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

Oral History interview transcript

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So my name's Liz Currie. I'm a researcher for The Open University and I'm interviewing for the Looking Back, the first OU PhD project on the 16th June 2021. And Joan, if you'd like to introduce yourself and your PhD title please.

Yes, I'm Joan Whitehead, and my PhD was entitled Motives for Higher Education.

Lovely, thank you very much. So we'll launch into the questions now. So can you tell me a bit about the area you were born, and whether your family were familiar with higher education at that time?

Yes, I was born in Oldham in Lancashire, but I was actually brought up in Saddleworth, which although on the Lancashire side of the Pennines is very firmly in Yorkshire, and that's quite significant when I come on later to talk about what school I went to. No, I don't come from a family with a background of higher education. I was the first person in my family, and that includes the extended family, to go to university. But my parents really had been denied educational opportunities for different reasons. My father had to leave school as soon as possible because his father died, and therefore he was needed to go out to work. And my mother, who had in fact passed the scholarship, as they called it in those days, to go to grammar school, was not allowed to go because my grandmother thought that education was a waste of time for a girl. So in that sense both my parents were deprived of their opportunities, and therefore of course were very keen that my sister and myself should take every advantage of educational opportunities.

So you mentioned your school days, what was that like then for you?

Well it was very significant, because I went to one of the first comprehensive schools. The West Riding of Yorkshire was very advanced, and felt that comprehensive education was the answer. And so they built comprehensive

schools, and I went to one of the first, Colne Valley High School. I was I think one of the second complete cohort to go through the school, and why it was important is because they were very much a school with a mission, and the mission was taking what were very largely working class children into the school, and to encourage them to go onto higher education and things like that. And it was in my view a wonderful place, I enjoyed it very much, and I think it really did encourage a lot of people, particularly of my generation who probably would not have thought of university as being for them, to actually go to university. So that was why it was actually important.

And that was a secondary school, or was it both primary and secondary?

No, the primary school I went to, I will not bore you with, it was a dreadful place, and did much I think to quench any educational aspirations anybody might have had, but anyway I survived it, and the secondary school was amazing.

That's fantastic, so moving on then to the end of secondary school really, what made you decide to go onto university at an undergraduate level?

Well I think it was as I said greatly the encouragement of the school that people should go into higher education, and my parents were keen for us to be educated. But also I myself was very keen to have a worthwhile career. I saw my future as having a career, and therefore obviously going to university and getting a degree was a prerequisite to having as I saw it a worthwhile career. So that was my main motivation really for going to university. And I studied psychology at university, and interestingly the reason I chose psychology, because I was doing English, history, and economics as my A-levels, was a television programme you may know about, which was called Seven Up! which was this tracing children starting at the age of seven, and I think they've done one relatively recently, and they followed a cohort of individuals for every seven years, and there was a television programme about them every seven years.

And I saw Seven Up! and it just intrigued me because the thesis they were exploring was give me the child until he is seven, and I will give you the man, in those days not any mention of women. And that idea I think grabbed me, and so I went to school and said I'm going to go and do psychology. And they all said oh nobody's done psychology before. So that was why I chose psychology as my undergraduate course.

And where did you decide to go to do that?

Well I had a place at Sheffield, and I kind of missed one of my grades at A-level, so I ended up at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, which I, through the clearing scheme, which I enjoyed immensely, and was very glad I'd gone there. It turned out to be a very good course. Because at the time some psychology courses were still very locked into a particular strand of psychology, so they were either psychoanalytic or they'd embrace the new behaviourism of people like Skinner; whereas the course at Bangor was very broad ranging and covered all areas of psychology. So fortuitously I ended up in a very good place.

That's often the way isn't it? So how did you find, I mean were you successful with your undergraduate degree?

Oh yes, I did graduate yes. And then I had thought that I might be an educational psychologist, which involved you doing two years of teaching, and then a two year MPhil course. So I did one year of teaching as a primary school teacher, back in Oldham this was, and in fact I taught in the primary school that my grandmother had gone to. It was an ancient Victorian building. But after a year of that I decided that perhaps I didn't want to be an educational psychologist after all, and so I went off to the States, as students did in my day with a $99 Greyhound bus ticket, where you got unlimited travel round the States, which I did with three other friends. And then I decided to, I had a special visa which was for students, which allowed you

to stay in the States for a year, and to work while you were there. It was a very special kind of visa.

