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Open Universities 2.0: Leadership, Strategic Reset and The National Agenda

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to build upon empirical research, leadership theory, open university practice, and shifting global trends to provide open university leaders with a framework for strategic reset. Strategic reset is re- setting institutions priorities – making leadership choices – and taking actions to build competitive advantage, quality, and service for the future. The foundational pillars of strategic reset are centred around 1) digitalization – specifically online capacity; 2) setting new strategic priorities, and 3) establishing a national footprint that aligns with critical national employment and workforce development needs. A secondary theme that weaves itself through this article is the need for open universities to revitalize their commitment to innovation. The article concludes by offering some tactical actions that open university leaders can consider for framing strategic reset and setting new priorities for the future. These include: 1) streamlined open university models; 2) precision access; 3) building a national service footprint; 4) renewal of critical partnerships; and 5) exploring alternative funding models.

Keywords: open universities, strategic priorities, digitalisation, leadership, strategic reset

Introduction

Open universities have established a unique and innovative position in the higher education ecosystem. These institutions emerged and thrived in the 1970s up to the millennium (Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Paul & Tait, 2019; Tait, 2018). Most leaders foresaw clear and smooth sailing for open universities. With thriving visionary leadership, expanded access, financial efficiencies, mass scaling, technological

innovation and unprecedented prestige the future seemed bright. As we crossed the millennium, however, open universities faced numerous challenges, funding reductions and an accelerated competitive landscape that has made surviving rather than thriving a more common reality (COL, 2023; Kanwar & Mishra, 2023; Meyer, 2006; Olcott, 2024a, 2024b; Tait, 2018).

Despite these challenges, open universities have continued to push back the frontiers of access and yet have lost some of their earlier unique and innovative attributes. Olcott (2024b) suggested this loss market position was less about where open universities failed but rather the massive shift by dual mode institutions and new online providers. This created unprecedented new competition for open universities. Early in the new millennium, most open universities were, and would continue to be, dominated by correspondence-based print models (Bates, 2018; Olcott, 2024a, 2024b). Online providers were tapping the entire educational landscape and print looked less and less appealing to students. Mainstream universities had shifted and if a student had a computer and good Internet access it meant access, convenience, and speed.

The multi-complexity of online teaching and learning, design and management creates immense new challenges that simply were not present in print-based correspondence delivery (Olcott, 2024a, 2024b). Learning design, communications, interaction models, technology requirements, assessment, and class discussions present a myriad of challenges for online delivery (Olcott, 2024b). The mixed results of online implementation in response to the global Covid 19 pandemic lockdowns were predicable. A lack of training and support for faculty and students, poor digital/Learning Management System (LMS) infrastructure, and most importantly a failure of leadership (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Brown, 2023; Olcott, 2023) demonstrated that quality online programs are no simple conversion from face-to-face or correspondence-based print models of delivery.

Purpose and Scope

This paper is a descriptive analysis underpinned by empirical research, literature reviews, best practices, history and theoretical constructs that provides open university leaders potential strategies and leadership approaches for the future. The underlying foundation of these strategies and leadership approaches is the concept of *strategic reset* (Olcott, 2024a). Business as usual or relying on past strategic goals, practice and innovations may need re-assessment.

The article opens with a general overview of open universities, the higher education landscape and introduction to the concept of strategic reset. This is followed by a research-based discussion of leadership, affordances of open universities, trends and forces impacting the global higher education landscape, and major challenges facing open universities. The next section focuses on leadership actions for positioning open universities for the future. The paper concludes with topics for future research and summary of key points.

Research Questions

1. Does strategic reset provide open university leaders a conceptual framework from which to reframe key institutional strategic priorities?

2. Does the tri-dimensional synergy of digitalization, identification of new strategic priorities by the leadership team, and a national geographic footprint aligned with the nation's current Zeitgeist provide tactical competitive advantages for open university competitive positioning?

Leading Strategic Reset: An Opportunity for Competitive Positioning

The post-Covid 19 pandemic higher education landscape created a unique opportunity for all institutions including open universities to shift directions, revise their mission, and redesign their institutional architecture for success. This conceptual framework is called Strategic Reset (McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Olcott, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Brown, McGreal & Peters, 2023; Mays, 2023.

