PhD Pioneers:
The Living Experiences of The Open University's First PhD Graduates

Oral History interview transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Professor Oliver Boyd-Barrett**
Interviewed by: **Elizabeth Currie**
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My name is Liz Currie. I'm a visiting researcher for The Open University recording an interview for the Looking Back at the First OU PhDs project on 6th April. Oliver, if you'd like to introduce yourself please.

Yes. So my name is Oliver Boyd-Barrett, of course. Only that's a lie because actually it's Joseph Oliver Boyd-Barrett, but for reasons we don't need to go into my parents decided they preferred the second to the first Christian name so everyone therefore knows me as Oliver Boyd-Barrett and yes I am very happy to say that I earned my PhD from The Open University in 1978. I believe. I hope Liz you've got the date there in front of you. And my PhD concerned the international news agencies. That is people like Reuters and Agence France Presse and Associated Press and this research was the first substantial attempt that I know of, that I still know of, to talk about how these institutions operate and still operate in the world.

Thank you, that's fab, OK. Thank you for that introduction. So we're going to move on to the questions if you're comfortable. So the first question is a very loose one, just tell me about the area you were born and your family and their relationship with higher education.

Yes. So my family was mainly Dublin-based, had been for at least 200 to 300 years based in Dublin after a family called Boyd married a family called Barrett. And my immediate family I think we can describe it as a professional family, but none of us had much familiarity at all with higher education, with universities. My father was an accountant. He trained, he was an apprentice to an accountancy firm in Dublin when he was a very young man, I don't suppose he was much older than a teenager at that time, and my mother I think her schooling probably stopped around the age of 16 again in Dublin. And I was the youngest of a family of the four children that they had and I was the only one of the four to get a university degree; unfortunately sad to say because all of them, each of them would have been totally

capable of doing that. Having said that, in the broader family we did have, two of my uncles were architects and they pursued their professional studies to I would have thought, I'm not sure totally, but they pursued their studies at least to the equivalent of a degree, I would say, including in both cases the Dublin School of Art and I know that one of those two architects did continue professional studies in Britain. And I also had another uncle who was, and unfortunately I don't know too much about him, but I know that he did have a PhD. Again he was based in Dublin for much of his career, but I'm pretty sure that his PhD came from a British university, but unfortunately I don't know which one. And then yet another relative, he was actually a great uncle, not an uncle, also, he became a, he was a Jesuit priest and ultimately later became quite a successful author of history books and also of religious related books as well. And although as far as I know he didn't get a degree, nonetheless I think we can safely say that he was an intellectual.

So, through those kind of links and others from a fairly early age I became aware of and I think grew to admire those members of my family beyond my immediate family, primary family, I did become aware of these other people who to an extent we can describe them as intellectuals. And strangely three of them, because there's one other person I haven't mentioned, but three of them were architects, which has always struck me as rather odd.

What made you decide to think about going to university when you were younger?

I don't think I was ever naturally oriented to being an intellectual, but I did become, in my early teenage years I did become very religious. But it was a very Catholic household, we were very much Irish Catholics, so Catholicism was something you just didn't question. And I burrowed into that tradition as a young teenager. And that inspired me to study harder because up until then my scholarly aptitude we can safely say was abysmal. I would be one of those who would stand outside the headmaster's office every Monday morning waiting to be caned for my

transgressions the week before. So through religion I found the inspiration to study harder, to do better, and in time that led to better result academically, did a reasonably good performance in O-level and A-level and was then able to apply to university and was accepted at the University of Exeter, which is where I took my first degree.

And what did your family, your parents particularly and your siblings think about you doing higher education?

I think they were proud, I think they were slightly bemused, I'm sure I probably irritated the hell out of them on the basis [silence 0:07:29] for my enthusiasm for what I was learning, because I took a degree in sociology. But by and large they were proud. Even if not terribly good, not for any palpability of their own, but they were simply so unfamiliar with the world of higher education that I couldn't really look to them for guidance on university-related matters or my future career in the university world. But pride certainly, yeah.

OK. So you studied sociology you said at the undergraduate level. And I know we've touched a bit on why you decided to study for an undergraduate degree, is there anything else you can add to that about what made you decide to take that next step to higher education?

