

Michael Young Centenary Conference, Wednesday 11 November 2015, The Barbican

Keynote Address: Founding and Future of The Open University

Introduction

Good morning everyone, and thank you very much for inviting me to this wonderful event, celebrating the life and legacy of Michael Young.

Michael Young's incisive analysis of British society and politics made him one of the foremost thinkers of the age. But he was never content simply to offer an academic critique of what he saw. Instead, his real legacy is in the practical policies and influential institutions which he helped create. These organisations reshaped post-war Britain and continue to be profoundly important today.

And perhaps one of the best-known and most-loved aspects of that legacy is The Open University. So today, I want to reflect on how and why The Open University was set up, discuss its continuing importance to today's Britain, and suggest how we might take it forward into the twenty first century.

Michael Young's background and thinking around the OU

Michael Young was a profound believer in the transformative power of education and was always deeply concerned with issues of inequality and exclusion. He partly made his name, of course, by taking on what he saw as the social divisiveness of the grammar schools. In the early 1960s, he turned his attention to higher education, and the way in which bright people were being denied access just because of accidents of birth.

Higher education at that time simply wasn't designed for anyone who didn't fit the mould. Anyone who needed to work at the same time. Anyone who wasn't eighteen years old. Anyone who didn't have traditional qualifications. Michael was determined to tackle this problem, and ensure that anyone who had the determination and passion to succeed – however old they were, whatever their background, wherever they lived – was given the chance.

But one of the main difficulties Michael faced was that distance learning, the obvious model for achieving his goal, was so clearly second rate. And he knew this because *Which?* – the magazine he founded, at the Consumers' Association he had established – had found standards on correspondence courses to be 'deplorably low' and 'uninspiring'. Students were given a couple of school books and sent away to get on with it. Michael knew that people deserved better. His determination to improve struggling educational methods is an enduring lesson for today.

So he came up with a model based on three principles which still influence the way we work and teach at the OU today.

Vision for the OU

The first was face-to-face or residential teaching: a recognition of the fact that students couldn't devote time to classroom learning each week, but still needed the opportunity to learn from dialogue with exceptional teachers, and explore topics with fellow students. Initially we provided

'OU summer schools', but now our approach to face-to-face support is even more flexible. Students get together at tutorials, day schools and informal study groups; and through online conferencing, study networks and course forums.

(I have recently begun studying my first OU module – M 140 on statistics. I've been to two tutorials – one physical, one virtual. There were many more students attending the online tutorial).

The second was technology: and particularly at that time, television. This was already an important aspect of education in the US and the USSR, and Michael had realised its potential to reach thousands of would-be students. One outcome was 'Dawn University Week' – a series of weekday breakfast lectures networked by Anglia Television. The OU provided BBC late night programming, but now embeds video and audio assets in its learning journey, reserving its BBC partnership for inspiring exploration of key themes matching our research and curriculum expertise. This partnership continues to deliver critically acclaimed and popular quality programmes – from *Coast to Bang Goes the Theory*, and *The Hunt*.

And finally, Michael believed in radical new teaching principles. The idea that students themselves should be involved as active participants not passive recipients of education. That their life experiences outside university – in the workplace and in the home - shouldn't be seen as irrelevant or a distraction, but a positive asset. That they should be actively collaborating with their teachers in learning and in research for the best possible experience and outcomes. And, once again, that idea is enormously relevant to us now.

Michael put these theories to the test in the National Extension College: or, as he termed it, 'the Invisible College of Cambridge.' It was a new type of institution, for a new type of learner. Without permanent buildings of its own, it trialled these new ideas – residential learning, innovative technology, imaginative pedagogy – and was hugely successful.

At the same time, the Labour Party began to drive forward their plans for what was then called 'the University of the Air' – a university grounded in Michael Young's vision. It seems only fitting, therefore, that we eventually were given the name he suggested: 'The Open University'.

It wasn't plain sailing by any means. It's fair to say that initially, no-one thought it could be done. Our founding University Secretary was told he would be 'mad' to get involved. Our first vice-chancellor said the project faced "downright hostility" from the educational establishment. And one senior politician of the day needed just two words to sum up what he thought of the idea: "blithering nonsense".

But the sceptics and the doubters were proved wrong: by the enormous popularity of the courses, by the quality of teaching and research, and by the success of Michael's model.

And I'd argue that Michael's vision of expansive, accessible and high quality higher education is as urgent and as critical to higher education today as it has ever been.

So I want to talk now about how we continue to evolve and build on his legacy to ensure the OU, and other educational ventures Michael inspired, remain relevant, attractive and innovative in the twenty first century.

