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## THE PROSPECTS FOR OPEN LEARNING

Michael Young

‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.’ Edmund Waller, *Reflections upon the Revolution in France*

To anyone like me old enough to have been around in the history of the Open University, as one of the pre-historic creatures of the movement, what has happened in the 25 years since it was established seems a bit like a miracle, especially in a country which by and large has not in modern times won the kind of reputation for innovation it had in the Victorian era. The OU represents the most striking and far-reaching development of the second half of the century in higher education, world-wide, and perhaps even in education generally. One has only to think of the steady expansion in the numbers of its students - accelerating and up since 1990 by 25% - to over 200,000 now; its 3,000 full-time and 7,000 teaching and consultancy staff; its 310 study centres in the UK and the rest of Europe; its extraordinary Business School and Health and Social Welfare programme; the 30 or so other Open Universities which have been inspired by the British example elsewhere in the world, from Germany to China, from Japan, to Israel, from Holland to India; and then there is the widening use in higher education of modules and transferability of credits, and the multiple influence on other levels and kinds of education and other universities. Neil Costello of the East Anglian office (he has along with David Grugeon, Roger Mills, Naomi Sargant and Roger Webb, been most helpful in talking over with me some of the issues I am going to discuss tonight) - Neil told me that an OU text he looked up in the Cambridge University Library a few yards away from here was so thumbed over and dog-eared from hard use by ordinary Cambridge students it was almost falling to bits. Only the most valued of modern books fall to pieces. The proof of success lies in their extinction.

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It is all a remarkable story, with the success being due to a dedicated staff and dedicated students, or perhaps it would be more to the point to put the students first. The OU is quite outstanding for the high morale of its staff, even now when they are being squeezed by the expansion in student numbers without a commensurate expansion in resources. The OU confidence level is all the more striking because it stands in such sharp contrast to that in the country's schools - teacher morale has never been so low in my lifetime, or perhaps ever - and Britain's ordinary universities have been suffering too. I think the sense of confidence which is around in the OU is due more than anything else to something - the enthusiasm of adult students - which I myself first spotted in the early

1960s when I was beginning to propose an open university (very small o, small u then), and Churchill College played a part. It is just chance that Roger Mills chose Churchill for this affair tonight although it seems a little like serendipity. It certainly feels strange for me to be back here after a gap of over 30 years. I was at that time, my memory tells me, a Lecturer in Cambridge University and a Fellow of this College.

In 1960 from my base in Churchill and with the support of only one person in the College, a classics don and Senior Tutor, and I think only one other person in the university, Peter Laslett of Trinity, I tried to persuade people in the university to open a second campus at Cambridge, operating in Cambridge vacations, for the teaching of external part-time students. My use of the word, campus, was a bad mistake. It made Cambridge seem like a mere Michigan State University. This City of Cambridge not a Paradise but a campus? What foolish talk was this? But at least I did not make matters worse, in terminological terms, by urging that Cambridge should become the first dual-mode campus university in Britain teaching at a distance as well as face to face, although that is what I had in mind.

It was obvious that not many of the ordinary academic staff at Cambridge would be willing to teach in the vacations, instead of doing their research and whatever else they did. So I once again showed my greenness (before it was a good thing to be green) by proposing not only that most of the external students would be taught at a distance but that this second Cambridge would be staffed by teachers from the Battersea Poly who assured me they at least were prepared to teach in vacations. Oh for the innocence of youth! Battersea Poly taking over King's Parade and the Cavendish! Even later on, when the OU was started Walter Perry recorded the 'profound scepticism garnished with ridicule and hostility' which surrounded it.

Anyway, acknowledging defeat but not total defeat, I fell back on running single vacation courses at Churchill for London University External Degree students.

The College Archivist at Churchill has checked the story for me. The chain of correspondence between me and the Bursar starts with me, in January 1961, asking for permission to go ahead. I suppose I could consider myself fortunate that in Cambridge the OK for the course came through quite quickly: it only took two years for the permission, although I was rather taken aback by the price – 2s 6d for a breakfast and £3.10 for a double room for a week. But in conjunction with the Cambridge Board of Extra-Mural Studies it eventually happened, for 120 adult students, and since I was teaching sociology in the Faculty of Economics I dutifully chose Economics as the subject for the course.