And so I decided to stay, and I got two jobs. I taught child psychology in an institution called the Washington Technical Institute, which had been set up by the Johnson administration to take black students through the last two years of high school, and the first two years of junior college, so that they would be ready to go on to college. And I taught psychology to students in their final year there, so it was a predominantly black college. I also worked, because that was part time, as a research assistant for an organisation called the American Institutes for Research, which was a non-profit making research institution, which got grants from all over the place. Its most famous studies are the same as Milgram's studies on obedience, but that wasn't at the place that I worked. And I worked on a research project there, which was I have to say very boring.

It was looking at perceptual vigilance, basically how long can somebody stare at a radar screen before they lose attention, and the answer is half an hour if you're interested. And I was reviewing all the research, and coming up with a paper that drew all those things together. And this was in 1969, and it was funded by the Pentagon, which I had to keep very quiet about, because of course that was the height of all the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and things. So I did that in America, and at the end when my visa expired at the end of the year I had applied for a permanent resident's visa, which you weren't allowed to do, and so I was thrown out. I was told I had to leave because my visa had expired, and so I did leave, and they did come and check up that I actually left. I could have stayed in the States to do a PhD, I was offered a place at the University of Arizona, because one of the people I worked work for at the American Institutes of Research was going there to be a professor, and would have given me a scholarship.

But I decided I didn't want to remain in America at that point. So then I came back to this country, and applied for jobs, and I decided then that I wanted an academic

career. And so I applied to The Open University for the research assistantship in the faculty of educational studies, as it was then, linked to the psychology teaching team. And that was the job I got, and that's how I came to be at The Open University. Studying for a PhD. Well having decided that I wanted to be an academic, I felt obviously a PhD is probably something that you need, and The Open University were very generous. I mean people like myself who were research assistants were given as long as we were registered for an approved course of study, which a PhD was, a day a week to do our own research while obviously the rest of the time working as a research assistant for the faculty.

And you didn't have to pay fees, they were taken care of, so that was why I decided to study for a PhD, and why I did it at The Open University basically, because they were offering you in effect a scholarship with time and your fees paid. So that was my main reason for doing it, and also I was very interested in actually doing research. I really enjoy doing research, particularly analysing data. My inner geek comes out at that point, and I really enjoy that. So that was why I chose to do a PhD, and why I did it at The Open University. So I'm not really a typical Open University student in that sense.

Was there anything about the politics or ethos of The Open University that was an additional attraction, or was it something that didn't really affect you?

Oh no, I mean I thought the whole concept of The Open University was a wonderful concept, and I was very pleased that there was a job there that I could apply to do, and that I got it. I mean as well as studying my PhD there, I did write course material for the education courses, and as you say of course they were mainly for teachers who were topping themselves up from a certificate to a degree. And so I worked on a couple of their courses, wrote units for those as well as doing my PhD. And I thought it was an amazing opportunity for people who had not had the opportunity, rather like my parents, to go into higher education earlier. So yes, I was very attracted to it in that sense as well.

Thank you, so moving on slightly to your actual studies, what are your most enduring memories about studying for your PhD at the OU? I know it was interlinked with your job as well, but.

Yeah, I mean I think it's a bit more difficult I think for me to separate it out from the job, and from the experience of being at The Open University, and I think many of the things are probably general to studying a PhD anywhere. I mean first of all I did enjoy the research that I did, I did a very large sample of sixth formers, a national sample. I had something like 700 sixth form pupils in my sample, and I had 88 variables on each of them. So it was an enormous database, and just doing that research and analysing it was the thing that I really enjoyed. And I was testing out two psychological theories of motivation, broadly intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic being interested in the subject matter itself, and therefore you're motivated by things like curiosity, finding things out, an interest in the topic. And extrinsic motivation, that is carrying an education task for the reward at the end of it, such things being good exam results and a good job.

