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OPEN FORUM : PUSH TO OPEN TV1

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TAKING PART

Joel Greenberg - OU

Trevor Phillips - OU student

Anjali Walker - OU student

Margaret Debenham - OU student

Gill Kirkup - OU

Diane Watson - OU

Geoff Peters - Pro Vice Chancellor
Strategy OU

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MUSIC OVER GENERIC TITLES

HOWARD STABLEFORD

Britain's largest university is set to grow even larger. We look at new ways of exploring pictures. But first a user friendly guide to computing.

(MUSIC "Sitcom/Leisure/Travel"- Kevin Jarvis - Carlin 163)

The micro chip affects all our lives in one way or another. During some part of the day most of us will use some form of computing technology.

One of the great success stories of the Open University, is the way that it's made use of technology widely available in our homes; televisions and videos, audio cassettes and radios, have all had a huge impact in the delivery of teaching materials to students.

So what will be the next device to have a similar impact. Top of the list has got to be personal computers. But if you're not part of the generation that grew up with game machines, I can't get the hang of this for the life of me, then computers can seem to be extremely intimidating, so where do you start? Well Joel Greenberg, you've been using computer technology with the OU for many years now. Now obviously people doing courses like information technology, and physics will need a computer for their courses, what about other students who may have an inkling that a computer could be useful to them but don't know anything about them, where do they start?

JOEL GREENBERG

Well you can really think of a personal computer as a purchase of any other normal domestic appliance and there's really only two factors to consider; one is what you want to use it for and how much it costs. Really the important thing at the end of the day is going to be the actual computer programmes that you use. For example, if you want to use the computer for word processing, assuming you have a computer which is capable of running a word processing package, then the actual package itself is going to be of more importance to you than the computer.

HOWARD

So people shouldn't be worried about buying a computer that's going to be obsolete in a year or so's time.

JOEL

No that shouldn't be a problem. Most computers now, entry level personal computers are capable of being extended and having functionality added to them.

HOWARD

Let's have a look at some of the basic options. This is a standard personal computer isn't it. What would this be used for?

JOEL

This is typical of the computers that Open University students would use and it's used to run a range of software. You see a number of pictures on the screen. Now this in the computer world is known as a WIMP environment. WIMP stands, the W stands for Window, this is a window on the computer screen. Icon, all these little pictures are referred to as Icons. Mouse, this is this little device that I'm moving on the desk and the pointer, the P stands for Pointer which is a thing that you move to one of the icons and then by pressing the button on the mouse a couple of times like so, you select something and something happens.

HOWARD

Well that's straightforward and standard isn't it, what sort of add-ins could you put into that system?

JOEL

Well apart from a printer that most people would have connected to their computer, a number of other devices. This device is called a modem, and you can connect it into your computer and allow you to communicate with other computers around the world if you want. This technology here is called CD-Rom which stands for Compact Disc Read Only Memory and it's a way of adding an incredible amount of data storage to your computer. This particular computer actually has one installed and you can run programs from it including full motion, full screen video and I'll show you how we do that now.

(SOF TAKEN FROM OU PROG)

WOMAN

But what is gravity? That was a question that perplexed scientists and philosophers alike for centuries until the answer was finally discovered here. This is Wilsthorpe Manor in Lincolnshire, the birth place and the home of the great British scientist Sir Isaac Newton and that of course brings....

HOWARD

That's amazing quality as well isn't it. There is an alternative though to this size of computer and that's the lap-top, we have one right here. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?

JOEL

Yes, the lap-top computer is nice because it doesn't take up as much desk space and that's of tremendous importance to certainly the Open University students. They're two, really two disadvantages to these, one the keyboard - you can see that it's small and it's difficult some, for some people to use and normally the screen quality on computers which aren't very expensive, lap top computers, the screen quality is quite often poor. This particular one actually has a very high resolution colour display - 256 colours, probably as good as the screen on the computer that we've just looked at; unfortunately it's new technology and very very expensive?

HOWARD

How much?

JOEL

Three and a half thousand pounds plus VAT for this computer.

