

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

Oral History interview clip transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Professor Max Bramer**

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Clip 2

[00:15:43-00:18:17]

I was suddenly thrown into this situation where whether you are the most junior person, which I was, or the most senior person, you're bailing out this ship that's rapidly sinking, but you're trying to get somewhere like America. So you have got to take responsibility, you have got to work hard and you've got to become very self-reliant or the ship will sink. And I was given a lot more responsibility than I would ever have got in a university like Oxford or Cambridge. They probably would just park me somewhere for a few years, and I would never have done anything. But in the OU you had to learn how to do things or you'd be gone and the course would be gone with you. So we were developing a course, so one of the first computing courses and it had the usual large number of course units, printed documents, supplementary material.

We had to write software for the course. The Open University computer system didn't have useful software, we had to write a complete operating system, and then document it, write manuals, write tutor marked assignments and so on and of course all the television and radio programmes. So I ended up I think de facto really responsible for getting all the printed material out. Certainly I was at the far end of the process. The final versions that went to the printer for final publication were those that I had prepared, I got the final cut on every single document, which isn't necessarily a great thing when you're 24 and don't really know what to do, but we survived and just learned to do a lot of things. And one thing I realised was I got to meet and talk to some really good computer scientists, I mean professors, people who are obviously very knowledgeable.

But I rapidly realised that many of them can't write at all and many of them have no idea how to explain anything to anybody that isn't basically in the next office or preferably working on their project. And no offence, but I stand by that today and I'm sure my friends say that about me as well. But nevertheless I discovered that that was the case. And although we had a lot of consultants writing material, we wrote some of it ourselves, but the material you wrote just basically couldn't be used. I'm sure this is still true, it's just not written in the right way. You've got to think we are writing this, we are sending this to somebody in a submarine under the Arctic, under the North Pole, or somebody in Pentonville Prison doing it in his spare time and they're not going to phone you up and ask you what this word means, or have you made a mistake about this? You have got to explain this, and once you've got that idea in your head, this is really for that person, the guy in the submarine under the North Pole, it makes a lot of difference to the way that you do it.