Strategic reset is far more important and complex than just digitalization and revising strategic plans. It is the deliberate choice by open university senior leadership to take the reins of change and reframe their institutions within the context, culture and communities of their national geographic footprint. Strategic reset is defined as follows:

> Strategic reset is a systematic leadership process for university leadership teams to re-assess existing institutional teaching, research and service missions; explore new institutional directions, reconfirm strategic priorities, mission, resource allocations, digital infrastructures, and retro-fit their institutions to be more agile, flexible, and adaptive to emerging trends and changing markets; stabilizing existing priorities and repositioning institutional capacity to pursue new priorities. Strategic reset is re- setting priorities – making choices – and taking actions to build competitive advantage, quality, and service for the future (Olcott 2024a).

Strategic reset is predicated on three foundational pillars. First, the core model of open universities that prevailed in the golden period 1970 – 2000 must be reframed for a dramatically different HEI landscape of 2025 embedded in digital capacity. Secondly, open university VCs/Presidents and their leadership teams must identify and prioritize new strategic priorities (strategic reset). Thirdly, leaders must build their new competitive capacity around a digital national footprint that is acutely aligned with the existing HEI ecosystem and the Zeitgeist that defines the in-country norms. We will return to these core leadership pillars later in the paper in the discussion of leadership strategies and actions.

An Integrated Synthesis of Literature, Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings

The complexity of strategic reset requires a very targeted and yet broad literature review to ensure the reader understands the challenges facing open university leaders. The following literature review will cover an overview of strategic reset followed by selected research in leadership, affordances of open universities, the broader global landscape and concluding with a discussion of challenges facing open universities identified by leaders in the field. This section will conclude with hypotheses to the stated research questions.

Strategic Reset

Strategic reset is not a new term although its reference has typically been related to the business world and not modern open and dual mode universities. McGreal & Olcott (2021) introduced the concept of strategic reset for universities in a research project on micro-credentials for Athabasca University (AU) in 2021. Strategic reset was presented as a conceptual framework and synergy to consolidate digitally linked functions of the institution to be more effective (micro-credentials, online teaching and learning & open content (Olcott, 2024b). Again, the focus was on senior leadership in universities applying strategic reset of institutional priorities.

Although the concept was briefly discussed in the AU report and later (McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Olcott, 2021)), the concept was not formally published until recently. Olcott (2024a) provided a conceptual framework for strategic reset describing the key variables whereby strategic reset could potentially could position open universities in a stronger position in a competitive landscape.

Leadership

Strategic reset and digital transformation are as much about leadership as technology (Olcott, 2025). More specifically, digital transformation is about refining business models (Tabrizi, Liam, Girard & Irvin (2019) and this very challenge has been accentuated for open universities. Government funding cuts, introduction of fees, and increased competition all lead back to the need for new sustainable funding models for most tertiary institutions.

Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership as moral leadership meaning it must serve the majority of the people in positive ways. Strategic reset and the leadership of open universities can call upon the leadership literature from several vantage points. Mintzberg (1975) was the precursor to Burns seminal 1997 book *Leadership* except Mintzberg focused primarily on management – not leadership. They are not synonymous although there are certainly overlaps amongst leadership and management roles.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) formulated their theory of situational leadership which many ODL practitioners like to ascribe to by thinking there is a precise leadership style for every situation. The theory focuses on the situation and the role of people versus task and the maturity level of the followers or team. This is very popular leadership theory yet organizational members need leaders they understand and who they can follow when critical decisions are on the line (Olcott, 2024b).

At the same time, followers may be reluctant to support leaders who change strategy and leadership approaches often. Followers want a human being running their organization (Olcott 2023; 2024b). Rogers (2003) diffusion of innovation theory is also valuable for exploring the alignment of institutional digital functions in strategic reset synergies and isolating various affordance and barriers to adoption.

Kotter's (2012) eight step (8) change theory is one of the most applied theories and has been employed across all types of organizations. Conceptually, it is easy but in practice it is a different story. It starts by establishing an urgency (not panic) for change. The leader brings together a leadership team to share and build a viable vision for the organization. The team then communicates and reinforces the vision to the organizational members and all stakeholders by identifying short-term wins towards progress. It is a

continuous process with constant refinement, shifts in focus, dispensing with some ideas and bringing in new ones to solidify the change process and meet short-term goals.

