2026
OpenLearn 20th Anniversary

Sara Aloe, Andy Lane, Patrick McAndrew, Laura Dewis, Andrew Law, Patrina Law, Jane Roberts and Simon Ashby:

SARA ALOE: I found it after actually losing my job in corporate background, and I just decided to look for something fun. And for me, this was really amazing because due to personal reasons, I did not have an opportunity to go to university right after high school. But OpenLearn gave me ideas what to do with my future.

So today I'm a bachelor of political science, and actually OpenLearn gave me a lot towards doing it. It gave me the bravery to go for it. I was 30, today I'm 36, so we're talking six years of adventure with OpenLearn that it opened the door for me.

ANDY LANE: If university decided it wanted to get into open education platform after there have been various developments in the United States. Firstly, MIT in Boston, USA had launched the MIT OpenCourseWare project back in 2001. At the same time, the Creative Commons institution was founded, and that also launched with six Creative Commons licenses in 2001.

PATRICK MCANDREW: So back before OpenLearn started, there was this idea coming about of open content. The idea that we could actually share things. There was a lot of focus on swapping things between different universities, different learning educators, different educators taking other people's materials.

And the university connected up with one of the prime movers in this area, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. It was a bit different what The Open University wanted to do because The Open University didn't want to just swap materials with other universities. They wanted to reach out and offer them in a new way to learners as part of its widening participation outreach mission to reach learners.

ANDY LANE: And there was a conversation that went on, and then The Open University decided, we set up a small team to think about, should we do something in this area? We've been approached by the foundation. What should we do? They prepared a report that went to the vice chancellor executive to council to academic board then, and everybody agreed we should do something. So that's how the idea of doing what was originally called an open content initiative came about.

LAURA DEWIS: I think the original goals there were probably two in my mind, one which was to equalize access to education, something that had been at the heart of The Open University's mission since they were founded. But also in a new world, it was also to provide those materials to other the educators who may not be as well resourced as the university, for example, so that they can use and remix those educational materials in their own context.

So what you had was rather than everybody trying to create the same kinds of materials, reducing that duplication of effort across an educational system globally and being able to make those educational materials completely relevant for people in their own context, in environments, in their own social situations. And I think the second thing was a kind of reinvigoration of the university.

PATRICK MCANDREW: So OpenLearn actually tried to achieve a lot of things for the university and actually for the world as well. So it was trying to help reach people. And part of its different mission to other universities, this outreach and widening participation. It was also trying to modernize its own structures. And OpenLearn turned out to be really helpful in very rapid development, meeting goals in very short term compared to traditional working within the university environment.

ANDY LANE: Well, once that decision had been made that we want to do something, we decided that the open content initiative will have three stages. Stage 1 was to set up a small team to actually do a detailed plan for what could be done within two years.

PATRICK MCANDREW: So as a project, what started off was the open content initiative and became open. It had a classic project challenge. It was only funded for a couple of years, had plenty of resources, but it had to do it really quickly. So one of the challenges really just about structure was working very quickly and getting to launch as rapidly as we did.

LAURA DEWIS: of the challenges on OpenLearn came about from the university being both a huge advocate for this. This is something they'd signed up to do, had committed to a strategic level and also being quite nervous about it. So there's a lot of people internally saying we're selling the family silver.

And in fact, sometimes the press picked up on that would talk about, how is this going to work for the university? So that was really challenging because it just meant that we had to prove that it would work before we knew it would work. And it was very much an experiment in the early days.

ANDY LANE: Now, the timeline for stage 2 was to start in April 2006 and run to April 2008, so two years. And we had $99 million from Hewlett Foundation, and the university put in about $1 million as well to cover those two years. So things had to start very quickly. And one of the key things we said we'd do is we'd launch the platform by that October, launch a platform with 900 hours of content.

PATRICK MCANDREW: Launch day for OpenLearn 25th of October, 2006 was really when I realized it was going to work. As soon as that, because before that it was very scary working up to can we actually do this? Can we actually get the technology to work? Because of course, in the months before we broke a few things and things that we respected work, didn't work, and we were carrying out betas and it was all very pressured. And we'd gone with a launch date of 25th of October.

And on that day, I wasn't there, I'd got my computer open, and I wasn't paying much attention to what was happening in the room because I was actually on the back end looking at the data flowing through, and it was working. And I could say straight away that we were getting people globally onto it. They weren't just from the UK. In fact, through the analysis very quickly, we found we'd got access from more countries than there were in the United Nations.

And because actually it's a bit of a lower barrier to getting internet to name than it is to get into the United Nations. So very early, this is going to succeed. It works. We've got content on it and people wanted the content. And that was a wow, everything else is a bonus from now on.

LAURA DEWIS: The moment that I thought OpenLearn was definitely a success was when we persuaded the university council that we had a model for sustainability. And when we were able to go to the council after a number of years and say, "This is the impact that this project has had and this is how we could make it affordable to roll out and become a sustainable part of what we do as just part of how we operate as the University?" And when they agreed to that pitch, that was when I knew, OK, this is a success.

