

Open Universities: You do not need a high school diploma to get into university

By Carlo Ricci

Abstract

In this paper I hope to empower students by exposing the myth that a high school diploma is a necessary first step to getting into a post secondary institution. In what follows, I will be sharing a brief history of open universities, give an example of an open university in a specific context and celebrate its policies, and continue to challenge some more myths about the importance of a high school diploma for success in post secondary schooling.

In this paper I hope to empower students by exposing the myth that a high school diploma is a necessary first step to getting into a post secondary institution. In speaking of problem posing education, Freire (1970) writes about the need to demythologize a lot of these myths. He says that it,

...sets itself the task of demythologizing... regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality... makes them critical thinkers... bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality...thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (pp. 83-84)

In this spirit we need to work to transform the current schooling system, and within the scope of this paper, we need to help, join and celebrate those who are and have taken bold and revolutionary steps.

There are many routes that students can take to get into post secondary institutions. Among the many routes, students can enter as mature students; they can enter with SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or ACT (American College Testing Program) scores; they can take just the prerequisite courses that universities deem to be necessary for students to enter; and they can enter by applying to open universities. I want to emphasize that this is not an exhaustive list, but merely a sampling of options. For the purposes of this paper I want to celebrate the open university route. There are many legitimate fully accredited open universities that understand that the traditional barriers of grades, high school diplomas and past educational experience ought not to be a barrier for those that choose to pursue post secondary education.

I continue to be puzzled and frustrated that after nearly 40 years of the open universities, people I speak to are shocked and surprised this option even exists. I have shared this with hundreds and maybe thousands of people including university professors in education, my graduate students in a faculty of education, school administrators, parents, potential students and the reaction I get is shock and disbelief that this option exists, that students who want to get into a university can do so with or without a secondary school diploma.

The question then becomes why!?! Whose interest is being served by ensuring that people who are interested in attending post secondary institutions do not know about the open university options? The teachers, school administrators and parents that I have talked to have shared that they do not go back and tell their students about this option even after they find out about it; perhaps, out of fear that many students might leave in droves? What would happen to high schools if prospective students begin to discover that alternative pathways into post secondary schooling become popularized? This I hope to find out. I am urging all parents, teachers,

administrators, peers, professors, and anyone who knows someone who is interested in post secondary schooling to share this article with them, to make them aware that alternative, legitimate, and for many, I believe, preferable options exist. Let's stop censoring the truth and truly place all of our cards on the table and then let individuals decide the route they prefer to take.

I am not suggesting that all students should go to post secondary education, nor am I under the illusion that post secondary education is the best route to a happy and fulfilling life—this I believe is yet another myth. For instance, some try to perpetuate the myth that more and higher levels of schooling equals more money (again, not the same as happiness). These studies often ignore the clear outliers within the data; that is, doctors, lawyers, and engineers, for example. Once these careers and outliers are taken into consideration the numbers tell a different story.

In what follows, I will be sharing a brief history of open universities, give an example of an open university in a specific context and celebrate its policies, and continue to challenge some more myths about the importance of a high school diploma for success in post secondary schooling.

I am not suggesting that education is not a useful first step in being a successful university student, but what I am saying is that education and schooling is not the same thing. Holt (1989) offers the best definition of education that I have come across. He writes that, "Living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would say unconscious) without constantly learning things" (p. 157). As we live our lives we become educated and schooling can actually interfere with our education. Gatto (2005) makes this point brilliantly and

clearly in his book, *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. The point is that mainstream schooling may not be the best preparation for post secondary studies.

A brief history of open universities

In January 1971 students began taking courses at the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom (Open University, 2007a). On its website the Open University says that it is the world's first successful distance teaching university. In 1926, educationalist and historian J. C. Stobart wrote a memo while working for the BBC advocating for a 'wireless university'. It took over 30 years and by the early sixties many different proposals were being debated. Jennie Lee was an important figure in the initial start up of the Open University: "Without Jennie Lee, it seems likely that Harold Wilson's idea would have failed." She says that,

Harold Wilson asked me to go to Chicago and Moscow. Neither was anything like what I wanted to do. The Chicago lads were lovely but they were only short-circuiting the first year or two of the degree. In Moscow all they were doing was routine long-term broadcasting and some correspondence courses. (Open University, 2007a)

Not fully satisfied with what she discovered in Moscow and Chicago she worked toward what has become the Open University.

