

30 Years of Distance Teaching

Prof. Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, who specializes in comparative research of higher education systems, describes distance teaching from a historical perspective

In its thirty years of operation, the Open University has met all the challenges posed by its founders and made a significant contribution to increasing equality and expanding access to higher education in Israel.

The Open University was inspired by the model of the Open University in Britain, and established in an era characterized by massive expansion of higher education systems throughout the world and especially in Europe. At the end of the 1960s, leaders of many countries recognized that higher education must be viewed as the right of many and not as a privilege for few, and that the larger the number of educated citizens, the greater the benefit to the country, economically and socially. When the Open University in Britain was established in 1969, only 5% of the relevant age group studied in universities. Presently, almost 50% of them study in institutions of higher education in Britain – clearly, a dramatic change. Indeed, the establishment of large open universities was one of the ways to expand the circle of learners in higher education systems in many countries throughout the world.

The initiator of the idea to establish the Open University in Israel was Yigal Alon who served as Minister of Education and Deputy Prime Minister at the beginning of the 1970s. At one of his meetings with Harold Wilson, British PM at the time, Alon heard, and was very enthusiastic, about Wilson's idea to establish a large distance university that would reach every home. There were only seven higher education institutions in Israel at the time. Acceptance to these institutions was very selective and only 12% of the relevant age group was accepted. Alon's enthusiasm convinced the Rothschild family and the *Yad Hanadiv* foundation to fund a trial project of an open university in Israel during the first seven years of its operation.

Four innovative principles served as the foundations for the establishment of the Open University: distance teaching, open admission, strict quality control of study materials and teaching processes, and reducing the costs of providing higher education.

Distance teaching – Since the establishment of the first universities in the 11th century, these institutions operated based on the idea of aggregating individuals from many and faraway places to a specific campus in order to teach them different knowledge fields. Distance teaching universities are based on a completely different idea: the university promises to reach students wherever they are and in any way they wish to study – whether alone (at home or at the workplace) or in study groups, as close as possible to their place of residence – and even to enable students to design a program of study and to study at a pace that suits their taste and lifestyle.

Open admission – Open admission was a revolutionary idea in the academic world that for hundreds of years imposed selective admission requirements and taught only a small number of choice students. The underlying idea of open admission is to enable studies towards an academic degree to talented individuals who are able to cope with higher education, however, for various reasons, cannot study at a regular campus university (due to life circumstances, not meeting admission requirements, limitations of work hours, physical distance, etc.). Experiencing academic studies and meeting academic course requirements are better predictors of success in academic studies than matriculation exams or psychometric exams.

The limitations of physical infrastructures and personnel do not enable campus universities to accept all those who apply for academic studies and to conduct the selection process only after the first academic semester or year. A classroom, in most cases, cannot seat more than several dozen students, and the faculty in higher education institutions cannot teach more than a limited number of students in a face-to-face situation. On the other hand, a distance teaching university does not have to cope with physical limitations of place or of personnel. Such a university can continuously expand, and indeed, several large open universities teach hundreds of thousands of students.

Strict quality control of study materials and teaching processes – One of the central ideas underlying the establishment of the Open University in Britain was the preparation of high quality study materials that would be user-friendly for distance learning students, and at the same time serve as high quality textbooks for students at other universities. Study materials are developed by teams of specialists from different universities. During their development, the materials undergo strict control and review processes. The teaching-learning processes also undergo careful evaluation and control. The Open University in Israel, with the same high standards, makes a significant contribution to the development of textbooks and academic study materials in Hebrew in many knowledge fields that serve students at other universities as well.

Reducing costs of providing higher education – Significant expansion of the circle of learners in higher education systems involves large financial investments. The establishment of large open universities was intended, among other things, to enable teaching of tens of thousands of students – and even hundreds of thousands – at lower costs than those necessary for teaching students on university campuses. Preparation of study materials by a relatively small staff for thousands of students significantly reduces the cost of an academic degree per student. Cost studies conducted in recent decades in countries with open universities showed in fact that the cost of an open university graduate is often half the cost of a campus university graduate.

