and integration. The previous discussion highlights the point that these values have not always been evident in the past activities of the University of London, which have tended towards separation in purpose and function. Even with the present External System, the organisational subcultures required to operate the "partial" and "full" models of student support are markedly different, and have developed varying techniques to cope with the problems which they have faced. If developmental policy can be shaped on the premise that students should have the option of buying into the System at a level that suits their own needs, then future plans can be mapped out with this direction in mind. This would have to be a proposal focused on the development of future qualifications, rather than the modification of existing ones.

It is, of course, somewhat facile simply to promote the virtues of "flexibility and integration" without specifying the details of precisely how such policies might, in practical terms, be implemented. But there is a theoretical and philosophical leap that needs to be made, before the particular details can be worked out. It is perhaps fair to say that, throughout its history, the University of London has contained many excellent and thoroughbred constituent elements - but that the University as an entity has always been somewhat less than the sum of those parts. A move towards integrating the External System's models of student support, to provide a more flexible learning environment, would require something of a break from the University's previous patterns of behaviour. The logic, however, is that of blending rather than discarding existing traditions, and there would be strong elements of continuity in any evolution of this kind.

Conclusion

It is suggested, therefore, that the overall policy direction of the University of London External System should be towards "flexible learning", a concept which may even come to displace that of "distance education". Essentially, students would, for the first time in the history of the External System, be presented with choices as to how they might gain access to support services. If the psychological breach of functional separation can be modified, then the practical implications of designing dual mode presentation could start to be addressed. It is certainly possible to envisage an upgraded role for the institutions, which would bring them much more closely into line with the University's operations, and which might require them to provide more in the way of local resources to students. It is equally feasible to imagine a gradually expanding Virtual Learning Environment, via which a range of support services could eventually be delivered. Overall, this proposed policy shift would represent not so much a break with tradition, but a rather a merging of separate traditions into a more integrated and cohesive whole.

References

1. HARTE, N. (1986) *The University of London 1836-1986*, London, Athlone Press.
2. ALLCHIN, W.H. (1905) *An Account of the Reconstruction of the University of London. Volume I: From the Foundation of the University to the appointment of the First Royal Commission - 1825 to 1888*, London, H.K. Lewis
3. MARRIOTT, S. (1981) *A backstairs to a degree: demands for an open university in late Victorian England*, Leeds, Leeds Studies in Adult and Continuing Education
4. DE SALVO, A. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of the University Correspondence College*, Cambridge, National Extension College Trust.
5. THOMPSON, F.M.L. ed. (1990) *The University of London and the World of Learning, 1836-1986*, London and Ronceverne, The Hambledon Press.
6. BELL, R. & TIGHT, M. (1993) *Open Universities: A British Tradition?*, Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Author

Richard Arnold
University of London External System
Learning & Development Directorate
34 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9EZ
Richard.Arnold@lon.ac.uk
www.londonexternal.ac.uk