

HISTORY OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Open University was the world's first successful distance teaching university. Born in the 1960s, the 'White Heat of Technology' era, the Open University was founded on the belief that communications technology could bring high quality degree-level learning to people who had not had the opportunity to attend campus universities.

However, ideas about distance teaching and educational uses for broadcast media had been circulating in Britain for a half-century or more.

In 1926 the educationalist and historian J C Stobart wrote a memo, while working for the infant BBC, advocating a 'wireless university'.

By the early sixties many different proposals were being mooted.

R C G Williams of the Institution of Electrical Engineers argued for a 'tele-university', which would combine broadcast lectures with correspondence texts and visits to conventional universities – a genuinely 'multi-media' concept.

In an article for *Where? Magazine* (autumn 1962), Michael Young proposed 'an Open University' to prepare people for external degrees of London University. The BBC and the Ministry of Education were then discussing plans for a 'College of the Air'. In March 1963, a Labour Party study group under the chairmanship of Lord Taylor presented a report about the continuing exclusion from higher education of the lower income groups. They proposed an experiment on radio and television: a 'University of the Air' for serious, planned, adult education.

There was no mention of a University of the Air in the Labour Party manifesto for the 1964 general election. The idea was very much the personal property of its leader, Harold Wilson. His thoughts were running on 'a new educational trust' that brought together many institutions and organisations to produce television and other educational material, rather than on an independent and autonomous institution that granted its own degrees.

Having won the election, Harold Wilson appointed Jennie Lee, Minister for the Arts, and asked her to take over the University of the Air project, moving her to the Department of Education and Science (DES).

Where Jennie Lee's Vision Originated

Without Jennie Lee, it seems likely that Harold Wilson's idea would have failed. Her total commitment and tenacity gradually wore down the mountains of hostility and indifference that she faced.

"In the Ministry, I was de jure a Minister of State – a junior minister – but de facto I was working on my own, dealing directly with the Treasury and with the Prime Minister. The civil servants hated it: all very irregular. But it was the only way you could get a new job done.

"Harold Wilson asked me to go to Chicago and Moscow. Neither was anything like what I wanted to do. The Chicago lads were lovely but they were only short-circuiting the first year or two of the degree. In Moscow all they were doing was routine long-term broadcasting and some correspondence courses.

"I had a different vision from that. And I hated the term 'University of the Air' because of all the nonsense in the Press

about sitting in front of the telly to get a degree.

“I knew it had to be a university with no concessions, right from the very beginning. After all, I have gone through the mill myself, taking my own degree, even though it was a long time ago. I knew the conservatism and vested interests of the academic world. I didn’t believe we could get it through if we lowered our standards.”

Jennie Lee established an Advisory Committee. Its report was ready to be included in a White Paper published in February 1966.

Labour’s manifesto for the 1966 general election contained a commitment to establish the University of the Air. In that election, Mr Wilson was returned with an increased majority and in September 1967 came the crucial Cabinet decision to set up a Planning Committee ‘to work out a comprehensive plan for an open university’.

Jennie Lee gave her name to the University’s first Library beside Walton Hall. In 2004 a new University Library, housing her political archive, has opened. It is the centre of a massive digitisation project enabling millions of users to enjoy University Library facilities wherever they are.

THE EMERGING INSTITUTION

Lord Perry of Walton, founding Vice-Chancellor, died on 16th July 2003. Professor Walter Perry, Vice-Principal Edinburgh University was appointed The Open University’s first Vice-Chancellor.

This interview was conducted for the University’s 10th anniversary.

“I came to The Open University from a wholly traditional background, having spent most of my working life as a member of the staff of the Medical Research Council and as Professor of Pharmacology at Edinburgh. I had no experience of any of the new universities,

nor had I ever been involved in adult education. I had heard about the University of the Air, but I regarded it as a political gimmick unlikely ever to be put into practice. It wasn’t until my son read out the advertisement for the post of Vice-Chancellor that I began to think seriously about the proposal and the challenge it presented.

“It wasn’t that I had any deep-seated urge to mitigate the miseries of the depressed adult; it was that I was persuaded that the standard of teaching in conventional universities was pretty deplorable. It suddenly struck me that if you could use the media and devise course materials that would work for students all by themselves, then inevitably you were bound to affect – for good – the standard of teaching in conventional universities. I believed that to be so important that it overrode almost everything else. And that is what I said in my application.

“During 1969 the first staff of the University were pushing ahead as fast as we could. A dozen of us were in office by May, using the house in Belgrave Square where the Planning Committee had been meeting. We had to write the first prospectus before any work had begun on the first foundation courses.

“By September 1969, The Open University transferred to Milton Keynes with 70 to 80 people. That winter the site turned into a quagmire, with floods from the river and our building activities. One hundred pairs of slippers were bought to save the new carpets.