On this occasion the professional economists at Cambridge did not mind teaching residential adults for a week. As it turned out, the economists were overwhelmed, I was overwhelmed, by the quite amazing keenness of these 30-year-old and 40-year-old students. Presented with the first opportunity they had ever had to hear and question real economists and talk with other students like themselves, they started work at 8am and kept at it until midnight for six glorious days. This is now a familiar story at OU summer

schools. But at that time some of the dons said they had never, amongst young undergraduates, had such motivated students.

What struck me was the strength of the potential need and opportunity amongst adults who had missed out on university at the ordinary ages, and I determined to redouble my efforts to propagate the idea of an open university for such part-time students as these, and since Cambridge would not take them on and London would not teach them, a new kind of university it had to be. Whatever the weeks at Churchill did, along with much else, to prepare the way for the OU, the Churchill experiment led directly to the London University Degree Service of the National Extension College which is still running well over 30 years later, with over 800 London students studying with the NEC in 1994. London external degrees have been vitalised too and are expanding rapidly. The latest development is that NEC has been asked by Coca Cola/Schweppes to run a degree service for 18 year olds joining the firm straight from school. They will work and study at the same time.

### **The danger of being inward-looking**

The enthusiasm of those adult students at Churchill and the millions of other adult students of the OU since then have generated and maintained the morale of the OU staff, and as long as morale remains high, the OU will be set fair to continue its progress. But there is a reverse side to it. A well-deserved assurance can easily become a rather smug over-assurance. The shared achievement, the solidarity, the team-spirit of the staff, can become self-congratulatory and inward looking. Outsiders talking to OU staff have noticed how dynamic the staff are when talking to themselves or about themselves and how when a general educational issue is raised, nothing to do with open learning, OU eyes can become glazed over. Insofar as this is true, it represents a great danger. Nothing fails like success if it makes anyone think that any right formula has been, or ever will be found for open learning. The danger could be especially great if the OU thinks of itself as being part of the mainstream instead of being a different and essentially innovatory body. The OU has always sought to be open as to ideas. Is it? Is it really as vibrant with ideas as it likes to claim, and does claim in the University's official document on its 1993-97 *Plans for Change*?

I will answer my own question by saying that, whatever view one adopts about it, at least it is surely worthwhile taking great trouble to ensure that this great institution does not follow the way of so many others and fossilize, go dead from within, get stifled by its own bureaucracy and ingrained habits of mind; to ensure that minds remain open; and to ensure that no possibilities are ever closed off just because they do not fit well with any of the conventional notions of what the OU is about. There are many ways of marrying counter-institution to institution, and I am only going to talk about one of them. The main point I want to make in the lecture is that if the next 25 years are to be as brilliant as the previous 25, or more so, research and reflection on open learning will need to be encouraged in a large way. I don't mean research in the academic disciplines represented in the Open University, but about open learning as a means of education. It is not just a question of being self-critical but of allowing a revolving core of people to have time to

think, study and experiment in new practices. Discourse, dialogue, discussion, research are essential to all academic progress but with open learning a very special effort needs to be made to foster research into open learning itself.

My proposal is that a Research Foundation for Open Learning – a look-out tower for open learning – should be set up for the systematic study of crucial issues by scholars given time off on secondment and drawn from within the OU central staff, the regional staff, other Open Universities and open learning institutions in other countries, like Deakin and Southern Queensland in Australia, Athabasca and Laurentian in Canada, UNISA in South Africa and Indira Gandhi in India, and also drawn from people who are quite outside open learning. The Foundation would probably need to be started on the strength of grants from ESRC, from the great charitable trusts like Ford and Rockefeller, Nuffield and Rowntree, Sainsbury and Esme Fairbairn, the Volkswagen and Agnelli Foundations, and there should be enough resources for pilot projects as well as straight research and, perhaps most important of all, for calm reflection. The field would be the whole of open learning and not just that bit of it which operates in higher education.

Perhaps I can best make the case by raising a few of the issues which could command attention, at least for the team projects (as distinct from more individual work) which the new Foundation could support. The issues are about schools, the internationalisation of open learning, the increasing competition the OU will face, the under-privileged, and the encouragement given to individualism. Big questions, I know, for a short space of time.