In its thirty years of activity, the Open University of Israel has impressively expanded its circle of learners and the fields in which it awards Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Despite the fact that the system of higher education in Israel has expanded considerably since the 1970s, and there are many new academic institutions in the field, the number of students at the Open University is continuously rising. This underscores the vital need for the continued operation of the University. The future poses new challenges for the University – defining new target population groups, expanding the variety of higher degrees, strengthening the University's research institutes, integrating advanced technologies into teaching-learning processes, increasing collaboration with academic institutions in Israel and the world, and much more. We are sure that the Open University will find ways to contend with these future challenges in the same way that it successfully faced challenges in the past – with resourcefulness, creativity, and attentiveness to the needs of its students.

Dr. Ruth Arav, who served as the first Open University Dean of Academic Studies and before that was head of the Academic Teaching Administration, examines the vision and reality of distance teaching at the Open University

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When the Open University was established in 1974, its founders formulated the following great vision: the Open University will enable every individual willing to invest in studies – whether the individual has a matriculation certificate, is a professor or an elementary school graduate – to study towards a Bachelor's degree in an accredited university. They called this vision **open admission**: students who enroll in courses without any admission requirements and fulfill all requirements for their degree studies, will be eligible to receive an academic degree. Thus, the new university aimed to be a **second chance university** for those who missed their first chance at university studies.

For two years, the first OU faculty members worked on developing five courses aimed to be the first courses in study programs towards two undergraduate degrees in fields that the Council of Higher Educations accredited the University to award its graduates in the future: BA in Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and BA in Humanities and Social Sciences. In Fall 1976, the Open University opened the first semester of studies at "Everyman's University – Experimental Enterprise" (the name of the Open University at the time).

We envisioned students eager to pursue academic studies but unable to fulfill this wish, either because already at an early age they had to work in order to help their families and did not complete their high school studies, or because during adolescence they preferred other activities rather than studies, or because they had physical disabilities that prevented them from attending a campus university on a regular basis. We also envisioned those who simply wanted to expand their horizons in new fields of knowledge. Among the potential students, we thought of new immigrants, residents of the periphery, individuals from financially disadvantaged population groups, high school students and retired individuals.

In those years, we maintained that the innovative teaching principles adopted by the Open University would also enable those students that could not attend full studies at a regular university campus to overcome study difficulties, to meet the academic requirements, to accumulate credits and to receive a Bachelor's degree. We offered everything we thought was necessary for distance learning at the University: the option to study alone, at home, using up-to-date learning materials in units written specifically for **self-study**; the option offered every student to study at his or her **own pace**: one course per semester, two courses per semester or more; **assignments** included in the study kit mailed to the students; **tutorials** once every three weeks for students to discuss material they did not understand with the course tutor, and to exercise, expand, deepen, enrich and solve exercises and clarify questions together; **office hours** and **telephone tutorials** provided by the course coordinator and the tutor that afforded direct communication between students and the course team.

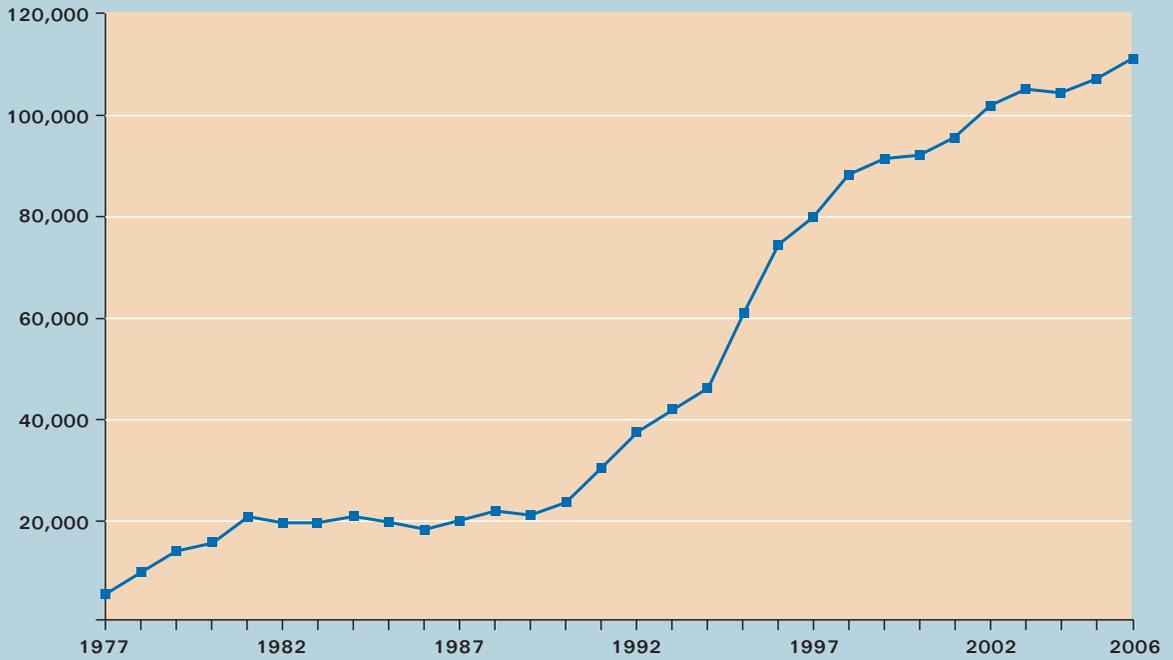
Indeed, many of the Open University's 19,359 graduates correspond to the profile of the OU student we envisioned. Alongside these students, there are also many other graduates and current students who do not match this profile: in recent years most of the OU graduates and students are not adults 30-45 years of age, as was the case in the early years, but rather young adults after their military service similar to students at regular universities. The latter choose to study at the Open University mainly because studies at our institution offer them maximum flexibility with respect to work hours and study pace.