Yes. I gave that a matter of thought, which I look back on and I'm surprised I gave thought very much to anything other than just getting through exams. But I do remember struggling with this because my clear orientation was to history. That was what I was really good, at least in terms of passing exams and other school work. But something told me, I came across the term sociology when I was in the sixth form and it seemed as I remember someone else describing sociology as a bag of crisps, every single crisp in the bag is really quite exciting and full of taste and it crackles and it's got salt and all the rest of it, and that seemed, so it was quite exciting in that respect. But also more importantly, more seriously I thought,

I many times regretted this decision and this logic, but I thought that sociology would be more relevant to a world that I knew was vastly changing and changing at great speed, and sociology seemed to give me greater purchase into understanding the world as it is. And I also thought that somehow it would be more practical, they'd be more of a hands-on element to sociology than history.

So that's the reason. But as I say many times later I regret that, because I've come to admire the importance of history and I think I probably could have been a reasonably good historian and I might have been more satisfied with my achievements had I gone down the history route than the sociology route.

OK. So that's quite an interesting thing to say that you would have, I don't know, you're not satisfied with your achievements at the undergraduate level.

Oh I think at the under, well that's true too, yes I found the University of Exeter, people expected me to get a first, but I came out with a 2:1. And quite possibly had I taken a different, had I taken the history route that I think probably would have been better for me at that level.

And what about later on in terms of you feeling that you haven't achieved what you could have done?

So ultimately I ended up as a media scholar, which is a very interesting field and it covers disciplines of sociology and economics and politics. It really is a truly trans-trust disciplinary, focus of interest. But my focus, certainly when I was studying the news agencies, my focus was on trying to understand them as operating institutions in the now. I needed to know the basic business model and the professional model and it was very much a present focus; although I also had, I needed to find out a lot about their history and I needed to write a lot about their history. And I many times since felt that had I, well I'm saying this more assertively

than I mean, I many times come across histories of these particularly institutions and other media that leave me feeling very impressed indeed and showing me sources that had I known better. Had I been more of a history scholar, I would have known better where to look, where to go to get them. Or what to do when I couldn't get them, because that's often, you're probably very well aware of this, I can see sometimes it requires great ingenuity to persevere in the apparent absence of documentation.

So that was something I came across very early on in my news agency research. So many times I thought oh my goodness if only I'd been a professional historian I would have come up with something more substantial and something that I could feel more comfortable with. But then on the other hand I wouldn't have had the tools that sociology offers to prise into and to investigate things that are I suppose to things that once were, even though those two things of course are intimately interconnected. So I have mixed feelings. But you touch on an interesting topic that's my struggle between sociology and history.

Well I think that's very interesting, we might come back to that as we go along if you'd like to. So let's move on to why you decided to do a PhD.

Right, well in thinking about this interview one thought I have is that, I mentioned a moment ago that I was the only one in my immediate family to go to university. And the whole business of university I found quite intimidating actually. I think intimidating is quite a good word to use. Even though I came from what most people would regard as a very professional, middle class family and all of that. And I still felt, because no one had any familiarity with universities and besides which in this time the notion of university was spreading out to a wider part of the, it wasn't Oxford and Cambridge anymore, we were into the red bricks I suppose and approaching the plate glass era so to speak as far as universities were concerned. So it was very unfamiliar and I, at one time my father had encouraged me to think

about applying to Oxford or Cambridge, and I might have had a chance, I don't know.

But I was, again partly because I simply didn't know enough. I didn't know how to do it. I didn't have enough information. I wasn't at a school which remotely expected anyone to go to Oxford or Cambridge. They barely expected anyone to go to university, it was a Roman Catholic, run by the Salesian Order, very good Order by the way, I've got no complaints about their education other than it just wasn't geared to preparing people for university. And certainly not for [silence 0:16:08] study. So I quickly shied away from persevering with the notion of Oxford or Cambridge because it would have required some additional exams, some additional entrance tests. And that scared the be Jesus out of me, so I just went the easy route and went with the first university that would have me based on the anticipated A-level results.

And that sense of being intimidated by the whole world of universities continued even after I got my degree at Exeter; whereas, anyone who was inclined to move ahead into the university world, even then would have been advised to look around for suitable master's programmes and then perhaps to go on to do PhD study. But I wasn't into that. I even remember at the end of my first degree getting an offer to go to UCLA. But once again just through sheer sense of being overawed by this giant step of going to America, strangely enough of course I ended up in America and not that far away from UCLA, but at that time it just seemed so daunting, I didn't, I got the offer, but I didn't follow it up. And instead I applied for, I don't regret this, it was actually probably a good thing, I applied for a job as a research assistant just on the basis of my first degree with a gentleman that's turned out to be one of the founding fathers of British Media Sociology and a fine scholar, Jeremy Tunstall. And he had advertised for this research assistantship at the University of Essex and gave me the job.