1. Schools One does not have to be a very sharp observer to notice that schools, especially secondary schools, are in trouble, and seem to get deeper into it every year. It is partly that schools have been so much embroiled in politics. There have been nine Education Reform Acts in the last ten years, without including this year's new reform of teacher training. It is difficult (to say the least) for teachers who are reformed so repeatedly to keep going at all. They have not assimilated one reform before they are overtaken by another, and another. But teachers also have to cope with a most significant change in the structure of their population, which is that children are in certain important respects growing up more quickly than they did. It is happening sexually. The age of menarche for girls has gone down from 17 to 13 in a century and the age of puberty for boys fallen too but not to as low a level. It is happening socially. With the help of the affluent society children behave like little adults much earlier than they did – with their own music and clothes and paraphernalia – and the authority of parents has weakened, which means that there is less authority for teachers to borrow from parents, and it is more difficult for them to keep order in the classroom. But while childhood has been shortening, education has been lengthening, both the legally compulsory period of education and the conventionally acceptable length of it, after 16 and on into higher education. The result is that teachers are having to struggle with ever less biddable pupils who feel like conscripts even if they are not.

This is where the OU is in such sharp contrast and those economics dons of 1963 got it right too. The adult students of 1963 and the adults of 1994 were, and are, volunteers. They want to learn, often passionately, in a way that is unusual amongst teenagers. The contrast raises the question whether we, or any other industrial country, has got the balance right between school and adult education. Would it not be better to reduce the school-leaving age, find work for them which has a supervised educational content to it, set up a Civilian Conservation Corps like Roosevelt's great organisation in the 1930s, preferably an all-European Corps including Russia, and vastly expand continuing education for volunteers at all stages of life. The entitlement to funded education could be much extended but people could take their ten years of post-primary education at any time in their lives; it would not be confined, as it is for many people, to the years from 11 to 21. Conscription would give way to volunteering; the benefits to education and to society could be very large, as long as special steps were taken to stop exploitation of child labour and provide special support for people who are not to be able to compete in the labour market.

Myself, I expect this will happen in the next century – it really will be a major reform, and some – but it all needs a great deal of analysis and thought and research of the kind that the new Foundation could take on board. The first step along that road could be for the OU to lower its age of entry to 16 and work with organisations like the National Extension College and the Open School to prepare for the new intake. The Open School has an important role in expanding choice of subjects in the 6<sup>th</sup> form, in supporting children with learning difficulties, in helping invalid and excluded children whose education is interrupted. It seems to me odd that a body like OU which prides itself (rightly) on having no entry qualifications should still have one overriding entry bar about age. Why should the age of consent for OU purposes be 18 when for ever more vital purposes it is already accepted that the age should be 16? Given that adulthood comes earlier, should there not be equality centred on the age of 16? As a start.

2. Internationalisation of OU The Research Foundation would fail of its purpose if its brief was confined to the UK. I care particularly about this because my own work in open learning since 1970 has been mainly with the International Extension College in Africa. The same fundamental dilemma which underlies so many OU decisions – the economies of scale tell in favour of largeness while individual educational needs often tell in favour of smallness – arises acutely on the international scene. It would make a lot of sense from a purely economic point of view for the OU to take in more and more students by means of satellite in Eastern and Western Europe, and go on to do the same on the Pacific Rim and elsewhere in the world wherever there is a demand, becoming an educational counterpart of the BBC World Service with its daily audience of over 100 millions. But would it make educational sense? I think not, or at least not in the long run. It would be a kind of educational colonialism.

I am sure there are instances of courses which could be globalised, for example in teaching English and for various specialised purposes, but they would be exceptional. Generally speaking, a primary purpose of education is to foster autonomy, for individuals and corporate bodies; so educators in one country and another need to be helped to become autonomous themselves so that they can devise their own indigenous open learning courses suitable for the particular needs of their own countries. But this approach does not in the least rule out co-operation of an intensive kind between open learning institutions in different countries, not just for training and information exchange but in the production of courses with some modules in them which are common and some specific to the country where the students live. This is indeed very much the concept behind the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities and its first joint course, *What is Europe?* But there will always be a need for monitoring what is done and considering new co-operative projects, and in this the new Foundation could certainly play its part.

3. Increasing competition for OU. As the OU has helped to spread open learning around the world, so it has increased the number and effectiveness of its competitors. Greville Rumble, in a stimulating article in 1992 in the journal *Open Learning*, argued that Campus-Based Universities (CBUs) could have certain competitive cost advantages over Distance Teaching Universities (DTUs), for instance by developing distance teaching versions of their on-campus courses. The dual-mode university (DMUs in Rumble language) – campus and distance – may be as much the university of the future as DTUs. The OU could, for instance, open its own campus for residential teaching.

