

Charter Day 2016 – a Revolution of Rising Expectations

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you so much for taking the time to come and celebrate Charter Day with us.

An especially warm welcome to those of you who are joining us from around the UK and those linking up online.

Charter Day is the day when we pause to reflect on our past and our progress.

A year ago at Charter Day I was just a few weeks into my time here. You may recall I said then that I'd tell it how it is. And that I would love the OU and fight for the OU. I thought I'd give an update on those commitments.

So how's the loving going? And how's the fighting going?

First of all the loving.

Students, of course, come first. All round the UK I've met hundreds of the most inspiring, dedicated and hard-working people you could ever wish to come across. On Friday I presided at the first graduation of the year in London. One graduate as she stepped towards me was clearly overcome with emotion. "How were your studies?" I asked. "The OU literally saved my life" she replied. I could tell she literally meant literally. We say our learning can be life-changing. In that case it was also life giving.

I've particularly loved getting to know our top-class students union reps. I'd like to thank Ruth Tudor especially for her years of service to the OU Students Association.

And talking of students, I've loved being one myself. I have been taking M140 – an Introduction to Statistics. But when I was up at midnight trying to manipulate recalcitrant cress seeds on damp kitchen towel into flower pots I have to say the love was wearing a little thin. Thanks to my AL and module team on M140 for their tolerance of a learner VC. It has been great to meet hundreds of staff, in every possible role across the university. From security staff, gardeners, catering, recruitment, receptionists, accountants I have never

felt such universal dedication to a cause. I love the belief in every one of you in what this organisation stands for.

ALs are the bedrock of the organisation, holding the crucial relationship with our students. The hours you put in and the care you take over students stirs my heart. Thank you for all you do.

And last (to feel the love) – our wonderful central academics. You create the most brilliant learning experiences and your research is so smart. I'm getting to know you and your research better and loving that experience.

Thank you all for what you do. And thank you for your kindness and comradeship in my first year. I recognise that it has been a challenging year for the OU. Loving an organisation doesn't mean letting it stay the same. It is vital to improve things to allow our great organisation to survive and thrive. I continue to be prepared to make the decisions that are necessary to secure our future because the OU is worth fighting for.

There has been plenty of fighting. And it hasn't been my fight alone. We have all been fighting back at the OU and for the OU. Let's review where we are.

We haven't yet won the fight but I'd say we are winning. All across the UK the needs of mature and part-time students are being recognised more than they were. In Northern Ireland there is new funding available for part-timers. In Wales and Scotland threats to part-time support have been successfully seen off and the unique role of the OU specifically recognised by the governments in those countries. We sincerely hope that those improvements in the Celtic nations will be cemented after the elections next month.

From Westminster, it's been announced that new loans will be available for part-time students in England - for those who want to study a second degree in Science, Technology, Engineering or Maths, and for Masters students. The Prime Minister's commitment to promoting widening participation is welcome and an area where we have a really critical role.

And there are other positive signs for the future, as the Westminster Government has announced a review of life-time, flexible and part-time study across the board. We've got many policy ideas – improved credit transfer, collaborative outreach on access, further relaxation of the rules around Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (or ELQ) and finance being available to support modular study. We're going to fight even harder for those policy improvements in the year ahead.

So that's some of where we are today. But where are we heading to, as we finalise our new strategy for growth? That Students First Strategy. And how does that fit with our almost 50 year history, an institutional story of which we're all so proud? That 50th now just three years away.

I want to talk about aspects of the Open University which we need to build on as we work towards our fiftieth anniversary in 2019.

Those are, our community, our research and our ideas for the future.

It's clear to me that the sense of community is a great strength of the Open University, but it's also important that we act as one community, always respecting each other as individuals.

The last year has seen real challenges for our university community. We have taken some difficult decisions and this has shown that we sometimes struggle to communicate well, to really hear each other, across such a large and complex organisation. And I promise we will continue to learn from these experiences and do our best to keep effective two-way communication.

We can be a stronger community of learners, committed to helping each and every person realise their goals and fulfil their potential, both within the university and with our students. That concept of a learning community, including our students, all our teachers and the wider society of organisations and businesses our students are involved in is one that we can refine and enhance.

And that community should be as broad and inclusive as possible. I recently had the chance to see the work we are doing with prisons and prisoners. It was enormously moving to see how people were determined to use their new skills to get their lives back on track. Further afield, our programme with the British Council to support Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan is also incredibly important work that I'm particularly proud of.