The change process must exist within what Schein (1985) has labeled as organizational culture. This is the shared values of an organization that drives behaviors and also includes the informal organization – how things are really done in this place aside from written procedures and policies. This informal culture is seldom covered in written procedures and one only learns these by immersion in the culture and by experience.

Indeed, this is the organizational reality that strategic reset must function. It is a complex web of leadership, change, culture, digital tools, and informal rules that define an organization. There is no ten step process for all leaders to implement precision and error-free digital transformational and visionary leadership.

Lamond (2004) reminds us the difference between preferred leadership style and enacted leadership style. What does this mean? It means most of us have a preferred set of attributes and affordances we like to infuse into our leadership style. The problem is that a complex world requires leaders to adapt, be agile, change directions, and make compromised decisions. What emerges is an enacted style of leadership that has overtaken one's preferred style. This is the real world and again accentuates that strategic reset is about leadership. This article explores whether strategic reset provides a sound approach for open university leadership to reframe institutional priorities and adopt innovative strategies to meet those priorities. And, at the heart of navigating strategic reset or a 360 restructuring is empowering and courageous leadership (Olcott, 2024d; Paul, 2024).

Open Universities at a Glance: Leadership, Legacy and Affordances

Indeed, when one thinks about the legacy of open universities from 1970 to the 2024, the most indelible contribution centres around access, particularly access to university education for underserved and/or marginalized groups that historically faced immense social and financial barriers to entry (Daniel, 1996, 2023; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Kanwar & Mishra, 2023; Paul & Tait, 2019). Open universities are not exclusively located in developed countries and their legacy has been generally more aligned with expanding higher education access in the developing world.

Indeed, across the globe in developing and developed countries, access has been the core philosophical base of open universities. Moreover, the context, culture and specific aspects of social, ethnic and financial barriers and higher education systems in open university countries were unique and different for each. The story has continued almost from a place of folklore emanating from the original words of the Open University UK (2024) describing its mission and in many ways reflects the spirit of open universities globally:

> The Open University's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. We promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership we seek to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open learning.

During the past five decades, the affordances emerging through this openness to people, places, methods and ideas has produced remarkable affordances for higher education. Although beyond the scope of this paper to delve in to the history and details of each, the following highlights some of the key contributions from open universities (Olcott, 2024a; 2024b).

- Mass access to higher education
- Open access and flexible options for student entry in programmes, particularly part-time adult learners who are employed and have families.
- Breaking down traditional elitist social, cultural, racial and economic barriers for marginalised groups and underserved populations.
- Scaling strategy to serve large populations of students which in turn allows economic efficiencies for operational costs and lower cost per student.
- Team approach to learning design and materials production where lead faculty, learning designers, student service specialists, advisors, and assessment specialists work together. This OUUK innovation has been adapted and used by universities across the globe – open universities, dual-mode, mega-universities and variations on all of these using digital technologies for distance teaching and learning.
- Open content –open educational resources (OERs); open educational practices (OEPs) and massive open online courses (MOOCs)as well and innovative partnerships for making content more accessible and nominally free. FutureLearn, its predecessor OpenLearn and the European MOOC Consortium (EMC) are prime examples.

Finally, one of the most invaluable contributions by open universities has been serving as a catalyst for dual mode online institutions to expand access visa via online delivery. Ironically, most open universities lagged behind in online upgrades and relied on traditional correspondence study. This was, however, an example where massification whilst effective using print was out of step with the mainstream higher education technology trends of the early 21st century. Online was faster, cheaper, more flexible, and more dynamic for learning design, assessment, and online support (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Olcott, 2024b).

Today, most dual mode universities have specialised units for learning design and content production and have subsequently revamped their organizational structures to ensure closer collaboration and working relationships between experts in the key areas. Open university innovations have transversed global higher education and provided new vantage points and models for all institutions to consider. These include lead faculty, content specialists, assessment specialists, student service advisors, and production staff. Despite dual mode institutions adopting many ideas and flexible approaches from open universities, the intent never was and is not to serve masses of students or to become open universities. Dual mode institutions are, and will continue to, use digital innovations in innovative and effective ways. This does not, however, mean they are planning to become open or mega-universities.