The competition in Britain is more evident than ever since the polytechnics became universities. As almost everyone here will know, there is hardly one of them which has not made a feature of open learning for their growing numbers of part-time students and many of the old civic universities are moving in the same direction.

This diaspora inside the country is an advantage in one sense: there are now more and more institutions interested in gaining proper financial support for part-timers and so ready to join what could be called the 'Birkbeck crusade'. On the other hand, there is going to be increasing competition for adult students, and this is very likely to show itself in all sorts of student statistics. The retention rates will be put on a comparative basis and become more sensitive than ever. There will be competition, and the OU can help itself by broadening its range, as it did when it accepted the Open College of the Arts into affiliation. OCA is small now but within 10 years could be growing as fast as the OU Business School. But, just as on the international scene, there will also be plenty of scope for collaboration. Many different kinds of alliance between the OU and other universities should be possible. That thumb-marked copy of an OU text in the Cambridge University Library could be a portent. At all events, there is much scope for research and

reflection on what kind of shape open learning will take in the future when almost everyone is going to be getting in on the act, or trying to.

4. The under-privileged I gather that of the entrants to the OU undergraduate programme roughly one third already have qualifications to a degree level or its equivalent, one third have qualifications which would get them into another university, and one third are not qualified to enter other universities. It is that final third which is crucial to the name of the OU and its basic principle of open access, that is lack of formal entrance qualifications; and this being so it is an embarrassment that the proportion is as low as one third. Even that proportion may decline further as there is an increase in the financial pressure to take more students who sail through, and don't drop out. It is also surely an embarrassment that amongst the crucial third there are (despite all that has been done so far to push the numbers up) not more unemployed in the student body, more people from the inner cities, more people from ethnic minorities. We are living in hard times which put to the test anyone's allegiance to the goal of equality of opportunity. But the goal matters most vitally to the OU which has all along striven to remain true to ethical principle.

A good deal is known already about this crucial third but more needs to be found out by means of research, building on the good work which has been done at the OU's Student Research Centre. When people of this kind drop out because they just cannot manage the work, what effect does it have on their morale? Are they worse off, more dispirited, than if they had not entered the OU at all? Could they, when they give up, get more useful advice from the OU about what to do instead so that they do not turn their backs on education completely? Then there are the even more difficult questions about the reasons why more people from these under-privileged groups do not join the OU. Of course, it's partly the fees. The OU spends over £2 million a year on financial assistance to poor students. But it's far too little and would be even more so if the far-sighted LEAs who are still able to give Discretionary Awards were cut back still further. Then how many would-be students, if they know of it at all, think that, by reason of its name of university, the OU cannot possibly be for them. Universities are for toffs or WASPS. If altogether more were known about attitudes, the OU could make its appeal to them more attractive.

There is also room for further pilot projects in the Regions, and the new Foundation could be their sponsor. My own belief is that it could make a great difference – this is the sort of ambitious project that I and my colleagues from the International Extension College have been helping to plan in South Africa in the last three years – if, as courses unfolded, there were at various stages pay-offs for people in terms of earnings and job prospects. Unemployed and other people would exert themselves more if they really thought it might improve their job prospects. All this would require a programme with the same sort of vocational bias as the Open Business School but for quite different sections of the population – the Open Non-Business school, or the Open School for Work, but not, certainly

not, the Open College or the Open Tech. The OU would need to learn from the false starts there have been.

5. Individualisation I come, lastly, to the part open learning has played, and could play, in the increasing individualization of society. In this it belongs with a much more sweeping trend which has caught up the whole modern world, largely due to the onward march of technology, and for a moment I am going to have to go a bit wider than I have so far in order to explain what I mean. Technology has, for example, individualized the activities of the home. This is a rather new development. For quite a long period technology was the buttress of the family. In the days when there was a marked division of labour and of power between the sexes many of people's activities were outside the home because the prevailing products of technology were on the scale of the community. But as the scale of industry has enlarged, industry has produced smaller and smaller machines with which to automate the home. The new miniature machines have been home-sized: and at first they brought people back into the home – public laundries gave way to the washing machine; public baths to individual baths; ice-making in factories was replaced by small refrigerators in the kitchen; heated homes became as warm and comfortable as the pub, or more so; the bus and the train were challenged by the car; the cinema was largely replaced by the television; and to watch sports people did not any longer have to go in such numbers to giant stadia when their own sitting room was a tiny stadium for all the family.

