

# Spotlight on Academic Course Development

## Open University Courses

Like other universities, the Open University focuses on three areas of academic activity:

- preserving knowledge – writing and developing courses
- disseminating knowledge – teaching
- creating knowledge – research

The OUI differs from other universities in the way these activities are implemented, the proportion of each, and the manner in which they are performed. Course development lies at the core of the Open University's activity. The courses are the primary tools for preserving and disseminating knowledge. Development is in the hands of top researchers in the field of each course. The high standard of the courses is guaranteed by strict quality control procedures.

Open University courses differ substantially from courses at other universities. An OUI course is primarily an academic creation: one or more volumes written and published especially for OUI students or pre-recorded lectures together with digital learning materials. Most courses are divided into study units, each covering a defined topic designed to be studied within a given timeframe, with the content explained as clearly as possible and including self-study tools such as guiding questions, problems or exercises with solutions (to be used as examples) and sometimes also self-assessment questions. Other courses are based on existing textbooks, accompanied by a study guide directing the student to the sections of the textbook that must be read; expanding, explaining and clarifying sections or topics in the text where necessary; and containing guiding questions. Today, some of the courses (or parts of them) are filmed as lectures available on CD or online through the course websites.

After a small group of experts develops study materials for the Open University, many thousands of students can benefit from them. All courses also include additional teaching elements, which are usually optional: group tutorials, guided fieldtrips or symposia. Every course has its own website, which serves as a virtual study center. The website offers different kinds of auxiliary and enrichment material relevant to the course, including, among others, videotaped tutorials and sample assignments and exams.



## The Development Process

At other higher education institutions, the approval procedure for a course involves only academic authorization of the course syllabus and the selection of a lecturer; hence, a course can be launched within a short time and at no cost, beyond the salary paid the lecturer. At the Open University, on the other hand, a course is offered only after all the learning materials have been prepared and distributed.

Applying distance teaching methods requires the development of stand-alone courses suitable for independent study. The academic standard of the courses must be at least as high as in other universities in Israel. This makes the development of Open University courses intensive, complex, time-consuming and costly.

Every new course is planned to be integrated into one of the Open University study programs. According to development procedures, the course proposal is submitted to OUI entities in a fixed format. Proposers of courses are asked, among others, to show the relationship of the proposed course to the field, the discipline and existing courses; it must include the course level and prerequisites, specify the format and the materials it includes. Those proposing courses and those with no prior experience in writing study materials for the Open University are required to submit a writing sample; in the case of filmed lectures, a screen test is required. The process of approving a course after the proposal is submitted includes several stages: internal evaluation; review by external experts in the relevant field; and discussion by the relevant Academic subcommittee. Once the course is approved, it is submitted to the Academic Committee (the Senate) for review, and finally authorized by the President.

Following authorization, the arduous work of preparing the actual study materials begins. The production of high quality study materials involves a variety of tasks: writing, preparing illustrations, acquiring existing materials, and securing copyright for any text or visual items to be included in the material that were not created by the course developer. The production of print material involves members of the OUI Publishing House: copyeditors and typesetters, graphic artists and production professionals. In the case of online or video materials, experts on learning technologies and their application in distance learning are consulted.

## Levels of Open University Courses

The Open University offers undergraduate and graduate courses. Courses leading to a Bachelor's degree are classified into three levels that reflect their difficulty level and the student's stage of studies: introductory, intermediate and advanced.

- **Introductory courses** – these courses are generally introductions to the various disciplines, and do not require any prior university-level knowledge. They are based on the assumption that this is the student's first encounter with the University's distance learning method and thus, there is a focus on didactic processing that combines all the study material in the unit.
- **Intermediate courses** – these represent the majority of courses in the various programs and provide the core content of the various academic fields.
- **Advanced courses** (with or without seminar papers) – these are courses designed for students in the final stages of their degree studies.

## Open University Study Materials

### A variety of course formats

In the early days of the OUI, the format adopted for courses was largely based on those taught at the Open University of Great Britain. In the decades since then, additional course formats have been developed, due to various constraints or thanks to technological advances. Today, the OUI develops courses in a wide variety of formats, using, among others, advanced information technologies. Digital technologies enable interaction among the students themselves, as well as between students, tutors and course coordinators, and this has influenced the nature of both the teaching process and the study materials. In addition to the traditional study units, study materials may include printed or digitized study guides, readers, videotaped lectures, websites, and electronic learning aids such as CDs, PP presentations and courseware. Most courses are designed for study over one semester.

## **The traditional OUI model: Units for independent study**

The traditional Open University coursebook, which serves as an alternative to face-to-face lectures and exercises, presents the materials in a manner suited for independent study. A traditional course usually has 10 to 12 study units. A typical OUI study unit begins with a presentation of the main topics covered in the unit, as well as its organization and learning objectives. The body of the unit, containing the crux of the study material, includes questions, exercises, review questions and answers, followed at the end by a summary, summarizing questions, appendices and a reading list.

Traditional OUI courses emphasize not only conveying the content to students, but also improving their learning skills, to which end a variety of didactic elements is included. Open University students study at least partly on their own, so it is important for the text to conduct a dialog with them and help them progress through their studies step-by-step, allowing for stumbling blocks and for queries that may arise along the way. Equally important are the questions on different levels and of different types interspersed throughout the text (questions for reflection, questions with answers, and summary questions on various levels of difficulty), interim summaries and integrative summaries of discussions, as well as points to stop to think about, or to assimilate topics covered. The insertion of examples throughout the text, the creation of a clear structure divided into sections and sub-sections, a comic interlude and summaries – all these are didactic tools that facilitate independent study. Graphic elements, images and diagrams are judiciously used to help clarify and illustrate the message of the text.

In recent years, the Open University began to produce digital copies of textbooks in a format that can be read on a computer screen. As a result, the books are accessible from anywhere at any time, and enable students to search within the text and tag important sections. In certain courses, audio books are also available.

## **Courses combining a study guide with other materials**

Course writers sometimes prefer to include alternatives to study units in the study materials, such as a reader that includes academic articles or chapters reproduced in full from textbooks, or other documents and materials; or a commercially available reference book; or several recorded lectures, or CDs, and so forth. Most such materials have no distinct pedagogical approach. To overcome this, the course development team prepares a study guide that steers the student through the material while demonstrating ways and means to improve learning and provides advice on reading, viewing or drilling materials that were not initially developed for independent study. This format does not suit introductory courses; it assumes that the student already has some experience in independent study.

Today, the study guide is an important tool in distance teaching and learning in many courses. It is comparable to a navigation system, a sort of sophisticated GPS, which helps students go from point A to point B in their studies without drowning in an overwhelming sea of materials. But a study guide is much more than simply a GPS: it determines the users' destination; adjusts the mirrors, warns about potholes, selects the safest route to take, and sometimes draws attention to the flowers growing at the side of the road...

The study guide, as its name suggests, guides students through the course and – by means of discussions, clarifications, supplements, comments and questions – helps them find ways to deal with the study materials. The guide is not self-sufficient. It accompanies the main body of the course content, i.e., study units, textbooks, reference books, readers, courseware, presentations, filmed lectures and video clips. The guide's scope depends on its role in the course; it can vary from a few dozen to several hundred pages. The development team may sometimes prefer to film the study guide, rather than write it.

A typical OUI study guide contains a range of components, including learning goals, stages of learning, a list of study materials, questions for guided reading, a glossary, additional graphic elements not included in the other course materials and necessary for discussion, supplements to the main reading material, practical tips and instructions for coping with exercises.