POST-PRODUCTION TRANSCRIPT

OPEN FORUM 41

THE FIRST TEN YEARS

A REVIEW OF THE FIRST
TEN YEARS OF OPEN UNIVERSITY

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The Open University campus at Milton Keynes at the beginning of 1979 the most outward and tangible evidence of ten years growth of a project whose successes are largely intangible. The achievements of our 32,000 graduates have been made possible by the creative work that starts with a few hundred staff within these modest brick walls. There are presently over 67,000 students registered but nothing here is for their direct use, for this is a production centre, and the latest blocks under construction are for the B.B.C. who will move their O.U. production unit here in 1981. Ten years ago the neglected former manor house of Walton Hall, was the only existing building on the 70 acre site which was offered to the University as its permanent headquarters by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation Urgent renovations were started and at the same time the first of the new buildings was being put up to house the pioneer academic and supporting staff. Facilities were minimal and urgency was the order of the day. The builders themselves were making history they were laying the foundations of the worlds first multi-media distance teaching institution, Walton Hall was sailing into uncharted seas. The historical context was given by one of the O.U.'s founding fathers, Sir Peter Venables, at one of our first formal ceremonies, the presentation of the Universities mace.

Though I am sure everybody in this room knows that the last decade of the 1960's has seen widespread indeed deep rooted changes in the economic, political and social aspects of our lives. But change is one thing, what has been the most challenging thing has been the accelerating rate of change, which has happened in this period, and nowhere has this been more true than in higher education. And altogether during that decade eighteen Universities well established then just at the very end of the decade, came the newest of the new, the Open University, which I would say is the very embodiment of innovation within a broad tradition, and it was granted its charters most of you know, just before the end of this dramatic decade, in fact on the 20th May 1969.

The ceremony at which the charter was actually presented took place at the Royal Society. Everyone connected with the project was present Harold Wilson, Jenny Lee, Vice Chancellors and politicians. The occassion took on a mood of academic ponderesness which gave no hint of the startling innovations contained in the traditional looking

document that was presented to Sir Peter Venables as Chairman of the Planning Committee.
Then Geoffrey Crowther was installed as our first Chancellor an appropriate choice with his famous report, that noted how many had missed out on higher education.

The first and most urgent task before us, is to cater for the many thousands of people fully capable of a higher education, who for one reason or another do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover sometimes too late that they need. Only in recent years have we come to realise how many such people there are, and how large are the gaps in educational provision through which they can fall. The existing system for all its great expansion misses and leaves aside a great unused reservoir of human talent and potential.

Norman McKenzie was a member of Jenny Lee's first enquiry into the University of the Air, and of the planning committee of the Open University, he recalls the mood of the early stages.

Cause it goes back rather more than ten years, back to 1965, when Jenny Lee had her small committee working, to look at what eventually was called the University of the Air, and I think the very title at that time, showed how much television and radio loomed in the thinking of that group, and of course almost four years between that first group coming together and the launching formally of the Open University. I think we were all pretty naive in those days and I think we were animated by a great deal of enthusiasm and there was a lot of imagination and the will to make good. But there was a feeling that television and radio could probably do a lot more than it turned out they could do. I think there was at that point, an idea on the part of the B.B.C. and the Department of Education and Science to set up what was called provisionally the college of the air. Jenny Lee's decisive intervention was of course to make it a University concept, the idea of a chartered institution which could grant it's own degrees. Er it was a good committee Sir Peter Venables was a marvellous Chairman for it, but it started with one overwhelming advantage and that was the partnership with the B.B.C., this was agreed in a very early stage, and it meant that so far as professionalism was concerned there wasn't a great deal to worry about, there would be people who would see that things were put together and went out on time. What the planning committee had to think about I think was what should be taught, by what means it should be taught apart from broadcasting,

and to whom it was to be taught. Now the question of what was to be taught was also put a bit on one side, because you had to recruit an academic staff, you had to get your first professors in post, you had to get them working, there was a realisation I think that it would be an inter-disciplinary University there was going to have to be a limited number of courses, that you couldn't offer the same range of courses as at a normal residential University offers. But when you looked beyond that it was quite clear that there were major problems, for instance what part should mail order in effect play? The scale in other words the complexity, er was something which this planning committee couldn't and didn't forsee. It did see I think a very important combination between printed matter and electronic matter, between the books and other forms of written communication and broadcasting. What I think it under estimated was the amount of face to face teaching, that had to develop and for which those two I think have now satisfied demand. The old hands in adult education who were on the committee kept saying and quite rightly kept saying they'll be a bigger demand for face to face help, counselling and teaching than you think. And I think myself that this was one of the major causes of an expantioning costs and a major cause of expansion in effectiveness.