And I worked with him for a year and a half I think it was. He was writing a book. It was the first ever book, a sociology book, first ever book, first ever study of its kind actually, of British journalists or at least of Fleet Street journalists. The first attempt actually to find out how this job is done other than what journalists themselves said they were doing in their autobiographies, which of course is a totally different thing to how journalism is actually practised. So Tunstall had set off on that really, really interesting, and I was fascinated by that genuinely and so very happy to have got that job. And he, now the interesting thing about Jeremy who was a Cambridge graduate, but he himself didn't have a PhD. He had gotten this far into his university career. He may have had a master's at this point, I don't remember, but he definitely didn't have a PhD. And he wasn't the only one. There were two or three other people who are now regarded as very strong scholars in media sociology but they didn't have PhDs. James Halloran at the University Leicester who founded the Centre for Mass Communication Research, he was the same. So this sense, so this was good for me because I wasn't, this wasn't someone who was saying to me, oh you've got to get your master's, you've got to go and get a PhD, he was basically saying I think inasmuch as I got any messages, find something you're interested in, study it hard and write a book about it.

And so that was good, I had some very good experiences working for him. He entrusted me to interview certain categories of specialist correspondent, including Labour correspondents and fashion correspondents and foreign correspondents in Bonn and in Rome. Then that project came to an end. Sometime later, there was a bit of a gap, but sometime later Jeremy moved to The Open University. And he was one of the founding academics of The Open University and in particular of the Faculty of Social Science at Walton Hall. And he wrote a book about that experience called "The Open University Opens". Probably a very interesting volume [unclear 0:21:16], well you may very well know it. He wasn't, there were some other authors, I don't remember their names now, it was a jointly authored book as best I recall. And then it wasn't immediately, but sometime later he was successful in getting some funding from the Leverhulme Trust for a project that

would have to do with the international news agencies. He advertised for a position for somebody to manage that project, and I was very fortunate to, I applied for the job and I was very fortunate to be offered it.

So this is in 1971 I actually, although I'm continuing to live in London for the first year or so, that's how I came to be associated with The Open University in a full-time research capacity. The funding for that lasted a total of four years, so it was quite generously funded. And as time went on Jeremy did, he began to encourage me to think about getting a higher degree. I think overall the thought of having to worry about that totally appalled me, but I could see he had to be right. He was saying well I'm probably the last of a generation who can survive in this game without a higher degree, without a PhD anyway and maybe you should think about it and hey The Open University offers a route to do a PhD so why don't you sign up? So I did. As best I recall throughout the entire four-year period, and perhaps you would know the answer to this, I don't recall, I didn't have to pay any money for this. Because that was another, always another consideration, how much is this going to cost? Would I be able to afford this? But I don't remember having to pay anything. Perhaps that was because I was a full-time researcher and therefore eligible to study without having to pay for the fees. I think that was probably it. So that was very attractive. So that definitely made it very attractive to study at The Open University.

And then the conditions were not onerous. Apart from the research I was already doing for the project on international news agencies, there were courses that I was encouraged to take and I think I did go on one or two conferences or brief research training courses, but I don't recall, you know, these days with tour degrees as you very well know and indeed here in the States the common pattern is you have a PhD which is primarily taken up with coursework, but then you at the end for the last year or so the students are focusing in on their research and they do produce original research. But nothing like what I was doing which is a big, big project with some funding behind it that took four years to complete. I'm trying to remember

now where I was going with all of this, but I think I do want to say that you see I already had 18 months of very valuable experience looking at how Jeremy operated. And when I think back, even now and I've said this, once or twice I've had occasion to actually say this in writings of my own, I think back and he was very much your British empirical social investigator. He was in the, the name Rowntree comes to mind, but he was following the steps of the great British empiricists when it came to trying to understand how society works. And I picked that up, I wish I had picked up more of it, but I certainly picked up that and I learnt a great deal from his approach to Empirical Sociology. He wasn't much of, I would say he wasn't much into theory, grand theorising; he was very much feet on the ground and walking through the muddy field and talking to the cow hands. And that was his approach and I've always hugely respected that. And that was at least the equivalent in terms of his learning value as an MA would have been.