At present, most students prefer **intensive tutorials**: tutorials once a week, rather than **regular tutorials** held every three weeks. Most of our current students study at one of our large study centers – in Jerusalem, Haifa, Wadi Ara or Beer Sheba – or at municipal and private colleges in which our intensive tutorials are held and where our students are provided with a feeling of studies similar to the format at regular universities. The Open University of Israel no longer offers studies toward only one of two degrees, but rather a choice among a wide range of single- and dual-track study programs in most of the disciplines and knowledge areas found in other universities in Israel. For example, students can choose to study towards a general degree in the Social Sciences or, alternately, choose a focused single-track degree, for example, in Psychology; or an interdisciplinary degree, for example, in Psychology and the Life Sciences. Today, graduates with a Bachelor's degree from the Open University or from any other university can pursue a Master's degree at the University in several fields, and earn a teaching certificate in some fields.

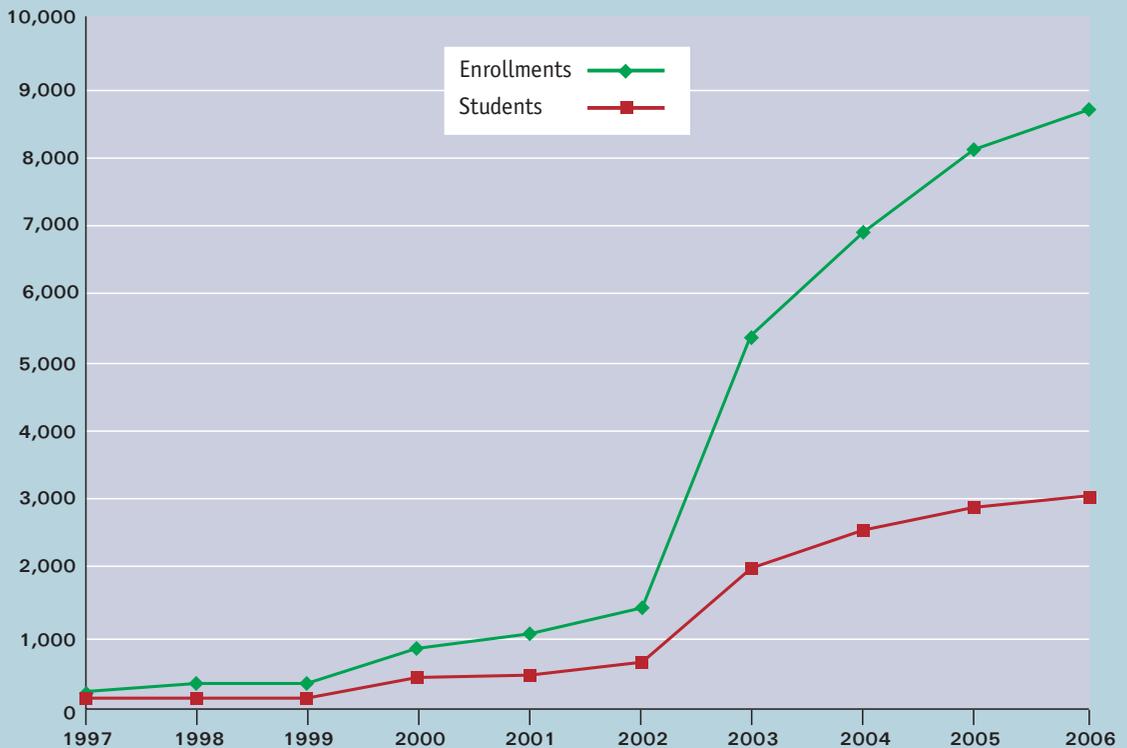
Academic studies at the Open University continue to be based primarily on materials written specifically for self-study. However, today they are also supplemented by a variety of technologies, most of which enable transmission of materials to the student's home computer. Every course has a course website that serves as an arena for discussions and conversations on the course topics in the course forum, with the participation of students, tutors, course coordinators and academic advisors. The website also provides a variety of study materials and links to relevant websites. The OU adopted innovative distance teaching technologies: the *Ofeq* system for interactive distance teaching using broadband communication, the InterWise system that enables teaching on an Internet infrastructure, and the video conferencing system.

