

Universities Association for Lifelong Learning: Reflections of a Lifelong Learner
Peter Horrocks: Thursday 17 March 2016

“Reflections of a Lifelong Learner”

Thank you very much for inviting me to address you this morning. It seems very appropriate to me that we're meeting here today in Oxford: not just because of the extraordinary history of learning and scholarship, but because of the fact that Oxford helped pioneer the university extension movement, which many might see as a forerunner of the idea of lifelong learning itself.

From the mid-nineteenth century, a group of committed and imaginative scholars sought to reach out beyond the traditional elite, engaging instead with working people and with women. Dons left the security of the cloisters and lectured around the country or established summer schools, opening up new worlds of learning. Eventually, this became the Workers Educational Association, an organisation which went hand-in-hand with the trade union and co-operative movements, and which laid the foundations for adult education as we know it today.

These pioneers understood that education was a right, not a privilege, and should be available to everyone. They recognised that education doesn't and shouldn't stop when a person leaves school. And they believed in the transformative power of education through a person's life. These are powerful ideals which are still profoundly relevant.

So what I want to do today is think about how we can all support and enable lifelong learning, through an inspiring and inclusive higher education sector which both changes individual lives and enriches society as a whole. I want to take three important issues - the role of part-time students, ways of funding the sector, and the place of new technologies in higher education – and think about what these mean for life-long learning.

But first, a brief personal note. The OU stands for giving life opportunities to people at whatever stage of their life or career. And I was the lucky beneficiary last year of the extension of this OU concept to the position of Vice-Chancellor, when I moved to the OU after a long and fulfilling career at the BBC (culminating as director of the BBC World Service). I've truly been given a life-changing opportunity as I learn the ins and outs of being

a VC. And I'm adding to that learning opportunity more directly, as I will explain in a moment.

I spent most of my career at the BBC, which, like the Open University, occupies a unique and vital role in British society. Both are institutions founded on ideals and ideas, both have a global reach and international impact, and both have to find the right balance between commercial success and more traditional concepts of the public good. So my remarks today will be informed by both of these experiences.

Being a lifelong learner

One of the great pleasures and privileges of my job is that I get to see this life changing impact in person. Our students range from sixth formers studying OU modules alongside their schoolwork, to our oldest graduate Clifford Dadson¹ who achieved his Open Degree aged ninety-three.

Last year, I met an Open University student in Dublin who was incredibly enthusiastic and committed to her studies, but was finding it difficult to progress. One of her tutors suggested that she might be dyslexic. It turned out that this was the problem – and that as a result, she was struggling to absorb all the written material involved in her course. Instead, she was able to switch to audio materials, which enabled her to really absorb the material for the first time.

It was like a switch had been flipped. Suddenly, she was soaring: not only in her studies, but also at work. With renewed confidence, she passed her exams and was expecting a promotion. Furthermore, other family members had also been tested for dyslexia and had been able to get the support they needed. Their prospects had been transformed. I'm sure many of you will have similar stories.

Recently, I've also been trying out the experience of life-long learning for myself by taking a statistics module. The experience of studying with one's own institution is both inspiring and salutary. I have the pleasure of benefitting from the excellent materials and dedicated teaching of the OU. I also learn from (and occasionally contribute to the learning of) other

¹¹ https://www.ouassetbank.co.uk/theme/cs_single.php?cas_id=113

students. I am simultaneously challenged and stimulated. And I have the added minor pressure of not wanting to be a VC who fails one of his own courses.

Studying history at Cambridge all those years ago was a totally different experience. As an adult, returning to study, I certainly think you appreciate the privilege of learning: and you have to become a master of time management and of juggling different commitments. And as I've grappled with finding the discipline and the time to study, it's really brought home to me the challenges that part-time students face every day: committing themselves to learning, while also working and raising families. It's made me even more determined to act as their champion and advocate, ensuring that they have everything they need to succeed, and ensure that more people benefit from the same opportunities.

Higher Education as a public good

In recent years, debate about tuition fees, about the student as consumer and higher education as a market have tended to really emphasise the individual benefits of higher education. And of course, these are incredibly important, even life-changing. But I also think that we need to underline and restate the importance of higher education as a public good. Because we know that the benefits of higher education go far beyond the individual. The economic benefits of a more highly trained, better skilled, more innovative, more productive and flexible workforce have been demonstrated time and again. The social and cultural benefits, too, are incredibly significant. Lifelong learning creates stronger communities, better health and higher levels of well-being. It provides people from disadvantaged communities with the confidence and skills they need to improve their life-chances, and those of their children.

These are ideals which informed the expansion of higher education from the 1960s onwards, from building the redbricks and the polytechnics, to founding the Open University. This represented a huge expansion in the number and types of providers designed to appeal to as wide a student body as possible. Even when tuition fees were introduced, it was still widely recognised that the public benefits of higher education required public subsidies and public investment.

