

Vice-Chancellor's introductory speech. Academic Excellence Vision event 20/2/18

Academic Excellence in a connected world: reimagining the Open University

Welcome

Welcome to today's significant event where we're going to discuss the vision for Academic Excellence at our University. We have a great history of academic excellence; of innovation; of creativity; of world class teaching, scholarship and research - one that I believe can sustain an inspiring future.

The university is renowned also for its radicalism, its unconventionality and its distinctiveness. This morning I would like to:

- Share with you some of my thinking about what Academic Excellence could mean in the unique context of the OU,
- Call for a challenge to some of our current cultural mythology by going back to our roots as a university of radicals
- And demonstrate how our legacy of open connectedness is at the very heart of a distinctive definition of Academic excellence for the future

But before we get into all that, I'd like to recall the last time I was here in the Berrill theatre – with some students.

Our students are why I am here, why we are all here; to improve outcomes, to fulfil untapped potential, to change lives. It's something I'm incredibly passionate about and I know you are, too. Later, perhaps you can tell me what our students want, from your own conversations with them.

Academic excellence in learning and teaching, supported by focused research and scholarship, to enhance our students experience and our mission remains our goal. As the Academic Strategy approved by Senate a year ago stated "We will champion the ways (those activities)... can be combined... to enhance our distinctiveness, reputation and above all student success."

Above all, student success.

Naturally we all recognise that we face uncertain times and difficult decisions (brought into sharp focus by the recent Curriculum Review process) in order to ensure that we enhance further that student success. There is no doubt this scale of change is tough – and can create anxiety. But this is not a time for faint hearts. We must be bold and recommit ourselves to our core purpose.

A different role for Universities – as community builders

Let's examine some of the context.

In a lecture I gave last November at Durham University I spoke about 'the end of the fortress university'. I argued that technology has broken the down the fortress wall of the university and that the monopoly on information and knowledge has been overthrown by the internet.

So what is the value that academics and universities can provide to students, now that discipline based knowledge is more generally accessible? Some universities, maybe like Durham, might be threatened by such a change but we at the OU are an academic community that embraces innovation and disruption.

For a university like ours, based on the sophistication and innovation of its pedagogy, the idea of serving as conveners that support learners and create communities of learning is an exciting one – and one that goes right back to our origins.

In the founding years of the university we were renowned for our academic quality and our connectedness with our own students, largely though the mechanism of broadcasting, as well as face to face contact through residential schools.

In considering preparing the university for the next fifty years I often think of our first Vice-Chancellor, Walter Perry, whose masterful account of the founding of the university sits on my bedside table. He wrote of the surprising interplay between academics and broadcasters and the *"revered shibboleths"* that were destroyed when they joined forces.

"Perhaps the most important one was that academics do not make good broadcasters; I am assured that they do. And, conversely, it is often held that BBC producers ...are hardly likely to make good academics...

Again, I am happy to say that our own experience points in the opposite direction"

So why take this trip down memory lane? I detect that there is still a sense of loss in the university for the end of that broadcast era and of residential schools. That sense of excitement in communicating and interacting with those academic communities was one of the things that made the OU special – but I think there is now a real opportunity to reinvent that direct connectedness of central academics, both with your own students and with the wider population.

We are starting to reintroduce a sense of academic personality in some modules, helping our students get to know "their" academics through videos and named, photographed authors. The new tools, especially OpenCreate, coming soon, will make that a reality. But there is so much more we could do together.

Research and Scholarship – a proud tradition to build on

The Academic Strategy speaks of an academic community conducting research and scholarly activity that enhances our teaching and our students' experience, that conducts research and scholarship that directly informs our teaching and learning. But what does that look like in practice?

We don't need to look far - we have wonderful examples to draw on among our colleagues' work:

Take the data analytical expertise of colleagues like Enrico Motta in KMi. That led to the ground-breaking MK Smart project, a collaborative research activity which helped put our city's technology on the global map.