HOWARD

Right; finally, very colourful display over there on that computer - what's that about?

JOEL

This is a more modern typical office system desk top computer - a lot more powerful than the computer that we were looking at earlier, but many Open University students are buying computers of this power. Basically any program that runs on the smaller computer will run on this computer, all this computer gives you probably, is more power, more data storage capacity and possibly a slightly better display quality. You pay your money you take your chances.

HOWARD

What level are most Open University students going in at?

JOEL

The majority of students are coming in, somewhere in between the computer that we looked at earlier and this computer, but a surprising number of Open University students are actually opting for computers nearer the top of the range.

(MUSIC - STING)

TREVOR PHILLIPS

I think it's this feeling though if you press a button everything disappears off the screen, am I breaking it, you know things, everything moves so quickly. If you don't quite know what you're doing, you're just pressing any button at random, you can lose a lot.

ANJALI WALKER

When I first, had my first experience of computers, I was terrified of this inanimate object just staring at me, beeping error, invalid pass drive and it's imbedded in my memory. I'm an arts person, I enjoy art, I enjoy languages, I enjoy talking to people, I could not relate to this object.

MARGARET DEBENHAM

I'm quite happy with the Open University becoming an electronic campus but it must not be in competition with face to face tutorials it's complementary medium - it gives an extra dimension, not a substitute.

ANJALI

It worries that they might start substituting the computer for face to face contact with the tutor. I need that contact, I need the human touch. I'm a distant student already. I'm isolated enough, I don't need that extra isolation to find that I'm not dealing with another human being at all.

HOWARD

Well I'm now joined by Diane Watson who's a member of the Academic Computing Committee and Gill Kirkup who's one of the authors of a recent about personal computing in the Open University. First of all Gill, do you sympathise with people like Anjali who are intimidated by computer screens?

GILL KIRKUP

Yes, I mean I think those of us who've worked on them now for the last ten or fifteen years can remember our terror at the first keyboard and screen especially if it was our own investment. I mean you sit in front of this device - it's very expensive, we credit it with intelligence it doesn't have and we become terrified that we'll touch something on the keyboard which will completely fuse it or make it lock into some sort of behaviour pattern that we won't be able to control. And all I can say to people like Anjali is, that doesn't usually happen, people very rarely break computers by touching them and if it behaves badly and you don't know how to control its behaviour, you switch it off at the back.

HOWARD

Do you think that computers in this day and age are essential tools to all students?

GILL

No, not to all students. I think for some students, they are very valuable educational tools but we have not reached the situation in society where computers permeate all our activities as such like pens and pencils that everybody who needs to write needs a pen or pencil, everybody who studies or needs to writes does not need a computer.

Some people will be helped to do lots of tasks with them, other people, the amount of energy they would put into learning how to use it would have a relatively small pay off at the moment and they should just forget about it.

HOWARD

OK. Diane, there's a bit of a debate in the Open University about becoming an electronic campus; first of all what do they mean by that?

DIANE WATSON

Well there are two aspects really centrally to the notion of an electronic campus. The first is perhaps more easily understood in that it's talking about equipping students with computers to enable them to deal with the content of course. The other part of the idea of an electronic campus is where we're thinking about individuals who are separated by time and distance but who are linked together by some kind of electronic communications, either using a telephone line or video conferencing or some form of technology of that kind.

HOWARD

What would be some of the advantages of using computer technology in this way?

DIANE

Well it would enable people to be brought closer together over distance and over time. For example, students would be able to get in touch very quickly with their tutors or with course teams. It would have the potential to bring into closer contact, students with disabilities or students who are in geographically remote areas. It would enable us to do a lot of the work that we need to do from home. For example we could access libraries and look through bibliographies without actually having to move where we are. The Open University would be looking for ways of enhancing what we have; creating opportunities and involving people even more without losing the very best of what it already has to offer.

HOWARD

Moving towards an electronic campus is clearly a complex issue, what's the most appropriate way to move towards that Gill?

