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Speech by Peter Horrocks, Vice-Chancellor of The Open University, at the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities conference, Milton Keynes.

The future for Open and Distance Universities. Discussing the move from the University of the Air to the University of the Cloud.

Welcome to The Open University. It is a real pleasure to be here with you for the 30th anniversary conference of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. And it is a great honour to be hosting this event here in Milton Keynes.

We are proud to be different by design. Design principles are an important part of what is happening at the University and that goes back to the founding of the University.

The idea that radio and television could be used to bring education to a wide audience began a long time ago with radio in the 1920s, but it was not until the 1960s that the idea gained momentum.

Back then, the Labour party under Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to take action and address the continuing exclusion from higher education of people from lower income groups.

Wilson later recalled: "That Easter Sunday in 1963 I spent in the Isles of Scilly. Between church and lunch I wrote the whole outline for a University of the Air. That's what led to the creation of The Open University, in 1969."

We were disruptive and revolutionary in our use of technology back then, and as we approach our 50th year, we intend to be disruptive and revolutionary again, to transform the life chances of tens of thousands of future students. When we are thinking of change, it is important that our own enthusiasm for it should not run away with itself. It should be for the sake of our students and for our mission. I am privileged to be in the position of awarding degrees to many thousands of OU students, many of whom have conditions, mental health conditions or other disabilities – and everything we are doing to change and improve this University is about ensuring those prospects continue to be strong.

At a time of unprecedented change and recognising future economic challenges, we have a crucial role to play in helping employers and employees respond to the rapid rise in automation which is expected to sweep away millions of existing jobs.

The ability for people to upskill and reskill will become crucial in ways we can't yet predict, and where students will need to be equipped to thrive as digitally-enabled citizens - people who are not just victims of digital change, but people who can take advantage of it.

Our Universities are ideally placed to give people hope in this time of general uncertainty.

We can and should help tackle this economic inequality from this employment disruption, and the resulting social inequality, by creating a positive digital learning experience and building essential digital skills – truly modernising our missions for this Century.

In talking about the future of open and distance education universities, there is a quote that comes to mind from a writer and thinker who helped shape much of the transformation that happened in the knowledge sector in which I worked until three years ago – the news media.

It is from internet observer Clay Shirky who suggests that ‘It’s when a technology becomes normal, then ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen.’

My previous role, if I may digress, but in a way that I hope you will see is relevant, was as Director of the BBC World Service, part of BBC News the largest international news organisation in the world with the world’s most trusted news brand.

Prior to that I ran the BBC newsroom where I carried out the most significant transformation in the history of BBC News when it moved from operating primarily as a broadcaster across TV and radio, with online (as we called it then) tacked on - to being a completely multimedia news organisation exploiting all its distribution platforms.

But more significantly using the capabilities of digital media to their full – by which I mean interactivity, direct contribution from the audience, collaborative newsgathering and a levelling of the relationship between institution and audience/consumer.

In the media world in which I first worked in the 1980s, looking back on it, there was an inbred arrogance – a sense that the producer knew best and that the consumer rarely answered back. Maybe that is familiar?

The media’s first ventures into the internet largely involved replicating analogue formats and putting them online – PDFs of newspaper front pages, broadcast news re-written for online, but once a normal bulletin had been broadcast.

Initially, in my experience, BBC broadcast journalists were suspicious of and even somewhat sneering towards the internet. They simply saw it, if they were prepared to involve themselves in it at all, as just a redistribution mechanism of their primary broadcast output. But that soon started to change and it was consumers and their consumption habits which started to change things.

I recall the BBC’s then UK political editor, Nick Robinson, starting to blog (this was pre-Twitter). He would post updates after he had picked up initial political intelligence in the morning. He found that political insiders would contact him either privately or online, adding information or possibly contradicting the initial account he had published.

By making his journalism more open and more contingent he gathered more information and tested his thinking, so that by the end of the day when he came to broadcast on the “conventional” broadcast bulletin he would not only have provided a better and faster news service during the day but his final polished TV output would have benefitted by that open testing and development.

What the earlier Shirky quote suggests is that we don’t need to invent some radical vision of the future in order to think how we should be changing. Rather we need to look around us carefully now and observe what is interesting and extrapolate from there.

So, I suggest, looking at trends in knowledge sectors – publications, books, music - that have changed earlier and faster, such as the news media, can provide lessons for universities. I realise that it can be sacrilegious in some academic circles to draw comparisons with media, content and indeed the news.

News of course is ephemeral and inevitably less perfect or polished than carefully crafted academic content. But there are at least some lessons.

