

PodMag February 2016

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the February PodMag, the audio news magazine from Social Sciences at the Open University. I'm Karen Foley and in this special edition we consider the past and future of the Open University.

I'll be interviewing Dan Weinbren who's written A History of the OU. Peter Horrocks our Vice-Chancellor about its future and Pat Atkins who has worked at the OU for the last 25 years about how times have changed.

But first let's have some news.

Julia Downes, one of our lecturers in Criminology and Social Policy has published an article in Open Democracy about research on sexual violence in activist communities. We'll include the link to that in the transcript, it is a great read.

And late January saw the return of the popular radio series collaboration between the Open University and the BBC, Thinking Allowed. Now this seven part series began on 27th January and it's at 4 o'clock on BBC Radio 4. Some of the topics in February include weather forecasters and museums and you can find out more about that on OpenLearn.

And it's Valentine's Day of course in February which proved to be a relevant time for Meg John-Barker and Jacqui Gabb to launch their latest book which is based on the research project Enduring Love. This book is called Secrets of Enduring Love: how to make relationships last and Meg John promises to keep us updated on her blog page, rewriting-the-rules.com I'll try and get an interview with her about that in the next PodMag for you.

And now on to this edition where we focus on the past and the future of the OU.

Dan Weinbren from Social Sciences has written a fantastic book, A History of the OU. He not only writes really enigmatically but he has some great stories to tell and this is what he said to me.

Daniel Weinbren thanks for talking to me today. So you've written a book A History of the Open University and on 25th February this year it's going to be the 50th anniversary of the White Paper which was published in 1966 called A University of the Air. And this is, I'm sure you know, was all about the government saying that they believed that the Open University could be established. Now that was only a few years since Harold Wilson first ever mentioned the idea. Can you just give our listeners a brief synopsis then of how this all came about?

Dan Weinbren:

Well Harold Wilson launched the idea in 1963 but in 1964 he became Prime Minister because there was a General Election and he had not got enough time to develop his idea so he gave the job to a trusted colleague. She'd had 28 years' experience in the Commons, she had been a widow for four years and she was about 60 years old, Jenny Lee. And she took up the idea and she promoted it so that it grew and expanded and became a larger vision of what the Open University could become. And she set up a committee to investigate what to do next and then she persuaded the BBC, the Civil Service and made efforts to persuade her colleagues, further education, all the critics she had, that this was a good idea.

And by 1966 when she knew there was going to be another election she went along to Chequers just before the election, before the manifesto was written. And it was a weekend and this is what Harold Wilson said. At the end of the afternoon anybody was free to speak on anything. Jenny got up and made a passionate speech about the University of the Air.

She said the greatest creation of the previous Labour Government was Nye's National Health Service, but now we are engaged on an operation which will make just as much difference to the country. We were all impressed. She was a tigress. She got this written in to the 1966 Manifesto. She made all sorts of compromises to get it there and then in February, just towards the end of February, a few days before the election she got this White Paper out.

Karen Foley:

Wow. That's sounds very impressive. And then what happened?

Dan Weinbren:

Well Labour fortunately for her won the General Election. She got reinstated in to a similar position to push through this idea. And she got it past all the problems of the late 1960's, the sterling crisis, the tax increases, the credit constraints, the prices and income standstill. And all the critics who came forward and said this would never work. It wouldn't be a university, you couldn't use television in this way, all those people. And she worked with her friend Lord Goodman who produced a brilliant set of figures for the cost of the OU which were a massive understatement.

The first Vice-Chancellor of the Open University called it "Perhaps a fortunate accident or perhaps it was a fortunate accident or perhaps it was an astute political move". Because as she said to the civil servant, Ralph Toomey in 1967 before the Open University was opened, whilst she was being criticised she said "That little bastard I've hugged my bosom and cherished and all the others have tried to kill off will thrive".

And I think what's significant about her is that what would derail a minister these days would be bloody mindedness to colleagues, indifference to a Secretary of State, contempt for the department she worked in. But she used all those terms for her advantage because she didn't care who she offended. She didn't care who didn't trust her. She wasn't building a career. She wanted an Open University.

And what we got from this White Paper was a university which could offer degrees, open to all, however unqualified they were, and operate independently, separately and of the highest academic standards. So it wasn't tied to one channel, it could work with all sorts and it was offering free to viewers and listeners well written educational materials which meant that it was well placed when MOOCs came along.