Throughout its history the Open University has used a number of teaching and learning tools and technologies; for example, audiocassettes, later videocassettes, and then, starting in the 1980s, personal computers, CD-ROM and web-based materials. By the mid-nineties the internet has made the OU the world's leading e-university.

In 1969, when the idea of The Open University was announced, it was described as "blithering nonsense" by Iain Macleod MP (Open University, 2007a). Times may not have changed very much. Today there are those that I speak to who still question having an open university, in spite of their obvious proliferation and successes. The Open University has been around for more than three decades and,

Has managed to convince sceptics that academic excellence need not be compromised by openness:

- Our graduates are recognised at their full worth throughout society.
- More than 50,000 employers have endorsed the value of the OU by sponsoring their staff to enrol in courses.
- The OU is the largest provider of management education in Europe, and one in five MBA students in the UK is studying with the OU. (Open University, 2007a)

The admissions policy at the Open University is open:

The Open University was established to be 'open', with no entry requirements. Nearly all of our courses continue to have no entry requirements. That's why we don't have a heading for 'entry requirements' in the course description for most courses.

Some courses aimed at postgraduates or people who are working in specific jobs, do have entry requirements. The course description will say what they are in the section labeled 'entry'. (Open University, 2007b)

I will say more about admission policies when I look at Athabasca University as an example of a local context. They vary and so prospective students would have to check the individual web pages of the schools they are interested in for more specific guidelines.

Athabasca University (AU)

Since I live in Ontario, Canada I have decided to look more closely at an option that students who reside in my province have. The philosophical premise and options that students have will likely resemble options that students have at other open universities. We do not have an open university in Ontario, but students who reside here can and do take courses through Athabasca. Athabasca was created by the Government of Alberta in 1970 and currently serves about 32,000 students per year. Student numbers have doubled over a six-year period. In total, some 260,000 students have registered in AU's individualized courses and programs since the University was created (Athabasca University, 2007a).

Athabasca University celebrates that it has been able to break down barriers in four major categories: Time, space, past educational experience, and level of income. With respect to time, students are able to learn at their own pace, for individualized undergraduate study courses there are no admission deadlines, and students may enroll year-round. With respect to space, students at Athabasca can study from wherever they are through individualized-study packages (student manual, study guide, textbook(s), and if appropriate CD-ROM, audiocassettes and videotapes) and the Internet. With respect to past education experience their 2007/2008 calendar admission policy reads as follows:

Athabasca University's general admission policy has one formal undergraduate student entrance requirement: students must be 16 years of age or older. Students under 16 years of age may be admitted with special consideration by petitioning Coordinator, Registration Services. An underage student's admission application form must be

accompanied by letters of support from the student's high-school principal or designate, and a parent or guardian. (Athabasca University, 2007a)

We need to publicize this option more loudly. We have an ethical obligation to share this option with all those who have an interest in post secondary schooling. We need to let them know that if students are 16 years old they are in automatically, and if they are younger they are still not banned from entering. They simply have to sign an underage student's admission application. We need to stop playing this cruel and unnecessary myth with students about the challenges of entering post secondary institutions. Again, why aren't educators and all of us empowering students with this information? We should be ashamed for censoring the truth, for hoarding knowledge, and for not helping to popularize one of the world's best kept secrets.

With respect to level of income, they argue that their method of learning allows students to study part-time learning and so they can hold a full-time job, and so level of income is not a barrier. I am not fully convinced by the last argument. Perhaps, it is less of a barrier, but I still see how it is a barrier for some.

