# Take me to the Open University

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There's one university in Cambridge that uses the entire city as its campus. Reflecting contemporary work patterns, the Open University suggests how academic space might be shared in an age of austerity.

In addition to its two heavyweights, Cambridge has a third university – the Open University (OU).   But then, everywhere else has the OU as well.   A virtual university seems like a very up-to-the-minute, digital concept, but it was founded 40 years ago, in 1969.

Right from the start the OU relied on state-of-the-art technology to reach its dispersed student body. In the early days that meant radio and TV broadcasts late at night or early in the morning.   Live broadcasts were replaced with audio- and video-tapes (remember them?), then CDs and DVDs, and now internet communications dominate.   The OU has seen whole cycles of telecomms technology emerge, become widely adopted, and disappear – without disrupting its operational model.

Not all the OU's activities are virtual.   In most courses students meet for tutorial sessions every six weeks or so.   In the Eastern Region, which includes Cambridge, there are 20,000 students and up to 200 tutorial groups can take place every week.   They are organised by the OU's Regional Centre in Cintra House on Hills Road but take place all round the region. Cambridge has the largest concentration of events.

Six locations are used in Cambridge: the Sixth Form College in Hills Road, Anglia Ruskin University, Homerton College, Cambridgeshire Regional College, The Moeller Centre at Churchill College, and the Trinity Centre in the Science Park.   These are purpose-designed buildings, fully equipped for educational use, disabled access, etc.   The OU uses them on weekday evenings and Saturdays.   Hills Road Sixth Form College, for example, might host 50 OU tutorial groups on a Saturday.   The OU also rents space for examinations – Wolfson College is a particular favourite; and for residential schools, which use educational buildings or hotels.

There are long-term contracts with most space-providers, who are pleased to get income from resources that would otherwise be left idle.   And the OU gets to use a wide variety of purpose-designed buildings, without having to worry about building management or capital and maintenance budgets.   It sounds almost too good to be true.  The principle is reminiscent of Christopher Alexander's proposition that 'a city is not a tree (but a semi-lattice)', where he pointed out that activities in cities do not have to be segregated into distinct zones. He quoted the example of Trinity Street between Trinity College's Great Gate and Whewell's Court, asking whether this is part of a commercial street or part of a college? – a pointless question, as clearly it is both.   Alexander was thinking about the intersection of two *spatial* systems, but in the OU's case the intersection is in *time*.   Thus, elsewhere in Cambridge*,* the same Hills

Road buildings are both the Sixth Form College and the Open University, but not simultaneously.

OU students come together regularly for tutorials, but at other times they work in whatever spaces at whatever times they individually find most congenial.   Ad hoc gatherings of students are encouraged by the OU but are self-organised.   These too use available space – pubs, cafes, homes, and so on.   If you have read visionary articles about the new workstyles and lifestyles of the emerging digital economy, this will sound rather familiar.   With the advent of distributed computing the idea that a firm's employees all have to troop into a corporate workspace, where they work all day and then disperse, is obsolete.   In today's offices it is normal to see fewer than 50% of the workplaces occupied, as employees work flexible hours, tele-commute or spend time in meetings.

The current notion is that individual work will become increasingly self-organised, with employees optimising their work-life balance between preferences and constraints, relying on virtual communication; and travelling to central locations only for interaction and meetings. Since the OU has been using this model for 40 years it's clearly not as novel as some people think; but on the other hand it's not exactly a leap in the dark – so there's no reason why it should not be widely adopted.   It's admirably flexible and resource-efficient.   This makes it even harder to understand why, for example, so many Cambridge colleges think they each need to build a lecture theatre of their own for a few hours' use per year – after all, the OU proves that a university is not a tree.
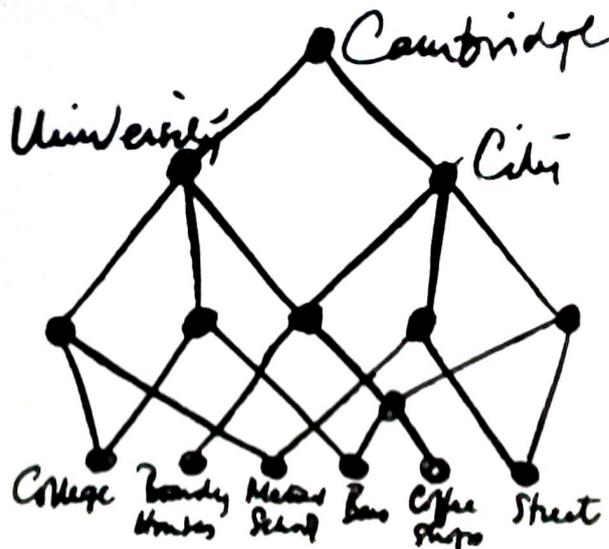


Alexander's semi-lattice diagram of Cambridge, from his essay 'A City Is Not a Tree' first published in *Architectural Forum* in 1965. It shows that the 'University' and 'City' systems share the same spatial resources, eg. college, boarding houses, medical school, bars, coffee shops, street. In contrast, a city with a tree diagram would have distinct spaces for each system, with no shared use – so the diagram would look like a tree with no cross-over links between its branches.