And there was quite a debate in psychology about was extrinsic motivation the most important motive that carried people forward, and it was generally felt that it was; whereas intrinsic motivation was thought by other people to be more important, and I was interested in that debate. And in fact it is intrinsic motivation that is the best predictor of achievement and ambition and all the rest of it. So there was that interest and excitement, and then there's the downside from my point of view, and that was writing it up. I hated doing that. I'm not fond of writing, although I have written articles and things. And it's a chore, I found it a chore anyway to have to write the thing up, because I felt having done the research I wasn't that interested in writing it up, but I had to. And my PhD supervisor said Joan, this is the point at which most PhDs fail, because people do not write them up.

And I think that's true, and I did find it hard, partly because I'd changed jobs by then, and I was at Cambridge University, and I moved there just before the Easter term, which is what people call the summer term. And so I hadn't really made that many contacts, and so I was going to my room and writing up my thesis by hand, as you did in those days with a fountain pen. And it was quite isolating really, and quite hard work, and I did get to the point at one point where I rang a friend of mine in London and said I have to get away, I can't stand this writing anymore, I've just got to come and stay for a few days. Fortunately she said OK Joan, please do that. And so I think that that was, the contrasting experience of the excitement of doing the research, and the chore of writing it up, but I think that was important for me to have done as a future academic, because it helps you to understand the problems that other students have.

Because it is true, most PhDs fail because they don't get written up, and I think that it was good to have that experience to be able to sympathise and understand with PhD students, and to advise them to try and get through that. I used to say to them this is suffering, but it's a rite of passage, and you've got to get through it. So I think those are the two contrasting things that stick out about doing a PhD.

One of the things that I've spoken to about other PhD graduates is that because the OU didn't have a research culture, because there weren't any undergraduate students on site and that sort of thing, that some of them, particularly the humanities subjects felt the experience could be quite isolating.

Oh yes, I think that's true.

I just wondered as a member of staff whether you felt you were a bit less isolated because you had your staff colleagues, or did you also experience that?

Certainly no, I didn't, I mean I didn't up to the point of writing it up. Certainly I, and also I liked doing it part time, because I used to save my days and have blocks of time like when I was going out to collect data from all the schools, and then blocks of time to do the analysis. But interspersed with doing other things, and personally that worked very well for me. I preferred that mixture, rather than doing it full time. And I can see that for traditional Open University students it could be very hard I think if you're working to have to settle down in the evenings and do things like writing up. But yes, certainly I've seen full time PhD students who I think just do find it a very isolating, very lonely experience. I mean there were a group of us in the faculty who were research assistants, and we were all doing various things, and there were some full time students attached to the faculty as well.

But yes, I mean it was a great culture with colleagues, and I enjoyed it very much, and so yes, I think that did help. But I think it was going to Cambridge, and then having to write it up where I didn't really know many people that made me realise how difficult it can be for some students. I mean in the sciences I think it's different, because you're often part of a research group, you're given a little project that's yours, and therefore you've got support. But I think in the humanities and the social sciences it can be a very lonely road yes.

Did you feel, obviously I'm not a psychology student, but did you feel that anything you were studying at the time felt like you were doing some ground-breaking stuff that had a real impact? Because again some of the students, the timing of their PhDs, like some of the geology students happened to be doing it when plate tectonics was discovered. So for them they felt like they were changing the world I think, and I'm just wondering if there was any element of that with your studies.

Well I don't think I changed the world. I think I did make a contribution, and certainly the questionnaire I designed to measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation I have used subsequently, and other researchers have used it, and it's turned out to be

very robust. And I think the emphasis on intrinsic motivation that my study helped to build on I think was important, and certainly not long after finishing my PhD I got a significant grant from the Leverhulme Trust to look at gender and educational achievement. And intrinsic motivation is key in that area in determining achievement, both of girls and boys. And I think that that was significant, and in fact it was only probably about three or four years ago that I got an email from someone saying could they please use my questionnaire. Even though it was designed in 1977, 1979, and I know that it is still very robust, and it does measure genuine differences in motivation, which are important.

