



**Response to the
Bradley Review of Higher Education
Discussion Paper**

July 2008

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***“Online study makes it possible for me. I could never get to a campus.”
Anna***

Executive summary

The Open Universities Australia (OUA) response to the Bradley Review of Higher Education outlines key ideas on how online and distance higher education can be used more effectively to provide greater access by students to a renewed system of Australian higher education.

OUA supports the Review's definition of higher education as an accurate reflection of the current Australian system.

However, OUA contends that the current system is not adequately equipped to cater for a range of new and complex challenges facing higher education.

Challenges such as:

- using the inherent capacity of the digital revolution to enhance the quality of and access to higher education
- the need to achieve, and the impact of, greater social inclusion in higher education
- the need to develop partnerships that will facilitate the further growth of the sector both domestically and internationally

OUA presents these issues in its capacity as a significant provider of online education and in having extensive experience in managing a broad range of adult students via its strong network of education partnerships.

Company Profile

Open Universities Australia is owned by the following universities:



With these partners - and eight additional educational institutions:

- Adelaide Institute of TAFE
- Australian Catholic University
- Charles Darwin University
- La Trobe University
- Learning Network Queensland
- Murdoch University
- Swan Institute of TAFE
- University of Adelaide

OUA offers over 750 units and 60 qualifications from 100 subject areas, most of which are online and at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

OUA removes the barriers of time, distance, location and educational experience, providing a way for self-motivated people to obtain a university education without leaving their job or needing to organise child care.

OUA offers the flexibility of a four study period or three session academic year. Students are able to opt in or out of any study period, choosing the period, their subjects and their study load.

In essence, OUA provides students with a convenient way to access higher education.

For more information about OUA visit www.open.edu.au

"Still being able to work, while I study, means life is more comfortable." Lorraine



An online higher education transformation

OUA provides a strong example of how online education can give students access to university education well-supported by necessary and valuable online support resources (see below for examples).

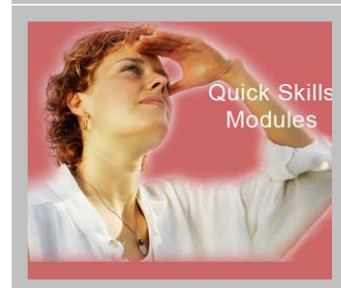
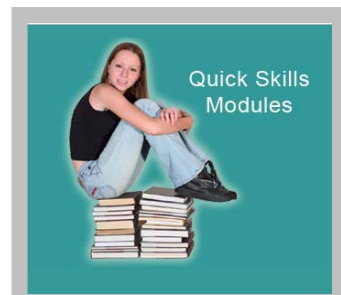
However, as much as the rollout of a national broadband network will provide the infrastructure for interactive online higher education, challenges remain as to how both academics and institutions in higher education can systematically identify, develop and provide state-of-the-art online learning experiences for students.

As noted in the Review's discussion paper, there are increasingly high student expectations for the latest materials online, yet there is a limited understanding of the cost and effort required to design and renew materials.

OUA would be interested in contributing to research and work in developing greater understanding of how funding and resourcing could be developed to cater for the new needs created by students in the new learning landscape.

These materials are examples of online materials and programs that OUA has developed with its academic partners to support students in their return to study:

- **Quick Skills Modules**
Five practical and short (each 2 hour) modules that to help students prepare for study by taking them through a set of activities.
- **Study Skills Units**
Undergraduate units that explore what it is like to study online at a tertiary level.
- **Smarthinking.com**
An online tutor service that helps students prepare essays, writing and develop other skills.
- **Macquarie Gateway to Academic Literacy**
Resources developed by Macquarie, but used by OUA students to familiarise themselves with the expectations of academic writing.
- **Online Student Centred Discussion**
A technique used to train tutors on how to engage students in online programs.



Social inclusion in higher education

Since 1993, OUA has helped more than 110,000 people work toward their educational goals. Many students have completed degrees they would previously have dismissed as unobtainable due to their age, location, work and family commitments or their previously unsuccessful attempts at education.

Removing these barriers, providing students with greater levels of convenience and responding to market demand – has, in conjunction with the popular uptake of internet technology, resulted in OUA enrolments growing by 169% in the last three years (Table 1).

In 2007 for the first time, with 25,046 students, OUA provided access to the largest online and distance cohort of students in the Australian higher education sector.

