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

Oral History interview transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Dr Ken Richardson**
Interviewed by: **Elizabeth Currie**
Date of interview: **23/04/2021**

Important
The content of oral history interviews is personal, experiential and interpretive, relying on the memories, perceptions and opinions of individuals. While all reasonable attempts are made to avoid inaccuracy, interviews should not be understood as statements of fact or opinion endorsed by The Open University.

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it.

In some cases, interviewees may have made changes to the transcript.

Personal/sensitive information regarding individuals who may be living has been removed from transcripts where necessary.

This is Liz Currie. I'm a researcher for The Open University recording an interview for the Looking Back, the first OU PhD project and the date is the 23rd April 2021. And I'll let you introduce yourself Ken.

I'm Ken Richardson, formerly a PhD student at The Open University approximately 50 years ago, nearly 50 years ago, by courtesy of Steven Rose, my supervisor, Medical Research Council scholarship to do a project, which ended up with my PhD entitled The Incorporation of Tritiated Lysine into Rat Brain Regions Following First Exposure to Light. How about that?

Wow. That's amazing.

It's a bit of a mouthful.

Very well remembered, thank you. So we're going to go straight into the first question, which is really about your early background, talking about the area that you were born and whether your family had any experience of higher education themselves and so on. So are you able to talk a bit about that early time?

Sure.

So can you tell me about, let's start with the area you were born?

Well I was born in Newcastle on Tyne, where my father was a riveter in the shipyards. Like most riveters, many riveters almost, he was partially deaf, so bang, bang, bang and he failed the medical in the call up. But by that time, by the time I was born, '42, they were short of labour in the mines and the shipyards owned a lot of the mines in County Durham, so he got shifted out to a pit village. So we ended up in a pit village in County Durham about a year after I was born, in a very

primitive colliery house, one up, one down, no gas, no electricity. Your only water supply was a standpipe by the front door and one light upstairs, one light downstairs, that was all. Five of us in one bedroom, my parents in one bed, three brothers in the other bed. Quite cosy in winter. The toilet outside, the old midden toilet, which the netty known locally, which the farmer shovelled out once every week or two.

But we were there for 12 years I think until we, the houses had been condemned for decades when we moved in, so we eventually got a council house in Bishop Auckland, some miles away in Bishop Auckland, where they were building huge council housing estates. To us the house was a palace of course, all mod cons. Nobody passed the eleven-plus, or very few people passed the eleven-plus in the Durham pit villages, so the time I was in primary school, about six years in primary school, only two or three people ever passed the eleven-plus. So like my two brothers, one older, one younger, I failed as well, so I was kicked out of school at 15 and went to work in a factory, in the local factory. So I actually started work about a few days after my 15th birthday, because my birthday is in July, which coincided with the last week of school. I think I finished school on Friday and started work on the Monday. Shall I go on Liz?

It sounds fascinating.

So after a couple of years working in a factory, well a year or so in the factory as a packer and loader, basically loading package, to loading wagons, quite heavy stuff, got a job in a warehouse of a department store, again basically just packing stuff and loading wagons. And I was so bored by then, when I was 17, 17 and a half, I joined the RAF. So I went and spent the next seven years in the RAF. Do you want these details Liz?

Absolutely yeah, I'd like to understand how you moved into higher education, what your journey was from what you're talking about into higher education. That would be great.

Yes, well nobody in my family background had ever dreamt of anything like going into higher education of course, but how did it start? I had no qualifications at all when I went in. In fact I went into the RAF to be an electrician, an aeroplane electrician. When I'd finished square bashing and did the second medical, they discovered I was slightly colour blind, which is not very suitable for being an electrician. But they said well you can be a driver, or we're short of people as operating theatre technicians in the RAF hospitals and that was just training on the job, a year's training on the job. I mean I really enjoyed that, I became an operating theatre technician, working in operating theatres in RAF hospitals in the UK and overseas. I think I took, I remember an anaesthetist saying to me once, because I worked with the anaesthetists as well, have you thought of doing any GCEs Richardson, as they were then, GCEs.