The Shifting Global Landscape for Open Universities

The global Covid-19 pandemic was significantly challenging open universities; however, many other global trends and shifts were already occurring prior to the pandemic (see Table 1 below) whilst positive glimpses were emerging around the 4th Industrial Revolution (IR) (Brown, 2023; Daniel, 2023; Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023); Schäfer, 2018).

The initial revelation from Table 1 is that business as usual and/or returning to pre-pandemic norms was unlikely. New institutional architectures were likely needed to navigate this complex web of trends, change, and innovation. Although a detailed discussion of each of these three broad areas and their characteristics is beyond this paper, the *main point* is to illustrate the challenging task that leaders confront in reframing strategic reset for their institutions.

And, whilst these moving targets will require leaders to be moving simultaneously, it is common sense that different priorities will emerge for different institutions and for different reasons and purposes. Indeed, one size does not and will not fit all. The strategic reset process of setting priorities – making choices – taking action is complex, it entails some level of risk, and in one sense we are all in unchartered waters. The complexities of this new world order suggest that access and rhetoric will not be enough for open universities.

Today, the global trends that are front and centre are the arbitrary disruption of the U.S. Trump administration's rapidly shifting policy and alliances across the globe. These developments have further exacerbated the Israeli-Palestinian Gaza conflict, the Ukrainian-Russia War, geo-political shifts towards right-wing populist governments defined by a new nationalism, militarism, and conservative government oversight; economic downturns due to the pandemic, climate change, south to north migration for employment due to climate change; a growing disparity between the have and have nots, an expanding rather than contracting digital divide particularly between the developed and developing worlds, energy and food shortages, and global realignment of political/military blocks – NATO, China-India-Russia-North Korea, and regional alliances (Menon & Castrillon, 2019; Penprase, 2018; Lindsey, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Table 1

Global Mega-Trends/HE-Covid-19/Online Education/4th IR (Revolution

Global Mega-Trends	HE / Covid-19 / Online Education	4IR (Revolution)
• Ukrainian War • Recession • Energy crisis • Nationalism • Digital divide • Economic recession • Decreased public funding • Competition • New global regionalism • Shifts in global economic powers • Climate change • Migration from Global South to Global North	• Online growth • Lack of preparedness • Lack of support services • Mission ambiguity • Leadership development • New pedagogical models • Micro-credentials • Need for faculty training • Contingency planning • Inequitable access to technology • New stakeholder relationships • Data ethics • Digital equity and inclusion	• Advanced digitalisation and automation • Job creation – job loss • Employee mobility • Integration and horizontal seamless business models • Constant skill upgrading • Continual diversification • Differentiation • Artificial intelligence

Note. © Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023, p. 76

Where do all these shifts and dramatic changes leave open universities? We already noted earlier that open universities were cautious to migrate to online delivery systems and many have continued to rely on mixtures of print with other low-end technologies such as video-tapes, audio-tapes, etc. (Bates, 2018; Olcott, 2024a). Print-based models have sustained themselves because it takes time for online providers to gear up. Dual mode institutions (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia, etc.) have no interest in mass scaling and hence their growth in the market is subtle but steady.

A second shift is that students and faculty are becoming acclimated towards online teaching and learning and although slow and difficult to perceive, the collective immersion of the online market providers of dual mode institutions chip away at enrolments, market position, and reputation of open universities.

A final note on global shifts. Under Trump as of March 2025, the U.S. has withdrawn its support of NATO, engaged in peace talks with Vladimir Putin without involving Ukraine and President Zelenskyy. It is worth remembering Russia attacked Ukraine. The U.S. has been complicit in allowing Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu to commit genocide in Gaza. The U.S. had the power to stop this unprecedented tragedy and did nothing. Higher education is also facing massive cuts in the U.S., UK, Australia and many other nations. In sum, in a short time since starting this article the world has become even more fragile than anyone imagined.

