Chapter 8
Open by Degrees:
A Case of Flexibility or Personalization?

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ABSTRACT
This chapter focuses on the history, development, and perceived value of The Open University UK’s BA/BSc (Hons) Open degree (hereafter referred to as “OUUK Open degree”) over the past half-century in the context of changing external pressures and addressing debates around the coherence and acceptance of such a personalized program of study. It touches on the changing views of “openness” over time, from the origins of The Open University’s “open entry” policy, through to ideas around flexibility of study, open education, and personalized learning. The chapter concludes with recommendations for other higher education institutions wishing to introduce a multidisciplinary open degree into their portfolio of curriculum.

INTRODUCTION
Almost all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer subject-specific degrees whereby students have to follow a more or less prescribed set of courses or modules, with this internal prescription often influenced by external quality frameworks, such as subject benchmark statements set out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom (UK)¹. Open degrees provide a valued alternative to subject-specific degrees by offering students the opportunity to study a flexible, personalized degree, where they can choose the modules they wish to study, constrained only by the need to study a required number of credits at each level or stage of study². This approach provides students with access to a wide variety of subjects that match and build on their existing skills and knowledge.

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to develop a personalized curriculum that reinforces their existing experience to meet their vocational needs and personal interests.

Unlike most other universities in the UK, The Open University started with a single BA Open degree. Only later was a BSc option added to the Open degree and, subsequently, specific, named degrees (see Figure 1). The Open University UK (OUUK) was established as the UK’s first solely distance teaching university in 1969 and the first students were enrolled in January 1971.

The University’s mission is to be “open to people, places, methods and ideas”. The OUUK therefore has an open entry policy to students with no previous educational achievement requirements. It is “open to places” in that anybody in the UK, Europe and more recently globally can study with the University. It is “open to methods” in that it started life as a correspondence university based on written texts backed up by radio and television broadcasting and has developed into one of the most internationally acclaimed e-universities, where all teaching, learning and personal interactions can be achieved online (Weinbren, 2014). At the time the OUUK was founded, only about 10 percent of the UK population went to university and widening participation was very much part of the government’s agenda. The creation of the OUUK’s awards was strongly influenced by the personal experiences of the University’s first Vice-Chancellor, based on the interdisciplinary, four-year degrees that were common in Scotland at that time. This was also the time when the UK was looking to train more scientists and technologists and a recommendation was made to the UK government in the Swann Report that:

To prepare for and assist in this change there should be a detailed study of current curricula in science, engineering and technology in University education and of the balance between specialized and more

Figure 1. Event to celebrate The Open University gaining a Royal Charter in 1969
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