From the perspective of thirty years of teaching students at the Open University of Israel, we can say that despite the changes in the profile of the typical OU student, in the frequency of tutorial sessions, in the variety of study programs and degrees and the use of teaching aids – the principle of **open admission** to undergraduate degree programs still stands strong, alongside **flexibility** that enables students to choose their desired study pace, place of study and study format. And most important: the Open University continues to provide a solution for thousands of knowledge seekers who cannot study in regular academic frameworks – and of this we are very proud.

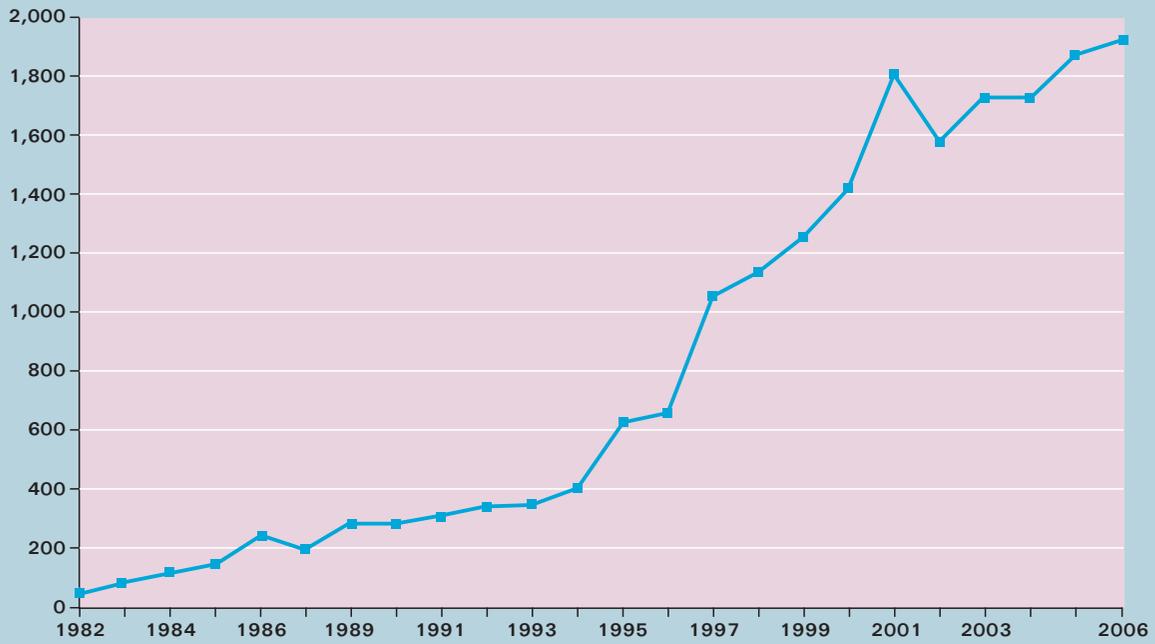
Undergraduate course enrollments, by year



Undergraduate course enrollments and number of students, by year



Number of students awarded Bachelor's degrees from the Open University, by year



Number of students awarded Master's degrees from the Open University, by year