Some may try to argue that we are or would be doing a disservice by letting students into post secondary institutions, since students would be ill prepared and not ready for the rigours of higher schooling. We know this is not true. With dual credit programs already being offered between post secondary institutions and high schools, we know that students are capable. Besides, it is not for us to speculate, but for individual students to choose. The distinction between high school and post secondary is largely artificial and so students can and have achieved. As well, in post secondary students choose to be there and they have the advantage of taking courses that they truly choose, rather than having to take courses in areas that they are not

interested in. The argument that they are not ready or capable, simply because they did not finish high school, I believe to be weak and another myth. After all, think of how many homeschoolers and unschoolers have and continue to challenge this myth.

Again, I am left puzzled why so many people are not aware of open universities. Students can gain access to an open university in a more humane and democratic way than they can traditional post secondary institutions. It is clear that their enrollment numbers are rising, but why are so many prospective students still unaware of their existence and their friendly policies?

Some argue for stricter measures

In Canada 70 per cent of parents expect that their children are headed to university and, yet, only 33 per cent actually go on to university (Ministry of Education, 2005). For political reasons, universities are under pressure to decrease drop-out rates. Part of a university's program evaluation measures how successfully and quickly universities are able to graduate students that come through their doors. As well, a low graduation rate costs the university money. As a result, some universities are opting for tougher entrance requirements. Where I teach for instance we were pressured to ensure that the students who enter our graduate program have at least a 70 percent average. I suggested to the committee that, in fact, by having a more democratic policy we are offering students opportunities that they would not otherwise have; unfortunately, the committee disagreed. I have since obtained the data for all of the entrance grades that students have come into our program with, and we are analyzing it to see if there are differences between students that came in with higher and lower grades in terms of time to completion, final exit grades and so on. We have just started our analysis and it appears that there is no difference. So the question then remains, why have these obstacles? Really, the grade is just a number and it

does not tell us anything about what the applicants have done since they completed their studies, nor does it give us a context with which to understand the grade. For example, there may have been legitimate out of school factors that contributed to the final grades the student received that have nothing to do with the students' capabilities.

In Canada, different universities and provinces have different strategies for dealing with what they consider to be unsatisfactory graduation rates. For example, Schmidt (2006) reports that,

When the University of Waterloo identified a problem with its graduation rate, it made a simple but controversial decision to raise entrance requirements, even if it meant unoccupied seats in some programs.

and

Concordia University in Montreal takes a decidedly different approach to its stubbornly low degree-completion rates, among the worst in the country. Six years after beginning full-time studies, just over half -- 54 per cent -- of students have a degree in hand.

Part of the problem is that universities study completion rates within a six or seven year period, as we have seen above. As another example, "Waterloo determined a few years ago that about half the students admitted with an average below 75 per cent failed to graduate within seven years" (Schmidt 2006). Since then they have raised their admission standards to increase their completion rate, which now is at about 80 per cent. The reason why six or seven year studies are problematic is highlighted by Attewell and Lavin (2007). They argue that, "Today many undergraduates cycle in and out of college. They stop for a while or drop down to part-time

status to earn enough money to pay for next semester's tuition, or for rent, or to have a child, or to accept a promising job opportunity.” After tracking students for 30 years they found that 70 percent of women who had attended the CUNY (City University of New York) system had earned a degree. So, they ask,

What accounts for the discrepancy between the critics of higher education, who bemoan its shortcomings, and our research? The distressingly low graduation figures that scandalize critics are typically collected six years after college entry. They give the impression that huge numbers of students “particularly economically disadvantaged and minority students” fail to benefit from attending college. That approach measures success or failure far too soon.

Furthermore, Attewell, & Lavin, & Domina, & Levey (2007) make a powerful argument for open admissions. They found that increasing access to college among today’s disadvantaged students can reduce educational gaps in the next generation. Their book *Passing the Torch* makes a powerful argument in favor of college for all.