The Winds of Change: Challenges on the Horizon for Open Universities

The challenges facing open universities, and universities in general have become more accentuated in recent years. Olcott (2024b) provided a through and insightful synthesis of some of these challenges cited by global leaders and practitioners from open universities. A brief summary of these included 1) building upon their massification and democratization legacies (Kanwar & Mishra, 2023); 2) stronger partnerships

with the private sector (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; Kanwar & Mishra, 2023; 3) a renewal to innovation, quality and retention (Paul & Tait, 2019; Guri-Rosenblit, 2019; 4) greater openness and more access (Nichols, 2024); and 5) formulating alternative funding models and showcasing the diversity of open universities (Daniel, 2019). Underlying all of these is that leadership will become even more critical to positioning open universities in the future (Olcott, 2024a; 2024b).

Olcott (2024a; 2024b) argued that the market had changed and the new reality was online was the new norm over print. The core value of more access was facing mixed reactions by the new competitive landscape as students questioned the costs of university study, the futility of long-term debt and who demanded jobs to go along with their credentials (McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Olcott, 2021). Micro-credentials or Alternative Digital Credentials (ADCs) are emerging globally and gathering momentum amongst employers, students, university online units and senior leaders (Brown et al., 2023; McGreal & Olcott, 2022; Olcott, 2024a).

COL (2023) reported that since 2017 the open universities in both studies had lost nearly 1 million students and more perplexing was the institutions had hired more administrators and support staff for less students. This would not be the first time that universities, including open universities, were criticized for administrative bloat.

Progress towards gender equity and equality had made little progress. The pandemic resulted in international students staying home in their respective countries-regions which created massive financial crises for many countries dependent upon large numbers of international students. This included Australia, the UK, the U.S., France, and Germany as well as other European and Asian countries.

Hypotheses

R1 Does strategic reset provide open university leaders a conceptual framework from which to reframe key institutional strategic priorities?

H1 Strategic reset provides open university leaders an initial leadership framework from which to re-assess and prioritize strategic priorities for the institution.

R2 Does the tri-dimensional (3 pillars) synergy of digitalization, identification of new strategic priorities by the leadership team, and a national geographic footprint aligned with the nation's current Zeitgeist and provide tactical competitive advantages for open university competitive positioning?

H2 The tri-dimensional synergy of digital capacity, prioritizing new strategic foci through strategic reset, and building a national footprint aligned with national priorities will be essential for positioning open universities in the rapidly competitive HE landscape.

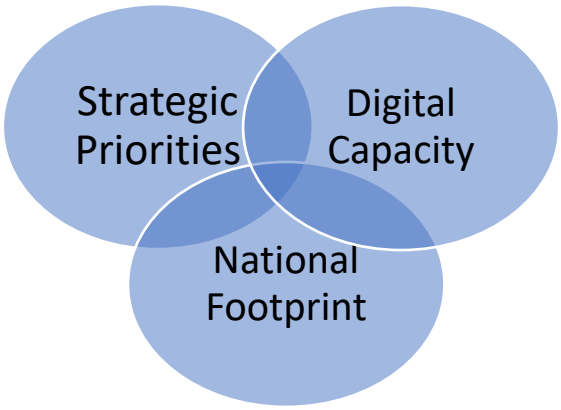
Leading Strategic Reset: Three Foundational Pillars

Leading strategic reset is based on three pillars as presented in Figure 1. Firstly, modern open universities need comprehensive digital capacity – it is the norm for the 21st century. Secondly, an institution's leadership team must be astute in inventorying key potential priorities for strategic reset and the necessary

changes to operationally address these key priorities. Thirdly, despite the global capacity of digital online an open university's primary footprint is national and must be aligned and agile enough to adapt to the normative Zeitgeist that defines this national footprint for doing business. This is also normative in 2025 and few open universities have online enrolments outside the country numbering in the tens of thousands. Open universities must meet the expectations of stakeholders at home.

Figure 1

Strategic Reset Pillars



Note. © D. Olcott Jr.

Figure 1 essentially posits that the core institutional leadership strategy for open universities must build these three pillars into a synergy for competitive advantage. Institutional presidents or vice chancellors in concert with their leadership team members must build their core market strategy around these three pillars. Why? First, without broad digital capacity the institution simply will not be able to compete. Moreover, this is a normative pillar – it's not optional and all competitors will have this capacity. Secondly, universities have historically tried to be all things to all people which means sometimes which inevitably leads to mediocrity rather than high quality focused strategic priorities.