No-one had any clear idea of what the student body would be like, everyone forsaw a different problems. Professor David Murry was asked about this in the autumn of 1969.

Prof. Murry

In a conventional University situation you've got a feedback constantly you can see them in the audience, you can see them and hear them in a seminar, you've got the written work constantly coming back to you. Er clearly we haven't got that straight away and we've got to manufacture ways of getting a feedback. But then there are the peculiar difficulties and they don't apply maybe in other subjects, that apply particularly in Government, but it is a political problem, I mean there are political difficulties in teaching about government to an audience that you don't know anything about in a society where there maybe some sensitivity about it, if we took an issue like, I don't know Vietnam, or something like this er we might have a certain amount of difficulty here, and people might object to some of the things we were saying. And yet one of the techniques that one uses in a conventional University situation is that of in a sense putting unconventional ideas to students, for the purpose of shaking them out of their established ideas.

Another Professor MikePentz dean of Science was also naturally concerned with the particular problems of teaching science at a distance.

Prof. M. Pentz

In fact one hears a great deal about this supposed intimate contact which occurs between every professor and every lecturer and everyone of the two and hundred and fifty students in his class, or fifty maybe. I think that apart from rare exceptions this just doesn't happen. And that it is quite invidious and idiotic to say that because of the Open University will not have this so called and largely non existant contact between student and teacher that we'll be disadvantaged, in fact I think we will contrive by different means of having more individual handling and contact with our students, dispersed as they will be all over the country, than is the case with the average poor devil of a University student in the average University.

Ten years later Mike Pentz is now surrounded by completed laboratory and office buildings and numerous prefabs, one of which contains his own office. Does he feel his original confidence was justified?

Prof. M. Pentz

In those days of course people were saying oh it won't work, you can't do this, you'll never be able to teach the sort of student this way and especially not of course science, what about the laboratories and all that, there was a tremendous scepticsm, in the teeth of which I suppose, in those days we had to be darned well confident otherwise we'd have gone under. Yes I think it was justified.

The new academic staff who joined the O.U. in the early years, found themselves heavily engaged in working in course teams, an entirely new concept and one of the University's outstanding innovations.

Course we had to invent the whole thing more or less as we went along, it was an enormous bit of improvisation. I mean there we were we had a course team, we had to make a course, nobody knew how you did this, we weren't even quite sure to start off with why we wanted a course team, we learn't about that in the process. And we had to improvise every aspect of the whole system. Of how, what sort of course materials are appropriate for the part-time distant learner. How should they be produced, how should they relate to each other? I mean the most elementary things hadn't occurred to people, nobody for example realised that you had to actually have professional editors, and as for the time for actually producing the foundation courses, loomed up on us, I remember going along to

Walter Perry and saying for God sake we've got to have an editor you won't have a course or you'll have a dead dean or something, we had no editors. The idea of a computer marked assignment for example, which is common place now, they had to be invented. Home experiments, I mean the invention of home experiments was really quite ludicrous, it went right back to, oh it must have been in the spring of 1969, and I remember the bursar coming into my office in Belgrave Square, that was before we moved up in the world to the prefabs at . Walton Hall. And he said hey I hear you've got some idea about home experiment kits, and I sa. yes, so he said well can you tell me how much they're going to cost? Well, well when do you want to know, so he said tomorrow, you see. One of the things which we had to be very much aware of from the beginning and we still are, and that is the crutial question of comparability. Were the sets of courses that our students were going to put together to get honours degrees going to stand up as being comparable to those of other Universities? And this of course implies that by the time a student does a third level course he or she needs to reach a certain level of performance of ability, of skill. In mathematics and science particularly, this creates quite some problems because the implications of being able to start on a certain third level course, is that you've acquired certain skills, certain abilities, certain knowledge from a second level course, and so on down to the foundation course. The whole set of courses has to form a coherent closely interlocked array.

