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

Oral History interview transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Dr Alfred Vella**
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This is Liz Currie. I'm a visiting researcher for The Open University talking about looking back to the first Open University PhD project on Tuesday 13th April and I'm interviewing Alfred Vella. Alfred, if you'd like to introduce yourself.

Alfred Vella, did my PhD at The Open University in the early '70s. I think I started in 1973 and my PhD was in pure mathematics. The title is a bit long but it's something like epimorphisms between groups given by presentations, or something like that. I can't remember. It was rather a long time ago now, more than half a lifetime ago.

I'm sure, thank you very much for that. So we're going to go into the first question if you're ready.

Yeah.

The first question is just tell me a bit about where you were born and a bit your family's familiarity with higher education.

OK, well, I was born in Birmingham in August 1952 to two Maltese immigrants, second child of, having one elder brother, one younger brother and two sisters. The younger brother died fairly early during my childhood as well so there was a bit of family trauma there. Except for about two years just after I was born, which I spent in Malta with my grandmother, all my childhood was spent within the inner ring road, the bus number eight route, famous bus number eight route in Birmingham, so I'm an inner city child. When I was first born we lived in a single-bedroomed lodging - I don't remember the landlady but I think they gave my mum a tough time. If you had babies in those days it wasn't something that lodgers are supposed to do, you know, even if you're a young couple. Then we moved to a brand new ground floor council maisonette built on what we call bomb sites in Birmingham. I think it was something, my recollection is a lot of ground that was rubble, although I don't know whether it was caused by bombs or bulldozers but they were called bomb sites by the kids. And that was in

Duddeston Manor and then the important thing there, I guess, was that although, because we're catholic, so most of my mixing was done with Irish families. But down the road in Acocks Green there were a lot of Asian families, which was nice. You could smell the sweets smell and see the sweets in the shops. But an important thing that I guess at those times, which has actually come up fairly recently, I think I've heard on television, somebody referring to the signs in cafes of no Irish, no blacks, no dogs, and although it was a long time ago it's still within living memory and it's just shocking that we can, that's how things were. Racism was rife and it's still a bit rife now I think but maybe a bit less than it used to be.

Bullying was a problem that I have faced all my life from being a child right up to working life. At school, well, when it's sunny I get a very good tan. And so I was rather darker than most children and the kids would refer to me as being black, would you believe; although I don't know whether I call myself European but that's - and I was bullied and I first of all learnt to run. That's a thing I did at primary school and then once I stood up to the bully, we became friends. Bullying carried on into secondary school although I never made friends with the bullies there. It's not said in my notes to you, but I remember that when I was at university, undergraduate, I joined the officer training course, just the thing that some people give, and we went to Germany for a couple of weeks training. We went swimming and the guys there said oh you're not black. Of course they'd seen the bits of me that aren't in the sunshine. So my legs and knees and trunk weren't so dark.

Anyway, primary school, I was good at maths. And I don't think I was good at anything else but I don't remember. My memory doesn't go back very far for specific items. But the school encouraged people to study and my parents encouraged us to study and so I guess I must have had quite a lot of help study-wise. One unhelpful aspect of school life at the catholic primary school was that they didn't like left-handed people. Something sinister about left-handed people, if you're a Latin scholar at least, and so they used to whack me on my hand with a cane and, guess what, holding a pen with the hand that's just been caned is not an easy thing to do and it does not improve your handwriting. So

that's one of the big memories of my primary school-time. But I was put in for the 11 plus, as I think most children probably were. Well, in those days, that's how you progressed. Nowadays where we are in Milton Keynes some children do the 11 plus from Buckinghamshire because it happens there but everybody did it in the days we're talking about and, to my mother's shock, and whatever, shock and alarm, I managed to pass.

So I was sent off to St Thomas Aquinas Grammar School for boys, boys-only school, catholic school, brand new school, no other children there except us in the first year, 90 of us joined in I think 1965. I'm not exactly sure, 1964 or 1965. And that was the early education. It was specifically apparently I read somewhere, but I can't find the source, that it was meant for boys from working class families; although I suspect there probably were boys not from working class families who weren't necessarily clever enough to go to the proper grammar school so they probably were let in as if they were, you know, because in those days, I think today still, who you know does actually count an awful lot more than we pretend to know. As we know from the recent hoo-ha about what Mr Cameron and who he knew and, OK. So I went to this secondary school. I think there were about five teachers plus a head teacher in the first year and I think the most memorable thing about my first year was that I came 29th equal out of 30 in the class. So no mean feat, you know. I could have come 30th but at one point it didn't really phase me, I don't understand why.