Firstly, the cultural ones. In parts of academia, although thankfully less so in distance and online universities, there is still a patrician culture, *de haut en bas*, in terms of professional practice. That we are the intellectual priesthood, dispensing tablets of knowledge. Of course we need to treasure our expertise and our standards. But when we are teaching people who are often mature, who have their own experience of life and work, we have to be more modest. And the internet and interactivity keeps us honest and modest.

And we need to be aware that we are competing with news media, and other content, for the attention of students, either in the initial choice of whether they sign up for our courses or for their attention when attractive content is drawing them away from their studies once they are taking a course.

So why don't we care even more about how readable, how visual, how stimulating and grabby, how entertaining or provocative our courses are? And do our materials always have to be absolutely perfect, especially if perfection is costly and slow, unresponsive and non-topical? Good enough content, I'm afraid to say, has a huge following. Just look at YouTube. And when it is online if it needs improving, it can be done easily.

I always told BBC journalists and producers that making content attractive was not a contradiction with quality, it is not selling out or dumbing down, it is an essential accompaniment. If you don't make academic content and the learning experience as stimulating and modern as the other content choices in the lives of students, don't be surprised if students lose attention or drop out.

Of course the immediacy of the feedback of on-line helps enormously as we can know at once what is working for students.

I hope you can see how many of those cultural and professional practice issues in other content fields have a direct application to universities and distance learning. Too many of us are still working in a mindset where we see digital as a cost effective alternative to the traditional pedagogy of distance learning books and materials.

At the centre of the UK Open University's changes in the months and years ahead will be to exploit fully the affordances of digital to the learning needs of future society and future students. Of course, we will take into account concerns about delivering for our existing students and make sure that the transition to that more fully digitally designed world is carried out carefully, carrying them with us.

The vision we have is of truly collaborative digital learning communities, where students learn from each other, their employers, their peers who are further advanced in their studies and alumni, as well of course their teachers, will create a pedagogy that is fit for a fully digital world.

When I meet our students and award them their degrees and they tell me they have flown in from Brazil, or Mozambique, and they have benefited from a truly global learning experience – that is the world of work so many people now live in. Where attending a conventional university with people from a very similar background, with

similar levels of prior qualifications, all going through the same social experience at the same age, will be seen for what it can be – too homogenous, too identikit, not diverse and varied in the way the world now is.

So it is not the radical, niche technologies that should interest us, but rather those that have the possibility to become, as Shirky has it, 'boring'. The basic attributes of digital that can reform learning have not changed significantly since the beginning of social media about ten years ago. It is just that they are not fully adopted in our learning practices.

With this in mind I will also add the usual caveat that attempting to predict the future is nearly always foolhardy, and so I will limit my conjectures to thinking about two aspects: the main areas that we might suggest will drive change within open and distance universities; and the context within which those universities are operating.

To look at the first of these, what are the current trends, developments or technologies that might represent what William Gibson described as the future that is already here.

There are three broad elements of particular interest to open and distance universities that I will highlight, although there are undoubtedly more we could address. These are Data, Openness and Flexibility.

To take the first of these, data, it is a commonplace to observe that the generation, analysis and interpretation of data is now a significant factor in society in a manner it was not just ten years ago. There is talk of data capitalism, data surveillance and data as the new oil. But what does this mean for universities, and in particular ones operating at a distance?

There are undoubted benefits we can give to our students in a data rich world, via learning analytics. At the Open University we are aligning analytics with learning design to help us inform which designs are more effective in retaining students and meeting their needs.

We can tell which elements of a course are aligned with effective performance and which ones are less well correlated. This is the type of feedback we have never managed before when we were sending out boxes of printed materials. The critical thing is to show students that their experience with something that for some of them is less familiar is going to create benefits for them.

And this type of feedback changes the definitions of our engagement with students and our ability to be able to respond to their needs. Our previous techniques for capturing student feedback would involve them completing a written, then later online, survey after taking a module, quite often a long time after their learning experience in question. Those feedback methods inevitably require some effort on the part of the student and the face to face focus group necessarily involves a behaviour – travelling to a physical point - that inevitably excludes certain categories of students.

We are now introducing much more immediate forms of response (I'm not sure that feedback is an accurate term any more, as this is now a less deliberate process for students) We are capturing immediate response data. For instance on our Student Home help page students are asked to click a simple green thumbs-up or red thumbs-down to indicate whether their query has been answered effectively.

Our teams monitor those "thumbs" in real time and refine responses in turn and feedback issues immediately to the learning/module teams. We intend to roll out this approach from our student experience site to all of the virtual learning environment next

year, in time for our main autumn presentation, so that we can be responding to students and improving their learning experience in real time.