The third pillar is aligning institutional affordances and capacity with the national needs of the nation. This means closer working relationships with government agencies, employers, workforce councils, sister institutions, and the private sector. Open universities often like to market themselves as global entities when in fact nearly all the major open institutions have markets that are primarily national. Going global is no small endeavor and is discussed in more detail later in this paper. The lesson here is if you cannot meet the stakeholder needs at your institution and within your national footprint, how successful will open university leaders be in justifying why they should be playing in global sandboxes when they cannot meet critical needs at home?

A Blueprint for Leading Open Universities: An Action Agenda

The focus of this article presented strategic reset as a conceptual process from which open university leaders can revise their future directions, vision, and mission. Figure 1 provided a synthesis of the three (3) essential pillars (strategic priorities, digital capacity, national footprint) for strategic reset. Indeed, leaders must first formulate their vision of the open university model 2.0. If it is the same as the past five decades, then leaders will go through a typical strategic planning process and yes – business as usual. Conversely, if the model is out of alignment with the needs of society, students, faculty, employers, funders, accrediting agencies, and governments, then strategic reset must consider key synergies from the new model. The central theme of this article has never wavered – open universities must engage in strategic reset and reinvent themselves to thrive in the future. This is imperative and not optional.

Leadership

Leadership is arduous, it's is stifling, and it is an interconnected web of theory, practice, concepts, and innovations that the leader must navigate and manage all at the same time (Olcott, 2023, 2024d; Paul, 2024; Tait, 2018). The complex and diverse vantage points covered in this paper bring an almost palpable fragmentation to this concept we call leadership. This is exactly why visionary and agile leadership is so difficult to manifest in complex organizations. The problem, as we illustrated earlier with Lamond's discussion of preferred versus enacted leadership style, is the world is gray and the leader must navigate all of these shifting and uncertain trends and imperatives.

Olcott (2024a) identified a number of general strategic visioning considerations for preparing for strategic reset by open university leaders. The following are initial steps in preparing for strategic reset.

1. Engage your leadership team in a strategic thinking process that analyses the available continuum of potential strategic priorities.

2. Ensure maximum and flexible online delivery capacity is normative with commensurate support services, digital technology infrastructure, and faculty/staff training.

3. Identify Preliminary Strategic Priority Synergies (SPSs). For example,

4. Inventory your institutional resources – fiscal, human, programmes, infrastructure.

5. Reflect on your geographical mission and national service footprint. Do not sstart with global ventures or (ad) ventures. Your regional and national footprint is essential for meeting national needs and the expectations of all your stakeholders.

6. Develop a preliminary plan and outline for change (Kotter, 2012).

Olcott (2024b) also examined strategic reset for open universities and introduced additional strategies not included at the end of this paper. These included the potential of combining mega-universities in to global consortia, monitoring A.I. and digital technology innovations (Olcott, 2024c).

An Innovative Implementation Agenda

Indeed, the challenging part of this article is taking all the landscape, trends, challenges, and potential opportunities and translating these into to practical action steps that open university leaders and their leadership teams can consider. There are no definitive solutions but the overwhelming evidence and trends suggest business as usual for open universities is not a sound option for sustainable and thriving futures.

The innovations that follow are not a panacea for open universities. They are framed within the context of the complex web of shifts, trends, challenges, and players covered earlier in the paper. Most importantly, at the very least they may provide an initial catalyst to begin exploring a future once again defined by innovation as the core value of open universities.

1. **Streamlined Open University Model:** Fewer programmes, less students and greater emphasis on quality and service (Olcott, 2024b). Build upon traditional flexibility for open access and enrolment to align high demand credentials with national workforce and economic development needs. *Implications for Practice:* Maintain high demand programmes and ensure quality in these programmes. Align credential continuum with national qualifications frameworks and industry/employer needs.

2. **Precision Focused Access:** Mass scalable degree access should be replaced by targeted degrees and skill-based micro-credentials. 175, 000 students = 50% degree and certificates; 50% in skill-based micro-credentials (Olcott 2024a; 2024b) *Implications for Practice*: Mass access has been a valued-added attribute of open universities but degrees without employment and career opportunities are contrary to serving student and employer needs. Particularly in developing countries, more micro-credentials or similar type school to work credentials are critical to open doors of equality and equity for all students.