The partnership between the B.B.C. and the O.U. has already seen over three thousand T.V. programmes produced for O.U. courses. How does Jim Stevenson look back on the beginning o f the partnership?

J. Stevenson: Well looking back, it was great fun to be making programmes in 1969 and 70. It was a little chaotic to say the least, we were all very new, there were new staff within the B.B.C. there were new staff within the Open University, and we both had to learn from each other. And I was quite surprised that anything came out of it at the end, but, and there were some disaterous programmes, but in the main it was great fun. But I think that the, the major difficulty that we all faced at that time, was that though there was a tradition of educational broadcasting and a lot of experience, the educational broadcasting that had gone before, had carried the main message. Now the Open University turned the whole thing upside down and made print carry the main message. And so broadcasting had to be a additional to the print, or a follower to the print, now this was

new, and it required a new way of thinking, about broadcasting. Now, I also think, that one of the difficulties in the early days was that there weren't enough broadcasts. Early decisions were that there should be, at most, one programme, one television programme one radio programme, per student week. And er, it would have been easier, if we'd had more broadcasts, if the proportion of courses had carried more of what I look on as the multi-media component of courses. And we would have in that way, have been able to experiment more, we'd have had a bit more flexibility, and more of the actual teaching message, could have been carried by the broadcasts. Now if we want to look at those early days, it's quite difficult now because, luckily most of the programmes have now disappeared for ever. But there are some still left and I've selected two programmes to show, one from the early days, one from later days, and the one from the early days is about genetics, we had a component of the science foundation course, which was about genetics and the text dealt with the theoretical aspects and we thought we would deal with practical aspects in the studio, so we brought into the studio, a cat breeder, and her cats, and Mike Pertz and we let them fight it out.

There were our four new kinds of cat and its taken me about twelve years to make them, and you see.

I like the way you say make them Dr. Man it seems there's a great deal of deliberation in what you do, not very much hit or miss? (well no) its evidently a bit of genetic engineering, practically.

You're doing the two things, you're selecting and planning your genetics.

And would you say that knowing as much as you do about genetics you can really take short cuts compared to the ordinary breeder(oh yes oh yes) who might be doing a bit of swopping and trying.

If you know what your genetics is, of course your chances of getting what you want, may be pretty thin I mean at one point, getting the chocolates are, chances were one in 32 of getting what we wanted.

Well that was a very successful programme in many ways, students liked it, and it was great fun to make. And to contrast with that and looking to five years later, in 1976, when we'd changed a lot and learnt a lot about programme making, I'm going to show you one of our drama programmes, and it really represents a point that we reached where we'd become professional in broadcasting terms, and

also in educational terms, because we were now taking I think, the right decisions about broadcasting, putting onto the television and into the radio, those aspects of courses, which leant themselves particularly well to those media.

When the curtain rises Leone wearing a cooks hat and apron is busy beating an egg in a basin with a wooden spoon.
'Now do I really have to wear a cooks hat','yes my dear fellow a cooks hat and you beat eggs and if that's not enough you have to represent the shells of the eggs that you're beating". "D o you understand now", "neither do I, however lets get on with it um".
"oh yes I suggest you turn towards camera a bit, about three quarter face, otherwise we're um, what with the obstrusness of the dialouge and noone being able to hear you, are you listening to me, Listen when I'm explaining things'.
"There's some people here, Govern, would like a word with you,"
" Who are you, and what do you want? you know perfectly well noone's allowed in here during a rehearsal".
"We are here in search of an author,"

I think one of the interesting things looking at both those pieces of programme is that they were both made in the same studio at Alexandra Palace. But you may ask, what, what's happening now, and what is going to happen in the future. Well now I think the process of making programmes, compared with the early days in 1970, is very different. A lot more of our material is recorded on location, a lot more is recorded abroad, there's an awful lot more editing, and there is , there are many more techniques that you can actually bring in, into the process of programme making. The programme making process is longer, its a more spread out affair, than it used to be. And the decisions that we take, are taken earlier, and I think quite rightly so, there's a much greater tendency for television and radio to be integrated closely into the written material of courses, and I think that there's a much greater success.

The final stage in the integration of the teaching system, is when the high quality print and broadcast materials arrive in the students home, and they have to reorganise their lives to cope with this new academic experience.

