

## UCU Response to Locations Analysis: The Case for Regions

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### Introduction

The Locations Analysis starts from the position that the current environment has changed considerably since the 2009 Review which had concluded that the closure of regional centres would be costly and not improve the service for students. The analysis argues that the operating model is now very different with the advent of Student Support Teams. Its starting position is that the decline of face to face tutorials, an increase in use of technology for the delivery of modules plus the reduction of the external facing role of regional offices mean that there is now much less need for a regional presence.

This paper presents an alternative position. In particular it challenges the notion that because there are SSTs, there is less need for a regional presence; indeed it argues the very opposite.

### Changing Context

The Referendum on Scottish Independence has been a game-changer and the outcome will be a move to more devolution and regionalisation in England. Interestingly, the OU observed as early as 2006 that:

An increasingly devolved and regionalised United Kingdom seems likely to require The Open University to be a local university, responding to local development policies and perhaps part of a regional consortium. Regulators will regulate for local conditions, employers will set hurdles, funders will set conditions and local targets, cultural and linguistic differences cannot be dissolved easily. All these factors argue for it to be entirely normal for a student support team to be locally based (with close links to partnerships most likely to extend its work) (Open University Student Support Review, 2006).

This indicates that it isn't **either** SSTs **or** Regions but that **both** are essential to the future development of the OU; the substantive case in 2006 hasn't changed, except that it is now stronger.

The OU needs to be in a position to take advantage of this direction of travel – having a regional face will enable it to be involved in local partnerships and consortia, and through them access HE funding streams (as is currently the case with local enterprise partnerships). If there is no regional tier of government or administration, it could be that the Universities will be expected to take on a key role in the development of local leadership regarding not only HE, but FE and even schools.

**The OU's regional structure will place it in a strong and flexible position to take advantage of opportunities in this changing environment.**

### The role of SSTs

These aim to provide support for students in a more focused, subject specific way. Staff in an SST include central academics, Staff tutors, Associate Lecturers, Learning Advisers and will in future

include tutor services. A SST should help to integrate regional staff into the academic life of the University. However, the pros and cons of SSTs have not yet been evaluated. This enormous change has followed on from the significant switch to qualification-based study and higher tuition fees to students.

**And yet the University is potentially embarking on another significant change before current changes are fully bedded in and assessed.**

### **Risk to business**

Aside from the risk to business from multiple significant changes occurring at the same time, it is important for the OU to retain capacity. Given the volume of business, it needs to be safely distributed. Regional bases provide an important contingency to the business. Too much centralisation and the loss of regional centres would be risky. And once capacity is lost, it will be very hard to get it back.

In addition, there needs to be a comparable service in England to that provided in the three other nations to retain a balance of operation. Removing regional centres in England will result in considerable imbalance.

**Both capacity and balance underpin the OU's ability to provide a high quality student experience.**

### **Keeping the OU Mission**

Social justice is at the heart of the OU mission – the many who would otherwise be excluded have been enabled to study and reach their potential. But reaching students from diverse backgrounds across the length and breadth of Britain has always been a challenge. Key to the OU's success in meeting it has been the integration of two approaches. One is the application of new information technology, first broadcasting and more recently computers and the internet. The other is a system of regional offices and staff which makes the OU present across the country in a direct and personal way.

**This has given the OU its USP and marks it out from other online distance learning providers. It is encapsulated in the notion of 'blended learning'. The importance of F2F and blended learning facilitated by regions cannot be emphasised enough. It is precisely this that gives the Open University better retention rates than other distance learning institutions which do not have this kind of pedagogy.**

### **The role of Associate Lecturers.**

Key to this is the role of Associate Lecturers (ALs) or tutors, who are vitally important in enabling students to achieve a positive experience. The ALs are often overlooked and the student experience tends to be seen in terms of high quality module material and student advisers.

The ALs are drawn from the same communities as the students. They in turn are recruited and managed by Staff Tutors and Regional Managers based in those same communities, that is, localities that have a strong regional identity. Whilst some ALs are recruited and managed nationally and purely remotely, most are not. What makes the current system work so well, and contributes regularly to high student satisfaction ratings, is the current arrangement which involves the

development of personal *relationship* underpinned by face to face contact. This is another distinctive feature of the OUs USP. The tutors are mostly recruited face to face; have face to face briefings and staff development opportunities; and have face to face tutorial visits and CDSAs. This works very well by being supported by a regional structure. Whilst in theory the OU could go down a wholesale remote and distance route, facilitated by technology, this would be a very risky route as it could undermine this important relationship. This in turn has the potential to undermine the OU's ability to deliver a high quality student experience and ultimately impact on recruitment.

**These relationships are built on the shared experience of being in a particular region, and the personal contact which this brings. In fact the 'personal touch' which marks out the OU as distinct from other distance learning institutions, depends on its decentralised and regional structure. It is the quality of these *relationships* between ALs and their managers which underpin the quality of teaching, which in turn is a key factor in the student experience.**

### **Widening participation, equality and diversity**

The OU originated with the aim of enabling a wider group of people to access Higher Education. It has been hugely successful in this respect. Current government policy on widening participation calls for local and regional partnerships. In order to build participation among excluded social groups, a recent report from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) sets out 'a clear expectation that institutions should nurture early and sustained outreach activity. This can be effectively delivered through collaborative partnerships' (p. 94). The report goes on to suggest that '[l]ong-term, sustained outreach programmes are crucial to success in widening participation. They are particularly effective when they involve HE providers, schools, colleges, employers and other partners working closely together' (p. 95).