Or our world-leading work on Thinking Skills and Creativity, led by Professor Teresa Cremin, focussing on creativity in learning for schools. I was reading her advice on how best to read to children only yesterday.

Or the incisive research into public service leadership of Professor Jean Hartley. Based on that, she is building with colleagues an academic community of police practitioners in the Centre for Policing; a prime example of research informed teaching.

Or our prowess in network engineering and computer science that has enabled an academic community to be created with partner employers such as Cisco and now Huawei. That exercise has now been leveraged into one of the most exciting opportunities in the university for many years – our involvement in the recently announced Institute of Coding.

And to create that, an academic community within and beyond the OU has been established. Within the OU, Computing and Communications and KMi are essential as well as our colleagues in the OU Group, FutureLearn, whose enormous numbers of users and its collaborative platform are an asset for the university, which creates great mutual benefit.

I'm hugely excited by these encouraging signs of our research leading to direct student, employer, mission and financial benefit.

And our scholarship can play an equally significant role in creating student and mission benefit.

For example, Bart Rienties' pioneering work on Learning Analytics, Clem Herman's work on scholarship and gender; bringing women back into STEM and our award winning OpenStem work, which is opening up our laboratories to those who might never have the opportunity to visit one in person.

Anyone who has seen Ulrich Kolb remotely manipulating one of our robotic telescopes, located on a hilltop in Tenerife or visited the Mars Yard here on campus to see the Mars rover in action will be inspired by the passion and ambition on display – and its potential for the future.

That brilliant scholarship needs to play at least as important a role in the university's intellectual endeavours as genesis research.

So these communities allow us to involve many thousands of students, employers and academics. But what if we could do that with many more?

Building the OU community of the future

What about those who take pleasure in informal learning on OpenLearn? Or our vast network of alumni? What opportunities might it open up for students if, for example, we – I mean all of you - convened and curated on-line spaces for our alumni to support current students, as career buddies, and where employers, policy makers, Associate Lecturers and others could engage with academic staff in scholarship and research?

Could we also build in public “webinars” or have more live “field casts” into modules or qualifications, such contact that every single academic in the university should be involved in, just as we were in the days of the summer schools?

What would the OU community look like if we included the millions of BBC viewers who watched Blue Planet 2 or one of our many other BBC co-productions? Mark Brandon (or Icy Mark, as his Twitter handle has it) played a vital role in advising the recent series. But what more could we have done to convene a conversation with the UK public around the environmental and scientific issues? Could we have positioned ourselves more centrally in the debate about plastic in our oceans?

Last month the opportunities for us to have such conversations at scale in other disciplines was clear to me when I was at a launch event for the new BBC series ‘Civilisations’, a follow on from the original “Civilisation” series written and presented almost 50 years ago by Kenneth Clark. It was commissioned by David Attenborough who was then Controller of BBC2.

The BBC want to build a national conversation around the issues raised through this series, engaging with academics to inspire new generations of learners - and they want to work with us to do it.

Our unique relationship with the BBC allow us to make students' learning more engaging and better connected with the world outside. We can use opportunities like this to galvanise and make a difference in society; redefining our mission in a digital world.

This connected, networked approach fits both with the OU's egalitarian ethos and with the digital technologies available today. Can you imagine what Perry's radicals would have made of the capabilities of the internet? You wouldn't have been able to stop them “broadcasting” and interacting with their students all day long.

The OU and Employability

This approach also fits well with the urgent needs of employment, which is by far the strongest motivation now for OU study. The needs that business expresses, as I hear when I talk regularly to the CBI and IoD as part of our policy influencing, is not about a narrow sense of technical skills but a much broader range of capabilities.

Competencies that range across disciplines - creativity, communications skill, critical thinking, advanced numeracy, data analysis, team-working, personal confidence and respect. Those are the skills that our employability project will propose are embedded across the whole of our curriculum. And we need not fear that as an excessively utilitarian expression of the purpose of higher education. For those are the skills of a positive and informed citizenry, not of reductive job filling.