But for the rest of it what I would have had, I had Jeremy who was my supervisor for the project and also for my PhD, of course he has long left The Open University many decades ago, although he is still alive, and then there was Ken Thompson, I'm not quite sure whether he's still around these days, probably not, but he was also a supervisor, who became very well published in his career at The Open University and had previously been a journalist as well so that was valuable having Ken on this project. And there were other people too, very solid scholars and researchers, they would have been in any institution and The Open University should have been proud and I'm sure was proud to have had them, because these people I think helped to give the institution the status and the credibility that it really needed to get started.

So I would have regular meetings with these gentlemen either in London or at Walton Hall and ultimately just began to, I think I had quite positive feelings about a lot of this experience and as I think back very impressed by the quality of the minds that I was able to interact with at Walton Hall, these guys would have been top anywhere. And on the other hand, the downside was they hadn't been through

the, they could help me to some extent, but ultimately I did feel I was on my own and I'm not saying this was a bad thing, but ultimately I did feel I was on my own in trying to make sense of what it was I was doing, of the information I was gathering, largely interview material, but also a lot of documentary material as well as published histories of these four organisations. But how to make sense of it for the first time, at a time where there weren't, you could count on your fingers really the number of people who were doing anything remotely comparable anywhere, how to make sense of it.

And that I struggled with and it was frightening, but I did it. I came up with something, I came up with a framework which I think it wasn't bad, that was the basis of a very, what turned out to be a very long dissertation, two volumes, I don't remember how many, I don't remember how many thousands of words, but I think it was probably twice as long as The Open University guidelines recommended. But ultimately out of that came my first publication, my book which was a great deal shorter mercifully for reader, not short enough for most people. But would I have gotten better advice would I have been, who knows, it's all a matter of if. So we're talking about an institution which is only beginning to emerge, no one really understands what it's about and where it can go, namely The Open University, these guys sort of inventing sociology as they went along and in a way inventing it through the courses that they produced for The Open University which kind of define the field now. So with all those struggles that they were having and then me with my adult struggles just working on this particular project.

But ultimately I think it was a good experience and I think the work that came out of it for me has stood the test of time reasonably well. It's contributed to the literature on international news agencies and on the media. It's attracted this field of enquiry, has attracted a lot of other scholars. And I would say most of them interestingly enough in the light of our previous conversation most of those later scholars have been historians. I don't know quite what that tells you, but it's interesting related to the struggle I had about choosing between sociology and

history. On the other hand had I chosen history I would not have ended up with Jeremy Tunstall and Ken Thompson and Graham Sullivan and the others of that era and I think that would have been a pity.

Do you have any specific enduring memories of being at the OU, something that you can paint a picture of?

Yeah it's much easier for me with reference to a later period because I did go back, even before the project had come to an end, totally had come to an end, that the project, officially the funding came to an end, the last year of the project actually was conducted from the City University in London because Jeremy had, I think it was a professorship, he'd picked up a professorship there. So I followed him to the City for the final year. But then after that I got a job at the, for the School of Education at The Open University. There wasn't anything else going that I could find at that time. It wasn't a particularly good time actually for getting jobs, for getting full-time teaching jobs. And then I spent several decades at The Open University in the School of Education. So I've got many, many memories of all of that. But I look back to the initial exposure to The Open University and what it felt like so to speak, it was just a very human, interpersonal relationship with all the ups and downs that that entails with these two or three very salient individuals in my life, and struggling with what was, I think anyone could agree, was a really interesting but really challenging topic, that is to say these four very important institutions that together define what the world is all about on a day-to-day basis.

And so my main memory therefore is one of struggles, Walton Hall, so vague memories of Walton Hall before much of the current building was up; certainly not the BBC, the BBC was still based in Alexandra Palace in London at those days which is actually quite close to where we lived, my wife and I in Wood Green. The fairly frequent car journeys up to Walton Hall, I remember that. Sometimes getting involved in periphery in course team meetings, so probably the atmosphere at Walton Hall has changed considerably in the digital age, but in those days, so I

was still working on the project when I became a member of, it did eventually become a course, the history of it was somewhat chequered, on Mass Communication and Society was the third, what I now call a level 3 course. I can't remember now what we call them at The Open University. And it was first of all chaired by Jeremy, but then later on it was chaired by another founding father of media sociology, Michael Gulevich, an American. And we had people like James Curran was on the team, not that he was Open University, and Janet Woodacott, some pretty big names in the field.