The OU's regions are ideally placed in this respect, having precisely the local contacts and facilities to build collaboration and outreach of the kind discussed in the DBIS report. Indeed they have been making a vital contribution to the OU's work in this area over many years, impacting positively on student experience and satisfaction.

Unfortunately the OU axed the Community Partnerships Programme in the regions in 2012-13, thus reducing outreach work and the opportunities for potential students in hard to reach social groups across England. The OU decided to centralise this work to focus on creating national social networks with organisations such as the WEA, and removing the opportunity to retain and build local community partnerships. This reflects the entire nature of the debate about the role of the Regions in the OU so that it has forced a choice between national and local rather than seeing one as enhancing the role of the other. The two roles should not be mutually exclusive and there is a real opportunity for the OU to use the regions to complement and support the national work in this area that is currently being missed.

This diversity in the student population should surely be represented in the workforce too? The OU should be creating employment opportunities across the UK, including the English regions. The OU is also the only university that offers HE to offender learners. In the recent SST reorganisation this activity was retained regionally as it is necessary for OU staff to develop local relationships with prison education officers and work with offenders. Offender learners will therefore be greatly affected by the closure of regional centres.

**The Regions are at the heart of the OU's ability to widen participation, represent diversity and deliver equality.**

### **Work-based learning**

For local engagement, developing relationships with employers and other learning providers, a local presence is crucial. This requires local knowledge and local personnel to be the face of the OU, to be at the table and to be able to negotiate. Sending someone from Walton Hall with a brief does **not** work. Regional centres play a vital role in delivering work-based learning to OU students.

Faculties such as Health and Social Care (HSC) and Education and Languages (FELS) lead the way here. Critically, a regional presence is not only required for delivering courses and monitoring students who are engaged in work-based learning. It is also vital for building local professional and employer networks, in order to sustain and win new business. What counts here is face to face contact, and the building of trust between stakeholders and the OU.

One example is the Pre-Registration Nursing Programme in HSC. This involves national liaison with Health Education England, regional liaison with local education and Training Boards and local liaison with health trusts and hospitals. Regional staff, in particular Staff Tutors and Regional Managers, build and sustain these relationships. They play a key part in recruitment and support of students, tutor allocation and providing quality assurance. They are also involved in regular contract review meetings and briefings with employers and sponsors. The general point is that the regions provide a vital interface with participating employers in the regions, and ensure that quality of learning is maintained whatever the work environment. And once again, what's at stake here is personal relationships based on local presence, knowledge and expertise. These factors all contribute to student satisfaction and high retention rates over the length of programmes of study.

**At the most general level the regional centres are the public face of the OU in the regions; to a great extent the OU is known to employers, local organisations and potential students through the work of its regional centres.**

### **Regional decline: a self-fulfilling prophecy?**

The scrapping of the role of the Regional Directors (RDs) in 2011 has meant that, for the most part, regions are no longer 'outward facing'. Where senior regional staff used to be actively involved with regional businesses and training consortia, further education colleges and regional policy making more generally, today their role in these areas is greatly reduced. Some of that work is now done by the OU's Business Development Unit which operates from the Walton Hall campus, and is thus remote from most of the English regions. This perhaps explains why it relies on regional staff for much of its business information on the ground. The irony is that such feedback happens despite, not because of, the new system.

The absence of a Regional Director, involved in local and regional policy making, was a major contributory factor in the recent debacle over the East Grinstead office closure. In the Locations Analysis materials the reduced external-facing role of the Regional Centres signified by the removal of Regional Directors – a deliberate policy by the OU senior management – is then used to justify why a regional presence has declined significantly in the recent past. A self-fulfilling prophecy.

**The change which has been most visible to all OU staff – central and regional – is the abolition of the term ‘regions’. They are now ‘locations’, ‘presences’ or even ‘geographical footprints’. The regions have been cut linguistically in advance of any proposal for their physical abolition.**

There are strong arguments in favour of the OU investing in its English regions rather than reducing its local presence and cutting its capacity. Rather than dismantling the Regions, let’s re-imagine and enhance their role. For example:

- The OU has a long standing partnership with the BBC at a national level and the BBC has a regional network. There is potential for synergy between the two organisations. The BBC has a visible presence in a variety of places in any region and there may be potential for some co-locational activities. In addition there is potential for lectures, webinars, podcasts, radio programmes, by local academics (Staff Tutors, ALs) which tap into regional diversity whilst also promoting the OU brand.
- An effective local presence enables regional staff to influence the professional education and training agenda in the regional and local areas. For example, through participation in Local Enterprise Partnerships, which have been increasingly a conduit for HEI funding. One such opportunity might be for the OU to develop Curriculum Partnerships with local HEIs.
- Further development of Widening Access Partnerships with Further Education and Local Employers.

### **Buy-In from University Staff and Trade Unions**

The Locations Analysis document does not identify the need for buy-in from the University Staff and the Unions are only identified as a key stakeholder, ‘to be kept informed’. This is worrying given the growing numbers of staff, both academic and non-academic, concerned at the current direction of travel of the University. Staff are entitled to evidence on what is currently working, a full cost-benefit analysis regarding any proposed changes, including consideration of opportunity costs.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the existing regional structure is in a strong and flexible position to take advantage of a changing political environment and the development of local as well as national partnerships. Internally, there have been significant changes with the switch to qualification-based study, higher tuition fees and the establishment of SSTs. These changes need time to be fully embedded and assessed. A quality student experience will require a balance of old and new systems and practices, in particular the preservation of all that marks the OU out from other online distance learning providers. A regional infrastructure remains crucial to widening access, ensuring quality student experience and the successful completion of qualifications.