Participation and access still matters today...

The first point to make is that our students still have the motivations Michael Young had in mind, all those years ago.

They want to improve themselves; open up new opportunities for themselves and their families. They have a thirst for knowledge: and more than that, a deep appreciation for knowledge, since excellent education has too often been denied them in the past. They want to study in ways – and at times – which make sense to them. And they are often achieving against incredible odds.

Many of them have been told they cannot succeed. That they'll never get a degree. They face huge challenges in fitting their study around working, bringing up a family, caring for a relative, coping with a disability etc. At every graduation ceremony, as I award degrees, dozens of students grab me and assure me that the OU has made the greatest difference to their lives.

Many of them doubt their own abilities at first. But through talent, sheer hard work and a good dose of support from our Associate Lecturers (tutors) and Student Support teams, they achieve amazing things. It is our responsibility – and our privilege – to support them in realising their potential.

But though our students remain the same, the world around us has radically changed.

.... the context in which we work has changed dramatically

Let me give you a few examples.

Firstly, the massive expansion of higher education as a sector. In 1967 there were just over 200,000 students at UK universities. Now there are over two million. The huge expansion of the sixties and seventies university building programme and then the conversion of the polytechnics has been revolutionary. Part of that has also been an explosion in the numbers and types of providers: offering online courses, apprenticeships, and boot-camps, not just traditional degrees. Our students today have more choice than ever before.

Second, the changes to the way higher education is funded mean that students rightly are looking for affordability and value for money as well as excellence in teaching and learning. For the debt-adverse the notion of higher fee loans is unpalatable. This has had a massive impact on would-be part-time students, with more maturity, more concept of the value of money and their 'provider' responsibilities, and less innate confidence that they can succeed in higher education. As a result the numbers of part-time students have collapsed, shockingly, by almost forty per cent in the past ten years.

The Higher Education Policy Institute has just put out a new report suggesting this collapse of the part-time student market, which delivers social mobility and provides new skills into an existing labour market, is arguably the single biggest problem facing higher education at the moment. All of us – in education, in politics and policy, employers and students – must work together to tackle this challenge. Because we simply cannot afford the waste of talent and potential this represents. Especially when part-time study makes sense to so many students and their employers. It's so cost effective compared to traditional, full-time, face-to-face study. The OU recently calculated that it costs the public purse about 25% less for every degree achieved by a part-time student than for a full-time student. That cost effectiveness, along with the immediate contribution in increased productivity for students who are already working, is a powerful argument for flexible polices to support part time learning.

Changes to the funding system have also created new imperatives for universities to generate commercial income rather than relying only on grants or student fees. We've stepped up to this challenge in many ways: developing new partnerships with employers, building on our global reputation for excellence by marketing our materials and developing consultancy services.

Rising fees mean we need to focus even more closely on what students need. So there's a far greater focus on productivity and employability than ever before. Students rightly want to be prepared for working life as well as enjoying the pure pleasure of learning.

Finally and most fundamentally, there's the impact of technology: evident in all aspects of our lives and equally important in education. I want to say more about this in a moment.

So how does the OU need to change and adapt?

The Open University is ready and able to meet all these challenges. In fact, I'd argue that because of our particular history, we are ideally placed to respond. Our commitment to life-long learning doesn't just change lives but can have a huge impact in both social and economic terms. We can meet the needs of today's students, today's employers and society as a whole. And we can underpin everything we do with our commitment to academic excellence and innovation.

But the way in which that social need, our mission, is achieved is inevitably changing. The withdrawal of direct public funding, mostly in England, but gradually happening in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland too, makes a profound difference to how that mission is supported. We need to be prepared to be self-reliant, not dependent on public support, welcome though the continuation of that would be. We need to be ready to innovate in our sources of revenue – commercial, contractual, philanthropic, corporate, through alumni giving and legacies. And we need to innovate further and faster in what we do and how we do it.

It means that we have to be prepared to be brave and dare to be different. The questions we in The Open University are asking ourselves are: how do we capture that same revolutionary, subversive spirit which drove Michael on? How do we continue to challenge accepted norms and not become complacent?

I see technology as key. And that's perhaps very appropriate, given Michael's emphasis on technology from the outset.

But now people don't need a television in their front room to benefit from technology: they've got a phone in their pocket. Michael Young could not have anticipated this new digital age, populated by digital natives, who have grown up swiping and clicking as well as reading and writing. Students who might learn as much from a YouTube video as a traditional lesson, and who are confident in connecting and communicating with people all around the world. Billions of people around the world who may have very limited access to traditional education are increasingly able to learn via a smartphone.