3. **National Online Teaching Footprint (**Olcott, 2024b). This is the historical footprint of all open universities. International focus only for research partnerships and open content sharing. *Implications for Practice:* Open university enrolments despite rather creative marketing serve primarily students in their own country. It is a fallacy to think that online capacity automatically means going global for more students. Open universities must focus on their national footprint first. Going global via online is complex with numerous barriers which demand that leaders can demonstrate actual benefits for the institution and to all key stakeholders at home.

4. **Strengthen Partnership Bases for National Priorities:** Foster new and innovative partnerships with employers, sister universities, government agencies, and public schools. Open universities should be a national asset and viewed as such by all key stakeholders in the educational ecosystem. Doing the right things will strengthen open universities – not doing the most things! *Implications for Practice*: Open universities must renew their partnerships and models with the private sector first and foremost. Employers must not simply be consulted they must be fully engaged and invited to be equal partners working to identify key degree/skill areas that align with the needs of business and the nation.

5. **Alternative Funding Schemes:** Open universities are uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in discussions with funding agencies, government agencies, students, employers, and other stakeholders to explore alternative funding models for the future. The primary goal should be to

keep costs as low as possible for students and the quality of academic programmes as high as possible. *Implications for Practice:* Open university scalability and the mantra that more students' equal lower costs works effectively if there is unlimited funding provided for all students. This is less likely today due to government cuts, greater competition in pricing, and maintaining low fees structures for students particularly in developing countries. The first alternative funding scheme should examine a new mix of degrees and skill-based credentials from a financial framework. Eliminate degrees that are expensive to maintain and do not provide ample employment opportunities for graduates in the workforce.

The above innovations are intended to provide senior open university leaders with an expansive range of potential choices for setting strategic priorities and adopting agile and flexible operational practices. Moreover, some open universities may adopt more streamlined and downsized versions whilst the importance of *traditional mega-universities* may expand particularly for serving students in developing world contexts visa via mega-consortia.

Future Research

Future areas of research may include:

1. The role of A.I. in leadership and strategic reset decision making (Olcott, 2024c).

2. Longitudinal studies of open universities to monitor major strategic shifts, identification of strategic priorities, and metrics of success in the HE market.

3. The development of a formal strategic reset change model that build upon the theoretical and practical foundations of Kotter (2012); Burns (1978).

4. Are global consortia of mega-universities a viable 'power in numbers' approach to providing mass access to saturated HE systems in the developing world? Can collaboration and competition exist on the same level to create these models for enhancing access to higher education?

Summary

The unique and indelible history of open universities has produced a profound legacy of action, innovation, access, flexibility, and openness. Today's higher education ecosystem is diverse, competitive, and seeking new strategies to align with the needs of society, industry, government, students and faculty. Universities simply cannot be all things to all people. Focus and streamlining must become more than just rhetoric and open universities can employ these values to retain their role as a national asset in reducing barriers to access and contributing to national economic and workforce needs.

Strategic reset provides a valuable visioning process for senior leaders to rethink the future of their open universities and to operationalize the pillars of digitalization, strategic priorities, and building a focused national footprint. Indeed, each institution will have unique characteristics and there will be significant pressures for open universities to look the same, offer the same programmes, and engage in business as

usual. Access, scale and openness are important and yet may not be sufficient to sustain open universities in the complex and ever-changing higher education ecosystem post 2030.

Open Universities can reinvent themselves to thrive in the future rather than just survive. Many open universities may need to be smaller, precision-focused, streamlined, embrace a national mission whilst learning from global innovations; play a leadership role in exploring alternative funding schemes and offer a mix of traditional credentials (degrees and certificates) in concert with micro-credentials and other alternative credentials needed by employers and students in the lifelong learning process. Conversely, mega-universities still have a viable access mission particularly in the developing world. These large institutions may become even more valuable than in the past. In the final analysis, strategic reset will take visionary, innovative and courageous leadership. The best is yet to come for open universities 2.0+.