Table 1. Enrolment growth 2005 - 2007

Enrolments	2005	2006	2007	% change 2004 – 07
Undergraduate	37108	47672	62076	259%
Vocational	447	284	528	118%
Transitional	1474	1486	1818	123%
Postgraduate	631	1312	2877	455%
Total	39660	50991	67299	169%

This growth has not only increased the number of adults accessing higher education, but it has helped to identify ways in which traditional forms of higher education do not cater for adult, incarcerated, disability or low socioeconomic status students.

Today, a typical adult student prefers to study when and where it suits them – which usually does not mean on campus. The OUA model enables them to remain at work, stay at home with children, run a business, buy a house or travel – at the same time they upgrade their career prospects, extend their knowledge or develop their personal skills.

Overwhelmingly, OUA's students are young, with 80% aged between 20-39 years (See Table 2). They are people building careers or starting families, as well as turning to education to create a better future. Their mindset is very much one of consumer in that they expect similar levels of convenience from higher education, as in other transactions they make in their lives.

Table 2. OUA undergraduate enrolments by age group 2007

Age Group	2007	% of students
< 15	50	.8%
15-19	3318	4.8%
20-24	17886	28%
25-29	15247	24%
30-34	10081	17%
35-39	6415	11%
40-44	4020	6%
45-49	2469	4.2%
50-54	1358	2%
55-59	725	1.4%
60+	507	.8%
Total	62076	100%

Partnerships in higher education

Opportunities through partnerships

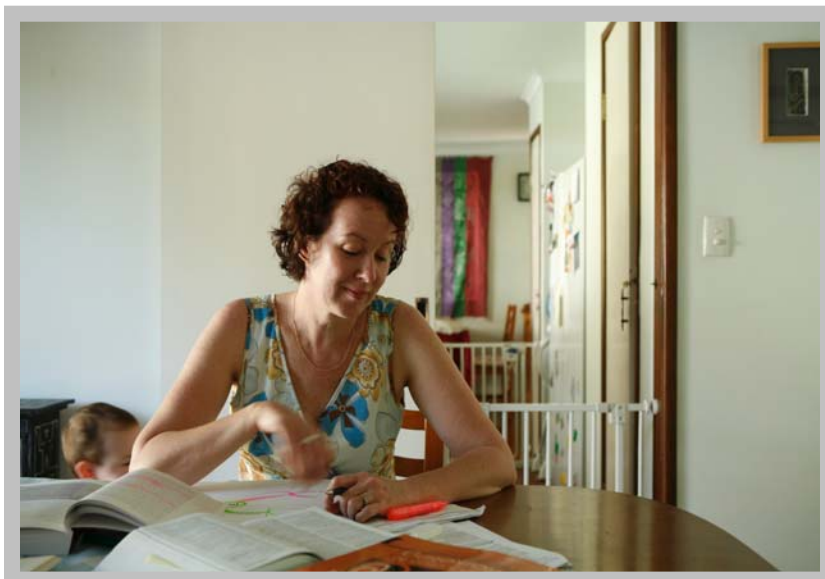
In essence, one of OUA's great strengths is that it is a strong aggregator of partners. Through partnerships with a range of universities, OUA has successfully sourced and delivered academic programs in response to shifts in market demand. While through partnerships with corporate organisations, OUA has managed to tap into streams of new students and create opportunities for more people to access higher education.

Since its inception fifteen years ago, OUA has brought together universities, business and government organisations to inform, develop and deliver quality, flexible courseware. Yet, it is the depth of OUA's relationships with the university partners in particular that see it transcend other types of university alliances and deliver tangible and enduring results. These partnerships work at each level from the strategic to the operational, providing insight and understanding that enables OUA to move deftly in support new initiatives and environmental changes.

OUA believes its success will rely on strengthening new and existing partnerships, aggregating key institutions and organisations that will innovate and lead online higher education.

International partnerships

In May this year OUA formed a joint venture partnership in China. The partner, a major agent for Australian universities, assesses students in-country. Eligible students are granted a place in an Australian institution. However if a student is not able or does not want to come to Australia just yet or is considered to need more preparation they are encouraged to study through OUA. Once a student has completed 2-4 units through OUA, they may then remain with OUA or apply for a direct entry place with an Australian partner institution. This model is low-risk, in that the start-up costs are shared equally between the partners. It is also designed to work in collaboration with the activities of our university partners and the in-country partner.