This represents the most fundamental challenge to education in the entirety of human history. All the old assumptions about how students learn and how teachers should teach are being turned upside down. If universities don't keep up with the scale and the pace of change, they risk becoming irrelevant to students.

And that would be catastrophic: because higher education is even more important, even more valuable in this digital age. We have to equip today's students with the skills they need to operate in

today's world – online as well as offline. Many of them will graduate into highly specialised, technology-dependent jobs. All of them need the ability to critically assess, interpret and use the information that's being thrown at them online.

So technology represents a *challenge* because it is such a disruptive force in education. But it's also clearly a *revolutionary force for positive change*, enabling us to exponentially expand and offer the kind of personalised, individualised learning that our students expect and deserve.

The OU are very much pioneers in this field. In 2013, we set up the UK's first platform for massive open online courses – aka MOOCs. We prefer to call it a social learning platform – because of the innovative way in which learners learn from each other, not just from their educator. Through this initiative, FutureLearn, we've brought together more than 75 UK and international universities, cultural bodies, and other institutions and providers to offer world-class higher education to anyone, for free. So far, more than two and a half million learners from 190 countries have taken advantage of it. And they think it's great: ninety per cent of students who take one of these courses rate them as good or excellent.

There is legitimate criticism of MOOCs - that they are only suitable for experienced learners, or that their bite-sized chunks are too quick and easy. But remember the criticism of the low quality correspondence courses that Michael Young set out to address. We shouldn't look down on free online learning. We should celebrate it as the apogee of openness. We shouldn't disparage the quality of MOOCs. We should see it as our task to use our innovative expertise to raise MOOC standards. And that is exactly what FutureLearn is doing with the most engaging high quality free social learning available anywhere on the planet.

[So part of what technology can do is expand our reach. But it can also transform the experience we offer. In the early days, we used to send students a home science kit: now we connect them up to an OpenScience Laboratory so they can collaborate interactively on their research, working at a distance on science experiments. Our efforts to put extensive materials and resources in the cloud are award winning. And we've developed the OU anywhere app which enables students to access their course materials wherever and whenever they need them.]

But this is very much the beginning. We are determined we will continue to push the boundaries of digital technology. Through innovation and creativity, we will develop the pedagogy, products and processes to maximise the benefits of new technology. It promises to make learning faster, cheaper, more effective and more fun. That's tremendously exciting, and promises to have huge benefits.

The OU is confident of our value

Today, we are the UK's largest university with over 180,000 students. We had 22,000 students completing modules in science, technology, engineering and maths last year. Seventy five per cent of our students are studying while working. We continue to be ranked highly in national standings, but even more importantly, our own students rate their experience with us incredibly highly.

Last week, the Government published a Green Paper outlining its vision for the future of higher education – calling for action to double the proportion of disadvantaged students entering into higher education by 2020. Whilst we welcome this pledge, we need to be mindful that this target should not just focus on young people. We know that nearly 40% of all students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education last year were mature learners. Widening participation

should be for all who can benefit from university - at all stages of their lives. Who better than The Open University - with our tremendous scale and reach - to help deliver the Prime Minister's pledge?

The Open University already supports young students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed - in contrast to the early days of the OU, almost a third of our new undergraduates are under 25- and we are exploring innovative new ways to increase our reach. In this way, the OU can make a great contribution to the Prime Minister's target for widening access.

The Open University is already the biggest driver of social mobility in the UK, supporting a third of all students in England without the usual entry requirements and welcoming almost half of those disabled students who wish to study part-time, once again demonstrating that there is more to social mobility than getting disadvantaged eighteen year olds into Oxbridge.

We have come a long way since Michael developed the concept of The Open University. But I'm confident that he would still recognise his values in our institution. In our passionate commitment to tackling social inequality and promoting social justice. In our tireless efforts to promote the highest standards of teaching, learning and research. And most of all, in our desire to help each and every student achieve their goals and realise their dreams.

People told Michael Young his ambition would never get off the ground. And people then told our students they'd never amount to much. But Michael, our students and The Open University have proved them utterly wrong.

We owe an enormous debt to many towering figures in post-war politics – Harold Wilson and Jennie Lee to name just two. But there is no doubt that without Michael Young's extraordinary vision, imagination and energy, we would not exist today. And I believe the best way that we can express our gratitude for his efforts is by continuing to deliver his mission and secure his legacy; bringing it right up to date.

Thank you very much.