So I took the first one as I'd done some basic medical training in human biology when I was 19 and got a B, and I felt ever so glad I can do this. So then I started doing O-levels, and then later on A-levels, and sometimes basically self-taught. The education officer was very helpful, they got me the syllabuses and the books, any books I needed. And there were some lectures going, depending on where I was posted, where I was stationed at the time, because I basically read according to the syllabus and regurgitated at the exams and managed to scrape my way through. I was one year in Aden and South Yemen during the insurgency there, which was exciting in some ways, but often in quite not so welcome ways, but I continued doing this studying for my A-levels. Then I think I'd started on the A-levels then in rather difficult circumstances, but I was quite highly motivated.

So what motivated you to do that, what was your thought?

Well it was just the thought that I could do this after all. When I left school, I mean I never dreamt I'd be able to do anything like that and neither had any of my family and my two brothers. They continued, my two brothers, in manual jobs for the rest of their lives, which is what I would have done if I hadn't had this lucky break. And of course, I had help from friends, like that anaesthetist, at several points since and always been very thankful for it.

And what did your family think about you doing these studies at that time?

Astonished. They'd always say they were proud, but afraid of me growing out from my family background, roots and so on, but I think I managed to hang on to those anyway.

So you did your A-levels.

Yes, then I thought well my next step, I couldn't be too ambitious and I thought I'd like to be a science teacher, just take a science degree and a postgraduate certificate, PGCE as it was then. So I enquired to Manchester University to do that and they said that, well they were just introducing this new degree called a BEd, which combined both the main subject and interspersed with the teacher training, partly in the teacher training college, but some of the lectures in the university, and that's what I did. I did biology and chemistry as my main subjects and I did of course, teaching practice in schools. After the first couple I realised that that was not for me, that the whole teaching system was, the school system was crazy and it wasn't for me, so I'll try and stick to some sort of scientific future. And when I got my degree applied for a job, in fact I was offered a masters, a chance to do a masters in Manchester itself with the fellowship.

But then I saw this advert for, I'd been interested in brain and I'd done some projects related to brain, neurobiology as an undergraduate. So I saw Steven's advert somewhere in The New Scientist I think and applied. I thought well this is a

remote chance, a remote possibility, so I applied and went down to Walton Hall for the interview and much to my surprise I was offered it. I mean it was beyond, further beyond my expectations to be doing a PhD with the Medical Research Council scholarship at that point in my life. So there we are, I turned up in September I think of 1970 at Walton Hall, somewhat overwhelmed.

Apart from the fact that you were offered the PhD, what appealed to you beforehand about studying at the OU, did you know much about it?

Not really, I mean I'd been sort of impressed, it was only because Harold Wilson had introduced grants for mature students to go to university that I got to university in the first place. And then I knew that he was behind the setting up of The Open University also, so I'd kind of followed that history with the occasional passages in the newspapers with great interest. But otherwise, obviously I was greatly in favour of it, but otherwise I never expected to have any connection with it.

So what are your most enduring memories about being at the OU doing your PhD?

At the time, well it was just amazing, really amazing in so many ways. I mean the first thing was that, the first amazing thing was that it had a whole suite of laboratories established, up and running just about a year after, well it had been an open field more or less, a full set of laboratories. They were called preparation laboratories. The heads of departments had obviously wanted to do research, so they were higher equipped, fully functional research laboratories and that was amazing to me. No doubt thanks to the attention of the heads of departments like Steven, and the chief technicians like the well remember Les Pierce and others. The next amazing thing was that I was sharing a laboratory with Aaron Sinner, who was Steven's project officer I think was his employment and Aaron took me under his wing almost like a master apprentice and showed me the ropes of working in the laboratory, wrote protocols for me and got me started.

And of course with Steven as a very gentle guiding hand as my supervisor, having given me a very pretty well defined and clear project, I mean I got off to a flying start. The other amazing thing was the group of people I found myself in amongst, that Steven had recruited to what later become, shortly afterwards became the Brain Research Group. Just the diversity of, I mean Steven was obviously the bedrock of ideas and set the basic theoretical framework of ideas for the research, but the others had ideas too. Obviously I'd come from quite a different background and it was just thrilling for me to be involved in amongst those ideas that were flying around and sparks flying, they fed off each other. Not just ideas about biochemistry or about neuroscience, but also about wider issues in science and also science and politics, which had just never occurred to me that science and politics could be intertwined in that way.