And so I got exposure to that. I got exposure to that model of producing knowledge. Even if it's teaching knowledge still they were defining fields of enquiry that would have a huge impact as much on other academics I think as on the students who took these courses. And funding, funding through the BBC, funding for quite serious projects. Like, for example, I wasn't involved with it directly, but very impressed by it, Janet Woodacott and I think it's Bennett, Tony Bennett, that's it, Tony Bennett another big name. And he and Janet did, together with Michael Gulevich, they did a case study of the making of one of the Bond movies, this was big stuff, what other academics get access to the production team of a Bond movie? I think back to it, wow, gee ain't that amazing? So that was really educational with a capital E. But other than that, no it's just that word, that lonely, that very intimate relationship that one has with a supervisor or supervisors, that lonely feeling of heavy burden of responsibility to actually make meaning out of something that other people didn't know what the meaning was either and they assumed that you would find it, that I would find a way of framing it. And ultimately I did.

Well you mentioned your wife, what was happening in your private life alongside, if you want to talk about that with me.

Yes, so I was two years into the project when I met my wife Leah, she was a graduate of, a music graduate from Vassar in the United States. And we got

married in the summer of 1973, we were living in, as I mentioned a moment ago, we were living in London, moved to Wood Green, close to, not to be close to Alexandra Palace but it was just a place that we could afford in Wood Green. And then towards the end, I think it was, yes our first child was born in 1977, so that was just after the project had concluded. So all of that was going on as well, life in general was going on in the background and. But then one thing, what I feel now is not so much about this particular period, which I think would have been fairly challenging for anyone, but about the whole Open University experience as I look back on it. And so this is incorporating not just the PhD period, but my experience later on working as a lecturer and so on at The Open University was how incredibly privileged we were.

Privileged because we had so much time, of course we had to write for courses and we had to pursue our academic careers, but equally we had an incredible degree of freedom to do what we wanted essentially, but you had to be mature enough to know how to seize that opportunity. And regrettably I wasn't mature enough and I abused the freedom and the privileges that we had, but that's what I recall. And I don't suppose that was in the minds of the people who [silence 0:39:48], but that's what they produced for the first few decades of that institution's existence, they produced an incredibly comfortable, secure shell for people to do incredible things if they could find what those incredible things should be. And most of us have a sense of there is something incredible here to be done, but I don't think many of us actually did them and that's a huge regret I have. But I also, well there's also a sort of admiration, wow that was a Labour Government initiative that extraordinarily the Tories put their backs behind as well and sustained. I don't know how it's turned out in the last couple of decades since I've been in the United States, but I'm a great advocate for The Open University and everything that it stands for.

So, just to touch back a bit and I can back off if you'd like me to, when you say you didn't take advantage properly of that that was on offer in that sense

and perhaps, I think you said you abused it, what sort of example do you mean?

Well yes, the word abuse is strong one, in other words I didn't, the problem was not appreciating my guard, what a fantastic opportunity this is, how am I going to use that? It's a mindset and as I look back I don't think I had the appropriate mindset to maximise the value of that opportunity, I think that's what I'm trying to say. I don't think I was alone in that and there definitely is a danger in giving people more comfort than they know what to do with and I think that was the downside of this historical moment in the history of The Open University.

Did you go to your graduation?

Right, so that was in 1978. I was then in the Education and I don't recall the precise reason that I didn't attend the ceremony. I was, I'm just trying to remember now, was I actually living out in Milton Keynes or, because we did eventually move up to, yes we were, by then we were in Harold, we were living in the village of Harrold which is what, about 10, 12 miles away from the campus. So all I can say is that I chose not to. I was very unsentimental about these kind of occasions. I'm quite different now, but then if they could send it to me through the mail, so much better than having to go to the trouble and expense of being there and listening to the speeches. But of course I was delighted to receive the degree, ultimately. And it was, by the way let me say this about, because it was a very traditional model of producing the dissertation and having it looked at by both your internal supervisors and the externals, and the externals were again three, for me, of course these are small worlds that we academic specialists inhabit, but for me, oh my God, these were the Gods. Jeremy Tunstall who had enough pull to get the Gods. And who were the Gods? The Gods were Dennis McQuail and Jay Blumner. Sadly Jay has just died I think he was over 100, he died the other day, and a guy called Tom Burns who I didn't know very well. He had done some work perhaps history on the BBC.