And I did the analysis for girls and boys separately, but the intrinsic motivation factor was particularly important for girls. It was what made girls transcend, and I'm going back now to the 80s, late 70s, 80s, to transcend the very strong stereotype that girls, academic girls were not acceptable, not socially acceptable. And therefore the fact that they enjoyed it, and they were curious about intellectual things was what carried them through not conforming to gender stereotypes, and therefore it was significant in that respect. And certainly for boys, I mean one of the things that I did, again the intrinsic motivation was important for boys, I mean although boys tended to be also extrinsically motivated. They wanted high status jobs, they wanted high earning jobs, but if they weren't intrinsically motivated then that wasn't enough to help them to be successful at school.

So yes, it was important, and I think it's become increasingly recognised, and I made a small contribution to that I think. That it's getting kids interested in school that's the key thing, but just saying you might get a good job if you do well in exams is not enough if they don't actually enjoy it. So I don't think that was earth shattering, but I think it contributed towards a trend that was building at the time.

That's fab, thank you.

On and I did get a full page spread in The Daily Telegraph on the thing I published on boys. It would have been nice if it was The Independent or The Guardian, but nevertheless you can't complain.

When was that, I can look it up?

Oh when was that? Oh gosh, now you're asking me. I'm hopeless at doing this. The article was published in 1998 was it? I mean I can send you the reference, it's online in the journals, I can send you the reference.

Well if you have time.

It appeared quite soon after that.

If you have time that would be lovely, thank you. You mentioned your supervisor, what were the important relationships that you had during your OU studies?

Well again obviously your relationship with your supervisor is important, because if you fall out with them then you're in serious trouble, and I got on very well. I had a main supervisor, which was Professor Don Swift, and then John Bynner helped me with the statistical analysis which I was not overly familiar with, and learned a lot from him. But also I think it's, what I find difficult is separating out the relationships related to my PhD from the relationships related to working for The Open University, because they overlapped so much. And I mean the people I, the friends I made at The Open University, many of them are still my friends. So it was being in, it was great being in an institution, and with groups of people that you got on very well with, and there was a great camaraderie. I mean just to mention one, it's a trivial example.

We did suffer the three-day-week because you lost electricity on certain days, and so we had a wonderful system whereby the people who had electricity cooked for the rest of us, and we all piled off to their house, and then the next day somebody else would have electricity and was doing the cooking, and lots of people would come. And it was that support group and friendship, and it's difficult for me Liz, to separate that out between the PhD and working for The Open University, because they were so interlinked.

That sounds lovely, what a nice idea that was.

It did make something pretty awful a bit of fun yes.

Absolutely, did you go, one of the questions is did you go to your graduation?

I certainly did.

Oh fab, and how did you feel, what was that like for you?

Well it was a great occasion really I felt. I mean it was in the Guildhall in London, and at the same time they gave honorary degrees to Ralph Dahrendorf and Vic Feather, and I thought there's nothing like nailing your left wing credentials to the mast here. And so yeah, I felt it was a very great occasion. I found it very emotional that I was actually, I mean obviously I graduated as an undergraduate, and that was great fun, but no I was, yes I found it a very moving experience really.

And does that, sorry I just want to double check, was that your PhD graduation you were just talking about?

Yes, my PhD graduation yeah, which was in the Guildhall.

That's lovely, and presumably you were very proud.

Yes I was, I mean I suppose one of the things that made me sad, both then and at my undergraduate graduation, was my father died when I was 17, and so he wasn't there. My mother was there obviously and my sister, and so there was a certain sadness, because he would have been very proud. So that was tinged with a bit of sadness, but on the whole yes, it was a great occasion.

So it's amazing how many PhD students didn't go to their graduation, which I think some of them feel that they wished they had.

Yes, well I think it's, I mean I enjoyed my graduation as an undergraduate, because it is a celebration, and I think it's for your parents and friends as well as you really. I think if your parents had made sacrifices then they should be there to see you graduate I think. But no, I enjoyed both of them immensely.

That's lovely, so you might feel you've already covered this, but when you look back over your time studying for a PhD, how do you feel about The Open University as a whole, as an organisation?