As Artificial Intelligence cuts increasing swathes across employment sectors it is becoming apparent that the higher human skills that I've referred to are what will provide the graduate premiums of tomorrow. The OU's enthusiastic, wide, engaged, digital community of scholars will be the best antidote to the risks to jobs of the fourth industrial revolution.

Conclusion

To conclude my remarks, I'd like to return to our very beginnings – as that University of Radicals.

A quote from Perry that is particularly resonant for me recalls the hostility and scorn expressed towards the fledgling OU by its “betters”. He recollected that: *“Most of my colleagues in other universities regarded my move to the OU as a sign of incipient senility. They thought I was quite mad.”*

But Perry wasn't afraid to be hugely disruptive. The OU's greatest disruption was of course its openness to all, whatever their previous educational experience. The second was its teaching methodology.

But to balance that radicalism the university also gave itself many of the trappings of a traditional university – fully demarcated academic disciplines, a traditional approach to academic governance, traditional ceremonial robes for graduations and even a residence for the VC.

The OU, as Jennie Lee put it would *“not insult any man or any women whatever their background by offering them the second best, nothing but the best is good enough”*. The university was somewhat paranoid about having the highest possible academic standards for its students, lest anyone should consider their degrees (or those who taught them) as not being deemed fit for a “proper university”.

And Perry also believed in another attribute of a “proper university”, the importance of research, for all (central) academics. This was generated by a recruitment need as much as a requirement of the university’s mission. In a 1960s world where almost all universities offered universal research time and study leave, it was a necessity to include a blanket entitlement to research.

However, having recruited his staff with the promise of ample self-directed research time, the first five years of the university were so hand-to-mouth that the initial academics willingly waived their entitlement in order to write and present (via TV) the first courses. And tight government funding also meant that there was insufficient resource available to enable academics to have the research time that they had been promised. It was only when the university’s financial stability was assured as student numbers grew that much later on the research entitlement became a reality.

So, the belief that certain academic practices are inherent in a “proper university” is still a core cultural tenet in the OU. But, what would have happened if the OU’s founders had been constrained more broadly by that need to conform? We would just have been another run of the mill university, instead of the most special university in the country.

Of course we are a proper university in every sense that matters to us and serves our mission; our courses and standards readily meet quality thresholds and the best of our research outputs matches some of the most research-intensive universities in the land - and our best research will continue to do so.

However, I think we can all agree that there is a substantial cross-subsidy from students’ fees to otherwise unfunded, generalised research activity. And, despite heroic efforts, our research grant income is not meeting targets, as funding bodies focus their grant-giving even more ruthlessly. In an era of massively reduced government funding, primarily in England, the mission of this university is at risk of being endangered.

We need the resource and focus to support our students, many of whom have diverse and complex needs. That means that we need to prioritise – to put students first.

What could we do with, say, £5m a year being shifted from research and put into a comprehensive wellbeing and mental health service to support students?

So do we want a definition of academic excellence that takes as its guide an outdated impression of what other universities now do?

Or do we want to adopt our own definition of what our proper university should be, unencumbered by what other people might think of us?

We can create a future where academic authors (whether central, regional or AL) write brilliant responsive, topical curriculum, having multiple direct contacts with a wide range of students across multiple technologies, platforms and methods, both for free and for fee. And academics convening and inspiring academic communities that extend to our alumni, the employers of our students and to wider society. Engaged academics delivering to learners everywhere, just as our mission compels us to. That is a definition of academic excellence that can be the OU's and no one else's.

After almost 50 years of proving ourselves, it's time to stop looking over our shoulders. Time to stand tall and take pride in the distinctiveness that flows from our mission, Time to build a genuinely open and confident University that grows and develops with its students for the next 50 years and beyond.

ENDS