About a year later I got involved in the IQ debates [unclear 0:15:23] based on such crude genetics theory and theories about the brain. So it was just thrilling and amazing, that whole experience.

Did you feel that you were working, not just the people but did you feel the subject you were studying was in a really groundbreaking place at the time? Because this was the 1970s wasn't it?

It was groundbreaking, it was exploratory research that I was doing, but it was groundbreaking. The new ideas about, I mean Steven's basic inspiration was about the brain as an active and reactive organ. It wasn't just a machine, it was a dynamic system and that interested me enormously because I mean I realised that there was still a lot of theoretical work that needed deeper and wider theoretical work. In my own work I was realising, working with brain proteins there was enormous variation. These were, I was working with genetically identical rats raised in environmentally identical circumstances in cages in the animal house, but there was still enormous variability in what I was seeing before me in the results of

the experiments and always found it wasn't just random noise. So later I took that up into much wider, I was just hooked and it converted me from a passive student to an active scholar, the whole thing.

Two years later I was chasing literature in all sorts of directions, I was devouring literature and spending enormous numbers of hours in the laboratory and chatting to others of course, particularly with, I mean John Hambley who had a genetics background and we had, so I just started chasing that up. And I knew there was more theoretical depth and breadth needed and I thought at first it was just all down to some developmental constructivism. So I got interested in development and then went for a job after two years. I mean I had a family and after two years in my PhD I was broke. I was renting a house about five miles from the OU and I was broke, in debt and needed a job. So I applied for a job here and I joined the National Child Development Study in London. I continued living in Milton Keynes actually, but yes and spent three or four years doing that before I came back to the OU as a lecturer.

This time in the School of Education to help set up the Centre for Human Development, for which I became the first acting director. There was still something missing. I did quite a lot and continued doing research all the time in development and I got much more interested in cognitive sciences as an aspect of brain function. Then I realised it was something more than development, or the development theory that was around wasn't just telling me what I really want, then I got interested in dynamic systems. I don't know whether you've heard of dynamic systems, so I thought that must be the answer what I was looking for. So I joined combined dynamic systems in my cognitive developmental work and I did lots of experiments and produced quite a lot of papers and always had research funds, sufficient research funds to help me continue with that.

And then later I realised what I was really looking for, the idea I was really looking for was intelligence systems. Right from the molecular base, molecular ground

roots upwards through physiology, behaviour, brain and cognitive sciences. That what I'd really been looking for was intelligence. So my last 20 years has really been spent on the concept, the idea of intelligence systems and the evolutionary, this was the important thing, the evolutionary connection between them. I mean I took early retirement from the OU for reasons that we may go into or may not, but I got, I'd become completely dismayed with the new value system that had emerged in the Thatcher period, where corporate values had taken over from scholarly values. One thing doing the PhD had taught me was the value of scholarship, the really quite profound value of scholarship and that was what doing a PhD taught me, the value of scholarship.

That for silly reasons, really as the ground solved the foundations of civilisation, the basis of the enlightenment if you like was scholarship and science and the scientific method arising from that. So all of that interested me, the scientific method was very democratic, it really is. The process of sharing ideas, sharing results of conferences and papers and so on is all very important and I understand that. But unfortunately by the '80s and the '90s the value system had changed. I mean at a stroke Margaret Thatcher had made the income of universities not contingent on government grants, but contingent on student fees, the numbers of students they could get. So suddenly research products and courses became not vehicles of knowledge and knowledge creation, but just commodities basically to be bought and sold in a market system.

So markets and corporate values started to take over unfortunately and for many it was a question of survival, but there we are. There's always been, still are many, large numbers of people doing excellent work in universities, but the imperative became to get as many students as possible. That was the income source. To do that, to make courses "more attractive" and even a hidden imperative perhaps make them easier. And I wasn't terribly happy it was always going to be involved with course teams and writing courses, but it's not, I felt it's not what I wanted to be doing, I wanted my freedom. So I took early retirement and since then I've

continued working continuously, quite a lot with other people. I've produced two more books on intelligence systems basically, another one coming out later this year. I don't know, since I took early retirement 30, 40, journal papers and other articles.