More recently, though, the focus has been first and foremost on the individual benefits of higher education. And important as those are, I think we also have to see the bigger picture: the very real economic, social and cultural benefits which the UK accrues from having a highly educated and skilled population. That means we should not have a society in which people only get the chance to go to university at eighteen, nor a one-size-fits-all model of higher education which assumes that everyone wants to leave home, study full-time and spend three years doing it. Certainly, the UK needs world-class traditional institutions designed for incredibly bright young people, like our present hosts. But we also need a thriving and diverse sector which allows people to study what they want, when they want and in the ways that they want.

Particularly since only a small fraction – around thirteen per cent – of people in the UK considering HE in the next five years are school leavers. The majority are working adults. Meanwhile, over the next thirty years, there will be thirteen million job vacancies but only seven million school leavers to fill them. So giving people the opportunities to retrain or upskill throughout their lives – not just at the start of their careers – is absolutely vital to our future economic success. Again, it's not only about the individual benefit, but about national prosperity as a whole.

The needs of part-time students

With this in mind, I want to reflect on what has happened to the numbers of part-time students in higher education over the past few years. The latest² data shows that last year, there were nearly a quarter of a million fewer students studying part time in the UK than there were in 2009 – a total decline of forty two per cent. The Higher Education Policy Institute has called this the single biggest problem facing higher education at the moment. That calls for a response right across the board – from politicians, policy makers, and employers as well as higher education institutions.

² HESA: In 2014/15 there were 244,000 fewer students studying part-time in the UK than there were in 2009/10 – a total decline of 42%.

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. Meanwhile, graduates who study part-time bring knowledge and skills from work which supports their studies, while their new skills make them even more employable. But at the same time, 'earn while you learn' is the only option for many students who can't afford to take several years off. All these are very powerful arguments for flexible policies which support part-time learning and reverse this trend.

Mature, part-time learners are often looking for something different from their younger counterparts. Those who are over forty-five at the start of their studies are three times more likely than full-time students (of any age) to study subjects allied to Medicine or Education³. Nursing is especially popular with mature part-time students: one in five of all new part-time students over forty-five signed up for a nursing qualification in 2013⁴.

The subjects they want to study are different, and the support they need is too. They need support at the very start to find out about lifelong learning. There is a woeful lack of information, advice and guidance for mature learners. They need support when they start their studies to gain the confidence and develop the study skills they need to succeed. And they need support and encouragement along the way to get through the challenges that balancing their studies alongside work and family commitments will generate.

Investing in this extra support for mature part-time learners pays dividends for the whole community. In 2014, the OU and Birkbeck University ran courses in Sure Start Children's Centres for parents of young children, on low-incomes to access higher education⁵. The motivation of the students was primarily to gain qualifications to get a better job. Few mentioned aspirations for their children or contributing to their community.

³ 2013/14, all UK by headcount of 1st year students (Jackson Carroll, SIO)

⁴ 19.6% on B700, 2013/14, all UK by headcount of 1st year students (Jackson Carroll, SIO)

⁵ <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cscthe/projects/Nuffield%20Report%2019%20March%202014.pdf>

However, by the end of the course over eighty per cent said they had higher educational aspirations for their children, and half reported that their children were more interested in learning. They helped their children with their school work with far greater confidence, and the visible effort that parents put in to studying made them a role model for studying for their school age children.

And many of the students went on to take on roles in their communities, from getting involved in running the Children's Centre, to applying what they had learnt on their Law course to engage in local activism and become a resource for the local community.

Funding higher education

The main reason for the stark decline in the number of part-time students has been changes to the funding regime, and particularly the increase in tuition fees. Those considering higher education while working are more likely to be debt averse, to already have significant financial responsibilities and living expenses, and also, to be less confident that they will succeed in higher education. As a result, they are less willing to take what they see as a risk in investing in their future. But part-time students should have the same rights and opportunities as other students. And the Open University, along with many others, was very vocal in arguing that part-time students should have the same access to student loans.

But there is much more to do to level the playing field. And the Government's recent policy changes are an important step in the right direction to addressing some of the unintended consequences of the current fees and funding regime. Making part-time students eligible for maintenance loans, for example, should help many thousands of people manage the costs of living while studying. The changes to ELQ rules, so that people wanting to study for a second degree in STEM subjects will be eligible for loans, is also very welcome. And of course, the introduction of loans to support postgraduate study is also very important.

I am pleased to say that there has been further recent evidence of government responsiveness to the concerns about the predicament of part-time and lifelong learning raised by the OU, among others. In the recent BIS grant letter to HEFCE the Government said it was "committed to supporting part-time and flexible learning in HE. Studying part time and later in life brings enormous benefits for individuals, the economy and employers.... We

ask the Council to support our ambitions in supporting part-time and flexible higher education". This encouraging statement was followed yesterday by an announcement in the red book to the Budget that "to promote retraining and prepare people for the future labour market, the government will review gaps in support for lifetime learning, including for flexible and part-time study". This review, which I understand will be an informal one, is a golden opportunity for those of us with concerns about lifetime learning, as the government is now calling it, to put forward a comprehensive range of remedies.