Karen Foley:

Excellent. So not only, I mean we know how much difference studying with the Open University can make in enabling students to change careers. To build skills that they may be couldn't work on but also, you know, make a really valid point that there's so much content there that's available on TV for the general public to enjoy as some of the work that we do here.

That has been really interesting Dan, thank you so much for talking your time to talk to me today.

Dan Weinbren:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

So of course that's all well and good but the higher education sector is changing quite substantially at the moment. So I asked our Vice-Chancellor, Peter Horrocks, about its future.

Peter thanks for talking to us today. So firstly can you tell us what do you most love about the OU?

Peter Horrocks:

I love the students. I love seeing graduation ceremonies. I love the students' success, the ability that people have to be able to achieve beyond their wildest dreams.

Karen Foley:

And what are your big plans then for the future of the OU?

Peter Horrocks:

I want the university to be succeeding more for its students. More students qualifying, recruiting more students, expanding the range of qualifications that we offer and having a greater impact on society through our teaching and through our research.

Karen Foley:

And lastly if you had a magic wand and you could make one wish in terms of the OU what would that be?

Peter Horrocks:

I'd like to see the government in the UK get behind the Open University, get behind part-time learning, mature learners and make sure that what society and the economy needs which is the ability for people of any background to be able to develop their skills throughout their life, that there's the full support for that. That would be a wonderful thing to be able to achieve.

Karen Foley:

So students and those graduating, success, research and a positive relationship between the government and the OU thereby enabling our students to achieve. I think we'd all agree.

Thank you Peter.

The Open University has seen some changes over time and Pat Atkins who is now the Director of the Student Support Hub has worked with the OU for the last 25 years. So I asked her about some of those changes.

Pat Atkins you have worked at the Open University for 25 years. Can you tell us what has been the most memorable thing in that time?

Pat Atkins:

Oh definitely the students. They're so excited about being students. They're so diverse. They're so interesting and they're so interested. And the place that you find students in most numbers is at residential schools. So those residential schools that are a solid week packed with students are for me the most memorable.

Karen Foley:

They are excellent aren't they?

Pat Atkins:

Yeah, absolutely. We all have residential school stories any of us that have ever been so I won't bore you with hundreds now. But yeah, students.

Karen Foley:

Brilliant. And you must have seen some changes over the time. Tell us what was one thing that's changed that you wish really hadn't changed?

Pat Atkins:

Now that's really interesting because lots of the changes that we've brought in in the OU have been really, really positive. For me there was one that I still regret and actually that I'm still trying to turn around in some ways. We used to assume that students were going to do a degree with us and we used to get them to register for their modules really early each year on the assumption that they were going to carry on with us. And at some point along the way we changed it and we kind of gave the students the impression that, yeah they were doing a module and may be they're do another module. And I think we've just lost something there. So I'm trying to put that sense of, yeah you're here and you're with us and we love you and of course you'll get through. I'd like to put that back in to the university.

Karen Foley:

And what is one thing that has then changed for the better? What's more positive?

Pat Atkins:

Well it's very much easier to get information out to students now and to hear their voice actually. So for me the whole electronic, digital changes have been really positive. I love being able to communicate by email with students, it's really quick. We're just introducing web chat on some of our services now which I think will be even quicker. And also just being able to deliver a wealth of resource to students really easily instead of having to ask for a toolkit, it's just there. Things like that I think are really loads better.

Karen Foley:

Lovely, thank you. Well that is all good for the positive.

Now I was cleaning my office the other week. I haven't been at the Open University for 25 years but I have been for some time so I wanted to ask you how many cassettes and VHS's do you think are in your house right now?

Pat Atkins:

Well I was a student on and off for many, many years. So I actually have whole modules at home, not just the VHS's and the cassettes. I have to say that I threw out the VHS's when I threw out my video recorder. But I've still got cassettes because I've still got a very old radio that still plays them. Not that I play them often. But I think I have something like 14 file boxes full of module materials, assignments that I wrote years ago, notes that I made as a student, revision cards that were stuck up in my loo. Just everything is still in those boxes. So, yeah, they clutter my garage and my husband wants to throw them out but he's not allowed to.

Karen Foley:

You can't bear to part with them. A lot of history there. Well Pat thank you very much for that that has been brilliant.

Well that is unfortunately all we have time for in this edition. I hope that you've enjoyed it and as always if you'd like to be interviewed on the phone or have a message or a piece of news for us, whether you're a student or an academic please email PodMag@open.ac.uk

Until the March edition then I'm Karen Foley and thanks very much for listening.