I've been very busy and the last two or three years have been particularly busy. There we are, it's thanks to the PhD that I did and Harold Wilson who got me going, and Steven Rose who gave me a big leg up, as did other people of course on my way. And I think I eventually found the theoretical framework that I felt I needed to be working in, the evolution of intelligence systems, so there we are.

And what year did you take early retirement, do you remember roughly?

Well it was about 2000, no 2003. I had an honorary senior research fellowship to keep me involved, but as soon as I took early retirement I was offered a senior lectureship at Durham University. I was living back in County Durham at the time and I took that up and agreed to do it part time. But I found pretty much the same value system had taken over all the universities and I felt I was quite honestly, as many other academics felt, were really just feeding students through. It was fun and I enjoyed it, I always enjoyed talking to students and other serious academics, but I gave that up after I think a year or so, maybe 18 months just to concentrate on my own work.

Thank you, that's great. Sorry, didn't mean to pressurise you, you're OK talking about that.

Sure.

Fab thank you. Did you go to your graduation at the OU when you did get your PhD?

No.

How did you feel?

I don't think I was ever invited actually. I don't think, the first undergraduates, maybe the first undergraduates' graduation ceremonies probably didn't start until '73/74. I finished my PhD in 1973 and was awarded, I can't remember there was ever an official award. I did get a letter or I got a certificate to prove it, but I can't ever remember being invited to a graduation ceremony. I can't remember any of the others that graduated with me, I mean in the Brain Research Group there were four of us officially graduated, awarded PhDs at the same time. Aaron, Brian and Jeff, and I don't know whether you've been in contact with those, not Aaron of course necessarily, but Brian and Jeff.

Jeff has had an interview as well.

He has right, good.

Brian, is that Brian Tiplady?

Yeah.

I haven't been able to track him down, find any information about him.

Right, you've searched on the internet have you? Well he was yes, he was doing some sort of academic work and I think he had some connection with Sunderland University for a while. He's been living in Edinburgh for many years, as is Jeff of course.

Anyway sorry, I'm distracting you. I'll maybe talk to you about him separately when we've finished just to see. So Jeff has had an interview too, which is

lovely to catch up with you. So you've talked a bit about how you feel about The Open University looking back, is there anything else you want to add to that, or do you feel you've covered it?

It's amazing how many students or formally Open University students I come across and they always say what a wonderful experience it's been, so it's always good to see that. But like all the universities, I mean they did end up in a bit of a mess, as I say with the value system. I think that's been reversed now fortunately and I think it's certainly been reversed in The Open University. And so they might get back on track, whereby scholarship rather than purely commercial, scholarly rather than purely commercial values may get their proper appreciation again and there's good signs that that could be happening.

What sort of signs do you see?

Your current VC I think has written some good stuff. I've read some of his articles about the importance of, I think of research more widely. If you read articles in The Times Higher a lot of academics have been wanting to get back on track and get away from the marketing, the harsh market led, market directed system, whereby the majority of staff now are on short term contracts. That cannot be good for scholarship and the growth and production of knowledge, because of the insecurity and this inevitably behind it and the imperatives for short term objectives rather than the longer term and deeper objectives.

That's true. Ken, do you mind just tipping your screen up a little bit again?

Sure.

Your chin's slightly disappeared.

I'm sagging in my chair or something.

The other way, sorry the other way.

The other way.

The other way, perfect.

I'll sit back, is that OK?

Slightly down again sorry, perfect, there we are.

All right, there we are.

Sorry about that. So it's interesting that you feel like The Open University might be starting to change or try and change back.

Back on track in the right direction, yes.

So the last section of questions I think we may already have covered, which is about what did you go onto to after achieving your doctorate, and how you feel your doctorate changed your life. And I think you've covered that mostly, is there anything else you want to say about that?

No, I don't think so, I mean I think I've already said it transformed my life, transformed my journey from a very passive student to an active scholar and it taught me the importance, the value of scholarship and I've tried to hang onto that, and fortunately I've always had connections with other people who've tried to hang onto that and that's been great.

END OF INTERVIEW