We need to enhance our learning community further. For example, I'd like to see our alumni becoming a stronger presence in our community supporting newer students. At every graduation, those new alumni tell me how they'd like to give back, in kind, to the university. I want to ensure that our Associate Lecturers really feel an even more valued part of the community. And I want to make sure that of our colleagues across all four nations are equally connected. I want to see us making more connections; alumni as student mentors; Associate Lecturers as vital links to local employers; students at a later stage of study acting as buddies to those who are still finding their feet.

I hope the recent engagement on our future strategic direction showed the power of our community in action. Working together, we've been having a really constructive and important conversation about how we truly put students first. We've been talking about what sort of institution we are, what we want to be, and how we are going to get there.

All this is helping to develop an ambitious strategy to achieve, to quote, a vision of reaching more students with life-changing learning that meets their needs and enriches society. So our new student number targets for autumn 2016 are an audacious aim to increase our overall student body for the first time in many years. We will build on the great work we are already doing to ensure we keep as many students as possible with us. And we have some exciting new ideas about how we can improve direct contact between students and all academics – central, regional and ALs - (and more experienced students) to help them make the right study choices. Do please get involved in these new course choices sessions.

Now I'd like to reflect on our research.

Our research is perhaps the best-kept secret about the Open University, at least in the world outside. Generally people know us for our commitment to access and inclusion, for our teaching and television programmes and for the fantastic graduates who go out into the

workplace. But they are less familiar with our incredible research. And I think it's time that changed.

Because our research is central to who we are and what we do. It is consistently advancing knowledge and understanding across a wide range of fields. It helps to enrich our teaching, our student experience and the wider society.

Some quick examples: The ExoMars orbiter; currently on its way to sniff out life on Mars, carrying with it a bit of the OU. Using a methane sniffing instrument developed by OU space-scientists. This world-leading research keeps us firmly in the public eye, helping raise awareness amongst prospective students.

Closer to home, our researchers are working on real-world problems affecting society. Take our team of medical scientists working under Dr Cheryl Hawkes, doing ground breaking work on the prevention and treatment of Alzheimer's disease. Or the multi-disciplinary team of healthcare professionals researching autism in Ethiopia, raising awareness, developing training materials and improving the quality of life for many families.

For students our work as a lead partner on An Adaptive Trust-based E-assessment System for Learning - or TeSLA for short - sets us on a three-year mission to ensure the reliability and credibility of online learning tests and exams, by creating a system of anti-cheating technology including facial, voice and keystroke recognition.

We are one of the major contributors to the 'The Conversation' which makes academic research readily available on-line. Articles by the Open University were read more than four million times over the past year. They range from breath-taking satellite photography of volcanic activity to the more down to earth problem of whether Christmas tree lights can interfere with Wi-Fi signals.

Today we see the culmination of our first 'My Pledge' initiative: each of us making a commitment to a positive change for the better. My own 'Pledge' is to get to know the Open University's research better.

I want to know more about the people behind that research - better understanding your motivations, your ideas and how your work can make a difference in the world.

As we look forward to our 50th anniversary, and plot and plan our future, I'd like us to take inspiration again from our glorious past in helping develop more great ideas for the future.

There are few more glorious names in our pantheon than Lord Asa Briggs who sadly died just over a month ago. He played a key role on the planning committee that created the OU and subsequently was the university's Chancellor for 15 years. Of course he was also a distinguished historian and scholar, including of our great partners the BBC.

I've been doing some research and looking back at some of Lord Briggs' writings on the OU, in particular a lecture he gave in 1985. From Asa's account some things were strikingly familiar at that time –arguments about the importance of employability, new relationships with industry and cuts from a Conservative government. But there were big differences. For instance, back then the internet was no more than a gleam in the eye, but Briggs was a visionary. He predicted that TV would play a lesser role and he saw in education that “more personalised communication, more scattered and two-way communication will become increasingly important and the OU should be in the lead”.

How remarkable to have that brilliant foresight thirty years ago. And to have that ambition, to “be in the lead”. He called it “our own revolution of rising expectations”.

We can and will have that ambition again. To have leadership in digital innovation, to grow our student numbers again, to proudly say we are the UK's most popular university, the one that makes the biggest difference to the lives of its students.

I am confident in the spirit of Briggs and our charter founders that the university can reclaim that ambition. And we can do it, with a little bit of love, and quite a fight.

Thank you