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Résumé / Resumen / Resumo

Universités ouvertes 2.0 : leadership, refonte stratégique et agenda national

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'appuie sur la recherche empirique, la théorie du leadership, la pratique des universités ouvertes et l'évolution des tendances mondiales pour fournir aux dirigeants des universités ouvertes un cadre de refonte stratégique. La refonte stratégique consiste à redéfinir les priorités des établissements – en effectuant des choix de leadership – et à prendre des mesures pour renforcer l'avantage concurrentiel, la qualité et les services pour l'avenir. Les piliers fondamentaux de la refonte stratégique s'articulent autour de : 1) la numérisation, et plus particulièrement les capacités en ligne; 2) la définition de nouvelles priorités stratégiques; et 3) l'établissement d'une empreinte nationale alignée sur les besoins nationaux essentiels en matière d'emploi et de développement de la main-d'œuvre. Un thème secondaire transparaît dans cet article : la nécessité pour les universités ouvertes de revitaliser leur engagement en faveur de l'innovation. L'article conclut en proposant quelques actions tactiques que les dirigeants des universités ouvertes peuvent envisager pour encadrer leur refonte stratégique et définir de nouvelles priorités pour l'avenir. Parmi celles-ci : 1) des modèles d'universités ouvertes rationalisés; 2) un accès précis; 3) la création d'une empreinte nationale de services; 4) le renouvellement des partenariats essentiels; et 5) l'exploration de modèles de financement alternatifs.

Mots-clés : universités ouvertes, priorités stratégiques, numérisation, leadership, réinitialisation stratégique

Universidades abiertas 2.0: Liderazgo, Reinicio Estratégico y la Agenda Nacional

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo fue basarse en la investigación empírica, la teoría del liderazgo, la práctica universitaria abierta y las tendencias globales cambiantes para brindar a los líderes de universidades abiertas un marco para el reajuste estratégico. El reajuste estratégico consiste en redefinir las prioridades de las instituciones (tomando decisiones de liderazgo) y tomando medidas para construir ventaja competitiva, calidad y servicio para el futuro. Los pilares fundamentales del reajuste estratégico se centran en 1) la digitalización, específicamente la capacidad en línea; 2) el establecimiento de nuevas prioridades estratégicas; y 3) el establecimiento de una presencia nacional que se alinee con las necesidades nacionales críticas de empleo y desarrollo de la fuerza laboral. Un tema secundario que se entrelaza a lo largo de este artículo es la necesidad de que las universidades abiertas revitalicen su compromiso con la innovación. El artículo concluye ofreciendo algunas acciones tácticas que los líderes de universidades abiertas pueden considerar para enmarcar el reajuste estratégico y establecer nuevas prioridades para el futuro. Estas incluyen: 1) modelos de universidad abierta optimizados; 2) acceso preciso; 3) desarrollo de una presencia nacional de servicios; 4) renovación de alianzas críticas; y 5) exploración de modelos alternativos de financiación.

Palabras clave: universidades abiertas, prioridades estratégicas, digitalización, liderazgo, reajuste estratégico

Universidades abertas 2.0: lideranca redefinicao estrategica e a agenda nacional

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo foi desenvolver investigação empírica, teoria da liderança, práticas de universidades abertas e tendências globais em mudança para fornecer aos líderes de universidades abertas uma estrutura para a redefinição estratégica. A redefinição estratégica é redefinir as prioridades das instituições – fazer escolhas de liderança – e tomar medidas para construir vantagem competitiva, qualidade e serviço para o futuro. Os pilares fundamentais da redefinição estratégica estão centrados na 1) digitalização – especificamente a capacidade online; 2) definir novas prioridades estratégicas e 3) estabelecer uma presença nacional alinhada com as necessidades críticas de emprego e desenvolvimento da força de trabalho nacional. Um tema secundário que perpassa este artigo é a necessidade de as universidades abertas revitalizarem o seu compromisso com a inovação. O artigo conclui oferecendo algumas ações táticas que os líderes das universidades abertas podem considerar para elaborar uma redefinição estratégica e definir novas prioridades para o futuro. Isto inclui: 1) modelos simplificados de universidades abertas; 2) acesso de precisão; 3) construir uma pegada de serviço nacional; 4) renovação de parcerias críticas; e 5) explorar modelos alternativos de financiamento.

Palavras-chave: universidades abertas, prioridades estratégicas, digitalização, liderança, redefinição estratégica