

Countdown to the Open University 1 (1981) clip: The nature of OU students

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Michael Richardson:

Naomi McIntosh, who is the head of the University's survey research department, of whose job it is to collect statistical data about students, is probably uniquely placed to answer more specific questions about the nature of our student population.

Naomi McIntosh:

Well with over 60,000 students it's obviously difficult to do anything other than make vast generalisations. The most important one is that we cover all ages, and although we don't allow in students under the age of 21, unless they've got good reasons to go to other places, after that you can go on up to 90, and we've had graduates in their seventies, eighties and even nineties I'm told. So most of you come in the mid-twenties, thirties up to early forties, about 75% in this middle age group. That means that you bring with you your families, your jobs and your lives, and you've got lots of other things going on at the same time, and we've learnt to have to take account of that.

The other thing we've been interested about it to see whether we've done anything to remedy the lack of opportunities for women over the years and we hoped very much that we would have large numbers of women applying. Indeed some commentators at the beginning thought that we would be the haven for housebound guardian housewives. Well that didn't happen and if you look at the chart which shows the figures over 1971 up to 1979 you'll see that in the beginning the numbers were very low and we were quite anxious to build up the number of women – advertised a lot, put on a lot of pressure and indeed succeeded in bringing the figures right up through to 1975/76. After that point it seems to have stabilised. This years have been a bit better.

Well we ask you quite a lot of questions on the application form about yourselves, and that helps us know what you're like since we can't see you face to face, and what you might be interested in studying – we ask you for your current occupation for example, and what you might want to change your occupation to. Looking at those in broad groupings we can also see how your backgrounds are changing and whether the University is meeting the sort of needs that the society wanted it to meet. If you look at the next chart you will see that putting occupations into broad groupings: housewives I mentioned before forming a slightly larger group of the overall population. The biggest group at the beginning was the teachers and that caused a lot of discussion because everybody was worried about them taking over the University. In fact that's not proved to be the case. We don't use occupation in our decisions about who we admit, but we do use it to understand how you progress. Teachers are now dropping to about a quarter of the occupational groupings and what I've tried to do with the other groups is to put together what you can roughly call the middle class groups, - professional, managerial and scientific, and what you can roughly call the working class groups. And you'll see that bottom group, the other non-manual and manual has increased quite appreciably over the years. And we need to take account of this as we write new courses.

Another important question which governments, politicians and we are all interested in is what your educational background is, not to help us choose who comes in but to see how you all do, and if you look at this chart you'll see that about a third of you wouldn't have been accepted for normal degree courses in universities or polytechnics and that's a very important group for us because we want to make sure that the courses are accessible to you. There's another sizeable group, about a quarter, who've already got 'A' levels or you're onto ONCs, HNDs, and you often want to specialise and top

up. And another very important and large group are teachers who now need to become graduates and want to change their teaching certificate into degrees.

What we do need to carry on doing is asking you for this sort of information. We can't always judge what's happening to you in your own home or in your own study centre, so if we do come back and write to you with questionnaires or bully you and ask you to come and join in discussion groups, or answer the phone when we ask you whether you think that course was terrible you will understand that we're doing it for quite good reasons and we'll feed the information you give us back into planning those courses for you better.