“I plan to finish my degree by the time my toddler goes to school”.
Shana

Partnerships in higher education

Domestic partnerships

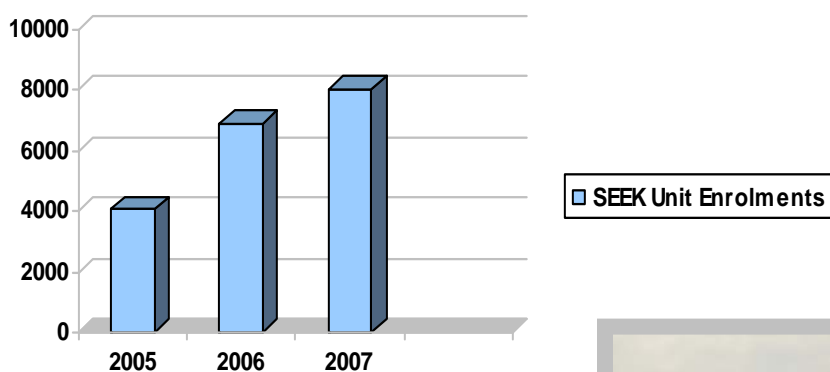
Another example of OUA using partnerships to generate new initiatives and business, is its relationship with SEEK. The SEEK relationship places OUA strategically in the related space of career development and has successfully generated a strong additional channel of students for OUA.

The relationship is moving into its fourth year and the collaboration has delivered education to a market of individuals that might not otherwise have had access to university education by making it affordable, accessible and relevant to their work lives.

To provide additional support in the career development of our students, OUA has established a partnership with EPR Career Counselling Services. This relationship ensures that students maximise their career options as a result of their studies.

Beyond these partnerships, OUA continues to develop a range of other corporate relationships that will result in different channels to different markets.

Table 3. SEEK enrolments 2005 - 2007



"I have the freedom to study at times and places which suit me, and I'd happily choose the beach over a lecture hall." Angelina



Meeting labour market and industry needs

OUA is particularly well placed to identify demand areas, source and develop relevant courseware with its university partners and deliver to market quickly. This is due to its close and strong connection with university partners and providers, connection to industry and its dynamic size.

A recent example of OUA capacity in this area was the identification, sourcing and delivering to market of an MBA and a Juris Doctor both within 12 months. Even more gratifying, after three semesters of delivery, the MBA produced its first graduate in July this year.

This agility and access to a vast array of courseware, sees OUA well-placed to deliver training nationally, to working people who cannot attend campus. Through its network of universities it can source courseware that meets industry need and deliver it conveniently, to meet the needs of students.

Downturns and University Advantage

While it is clear that OUA can respond quickly to areas of demand, it can also support areas suffering temporary downturns. In recent years, temporary downturns in information technology and languages resulted in funding cuts and the loss of both programs and staff. Yet, fluctuations such as these are often known to be short-lived and require funding and strategy that caters for these occurrences.

By providing courses through OUA, universities can access a current of interest they would not normally have access to. Whether an area is in decline or destined always to be niche, OUA can extend reach and provide access to a national market that may work, collaboratively and in parallel, to sustain low numbers on-campus.

Not only could OUA support low volume study areas, but also marginal programs and even boost current university offerings. For example, for regional universities wanting to offer a broader range of courses, OUA could fill the gaps.

For the last eight years OUA has successfully enrolled between 80-120 students each study period from Charles Darwin University. These students are award-enrolled at CDU, with OUA units used to bolster their range of selection.

This program, called University Advantage, allow any higher education provider to purchase units from OUA to fill gaps in their programs, or provide students with greater choice, particularly in advanced years of study.

“OUA gives me the flexibility to combine a busy working, social and family life”.

Mark



Meeting labour market & industry needs

Downturns and University Advantage

University Advantage operates under the following guidelines:

- Each unit of study is counted as 'load' at the university
- Each student has normal HECS options
- The unit 'load', HECS liabilities, and any HECS debts is reported through the university collection returns as normal load/liability/debt
- The unit is not reported to DEEWR in OUA's collection.

The scheme could be broadened to address other areas of national need or national interest by consolidating demand across the sector into a viable student cohort.

Meeting the challenge of the adult need for upgrading skills and retraining

Higher education providers are increasingly recognising that OUA can provide a very productive way of responding to demographic change and lifelong learning to meet the challenge of the ageing population and the need for upgrading of skills and re-training. This is reflected in the growing number of programs offered through OUA.

In 2008 OUA offers 750 units, 25 postgraduate programs and 20 undergraduate programs from over 100 subject areas. The breadth of OUA's academic program reflects the variety of students served by OUA.

In 2007 the ABS reported that 5.3 million Australians aged 25-64 years that held Year 12 as their highest academic qualification. Over their working lives, it can be expected that many of these adults will seek higher education to build knowledge and skills necessary to build success.