Let me get the ball rolling with a few ideas that the OU hopes this review will consider. There is a real demand from employers for dynamic, bitesize training. By making loans available for individual modules, rather than full qualifications, the Government could open up access to courses that provide specialist skills and enable hard-working people and their employers to reap the benefits sooner.

Creating a more coherent system of loan support across a variety of shapes and sizes of lifetime learning would take one naturally to the idea of lifetime learning accounts. The operational shortcomings of previous attempts to introduce such accounts should not prevent us from advocating their huge attractiveness in principle.

Much more could be done to make credit transfer accumulation and articulation work more effectively across the whole adult learning sector.

Digital systems that are friendly to learners and employers, that can support integrated loans and credit systems will be essential. The OU is keen to contribute its expertise in sector-supporting systems to assist with this.

However, financial support through loans, important though it is, is most valuable for those students who are willing and able to take on more debt. So the OU, along with others that do the heavy lifting in widening participation will be making the case again to government that the PM's support for a truly inclusive higher education sector and the new-found belief in part-time learning are directly contradicted by the proposed 50% cut to Student opportunity Funding over the life of this parliament.

Lifelong learning: The future

Digital technologies have genuinely exciting potential to offer that choice and flexibility, expanding education in an incredible democratic way, regardless of age, background, qualifications, experience or interests. The Open University has always been a pioneer in this

area – and with my background at the BBC, I’ve seen this from both sides. In fact, our partnership with the BBC remains one of our proudest achievements, and continues to be the route in for many of our non-traditional students. One student, Margo Morrison, started out by watching us on the television, began studying with us while working as a waitress and model, and is now a psychology graduate planning a career in psychotherapy. But without that chance encounter, she might never have embarked on her journey.

Now there are an infinite number of ways to access informal learning. Many of our students – regardless of age – access our information, course materials and teaching, through podcasts, YouTube videos and forms of social media. They complement, rather than replace, what we already do; but enable us to reach a far wider audience than ever before. In the UK, this is especially helpful for people who don’t have easy access to higher education institutions, or who find traditional forms of learning uninspiring or difficult – those who found school ‘boring’. But it’s also helping us to reach people around the world in incredibly important ways. For example, we are running really exciting online teacher training programmes in the developing world using smartphone technology.

But this isn’t just about expanding our reach – it’s also about enhancing 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.

I see a vital part of our commitment to lifelong learning as about equipping people to thrive in this digital world. Many of our students will graduate into highly specialised, technology dependent jobs. All of them will need the ability to critically assess, interpret and use the information online. For our older students, there are important arguments about social justice and social inclusion, ensuring they too have the skills to navigate the online world, without making patronising assumptions about them.

Building on our history of technological innovation, the Open University is doing some important pioneering work in this field. In 2013, we set up the UK’s first platform for massive open online courses. We prefer to think of this as a social learning platform, and we’ve found that one of the main benefits is that students learn as much from each other as from their teachers. Through this initiative, FutureLearn, we’ve brought together more than eighty 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 three million learners from over 200 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.

What they particularly value is the flexibility and low commitment. These online modules serve as a fantastic introduction to a topic, allowing people to work out if they want to develop their knowledge further or are simply content to pursue this for their own interest. As such, it represents an incredibly important step forward in our ability to tailor-make life-long learning in a genuinely personalised way. One of our students who suffers from a chronic and debilitating illness has studied subjects from Greek heroes to forensic psychology. The diversity of these subjects keep her interested and motivated, as well as connected to an incredibly rich and fulfilling online community.

So I think it's really important that we don't look down on online learning. There are some legitimate criticisms of MOOCs – but they are still new and improving all the time. Instead, we should celebrate them as the most open, accessible and democratic form of learning currently on offer – and recognise the incredibly important role they will have to play in life-long learning. And we see this as just one aspect of our efforts to improve our online offer. We want to maximise the benefits of technology across the board, to make learning faster, cheaper, more effective and more fun.

Conclusions

Life-long learning comes in many forms: but it's rarely what people think of as a traditional university education. It's part-time study, it's distance learning, it's online courses. It's people making the most of a second chance, or taking advantage of free time once children are older, or rediscovering the sheer joy of learning later in life. It's a tradesperson gaining the skills to grow their business, a new parent changing career, an experienced businessperson starting out on their own. It's a twentysomething catching up on the vital literacy skills they missed out on at school, an adult rediscovering long-forgotten abilities in maths, or a grandparent gaining the digital know-how to keep up with their grandchildren.

To meet all those needs, not only do we need the thriving diverse sector that I talked about before, we also need to be working together across the sector to ensure that no-one misses out. I believe that our efforts to support life-long learning and our efforts to widen participation have to go hand-in-hand. And I know that greater collaboration with other institutions has to be an important part of the answer. Our experience through the Social Partnerships Network is already giving us a lot of food for thought, and I am sure this event will also be really useful in terms of highlighting best practice and building new relationships.

I'm really looking forward to hearing from your expertise and examples, and am very much looking forward to working with you on this vitally important agenda.

Thank you very much.