In terms of completion rates there are other disturbing trends. It is worth quoting Schmidt (2006) at length about this,

Simon Fraser University continues to track completion rates by high-school averages at admissions. As their high-school averages increase, so do degree-completion rates, the data show. Among those who began their studies in September 1999, only 42.7 per cent of students with grade point averages of less than 3.0 at admission had completed an SFU degree within seven years. Conversely, among students admitted with a GPA of 3.75 or

greater, 81.3 per cent had an SFU degree in hand within seven years. Among those with GPAs between 3.0 and 3.24, it's 64.2 per cent. For high-school graduates with GPAs between 3.25 and 3.49, it's 68.2 per cent, and 77.6 per cent for those with GPAs between 3.5 and 3.74. Meanwhile, UBC identified many years ago, showing those with high-school averages below 75 per cent had a significantly smaller chance of completing a degree. But that's not why UBC raised admissions standards over the years, driven instead by limited space available for the growing numbers of qualified students admitted to UBC; this fall, the average entering grade of successful high-school applicants was 87 per cent. Beyond a certain cut-off, the relationship between grade point averages at admissions and completion rate tapers off, analysis shows. In UBC's case, its completion rate has remained relatively constant since the late 1990s. Among those who started studies in the fall of 1999, 77.3 per cent had graduated within six years.

From this we gather that obstacles are placed in students' way because there are only so many spots and not because students are not capable. As well, as mentioned above, the numbers alone do not tell us the whole story. Perhaps, what prevented these students from getting a low GPA in high school is the same thing that is preventing them from completing post secondary education within a required amount of time. In other words, it may be more a result of out of school factors than their capability. Again, the studies may not be long enough to truly gage whether the students did eventually complete their degrees, nor do they shed light on why it took them longer.

Cautions

Gaskel (2007) reminds us of the potential dangers of open universities and online learning in general. She writes, “At an international level, the increasing numbers of fake online institutions providing bogus degrees raise a wide range of ethical issues” (p. 103). UNESCO’s (2005) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* were developed to address these ethical issues and concerns. Bear & Nixon (2006) make a similar point. They write that, “Any school can claim that it is accredited; the use of that word is (unfortunately) not regulated in any way” (p. 93). Consequently, they warn us to be careful when selecting schools. Since many situations require degrees to be from recognized accredited institutions, it is essential that students be wary. For example, an accredited degree is required for “admission to another school, transfer of credits, job applications, applying for permission to take various exams (law, psychology, accounting, engineering, etc.), and so on” (p. 93). Of course, this only matters if you are interested in an accredited degree. Otherwise, you might get a good schooling experience even though the institution is not officially recognized as being accredited. Bear (2005) warns that even if an institution claims to be accredited there is a need to ensure by whom, and to ensure that the accrediting agency is officially recognized. She writes, “Many very bad schools claim to be accredited—but such accreditation is always by unrecognized, sometimes non-existent, accrediting associations, often of their own creation” (p. 14).

Conclusion

In short, open universities is a legitimate and, in some cases, a better option for many students. It is shameful that this empowering option seems to be censored rather than popularized. Sharing this information with prospective students is the right thing to do. Imagine how much stress, anxiety and overall ill health will be removed by empowering students with this information. Imagine how relieved so many can feel by removing the unnecessary pressure

and anxiety connected to entering post secondary institutions. The pressures that so many who want to enter higher learning feel because of the artificial barriers imposed by many post secondary schools is avoidable—and we all should do our part. Open universities are legitimately recognized options and so, again, I urge us all to do our part by sharing this paper or at least the information in it as widely as possible. Ultimately, students can use open universities as a stepping point and then transfer to another institution or they can stay and complete their degrees at these laudable transforming institutions.

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Biography

I currently teach in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University and I founded and edit the online Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning (JUAL). I try to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner centered principles in all of my classes. Everything of value that I have learned, I have learned outside of formal schooling. I have never taken a course in school connected to what I now teach and write about. I have taught in elementary and high school. I have also taught in undergraduate, teacher education programs and graduate programs. My personal schooling experience as a student and later as a teacher has inspired me to revolt against institutional schooling. I continue to heal from the wounds inflicted

on me by formal schooling. I have two daughters ages 2 and 4 that I hope will decide to be unschooled.