GILL

Well, I mean one word would be slowly, but I think with care and retaining all of the things that we know already are valuable and being very clear about the nature of costs - I mean if the University isn't handling those costs then they're passed on to the student that all of these new technologies involve costs of some sort and we have to be absolutely sure for the sake of our students that any cost that involves us or them reaps great benefits.

HOWARD

Gill, Diane, thanks very much indeed. We'll see how things develop.

So are computers a natural progression from pen and paper or do they herald a quantum leap in the way that we can learn. Zoe's been down to the National Gallery in London to take a look at one of their newest projects. In a small room in the Sainsbury Wing, there's a brand new gallery which contains no hanging pictures at all.

ZOE WELSH

That's right Howard - no pictures. Instead, here at the Micro Gallery, paintings have become units of visual information. With these touch sensitive computer screens, visitors can call up images of all the paintings in the National Gallery.

In fact it couldn't be more simple. Students and visitors are encouraged to defy the Gallery's conventional layout and construct their own customised route. Let's say you wanted to see every painting that had a cat in it.

Now the computer's giving me a set of paintings that have all got cats in them. Now I'd like to see the Graham children by Hogarth, so let's try that one and select that one. Yes now I'd like to see that on my tour so if I press TOUR it will give me the option to add it to my tour. So I'm going to add this painting to my tour. That's it. Now if I go back again, I'm going to be given the option to select another painting. Now I'd like to see that one, a girl with a kitten by Perronneau, so if I touch that one, yes I'd like to see that.

So then that's the picture I wanted, so I can also add that to my tour. You can add up to ten paintings to your plan which is printed for you free of charge. But it's not just tours the computer has to offer. Each painting catalogued has a wealth of information and some really lively animation.

(MUSIC - CLASSICAL)

Here it shows how Poussin used the same group of dancing figures in two of his paintings by just turning them around.

It also has a step by step, or in this case a finger by finger guide for people like me who have a particular painting in mind but can't remember the artist or title. Right so let's try picture types. Right, well I know it's a view so if I press VIEW and it's giving me the option of land water and coast and architecture. Well, it's by a river so let's try that one. Aargh, yeah, now there it is, "Bathers at Asnieres" by Seurat. So that's the painting that I had in mind. That's it, that's the painting, now it's telling me it's one of seven pages, so what other information will the computer give me. Well a great deal, both about the artist and the period they were painting in. If you're unsure of the exact meaning of say "Salons" or "Post-Impressionism" it's all there including some imaginative animation on colour and painting techniques.

(MUSIC - CLASSICAL)

The Micro Gallery contains the possibility of the whole museum. All of art shrunk to the dimension of a micro chip and that of course could be a major drawback. Computer screens are a deeply unsatisfactory way of viewing art.

(MUSIC - STING)

HOWARD

The new Higher Education Funding Council has recently released figures for money allocated to all universities. The Open University has done particularly well, with a total revenue grant of nearly one hundred million for next year. How and where that money will be spent offers up new challenges and many different options. Geoff Peters, Pro Vice Chancellor for Strategy is one of the people responsible for implementing some of these vital decisions.

Geoff the Open University seems to have done particularly well under the new Funding Council which is great news, but why do you think it has done so well in comparison with some other universities?

GEOFF

Well the real reason is that we're just so big. I don't think everyone, anyone realised just how many students we've got and therefore how big our grant would be. We're still very cost effective compared with everybody else.

HOWARD

Does that mean you'll be taking on more students?

GEOFF

Yes. We've got more money for growth; probably four and a half million pounds for next year and even more for the following year and that means that they're going to fund growth at about 8 or 9% increase per year from now on, and so that would mean more students on all courses.

HOWARD

And can existing students expect a wider range of courses?

GEOFF

Yes. In the short term we'll be taking students onto existing courses but the money that we're getting from the Funding Council should provide us with some funds to invest in new subject areas and remaking courses and so on.

HOWARD

Could some of that money be passed onto the students by way of lower course fees for instance?

