The Open University experience: Contributions to social change

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Objectives: This article has two objectives. The first is to describe the Open University Program developed twelve years ago at the Department of Public Health of the Brazilian National School of Public Health/Fiocruz (Oswaldo Cruz Foundation). The second objective is to present an analytical report on the Open University, highlighting its history, methodology, main results and an evaluation.

Methodology: Descriptive analytical.

Results: The authors describe the evolution of the Open University from plan to program. From its inception onward, the Open University has always worked to promote collective action to fight social inequality and improve the quality of life in the Manguinhos community, an urban complex (termed favela in Portuguese) with prevalent poverty, located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It has utilized education as a tool to encourage the people and the community to mobilize. The Open University began as 10 sub-projects, which brought together various Fiocruz units and departments. The overall project began with the task of diagnosing the situation in Manguinhos, assigning priority to the problems encountered and devising potential actions which could be taken. Manguinhos suffers from serious unemployment and informal employment, and low levels of education as well as adult illiteracy, malnutrition, high teenage pregnancy rates and poor housing conditions, among other problems. The next step was a research-action intervention. Due to the high unemployment rate, community vocational preparation courses were delivered to help make individual and collective income-generating projects viable. The Manguinhos Autonomous Workers Cooperative (abbreviated as “Cootram” in Portuguese) was created to administer the courses. Cootram employees, numbering some 1300, provide most of the cleaning and maintenance services at the Fiocruz Foundation. The project is active on three fronts: 1) socioeconomic, cultural and educational; 2) epidemiological; and 3) environmental.

Conclusions: In addition to providing information to its participants, the Open University has helped bring the academic world and the community closer together. The cooperative has been an important factor in raising the quality of life in Manguinhos, where its 1300 members represent twenty percent of the active labor force in the community. The Open University project has become an institutionalized movement for social change which addresses the roots of social inequality. The next challenge is to bring the program under the coordination of the ENSPSA (Sérgio Arouca Brazilian National School of Public Health), its researchers, and the public at large.