With continual governmental focus on improving productivity and the educational standards of the nation, it can be expected that working adults will increasingly turn to higher education throughout their professional lives. Whether for a first degree, or to develop their career through subsequent study, their needs are increasingly unserved by traditional methods.

OUA recognises the needs of these students and has a strong commitment to improve the convenience of study, while providing programs that help students achieve their goals.

*"I used OUA because I didn't want to interrupt my career. I actually got promoted while I was studying."
Gerard*



Participation in higher education

OUA remains a strong supporter of broad social inclusion in Australian higher education. OUA is committed to ensuring higher education addresses adult students, which also include incarcerated, disability and low socioeconomic status students.

Students with Disabilities

At present, when a student with special needs wants to study through OUA they face delays due to complicated structures around funds for materials conversion. Currently, a disability funding allocation is made to universities at the start of the year, based on the number of degree-enrolled, special needs students at each institution.

OUA students exist outside the current funding structure, process and allocation. When an OUA student enrolls, a university has to source funding, which takes time and effort.

If disability funding was directly available to OUA, materials and arrangements could be put in place far more quickly – enabling the student to start their studies within a reasonable timeframe.

This issue has reduced the numbers of disability students OUA has been able to serve. Removing this issue could make higher education available to many more special needs students.

In many respects OUA offers great benefits to special needs students, including:

- Opt in or out of four study periods each year
- Study one unit at a time or fast track
- No on-campus attendance
- Study at a convenient time and place
- Fit study around other commitments
- No entry requirements

www.open.edu.au
OUA's website
provides a
gateway to 750
units and 60
qualifications that
are only a mouse
click away.

Undergraduate		Postgraduate	
Study Period 1	Study Period 2	Study Period 3	Study Period 4
Close of Enrolment 15 Feb	Close of Enrolment 16 May	Close of Enrolment 15 Aug	Close of Enrolment 14 Nov

Participation in higher education

Incarcerated students

OUA is ideally suited to address the higher education needs of incarcerated students.

Yet, significant funding is required to assist course designers in creating “no technology” versions of their courses for incarcerated students who do not have access to the Internet. At present, OUA works closely with universities to provide offline versions, yet this has resulted in a restricted number of units being suitable for incarcerated students.

In 2007, OUA introduced the role of Incarcerated Student Coordinator. This support role works directly with students, their families and education officers to address special needs. In 12 months, this co-ordinator doubled the number of incarcerated students studying through OUA from 40 to 80. While the number of units they studied rose from 60 to 130. In addition, the role liaises with over 100 correctional facilities, to distribute information, support staff and develop strategies to better serve students in correctional facilities.

Connecting with other education institutions

Credit transfer

Credit transfer is still a key issue for students moving between sectors and/or institutions. The lack of clarity, uniform rules or method to achieve credit transfer often lead to confused students lost in bureaucracy.

While OUA students are able to credit any unit to any award they study within the OUA consortium, they have considerable problems when applying for credit at other universities.

The establishment of standard guidelines for credit transfer, applicable to all universities would go some way to alleviate confusion and improve this issue.

Of the 110,000 students that have studied through OUA it is estimated that over 35% have made their way on to campuses around Australia.

A clear credit transfer policy would facilitate broader participation and a less fraught process for many students.

“I’ve used units from four different universities. It is great to experience the difference, it gives you a real insight”.

Tracey



Summary

From OUA's perspective, the future challenges for higher education and online education are inextricably intertwined with rising student expectations. Through our partnerships with universities, corporate and international organisations, OUA has the ability to identify market demand trends, source the best programs and deliver interactive experiences for students through the development of new innovative partnerships and collaboration with organisations.

For higher education to be transformed by online technology, roll-out of broadband access, and funding of innovative online teaching and learning resources need to provide both academics and institutions with a systematic way to identify, develop and deliver state-of-the-art online learning experiences for students.

Beyond these technology challenges there remains core challenges for how higher education serves a variety of social groups. While it can be expected that the number of adult students seeking higher education will continue to grow, groups such as those with disabilities, the incarcerated and low SES economic groups largely remain unserved by higher education in its traditional form. For instance, OUA is ideally placed to serve disability students, yet it requires the ability to access support funding to help students more effectively and quickly.

OUA can also act as a significant provider of online education both to its own students, and to other streams of students through its University Advantage program. This program could be used to support regional and other universities maintain the breadth of their program. It could also be used to enable universities to continue to offer programs by consolidating on-campus enrolments with a stream of students through OUA.

OUA presents these issues in its capacity as a significant provider of online education and in having extensive experience in managing a broad range of adult students via its strong network of education partnerships.