GEOFF

Well, if we're going to take more and more students every year, we're going to have to continue to be attractive to students. I think we're going to have to look at course fees but we'll also have to look at financial assistance and so on which are the things that make the Open University most attractive for the future.

HOWARD

Generally Geoff, what sort of expansion is the University committed to now?

GEOFF

Well we're going to in our strategic plan, increase at a rate of about 8% a year and that doubles our student numbers in about ten years. So we'll be a university of about a quarter of a million students in ten years time.

HOWARD

How is the Open University going to cope with this expansion?

GEOFF

Well I think the first thing to say is that everyone in the University is committed to expansion. We're an open university and that means being open to as many students as we possibly can and in the past we simply hadn't had the funds to do that so there's a lot of willingness but on the other hand we will have to change some methods and it will mean some people changing the way they do things and you know, for some people naturally that causes them to be a bit defensive and we're looking at ways of exploring how we can do things better for students and better for staff and take on more students at the same time.

(MUSIC - STING)

(MUSIC - "BLOW MONKEYS")

(MIKE FITZGERALD CHATTING TO STUDENTS)

V/O (JENNY BARDWELL)

Mike, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about some of the early experiences in your educational career?

MIKE FITZGERALD

That was interesting, because the school I went to which was a Christian Brothers school in Liverpool, basically worked on the principle that either you learnt what they told you or they battered you, so it was a kind of education by being battered into submission and that actually was an extremely difficult experience, not just for me but for lots of other people. And then when I went to Cambridge I discovered this whole new world there - education was actually about curiosity and learning and where you could actually yourself make decisions about what you were interested in and how you wanted to learn and there were just all these resources in terms of people and books and other students and staff and it was extraordinary and that really was incredibly powerful and gave me a lot of confidence. And I think it was the first time that I understood that education was primarily about confidence, not about knowledge. It was actually about building people's confidence and encouraging them to be curious about the world.

I mean the whole OU experience has had a massive impact on me both in a very personal way but also professionally and has very much influenced what I'm trying to do here. If you look at what we're trying to do here, it very much takes off on, if you like, the OU values about openness, about access, about encouraging participation, about making yourself available, rather than assuming it's other people's responsibility to try and get what they can out of you.

We used to teach summer school and that was really where you learnt an awful lot. There was this one student who was in the class I was teaching and this guy was like completely horizontal on a bed, right, I mean he was completely stretched out on a bed and he had a periscope which he used to use so he could see the board or see whatever it was you were showing. And I was really kind of young and green I guess and he, towards the end of the week he asked to see me and I went along and chatted to him and he said, he kind of put his hand on me and he said Mike I'm really worried about the exam.

And without thinking I kind of launched into my usual sort of don't worry about the exam, you'll be all right because a lot of OU students, particularly in the first, the first time they're doing an exam, they get very uptight about it because it's long time since they've done exams and very often when they did them before, they weren't very, they didn't, they weren't very successful. I was very concerned about it so I kind of launched into my, look have you done your assignments, he said, yeah I've done my assignments, I said did you pass them, he said yeah I passed them, I said well that's 50% and you'll be all right and when the exam comes you only have to do a couple of questions reasonably well and you'll get through and don't worry about it and you know, I'll try and arrange for you to go and see the generalist tutor and have some exam revision and practice and support yeah? And he just stared at me you know and kind of smiled at me and when I'd finished he said, he said, that's really not the issue Mike, so I said what's the issue, he said well I've been told by the doctor I'm going to die in August and I just want to try and maybe do the exam. And I actually didn't know what so say. And he did actually die, never made it and that's always lived with me because, first of all it was about, there was a lot of discussion about you should only let people have education if it's going to be useful and here was a guy who was going to die and yet doing the OU was terribly important to him. He had no future in it. It was his first course, he wasn't going to do any more and yet it mattered so much to him and the people around him who cared for him when he was a student supported him and the fact that, you know, education wasn't about qualifications it was actually about giving people help and comfort and support really hit me. And that was a, that was a really illuminating moment for me, a really illuminating moment. And it meant a lot to me.

MUSIC & END CREDITS