“Applications from potential students were coming in: by the middle of 1970 we knew there were enough applications to make us viable.

“Originally the target was an intake of 25,000 for each of the first three years. The change of Government forced a cutback and the reduced intake meant that in later years there was a smaller pool of students to go on to second and higher level courses.”

In January 1971 the first students began work on their first units of the first foundation courses.

Charismatic figures like Mike Pentz, the first Dean of Science, roared defiance at more conventional peers elsewhere, as the OU proved triumphantly that it is possible to teach university-level science to unqualified students, at a distance. Home experiment kits and residential schools became part of the OU folklore.

Somehow, while still engaged in creating a viable undergraduate degree programme, the University's leaders found time to address other issues. Sir Peter Venables returned to head a committee looking at the wider remit of 'serving the educational needs of the community'. The concepts of continuing education, of post-experience study and of professional training and development were explored, and plans were laid for further expansion into those areas.

By the end of the decade, total student numbers had reached 70,000, and some 6,000 people were graduating each year.

Who's Who accepted that Eric Devenport, Bishop of Dunwich, did have a real degree after querying the BA Hons (Open) he listed after his name. The University's time had come. From then on the institution would each year boost new records in the numbers of people applying to study and achieving their degree.

The Open University was the first institution to break the insidious link between exclusivity and excellence. It is a University founded on an ideal and, like all revolutionary ideas, attracted hostility and criticism.

In 1969, when the idea of The Open University was announced, it was described as "blithering nonsense" by Iain Macleod MP.

More than three decades on, The Open University has managed to convince sceptics that academic excellence need not be compromised by openness. Our

graduates are recognised at their full worth throughout society.

THE FUTURE IS OPEN

In 2003 The Sunday Times Universities Guide placed The Open University above Oxford for teaching quality. We share with Magdalene College Oxford the record for numbers of University Challenge wins and we have a worldwide reputation.

They are remarkable feats for the OU, which has been teaching for just over 30 years. In key areas of the Government's own teaching quality assessment - such as general engineering - the OU was awarded the maximum possible score, out-performing the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and Imperial College.

The OU was described as 'blithering nonsense' in 1969. In the new millennium there is not a university in the land that does not make use of OU materials and study methods.

The OU has been faithful to its mission of openness to methods. Over three decades we have adopted various new media for teaching and learning. Audiocassettes and later videocassettes gave students more autonomy. Then, in the 1980s, personal computers opened up exciting new possibilities for many courses. By the mid-nineties we began the massive exploitation of the internet that has made the OU the world's leading e-university. Today more than 180,000 students are interacting with the OU online from home.

Every week more than 30,000 students view their academic records online. This peaked at 65,000 users in the week that exam results were available. The student guidance website receives 70,000 page hits per week. The Open Library receives more than 2.5 million page views and is a major centre for developing information literacy.

Many students are also enthusiastic about the effectiveness of the interactive course materials that they can access through the web or CD-ROM.

The most dramatic development, however, is conferencing on the internet, where numbers have risen from 2,000 students in 1994 to 110,000 this year. They take part in 16,000 conferences, of which 2,000 are organised and moderated by students themselves under the aegis of the Open University Students Association. At last count, 20,000 messages were being posted and 150,000 messages read every day. This intensity of usage allows colleagues to do pioneering research on the most effective approaches to online teaching and learning that gives the OU world leadership in this field.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) report *Britain Towards 2010: the Changing Business Environment* heralds The Open University as offering a "vision for the future" as students and businesses demand a more flexible approach to learning.

In the new millennium, it has created the means to achieve lifelong learning for all. The open entry philosophy of the OU has meant that excellent teaching, comparable in quality with other great universities, has been available to many more people.

The key to The Open University's success has been excellence in scholarship, in teaching, in research and, above all, in the systems and methods which help people to learn and to succeed.

On June 2nd 2003 The Mars Express mission lifted off from Baikonur space station in Kazakhstan. It carried the Beagle 2 Mars lander which was built at The Open University by Professor Colin Pillinger's team. The eyes of the world have fixed on this historic scientific endeavour.

With other Universities and the Met Office, Professor Bob Spicer's team has been running a gigantic climate prediction computer model using thousands of networked PCs. This has given more processing power than the largest computer in the world to run a vast set of calculations.

Open University peak-time television programmes such as *Rough Science*, *Renaissance Secrets*, *Landscape*, *Ever Wondered* and *Hollywood Science* have been seen by millions of viewers and have won new critical acclaim for the University.

More than 40,000 employers have endorsed the value of the OU by sponsoring their staff to enrol on courses. In addition, the OU is the largest provider of management education in Europe, and one in five MBA students in the UK is studying with the OU.