So these were my external supervisors and to my great relief they seemed to be quite happy with the content, but to my not very great surprise they didn't like the way that I had organised it physically. I had typed my own manuscript, I'd had it, in those days of course as you'd probably know, I'm sure you know, typing a manuscript was a very big deal. Those were the days before Word. I think maybe I had a golf ball typewriter which hugely impressed Jay Blumner at one time. But that was about as sophisticated as the technology went. So the first version of my manuscript had many, it just didn't look all that appetising. But part of the first and most important recommendation that the externals had was, just get it, make it look like a regular dissertation God damn it.

So then I bit the bullet at that point and paid for the entire thing, the entire two volumes to be retyped by a professional typist, somewhere, I think she lived in Wolverton, very tolerant lady. It took several months to do this. And of course it then gave me the opportunity to look at everything and by this time I was really hot on this and I was reading stuff more carefully and closely than I ever had before and every have since. And changing, not the meaning, but changing expressions, changing the language to improve it as best I could and that eventually then went to the internal supervisor who at that time was Michael Gulevich who had taken over from Jeremy and then he gave it the final green light and that was the story of how that dissertation came to be, yeah.

Do you think, what a time?

Yes.

When you look back over your study time at The Open University but particularly during your PhD, you've already, I don't want to duplicate all the stuff, you've already said quite a lot about this, but can you summarise how you feel now looking back?

About that entire experience?

Yes.

Yeah OK. The basic feelings are very positive, The Open University gave me an opportunity that I might never otherwise have had, I might very well, had it not been prompting from Jeremy or and had it not been for the fact that The Open University was really making this ridiculously easy for me I would never have got a PhD. The whole thing was just way too daunting. So I'm very happy and proud, that's a great thing that happened to me. On the downside I think about the kind of discipline that I see, many times I've supervised many dissertations of course, particularly here in the United States and they're just so much structured, there's discipline, there's regular feedback, formalised feedback, all of these things that we take for granted here in the United States and probably now in Great Britain as well, but in those days, maybe in some places you got that, in other places not so much, in The Open University definitely not, not in the context of the fact in social science at that time anyway.

Well I'm tempted to say yes that's the discipline, that's the structure I needed, but on the other hand, if it was there at that point would I have taken it? Probably not because it would have scared the shit out of me! So I was left to roll in my own shit so to speak and somehow when it was cleaned up it didn't look so bad. And it might not have happened without that unstructured context.

So when you looked back post-doctorate, so you've said that you worked at the OU for several decades, how long roughly was that?

Yes, so I know that I worked at The Open University until, well I don't know with a degree of certitude, I'm thinking the early 1990s. So that was about a quarter of a

century, approximately a quarter of a century I was actually working as a member of Faculty for The Open University. What was your question Liz again, sorry?

Really, what did you do after that?

Oh OK, yeah, got it, got it. So I think it's empirically true to say, you know, but perhaps I don't have a good perception on this, when I had completed that doctorate and I was looking for jobs The Open University School of Education was certainly not my number one choice. That's not where I really wanted to be. But I just could not find any other job that was closer to my interests or closer to anything that I could do. And I'm pretty sure this was just a very lean time for getting jobs, to getting starter jobs in higher - it had been in a boom period earlier and now it was entering, well these were the years of the oil crisis and so forth, and Ted Heath and Britain plunging into darkness and gathering storms with the miners and so forth and so on. So the universities didn't fare very well during that time.

So I ended up as I say in the School of Education, much to my disappointment I found myself having to work on courses which were very worthy, but I didn't feel I had much personal passion or engagement with to do with educational management and various other aspects of the world of professional education. I learnt a great deal, but through gritted teeth I suppose before I ever began to feel really comfortable or at home in the School of Education. But in the meantime we had moved up to Milton Keynes and we had started a family and ultimately had four young children and we were disinclined to upset the domestic arrangements. But every now and again, and this is the beauty of having produced a dissertation about, particularly on a new topic, every now and again something would come up that would haul me back into mass media.

So, one, for example, NATO or some research element of NATO, they invited me to work on something that related to news agencies and the kind of things that they were interested in. So that was helping. And then you'd get occasional invitations

to write articles and then this, that and the other. So I kept my hand in, even though most of the time I was obsessing about things I really didn't want to obsess about, namely to do with education. And that was pretty much how things were for a very long time until ultimately I still had a sufficient name relating back to my work on news agencies that the University of Leicester, the Centre for Mass Communication Research, where James Halloran that he had founded several decades previously and had been home to a very radical or what was thought at the time to be a very radical research institution, people like Peter Goulding and Graham Murdoch were associated with, and they invited me to set up a distance learning MA.