But perhaps because my parents didn't know the education system here, I think I've been very lucky. I've been very lucky in lots of ways but one of the lucky ways, ways I've been lucky, is not really appreciating the differences that some things make. So it didn't worry me whether I was, I don't think that the primary school graded people according to where they were in school. And my wife says that in some schools that she went to, actually couldn't pin the list and you were first, second, third, fourth, all the way down, you know. And that's good for competition if you're in the top half, probably not so good if you're in the bottom half, unless you're like me and it makes no, you don't know what I means. And so I was lucky that even GCSEs and A-levels. O-levels they were called in those days rather than GCSEs, it didn't really, I wasn't bothered. It didn't worry me

whether the teachers thought I was clever or not clever. I didn't have perhaps some of the disadvantages some people have if they're conscientious and a teacher shouts at you. I didn't value the more or less than other human beings, I guess.

OK, what do I want to say about St Thomas Aquinas, Kings Norton, two bus rides away originally and then we moved house to be slightly closer and only one long bus ride away. So originally I lived on the other side of the town of Birmingham to the school and then we moved not very far but on the other side of central Birmingham. So, as I said, I always lived within the inner ring road. So first year was not very good and part of it I put down to personalities. I didn't much like the Latin teacher or the French teacher; in fact none of the teachers were that good in my first year but in my second year a new teacher came, a chap called Graham Smith, and he was on paper the chemistry teacher. But because there were so few teachers, he had to teach biology and he might have even taught maths and physics as well. And it turned out, for some really weird reason, whatever he taught I was good at. Even if somebody else taught it and I was bad at it, when he taught I was good. So amazing, isn't it? He took me under his wing, I guess. He seemed to be patient. He talked to me. Perhaps he wasn't the sort of teacher that needed respect, whatever that meant. Again, my mum used to complain about my behaviour in that way. I would, well, just treat people like people rather than they're a judge so they're important. They're the Queen so they're important. Maybe [unclear 0:11:45].

However, when I was about 15, so skipping a lot of or most of the school-time, I was offered a job at a chemical company, Albright & Wilson, which I was planning to take but fortunately had a chat in one break with the economics teacher, who I've only recently learnt is now a Jesuit in Birmingham so he wasn't, he was just an ordinary teacher in those days and he persuaded me, Geoff Weedon persuaded me to at least do the O-levels rather than leave school before O-levels because, according to the, you know, I suspect the grades, so if I was being examine this year and last I would be failing because it's going on what the teacher thinks, the teacher says and because I didn't bring many apples to the teachers maybe I wouldn't have done very well this

year or last. But anyway I did the exams and then I remember, distinctly remember going back to school to look at other people's results because I think our results were posted to us, meeting in the foyer of the school, a teacher who I didn't get on very well with, Pat Mannion, gym teacher, because I wasn't very, some strange things happen in life, one of which is I was very unkeen on sports when I was at school because I had to do it, whereas when I went to university I used to do all the things that I rebelled against, sports-wise, and I represented Royal Holloway in a sports day, university sports day as captain no less, having done not very much and not been any good but, you know, sometimes nobody wants to fill some posts. Anyway, so I turned up in the foyer with Pat Mannion and he said hello genius. I'm thinking what does that mean? You know, it was rather a shock to me. And then he could see that the other kids didn't quite do as well as I did and I don't know whether I was the best in the class, in the year group, or equal with somebody but I would imagine that if somebody who was expected to do well did as well as I did who wasn't expected to do well, you'll get more praise won't you? So I did learn it might be good to play Columbo, to be the Columbo in the class and be not very bright and then do reasonably well at the end at least and then they notice a difference. I don't know. It's a strange world.

Anyway, sorry, I'm just looking at some notes. One important aspect perhaps is that my wife, I was going to say my current wife, which is technically true but there's no plans for another one, her mother taught. She didn't teach me at school but she taught also chemistry in the school. For most of my secondary school there were no, the only female in the school was the secretary. The boys school, all men teachers until I think the fifth year when I was in year 5 or whatever, fifth year. We had three ladies turn up. One married who was my wife's mother and two who I don't think were married but they soon paired up with teachers. It was most, quite a shock. So I did my exams and did surprisingly well and she said, and my wife has said that her mum came home and said how well I had done, you know. And I think that's one of the things I've learnt since then from then onwards is that I always do better for people who don't know me than people who do. So there's something about the way I behave

that doesn't seem to fit in with people's expectations or something. I don't know exactly what it is but, anyway.

So that was my GCSE, my O-levels, and then I was given a small fee which I think might have been a whole seven pounds a term, so 50 pence a week, to spend my break times in the labs preparing a quiz and stuff like that. And that allowed me to miss the bullies, an important thing, also the bad weather sometimes. So there are some perks and another perk which is sort of a bit of a throwaway perk but there was a young technician, probably a bit older than me, maybe three or four, a nice young lady with whom I could go over to the shops. She had a boyfriend but the other boys didn't have to know anything about this. So I could go over to the shops and be sort of one up on some of the boys at school. And there were a few important things, I think, about my A-level career. One was that I was interested in too many things. So I went along to biology A-level classes, which I didn't get on with because they spoke Latin all the time in the names of the species they did and I wasn't interested in Latin and I can't remember abstract, not abstract, what's the word, you know, give things a name. The name doesn't mean anything, does it? It's just an arbitrary label to things and I didn't get, I just could never remember about polyps and all the stages of life might be. But I did like maths, physics and chemistry and I did the A-levels in that and I did general studies and further maths as well.

So I wasn't able to go to all the lessons because they clashed. You weren't supposed, to do the first three A-levels with the possibility of getting studies but I wanted to do four. And the head teacher said I could do that if I did my, learn myself but I had to go to him and ask him if I could be excused from homework because it was interfering with my studies, which is quite a good line really, to be able to persuade the head teacher that homework wasn't worth doing, but he agreed. So I think he knew. By that time he had faith that I knew how to do whatever it is that you have to do in order to get on. So I did my A-level physics in the lower sixth so I only had four to do in my final year. But Paul Olson, who was I think a historian, again it was quite weird that there was a hierarchy of teachers depending on which university they went to, so the Oxbridge mob were in charge and then the lesser ones didn't do so well.

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I think the last thing that I should say about the school, which is important in a way, but a lot of things are only important in hindsight. So I used to get to school very early in the morning, I think by eight o'clock I was at school for a nine o'clock start, and there was this teacher, the music teacher. I didn't do music much but, Peter Bridal was there practising and I think I had the privilege of turning the pages for him while he played the piano and of course I was introduced to lots and lots of music just listening, you know, in an audience of one, to this great guy who later got a lifetime achievement award for contribution to music from Classic FM. I wanted to play the piano and my family couldn't afford at the time to give me piano lessons so I managed to have piano lessons from Mr Smith's wife. She was a peripatetic teacher there. Again, I didn't know that word when I was that age, but when the school found out I was made not to have piano lessons, I took up the double bass because this's something else she taught because apparently if they gave piano lessons to kids, everybody would want to do it. So they only gave lessons in something that less people wanted to do, which again was a very strange thing to do but that's probably still the truth today, I don't know. So I became a double bass player and actually that wasn't a bad thing because I then, when I was at university, played the double bass in a folk group. OK, do you want me to move on to higher education?

I think that would be great. So that's a really comprehensive view of your childhood and your education.

I don't remember a lot but there are some things that stick out and that's what I've…

Absolutely, and they've clearly impacted the decisions you've made later on. So I guess the next section is all about what did you study at university and why did you choose to study that and then what made you decide to do a PhD after that?

OK. So my family have zero experience in higher education. There's some debate about how much education they had. Because I think my recollection is that post-war Malta had a very tough time because of the tough time they had in the war and I think only people who had sufficient resources could actually go on to grammar school, which my mother was clever enough to do, but she might have had to pay. I don't know whether she actually did go to the school or not but she certainly left school without the O-levels and A-levels and I suspect she would have had to do O-levels and A-levels in those days because Malta followed the British system quite well. It was not part of the United Kingdom but it was almost part of the United Kingdom in some ways. They were taught in English, for example. So no idea and that might have been a blessing in the sense that there was no pressure then because it didn't mean anything but I popped off to university. My father had started as a labourer in the UK. He had been a clerk in the dockyards in Malta and I think he did notice, I remember him wondering why or telling us that he wondered why the expats got paid so much more than the natives doing the same job. So 50 years does make a difference to how things go. But he'd been a labourer for many jobs and then joined what as the GPO as a trainee and did lots of tickets, which is the important thing is that a ticket was qualification, I guess you could say, and so part of my childhood would have seen him studying, going off to courses in Stone in Staffordshire and coming back with some sweets as a treat for the children. And so the work ethic was definitely there. My brother, who was one year older than me, left school at 16 and I don't think he had much to show for his time at school. But again I haven't said that in what I've written. But he did later become an OU student and he graduated in Birmingham as an Open University student a long time after leaving school.

Anyway, so they were, my parents were happy to support me at university, which you don't get into university unless you have some support. I got some part of a means tested grant. By the time I was at university my parents had moved up in the world because they liked studying and so the means tested grant I got a partial grant. I remember for ten weeks lodgings were £70, so eat your heart out current students, that's what they charge for their half board I

guess, breakfast and one main meal and a nice room in what the Queen Mother described as something that looked like a castle. That was a breeze block building, a brand new one, that I moved in in my first year which got knocked down well after I left but it was sort of, well, it just looked like breeze blocks from the inside, almost a castle. Cameron Hall, nothing to do with David I don't suppose. I want to say that I was first in the family to get O-levels and A-levels but the rest of them followed after me. All three of us went to university, except for my brother who missed out and he joined later.

So I went to study maths and chemistry at the time, chemistry teacher I remember, so I was very keen on chemistry. And I was good at maths and I wasn't sure which of the two I wanted to study so I decided to study both as an undergrad. There weren't that many courses. I did apply to Cambridge because Graham Smith said he and his wife were walking in Cambridge once and he said to her that it will be nice if Alfred went along to that. I did apply but maybe my Latin wasn't good enough. My science must have been good enough because I think I got three As and two Bs. One of the Bs was in the lower six so I probably could have got four As if I tried. I know nowadays everybody gets five As, or whatever. I can't remember exactly what it is my son did. He did say and obviously did very well but I think everybody does. Every school has some children who get a lot of As nowadays. That's been a bit of inflation.

So I went off to study maths and chemistry at Royal Holloway. My mum says that I used to tell her when I was a young child about the bus numbers. Again, I have no recollection at all about this, I just remember her saying that if a bus number seven came along I'd tell her something about the number seven. Clearly, I was interested. So I went there and it was a joint degree. Something that I still think is a good thing to do even though I'm not sure it has been beneficial in the end. Out of the six students who started at Royal Holloway studying maths and chemistry, after one year half of them dropped out and did chemistry instead. I don't think the mathematicians thought we were serious students and I suspect the chemist didn't think we were serious students either because we were only studying half their topic.

So there has been some negativity about that. But I don't regret it because I'm interested in too many things and if anything in my life I've been, I have learnt that it might be better for your career if you study one thing and you become the world's expert in symbols, you know symbols. But that's not really what I'm interested in everything and that has paid in terms of jobs and financially in my career, it's been very useful. So I did maths and chemistry but in the first year there was an optional, I think, module, half a unit as they call them. I think a sixth of the degree was in computing and I did that and ever since that first year I knew a bit of computing so I got jobs in the summer holidays programming for people and I've done, most of my paid work in my life has been not maths or in chemistry, although I have been paid for doing both, it's been in computing most of the time. Somebody says who knows about X? I say well I know about X because I'm interested. And that's I think half, or more than half, the battle if you're a sort of person who's interested in what's going on around you, then if you chase it, if you follow it then the opportunities arise. You don't know what they're going to be but almost certainly they are. So it was Carol's mum and my chemistry teacher who suggested Royal Holloway and that's why I did Royal Holloway. I applied to the normal number of universities and I didn't get into Cambridge but I probably got places at the other ones.

OK, so computing comes in. I think the next bit to say is that I didn't know what to study. I probably don't have the cards but I went through all the research at all the universities in the country and I ended up with hundreds and hundreds of interesting topics, all very strange, but Conrad Singer who was somebody who taught me chemistry and for whom I'd worked during the summer holidays doing computing at Holloway suggested that I apply to Oliver Penrose at The Open University. I hadn't heard of The Open University, a new thing in those days, and there was no recent, I wasn't, I was on the normal, the mainstream education thing so there was no need for me to know about where people can go to do their degrees if they haven't gone the traditional route. And I think part-time in those days might well have been The Open University and London university. I'm not certain about the London.

So I applied to Oliver Penrose at the OU and Robin Hudson at the time, Nottingham, but Hudson wanted a first and Oliver Penrose offered me a place and I got a 2:1. I didn't know what I was going to get. I think I should have got a first, I got a 2:1 in the end so I went off to the OU and I had an interview presumably in 1972 I think at the muddy Walton Hall. And Oliver said don't worry, when you come here all the building will be over. Well, I don't think the building work is over yet but it was quite quaint and I think all members of staff, again, I'll know this later but I'll say it now, they were given, the academics at least were given a pair of slippers each so that when they came in from outside they could change their shoes and not put mud all over the building. And the OU was a very friendly place as I'll get, there was something about the OU that wasn't sort of run of the mill. All I knew about the OU when I was given a place there was that you need transport because Milton Keynes doesn't have transport. And I learnt early on, my wife to be, she wasn't my wife then, she was my girlfriend, visited every now and again and on Sunday I'd have to walk her to the railway station from Woburn Sands and I think, I don't know whether it's a four or five mile walk, because there wasn't public transport on a Sunday and then I'd have to walk back all by myself. Probably was good for me in those days, probably could do with some exercise.

So I came to study at Walton Hall in a brand new building. Something about me, there's always brand new buildings, except for the primary school, but everywhere else has been brand new buildings. There were some bad things about the OU, nothing really bad. So I've said one thing which is the walking. Carol lived in Birmingham still where she did her degree. So I knew her as the chemist teacher's daughter rather than anything else. Another negative thing was that one of them said to me, well, if you can't come and do, if you come and study a PhD here you're not going to get a job afterwards. Of course it's probably still true today that, depending on the topic you study, my topic was going to be sort of maths, physics sort of area, which I thought I should do so I could learn more physics because I'd not learnt any formal physics except what I'd sat in for some lectures at Royal Holloway without going for the qualification, I just was interested.

An important thing probably to say is that in those days there were still a lot of politics involved at The Open University - apparently Conservatives central office had told its members not to apply for jobs at The Open University because it hadn't got a future. It was set up by Harold Wilson, recommendations I guess from Jennie Lee who I think she was education secretary or something, and until they built what is now, was called a Venables building, people thought it could easily have just been closed down, just announced in Parliament that it was going to close down. There hadn't been that much investment in specialist university type buildings, all the buildings were office blocks. The nice building I worked in on my time at the OU was just a nice office block. I was lucky because I was a PhD student and I think I might well have been the only one in the building, the only one in maths, that was stationed at, based at Walton Hall. Because many academics lived in Oxford and Cambridge and they would have had their students based in facilities nearer to where they were based. Until fairly recently the regions had a big part in Open University life and it's recently been reorganised and is probably still being re-organised, but we had regions and the Oxford lot tended to stay in Oxford.

But because I was the only one there I had my own office some of the time. Some of the time I was based with other people in the office but they weren't there. So to all intents and purposes it was my office. That was quite nice. I also was eligible for a council house. Again something that annoyed some of the locals at the time. As always council house waiting lists were quite long but if you moved into the area for work, so both, not necessarily a student but if you moved into the area for work then you could have a house and I had a nice house within walking distance from work in Tinkers Bridge. There was a chap, you met some interesting guys, somebody called Ellison Platt who was a chief administrator of maths faculty, who was always supportive and the only administrator I've ever met, as far as I know, who thought their job was to make what the academics want happen, because he realised academics didn't know how to make things happen but he just knew what they wanted. And he found out what they wanted and helped them achieve what it was they wanted and whatever I needed, money to go to a conference or to go somewhere, I used to go to King's College London for lectures, he would provide the money. So much

so that I was embarrassed and I told him so that the only time I talked to him was when I was begging for something. It always struck me as a one-sided relationship. I always prefer to give as well as to take, something I hope I've done with my teaching.

Most of the academics were busy writing courses so you didn't see them there a lot. There were some interesting people that you met. So Robin Wilson who had been Harold's, who was Harold Wilson's son, was an academic at the OU and on a couple of occasions slept on our bed settee, because he didn't want to go back to Oxford. I presume maybe he had, there was a party or something that was, some reason for not easily driving the 36 miles it is to Oxford from Bletchley anyway, from Milton Keynes. We met, the academics met at tea, or those who wanted met at teatime. I put on the urn. I was very keen on that social aspect of work life, although I probably wasn't that sociable, I guess, but I was for the tea and biscuits that we had. I used to go in those days, times change, but in those days I was going to walk up to work to the maths building seven days a week and on the weekends you just turned up and the security people just opened it for you. There weren't these sort of security issues that we had in those days.

Important things that applied in those days, perhaps not so much now, was the informality of being a PhD student, so I was on, I think all academics at the time were on Senate. I was a student member of Senate. I was on a promotion panel so anybody who wanted promotion went through to apply for promotion and the panels including students would discuss them. Again, it's so different. Even the dean of faculty was elected and I remember them being involved in discussions about how we should run the election of the dean. Again I suspect nowadays it's much less than that, less informal. Two more people I would like to mention, one of which is David Singmaster. Again, he didn't have a big impact on my life. He's somebody else who slept on our bed settee, and he tried, in those days we were quite, I think newly married and wanted, so this was just after I got my PhD, he wanted to stay and he did stay and then we wanted to charge him for him staying, I don't know what to charge, but he wanted to give me a Rubik's cube. And I was never into, I've never been into computer games or games,

whatever, but anyway that was David Singmaster, who I think imported Rubik's cubes and made some money as well as some mathematical fame from the cube.

An important to note there was the first Vice Chancellor of The Open University was Sir Walter Perry, and after its tenth year of life, I think 1969, 1979, we did a little operetta, a Ballad of Walton Hall it was called. I hope there might be videos in the archives and I do have a photo which I must scan and send you, but anyway he played himself and I just played one of the extras in the Ballad of Walton Hall where essentially the first ten years' worth of history was played out on stage, an opera-type thing, operetta, and in the interval we went as a cast to his office for drinks. I'm not sure if vice chancellors do that anymore. And at Christmas he'd come round visiting each of the faculty parties. So he wasn't as aloof as most vice chancellors who I've met since have been. He was somebody who was hands-on and you would see eating in the refectory. So he wasn't some, a very important person that would speak to ordinary people. And I think that may, the ethos of early OU times. I played football with the maths faculty, the maths faculty team. I was probably a bit rough and would tackle any moving thing that was on the wrong, not on, if they're on my side of the pitch then they're fair game for tackling. I think maybe I learnt from a chap called Nobby Stiles who I think died fairly recently. Aside, my two sisters visiting Walton Hall I think became more interested in HE study because of visiting, me taking them.

So relationships at the OU, I didn't find Oliver Penrose very easy to get on with. Perhaps there was an age gap and a cultural gap, class gap, I don't know. Maybe it was just that we're both odd balls at a very different age. And so after a couple of years I decided to change topics from essentially mathematical physics to pure maths - again, for no reason than I asked around who was interested in having a new student. I had a bit of money left from the grant and a postdoc named Steve Pride, who is I think probably retired now, but he became professor at Glasgow University in pure maths, took me on to do combinatorial group theory, something I knew zero about, except that there was a student in my, as an undergraduate who I was asked to help, a lady called

Sue Halfpenny, who had the same tutor as me and the tutorial system wasn't quite the Oxbridge one but it was a system where you met your tutor once or twice a term and he asked me if I could look after her. I thought he knew her through bible study and she would read out her lecture notes and I would translate them into English for her and she did very well as an undergraduate subsequent to that.

So I met the topic of combinatorial group theory. I didn't know that I'd met it but, looking back, I realised that I had actually met it and I did them. I did my PhD in a couple of years after I started on that so I did four years altogether, two with physics and two with pure maths. I didn't go to graduation, to any of my graduations. I've got four degrees. I didn't go to my first one. I did go to my second one which was the PhD and that was in Birmingham and my parents attended that and my wife. Yeah, my wife of exactly one week, I think my PhD viva was one week after getting married and she was at the graduation and apparently there was some mix up about seats because seats at graduations are quite scarce because you've got so many graduands going there and each wanting to bring a couple and they were allowed two guests each. I managed to scrounge a few more places. Apparently, there was a kerfuffle and then people there, my parents, were sitting next to said oh, he helped me at summer school. So, you know, some little payback, serendipitous, whatever the word is, good turn perhaps sometimes pays back in ways that, unexpected ways.

How did you feel at your graduation?

Again, I have difficulty answering questions like that. I don't think I felt anything special. I'd been to lots of graduations of other people as an OU member of staff or student, but it was good to be seen or at least the system wanted staff to be seen in the parades, making pomp and, which again I fail to understand, I guess. I'm really not a ceremonial person. I don't understand why we have pomp and ceremony but we do and the OU used to encourage us, people who lived at Walton Hall, worked at Walton Hall to go to various things and I'd gone to all over the country to stand, to sit listening to people being accepted as graduates to the university. So I don't think I felt anything special. That's the

only, I've been to two graduations, that one and then some 20 years later I went to Paris to graduate again as a BA Open University and, again, that was for the children rather than anything else. They were young and they would perhaps appreciate studying and the pomp and ceremony much more than I would. I certainly didn't appreciate them, anyway.

So I don't know whether that answers the question. I think perhaps a bit weird, I don't, perhaps again this is aside, I probably haven't written down in my notes, but being Maltese and perhaps English being my second language, although I don't know any Maltese now, but I suspect I might have known a few words of Maltese when I was, lived there for two years and my parents spoke Maltese most of the time at least from my early childhood. So I have problems with words. So, for example, one example is pride. If somebody said do you not have pride in your work? Which probably applies to me a lot, I would think pride's a bad thing, isn't it? Pride comes before a fall and I have difficulty having two words, the same word with almost opposite meaning. So that might explain why I didn't feel anything special about graduating. I mean there were hundreds of people graduating there so you're not particularly special, I don't think, when you're in that room shaking the hand of some important person and you had to listen to the honorary graduands there, you know, the contribution they've made to the coffers of the universities or whatever way they've earnt their honorary degrees, so I fail to really understand. But at least I went twice to something, to half of my graduations.

Looking back over your time at The Open University, how do you feel about The Open University, I know you've touched on it already but just to summarise that?

I consider myself to have never left The Open University even though I've been off the payroll since 1981, sorry, of the full-time payroll since 1981. When I left I think I had a PhD student that I supervised as an external supervisor. I then did some more courses for my BA. I studied some technology. I hadn't done technology before so I thought let's learn some technology. I have tutored for the OU and I still tutor now. I think a few years ago I got some vouchers, Argos

vouchers for being 25 years, even though it's been 50 years at the OU, but 25 years working as a tutor. I still tutor project work. And I think I've said that if there was a PhD slot open in the right topic I'd sign up. I might not make a good PhD student because I probably wouldn't be there seven days a week, 24 hours thinking about the topic because, as one gets older, you get more baggage and more moss gathers with a rolling stone or whatever.

But it's been, I still believe in the OU even though they've been very slow to innovate, unfortunately, and so they've found themselves as innovators in distance learning, in online learning, but everybody does it now. Everybody and his dog does, you know, you can sign on for free to a Harvard course, a thing called a MOOC, Massive Open Online Course, MOOC, and I've done lots of those as well and, when they came out, I was I think one of the first to do these things and I told people at the OU, you ought to be doing this, but it takes a long time for the OU, so one of it's negative bits. And I understand why but, when I was at, I ended up being head of computing at University of Luton and I put university in quotation marks for Luton. But one of the good things about there perhaps, maybe not so good but in extreme contrast with the OU, every summer when it was clearing time the vice chancellor would find out what students are applying for, what courses students are applying for and he'd take on lots of students through clearing because he did his homework with UCAS and knew what students wanted to do and we could put on a course almost in two months for students who wanted to study X. If that's what they wanted to study, he'd provide them with a course, even though the validation process was maybe a bit not quite as it should have been; whereas, at the OU I think it takes years, maybe three, four years or longer to put on a course. And that's not, if you're in a market, if you're selling, competing with other universities, that's not an easy thing to do. It doesn't matter what your quality's like.

Times change, fashions and what people want to study so that's one thing. But the idea that people who, for whatever reason, maybe they weren't interested, maybe they couldn't afford to, maybe their families, whatever, couldn't join a traditional university and study full-time but wanted to do a career and university placement at the same time, that idea I think has been very important and

certainly has affected my outlook. I remember summer schools where I'd be an expert in quantum mechanics and all the students would be looking up to me in quantum mechanics but one of the students, a jumbo jet pilot, the other guy captains a ship, a supertanker, and you didn't, at least when you're young, have any, or you shouldn't, you've got no excuses for thinking that you're better than the students. You knew that you knew something they wanted to know but they knew a hell of a lot more than you did. OK I think that's something that's kept with me all my time from The Open University. The Open University experience taught me that we're just different, have different skills and we should be cooperating with each other, working with each other.

So the OU still an important thing and I think it needs to think about what it's selling, what its unique selling points are which are usually some bad managements, ideas and excel at whatever it is that's not mainstream now but will be mainstream by the time the OU do it. I think that's, I don't know if that answers the question. It's egalitarian. It was very democratic, very, I think that's probably it but the politics were still there. There was still the infighting between people, wanting to do their, prima donnas were there and all the other things that I think you find at any university. […]

I think having a PhD, that's something that you wanted to know about. It has been useful and has had some positive and some negative bits. The sort of institutions I've worked with, I've worked in some good institutions and some not so good institutions. I think The Open University's probably the best institution that I've worked with or for. At other places, maybe less important than say the Oxbridge. There's always been the people in charge have often not been so highly qualified and there's been a negative bit about PhDs. I noticed that a lot of PhDs, there's a certain amount of bullying because of you having a PhD if the boss doesn't seem to have one and two places I've worked, Luton and Oxford Brookes, the person in charge who's my line manager has been an aspiring PhD student, mature student but signing on for a PhD, and not quite achieving the grade and it's not good to be somebody with a PhD when there's people in charge without.

It does open doors for you. Certainly it's nice when you've got use of the word doctor in front of your name, sometimes impresses bank manager and managers, and I don't think I said this but a good way of winding up when you get your PhD and when you meet a GP and you want to wind them up and they say what do you do? You say PhD. And unlike them you don't have to practise anymore because they're still practising and you've finished, you've qualified after you practise. I don't think I've mentioned anywhere, but my son's a professor of mathematics at Oxford in the real University of Oxford, so it's paid back in some ways, although I don't think I necessarily encouraged him. I think he probably got the interest in maths by watching osmosis rather than training. So there are a lot of things in work that are good and bad but having the discipline to study things, having, perhaps I was always good at being sceptical, cynical, but I know cynic's bad, sceptic's good, don't know why but anyway, so being sceptical about things makes you question and sometimes questioning is good so you ask why did they tell us to go and eat out to help out, what was that about? Of course, would it kill tens of thousands of people? I know why they did it but I know they shouldn't have done it so being sceptical, having to think about sceptical and cynical, having a PhD asks you to question things all the time. What are your assumptions? One of the things I was good at for my maths PhD was to take the work of my supervisor, papers he'd written and ask why did he assume that, did he need to assume that and then finding that he didn't need to assume all of that.

So you could strengthen a theorem by throwing away some of the things that they assumed without needing to and it applies in real life too. There are lots of people who just make assumptions all the time about, and maybe these are things that women suffer from, people assuming too much when it might be empirical that isn't actually a rule. Just because you see white swans all the time doesn't mean you have to be white to be a swan. Just because you see male doctors a lot of the time doesn't mean you have to be male, and of course you don't have to be. But people somehow, generalisation is good. I mean I know when people say don't make generalisations, that's actually a bad thing to say to people because we wouldn't cross the road except that we know in general cars can't catch us if they're far away enough, you know, but you still

need to question your generalisations so that you, I think that's part of the PhD, working for PhD, strengthens that in people who maybe already have it, I don't know.

END OF INTERVIEW