Well I certainly, as I said at the beginning I think it was an amazing innovation, and provided opportunities for lots of people. And I think it's gone on to continue to be an amazing organisation for all sorts of reasons. I mean primarily a lot of it was giving people opportunities that they'd not had, whereas now I think it gives people opportunities to study things that they maybe wanted to and didn't, and so it's got a whole range of factors that I think make it, it is an amazing institution, and a huge success, which certainly people didn't think it was going to be, because I do remember going back to the early days that of course the Conservative government had planned to close it of course. It had only been going a very short space of time, and they had prepared, so we were told, all the golden handshakes etc.

But Macleod, who was the main mover of getting rid of it because it was, I suppose because it was a Labour idea, died, and of course the person who became education minister was Margaret Thatcher, who surprisingly supported The Open University for, well I think it was the wrong reasons, because she argued we were told that if students stay at home and study they won't get radicalised by going to university and become left wing. And it was true I think in those early days that the staff tended to be ideologically committed to The Open University, but a lot of the students were very Conservative, which I think is quite interesting that there was a difference between the staff who were there, and some of the students at that time. But no, I think it continues to go from strength to strength, and is an amazing place. I mean like all universities of course it's under stress from funding issues, which they all are, and god knows how they're going to survive all this COVID-19 business and what have you.

Absolutely.

And also the whole issue of fees of course is fraught, and I felt very privileged that when I was an undergraduate I got a scholarship, because obviously my father had died and my mother was, well she was working, wasn't earning a great deal, and I just feel so fortunate to have had my fees paid, and have a living allowance, even though it was only £340 a year.

Wow.

You did manage to live on it just. I think I ended up with a £5 overdraft at the end of my undergraduate career.

Well done, so just moving on to post-doctorate, what did you go on to do after you got your doctorate?

Well I got the job at Cambridge before I had written it up, and I got a job there, a five year fixed term contract in the Department of Education as an assistant lecturer. And then I completed my PhD in the first long vacation, and then after that I got a grant from the Leverhulme Trust. And what happened while I was there in my five years was the AUT as it was then negotiated that there should be a possibility of people who were assistant lecturers being given ad hominem promotions to lecturer if the faculty supported them, and that's what happened to me. So I was promoted, I got a personal lectureship if you like in the faculty of education after I've been there I think it was for three years. And so then I continued by academic career at Cambridge until I retired in, when did I retire, 2012 officially, but did a couple of years more bought in teaching, because my colleagues, despite the fact I kept telling them, had not grasped that I was actually retiring.

And so yes, I spent really my academic career at Cambridge University, which was good because Cambridge is interesting because it's got all sorts of strands to it. I mean for a time I was senior tutor of Wolfson College as well as my university job, and for about 12 years I was President of the Cambridge Association of University Teachers while I was there. So there were lots of things to do as well as a straightforward academic job.

So presumably you would have needed your PhD to have that career.

Yes, I think so. Oh yes, I think it would have been much more difficult to have (a) got the assistant lectureship without the fact I was nearly finished it, and certainly I don't think one would have got promotion without having completed it. No, I think it is very important yes.

In that context you feel like it changed your life.

Well in that sense it enabled me I think to have the career I wanted. So yes, I suppose you could say that that did change my life, but it certainly enabled me to

have the career I wanted. And since I retired it hasn't been terribly useful, but it's been, I became the county councillor in Cambridgeshire for a ward in the city of Cambridge where I live for the Labour Party. And I suppose it helped because I chaired the children's and young people's committee during the time, 2013 to 2017 when it was a hung council, and then when it became un-hung I was Leader of the Labour group there. And I stepped down this May, and it's now hung again. So my successor is again in a group withholding the balance of power, so that's what I've done recently.

That's amazing. Before we stop the recording, is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience of doing a PhD at the OU that I haven't asked you about so far?

No, I don't think so. I think we've covered most of the areas. As I said I think the contrast between what was enjoyable and what was less enjoyable was good, because of the insight it gave me when I was going to have PhD students of my own, and I felt that that was good. So no, I don't think there's anything else. I think I've covered most things. Is there anything else you want to ask me that I have not covered?

Well there's lots of things I want to ask you personally, because it does sound like you've had a fantastically interesting academic career, but I think for the purposes of the recording what I'll do is I'll stop the recording.

END OF INTERVIEW