I don't know whether Leicester still does this, but they were one of the first British institutions to get into, other than The Open University, to get into the potential of for profit MA courses. That was a hugely interesting experience. So I had the opportunity to set up an entire MA with assistance of course, but my position was the Head of Distance Learning for the Centre. And in particular to produce this MA which was a two-year, it was constructed as a two-year MA and we had to use all of the learning materials, without the infrastructure that The Open University had provided with its BBC television and radio programmes and all of that. And then, but there was the pressure also to make it pay. You had to bring in more money than you were spending. Quite an unusual challenge for academics in general, but it was so interesting.

We got, in the first couple of years or so we got interest from all around the world and in some places we had sufficient numbers of student as in Hong Kong and Singapore to justify our going out on a fairly regular basis to these places so that we could offer some sort of face-to-face classroom support for the otherwise distance learning that they were doing. Again very much like The Open University model which has always prized face-to-face in addition to people studying the materials in private at home. That programme is still going, I'm very happy to say. The politics of the centre were difficult for me, perhaps for others, and I ultimately

took the decision to leave that programme. It was up and running and could be interesting to other people. And I moved then to the United States in 1998 where I started off in an administrative capacity working within the California State University system, but ultimately taking the decision to return to being a professor and after a couple of years of that at Cal Poly Pomona which is short for California State Polytechnic University in Pomona. And I was offered a position to direct a School of Communications at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, which I held for, I was fluctuating between administrative positions that could pay reasonably good money, but also never stopped being drawn back into the fray of academic work.

And so that's ultimately what I ended up doing, just being an academic at Bowling Green and then finally deciding to formally retire, came back to California which we just love this area of California that we currently are in Ojai, it's about 18 miles north of Los Angeles, just south of Harry and Meghan at Santa Barbara, our newest neighbours. I still can't understand why we haven't been invited around for tea yet, but maybe Oprah will get on it. So we're very happy to be here and I took the opportunity then of taking up an adjunct position for the local CSU campus which is Camarillo, bit further down the road and continuing to write, continuing to produce stuff. I've never been, I can never count myself as being the most productive academic in terms of books and so on, but the most productive part of my career is now, has been these past 10 years and I hope, so long as I can draw breath, will continue to be for the, into the near future. Still writing about media but now particularly writing about media and some of the international relations issues of our time, including Russia, Ukraine, Syria and the like.

Amazing, thank you, is there anything else you'd like to add about the OU or being a PhD student or do you think you've covered it?

I think, yes let me just add then along these lines about, thinking about The Open University, about The Open University's open access approach to first degree level

and the wonderful work it's done in that capacity. And thinking back to the sheer quality of the written materials and other materials that my colleagues produced and I expect are still doing that today, but very high quality and I have rarely seen in the first degree programmes anything approaching that level of care and thought and consideration and student support, just magnificent. It may have, as a result of budgetary cuts and so over the last decade or so, perhaps it's not like it used to be, I get that impression sometimes, from things that I occasionally pick up, it's all changed quite possibly in the digital, cheapo digital era. But there was something wonderful for a time.

And I think it probably, but here again your research will find this out, I think that philosophy, even though the PhD programme, the MA programmes that we worked on in the School of Education, they were very professional and very structured and so too was the doctoral, the Ed Doc or Doc Ed or whatever they call it, that we were about to produce at the time that I left, that would also have ended up being a very highly structured professional programme. But what I'm wanting to say is, that even thinking back to those days when I was there, my suspicion is that the kind of people who are inclined to take that route, that were possibly, were they? And you'll be able to maybe make some judgement about, it may not be important. But they were the kind of people I suspect for whom this was the only possible route. Either because it's the only one they could afford, it was the only one they had time for or is the only one that didn't just depress them or oppress them with the sheer, the gravity and pomposity of what then still was a British higher education and its expectations and that's good, that's good. It was a breaking down of the barriers. It was a democratisation of thinking and researching.

So, although you'd rightly pointed out to this paradox of the open access, innovative aspect of The Open University at first degree level and its imitation of the tradition model in higher education, I do think there was more to it than that.

END OF INTERVIEW