Inside the home technology is changing again – even the family is giving way to the individual within it. The whole family no longer need to ensconce themselves in a circle around the telly promptly at 7.30; if they don't yet have TV sets in different rooms, along with Hi-Fi and God or Japan knows what else, they can use the video to detach themselves from the collective just as they can use their own, very personal computer to play games about monsters all by themselves. The fairy stories do not customarily come from the parents any more.

Technology, by enlarging choices, has made hurry sickness the modern curse of Midas, and perhaps the major disease of the Western world. If the cost of doing anything is what you give up in alternatives, then it follows that anything which you contemplate as an alternative adds to the prospective cost, or, as one can put it, the pressure on time. People are more and more jumpy, more and more aware of other places in the world where they might be, with other men, or other women, at other meetings, at other conferences, in other beds, on other moonlit nights. They are made continuously aware of what they haven't the time for, and the major tactic used to deal with the time-famine – doing more than one thing at once – like making love and simultaneously listening to a Bartok quartet on the hi-fi are liable to be self-defeating, as all members of the Senate of the OU will of course know for themselves from their everynight experience. They are always missing out on the cadenzas in the scherzo.

I have digressed a bit for a moment only because I want to stress the point that the development of open learning, though not dependent on technology to the same extent as

entertainment, belongs to a more general trend towards greater and greater individualisation, and could powerfully augment it. Most of the time of students, at any rate after the Foundation Year, is spent on their own, in the times that suit them and at the pace that suits them – the great virtue of open learning. A common vision of our future is that this will go much further: that as video tapes replace much of broadcasting, and open learning replaces ordinary schools and universities, people will be sitting at their solo stations online on a network of computer conferencing systems, able at will to join one of the digital superhighways which will span the world, members of a series of subcultural communities trying to keep abreast of the ever increasing obsolescence of skills as people get older, a high-tech concourse in which no-one ever actually sees anyone unless it be on a videophone. Since the birth of the Industrial Revolution, thousands of millions of people have laboured to produce a world populated by strangers, and not all of them are as benign as the absent teacher who is trying to empower the individual rather than dominate him or her for political or commercial reasons. The central problem of modern politics – that of the small man in a big world – is going to get a sharper edge in the next century with the big world getting bigger in one sense and yet also bearing down more harshly on us when miniaturised down to the size of a computer programme.

The implications not just in terms of Can-Do but in terms of Should-We-Do could be spelt out by the work done in the new Foundation. I would hope too that the work might highlight what can be done, quite deliberately, of an opposite kind, leaning and learning against the worldwide trend, encouraging students to work together as well as separately, not just in some schools and tutorial groups but as a necessary part of their courses as well as in other ways. The new OU course on family and community history could point the way.

To this end I would like to see tutorial centres becoming drop-in centres for drop-outs or people who had not yet dropped in, that is places where people could go before they become OU students, or if they didn't ever become students, to meet with tutors and each other to talk about their needs quite informally and about the possible value of education to them. This could be somewhat on the lines of the self-help Universities of the Third Age which have grown so strongly. There are now some 240 local U3As in Britain. The model for the new OU centres could be an illustrious one, classical Athens, where a tiny community without any technology in it shone with an intellectual brilliance which has never been matched in the modern technological world. The great philosophers – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno The Stoic, Epicurus – were all open to the community. Socrates was to be found on almost any day in or near the Agora, the market place, available for anyone to talk to. Plato's methods were a little different when he founded the Academy, as the forerunner of all Western universities, in the olive grove of Academus. Aristotle taught in covered arcades by the temple of Apollo Lykaios – hence the word 'lyceum'. Zeno taught in a Stoa, a painted porch. Education was both august and homely. One of the greatest of modern philosophers, who would by no means have been dwarfed in the Agora, was the Scottish philosopher, David Hume. For him fellow feeling was what kept humanity together and fellow feeling which always needs to be encouraged.

‘So far from thinking’, said Hume, ‘that men have no affection for anything beyond themselves, I am of opinion that tho’ it be rare to meet with one who loves any single person better than himself; yet ‘tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish’. Hosannah to that.