I feel that once you start to confront the whole notion of working intellectually and becoming your own, asserting your own personality, everything else goes too. In other words, at the Open University you become used to working independantly intellectually, you come

home and you to start to revise all your opinions about relationships, about your role at home, about your role at work, and everything can become quite explosive.

Nine O clock in the morning I started, sat down to write it, by twelve O clock I'd got a waste paper basket full of screwed up pieces of paper, and nothing written. So I managed to find somebody to go into a park with me and throw a frisby, because I thought a little bit of physical exercise might stimulate the academic thoughts going, you see. I came back and by four O clock, I still hadn't got anything and I was beating my head literally with my hands.
And these problems, the role of the part-time staff, distributed throughout the Universities thirteen regions, becomes crucial, the most valuable thing is a good relationship between tutor and student.

We hope very much to get a dialogue going, we're conscious sometimes that the students are not responding, but short of asking them to, which is what we can do at the beginning, talking them, tutorials, there's very little we can do really.

Um, except you and I were able to meet in the pub and chat, which is a big difference. For some students who can't get to the pub, or get to the tutorial even, well, what's the way round that?
That's really relies on the comments, you know the dialogue on paper which one hopes one gets going too.

Um which is where you run the risk, perhaps of putting the student off, by saying something that's a bit too blunt.

Yes yes, I don't know whether I ever offended you, with any of my comments.

No, but then I've been in it five years and I've had a chance to get a bit more confident, but for a first year student, I I remember in my first year I was very very sensitive to anything that was written down.

It's difficult, one wants to, er if you make a fairly severe remark you want to jolly the student along as if you're not saying this is a deadly sin, but, come along now, you don't have to do this sort of thing, you know.

No something of a risk to take on some thousands of part-time academic staff at the beginning of the teaching of the Open University to share the teaching load.

Well the outset was a very apprehensive time, I remember going along on the first teaching evening to the new study centre, with very

little material in hand because of the Postal strike, feeling extraordinarily insecure about what I was to do, and seeing a sign inside the door which said, if you have any difficulty see the counsellor in E2. So I raced up to E2 to see the counsellor to find that I was the counsellor in E2. And I think that was rather the way we began, we suddenly had to become the experts in this new venture, which meant trying to extend the skills we'd learned elsewhere and for use in a different teaching situation. The teaching we'd done before, had been for the most part, with material we'd prepared ourselves, to classes of University students. We now had to take on were students we knew for the most part unprepared in the usual sense, for University work. They were adults, many of them older than ourselves, and we were trying to link our own teaching skills into an already prepared package of materials which included not merely printed books, but television and radio, and we were trying to um use what learning we had to create the situation where these students now could learn not only material often prepared by us but across disciplines as well, we were teaching in that first year.
I think for some students is definitely the case that the face to face tuition has counted for a large part, for but even those students who are rather distant from study centres, where they can get face to face tuition I think we have gradually realised that they can establish real personal contact. To me it's astonishing that the Open University with a vast number of students, teaching at a distance maintains a kind of personal contact often with students that would be the envy of many of the other Universities.

The O.U. has come a long way in ten years. And in all that time its been steered by one man, Walter Perry, he has always had a strong sense of purpose, as he stated in an early interview.

It comes back to what I said before, I think I see something here that is very well worth doing, not only in Britain, but in the World I think it has a chance of increasing the standard of teaching in the whole of higher education, as well as offering an opportunity of higher education to an increasing number of people. As well as being one of the few ways of continuing education, being made available on a large scale. I think it's the most exciting thing, the most exciting job, that one could possibly have done.

The final word on ten years of the successful realisation of Walter Perry's plan, comes from Hilda Himmlevite a member of the original planning committee, who spoke at one of our degree ceremonies at Alexandra Palace, after receiving an Honorary Doctorate.

There are two opening sentences in the vice Chancellors annual report of 1972, which tell a story. The first sentence reads ' in 1969 the Open University recruited its first staff, in 1971 it admitted its first students, and in 1972 it produced its first graduates, this was of course because so many graduates had already come with a fair number of qualifications. With almost Churchillian brevity the sentence sums up these early achievements, the second sentence reads, 'it may be now be said to have acquired all the main attributes of other Universities, surely our praise should be that it has not.

Music: