

Transcript: Speech by Lord Crowther, first Chancellor of The Open University at the presentation of the Charter, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1969.

This is The Open University. Many men have tried, and with indifferent success, to define a University. I shall not add to their number. But we are The Open University, and it is fitting that I should try to outline on what that claim is based and what we take it to mean.

We are open, first, as to people. Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission. "We took it as axiomatic" said the Planning Committee "that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student. Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies."

The first, and most urgent task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover, sometimes, too late, that they need. Only in recent years have we come to realise how many such people there are, and how large are the gaps in educational provision through which they can fall. The existing system, for all its great expansion, misses and leaves aside a great unused reservoir of human talent and potential. Men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck. These are our primary material. To them we offer a further opportunity. Almost we can say, like the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour:

Give me your tired, your poor  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the open door.

But if this were all, we could hardly call ourselves a university. This is not simply an educational rescue mission – though that is our first task, and we do not decry it. But we also aim wider and higher. Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education, supplementing the existing provision, there is our constituency. For example, from the start, there are to be post-graduate studies, and the first degrees the University will award, other than honorary, will be post-graduate. I look forward also to the time when we can link hands with those professions who do not at present use formal academies for their training.

The Open University is not the rival of the existing Universities. It is designed to take over where they are compelled to leave off.

There are no limits on persons.

We are open as to places. This University has no cloisters – a word meaning closed. We have no courts – or spaces enclosed by buildings. Hardly even shall we have a campus. By a very happy chance, our only local habitation will be in the new city that is to bear two of the widest-ranging names in the history of English thought, Milton Keynes. But this is only where the tip of our toe touches ground. The rest of the University will be disembodied and air-borne. From the start, it will flow all over the United Kingdom. But it is already clear that the University will rapidly become one of the most potent and persuasive, and profitable, of our invisible exports. Wherever the English language is spoken or understood, or used as a medium of study, and wherever there are men and women seeking to develop their individual potentialities beyond the limits of the local provision –

and I have defined a large part of the world – there we can offer our help. This may well prove to be the most potent form of External Aid that this country can offer in the years to come. The interest of those, all over the world, who are wrestling with the problem of making educational bricks without straw has already been aroused, and before long The Open University and its courses, electronically recorded and reproduced, will be, for many millions of people, their introduction to the riches of the English language and of Britain's heritage of culture.

There are no boundaries of space.

We are open as to methods. The original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. We start, it is true, in dependence on, and in grateful partnership with, the British Broadcasting Corporation. But already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that before long actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the Industrial Revolution of two centuries ago. Then, the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance, is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second.

It has been said that the addition of the traditional university to the lecture room, is a sign of its inability to adjust to the invention of the printing press. That, of course, is unjust. But at least no such reproach will be levelled at The Open University in the Communications Revolution. Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding.

There is no restriction on techniques.

We are open, finally, to ideas. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much as it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human Society lives and moves. This is the Martha of education – and we shall have plenty of these tasks to perform. But the Mary regards the human mind rather as a fire that has to be set alight and blown with the divine efflatus.

This, also we take as our ambition.

What a happy chance it is that we start on this task in this very week when the Universe has opened! The word has a new meaning henceforward. The limits, not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed. I am reminded of Milton's description of an even greater return from outer space, with mission accomplished:

The Planets in their stations list'ning stood,  
While the bright Pomp ascended jubilant.  
Open, ye everlasting gates, they sung,  
Open, ye heavens, your living doors; let in  
The great Creator from his work return'd  
Magnificent, his six days' work, a world.