We are also able to use data to help inform our tutors, our Associate Lecturers, about their students. Of course, Associate Lecturers have their own direct relationships with students who are studying most intensively or enthusiastically – but it is the students who are not engaging and the data that is not being created on our system that can help tutors intervene positively.

And we should also be generous and non-proprietary with the data we give to students to help them monitor and shape their own learning.

To now consider Openness. Openness now comes in many different forms, it is not just about the open access to higher education it was when the OU was founded. Now it covers open educational resources, MOOCs, open access publications, open textbooks and open educational practice.

In this, open universities need to continue to adapt and be involved in the changing nature of openness in higher education. The adoption of elements of openness across the higher education sphere really hints at a much bigger shift, which is the blurring of boundaries.

This brings me onto the third element, that of flexibility. This can come in many different forms. The open model of education has always been about flexibility - allowing students to choose from a range of courses, to take a break in their study, to combine different size courses.

However, we need to challenge ourselves. When we have asked our students and our potential students about flexibility they have told us that the flexibility is often only a flexibility that is on the university's terms, not on theirs. Some students want to speed up their study, others want to be able to slow it down. Some want the option to be able to do both, according to the circumstances of their lives. And this is where digital's infinite flexibility will be the servant of the student's demand for flexibility.

This challenges the traditional assumptions of the academic year that are still built into the mindset of many academics. And it challenges us to offer a varied and flexible experience that might make us have to be more flexible than we have been used to.

I come from a digital news media environment where the expectation of immediate high quality content on the terms of the audience were gradually adopted by the organisation – an organisation that had been used to serving the news at a time when the BBC was ready to give it to people. That revolution happened in news at least 15 years ago. Universities are just about catching up.

But we will in the future push this flexibility further as students and employers demand it. For instance we are, as many of you are I expect, exploring flexible forms of Assessment. Can we accredit much more learning from elsewhere? Can we assess and offer credit for practical learning from the workplace on a much more systematic and responsive basis? Can we give the student a more flexible choice of assessment? Are we prepared to move from assessment “of learning” to assessment “for learning”?

The use of data, open resources and artificial intelligence has the potential to offer students different types of content within an overall course structure, better personalised to their interests and needs.

We need to consider these three elements in relation to a final aspect - the context within which universities operate, and the changing nature of society.

We live in a world where fake news and the negative role of social media sometimes determine public policy. I suspect that quite a large number of us in this room were naturally early techno-optimists. But as the polarising, degrading and demeaning aspects of extreme opinions and abusive content online undermine the cohesion of societies I believe that there is a natural swing towards techno-pessimism.

But the overwhelming shift towards a digital world cannot be held back just because we have some reservations and we should not despair. We need to be as committed to creating a constructive information society in the digital world as we have been over centuries IRL. And we will succeed in our civilising role.

All universities, but particularly I believe, open and distance ones who have a purpose in educating the wider population, have a particular role in helping to produce graduates who understand how to make effective use of these tools in their education, but also in being good networked citizens.

Here at The Open University we are trying to respond to these challenges while retaining our core mission of offering higher education to all, regardless of background or previous qualifications.

We want to transform the University of the Air envisaged by Harold Wilson in the 1960s to a University of the Cloud – a world-leading institution which is digital by design and has a unique ability to teach and support our students in a way that is responsive both to their needs and those of the economy and society.

Open and Distance education universities face an exciting and challenging time. Exciting in that they hold much of the expertise and practice needed to address many of the challenges facing higher education and society in general. Challenging in that they no longer hold a monopoly on much of this and must adapt to new market forces and pressures.

Sometimes, in the course of a day's graduation ceremonies, I shake hands with 800 successful students who have gone through OU study. They tell me about what they have done to cope with the death of a child, with an abusive partner, a mental health condition, their autism, their bi-polar disease. It is because all of my colleagues are committed to serving those individuals in the future that we are going to be prepared to make the changes that are necessary in order to support them and support our mission.

Let me conclude by telling you what I said to this university when I told them about the main directions of what we have called OU Redesign – OUR:

“I believe that the OU can have the most positive educational impact of any organisation in the world.

We can develop the next generation of digital learners, workers and leaders.

We can demonstrate that digital can be a force for good in a world that feels more uncertain than ever.

Now is our chance, not just to catch up with our competitors, but to leap ahead and return to the pioneering dynamic that defined our beginnings.

But I hope you will agree that it's an aspiration worth fighting for; for our students and for society for our next 50 years - and beyond.”

Thank you very much.