ANDREW LAW: So I was with OpenLearn for about 10 years and it was a fantastic and an idea I was deeply jealous of and wanted to be part of and it had gone through gargantuan efforts to establish itself as something that was reasonable for the OU to do. But most of that effort had gone into the architecture of building the thing, of getting the content out, and of making it all stand up and work. I think less attention had been spent on what it looked like and what it felt like as a user experience, and that is understandable.

So the first thing we did was an enormous overhaul of all of the systems and its look and feel. I think the second thing is that media landscape was changing really rapidly. There was YouTube, there was Twitter, there was Facebook, and although OpenLearn was a key

destination, we also needed to make sure it wasn't the only destination. So a critical issue was, could we syndicate this content onto YouTube, onto Twitter, onto other platforms that would emerge over the next few years?

The other critical thing that we did is when we asked those people what they wanted, they wanted a record of their learning. We knew they wanted a nice, clean, shiny certificate with the OU's brand on it, with a clear description of everything that they had learnt that they could share with their employers or other people, to really show that they had got confidence and an ability to understand the subject. I think these certificates were an absolute critical breakthrough.

PATRINA LAW: Digital badging came about in about 2012, and when I joined OpenLearn, I decided that it would be useful to try that technology as a motivating element for people who were studying. And the digital badging world was so ahead of its time because we now talk about skills wallets and skills passports in a way that understood you've got your perhaps LinkedIn profile, what you might talk about your skills and certificates. But now we're in a world where we're thinking about skills where we put all those digital credentials.

We put a badge on a course, and those initially were mass courses and learning how to learn courses. And they were used experimentally to really encourage young people who had not gained their formal maths qualifications and had struggled at school to motivate them through a course of learning to say, "Look, if you get through this course, you'll get this digital badge and you can display that on a public profile to say something about yourself."

JANE ROBERTS: I had the privilege of caretaking as head of OpenLearn, so that started in November 2019, when the original plan was because it was maintain to cover, no plans to rock the boat and keep a steady ship, look after the lovely team and make sure things run smoothly. Just three months later or four months later, all hell broke loose basically because as we all know COVID-19 happened upon us and basically we put into lockdown in March, and prior to that, as OpenLearn, would see roughly about 40,000 visitors to the site each day. But pretty much overnight that increased to about 200,000.

So a lot of those people were coming to the site not just to have a look. They were enrolling on courses and completing those courses. And so it made us realize that people were looking for something to fill a gap.

Potentially, it's made people realize actually the role that they're in is quite vulnerable, and perhaps they need to pick up some new skills and got lots of employability type skills on the platform. Lots of practical stuff for teaching online. We had to work with quite a lot of external people quite quickly on positive collaborations. Once we started working with people like the DFE, it increased the focus in terms of employability and encouraged us to work with our academic colleagues in the university to develop further employability courses.

And the other really good thing about the badged courses is that each of them was verified and supported by the CPD standards office, which meant that each of those courses could be used officially as CPD learning. So yeah, incredibly rewarding to be able to say that you were supporting these people in need. And that was born in the numbers that were coming to the site.

PATRINA LAW: I remember looking at the first piece of feedback from that first maths course that we piloted, and 40% of the learners on that course declared a disability. And from that, we grew more research into understanding the impact of these courses. They appealed heavily to people who did not have qualifications or had been excluded from education in some form, but also from a business perspective at The Open University.

Those learners were also having that real Eureka moment of I've just had some recognition from The Open University. It's a university, and I can manage the content and I've done this thing. What should I do now? And those learners were more inclined to take the next step, and a lot of them made an inquiry to become a student at The Open University, having realized that it was for them.

LAURA DEWIS: I don't think anything surprised me about how OpenLearn was used. I think I always knew that it was this amazing idea and that people would come to it, and it would change lives. I always felt like that because for every person who thinks about going into higher education, there are many more who either don't think they have the opportunity or think about it and put their toe in the water. But then for lots of reasons just think it's not the time or I can't afford it or whatever it might be.

And so to be able to give people that experience and the opportunity to learn without the full commitment of taking a university course is an enormously important thing to do. When you think about it, it is a much more important investment of your time and commitment of your time than anything that you might buy in a shop. And yet you didn't get to try anything before you invested that time and that money and the complete change of life for a lot of Open University students and coming to the university.

ANDY LANE: I'm most proud of the way in which OpenLearn was able to connect us to lots of other organizations around the world. So yes, we were doing things to see how they benefited the OU, but there was also, we could broaden and deepen the already existing contacts we have with other distance teaching universities in Europe or further afield. We could then also connect up with a lot of the organizations in America and further afield, who were becoming part of what started out as the OpenCourseWare consortium, but then later became open education global and still exists and we're still members of.

So it's been very important. It's really been to add another dimension to The Open University and what it's been able to do. So not just through our taught programs and what students can do, but it's this great penumbra of other people and other organizations who we can again, reach out to and provide educational opportunities.

PATRICK MCANDREW: So I think talking about OpenLearn as a whole, you've got to be proud of what it has achieved for learners and that which is not really my credit. It's the credit of the people who've provided all of the magnificent content and have kept it going. But from the research side, there was a really big result in terms of us understanding, and I've mentioned the idea that this led to further work that became MOOCs, that became the ability of universities to adopt its environment for students more quickly.

All of those things, we've still got a relationship going on the research side with the Hewlett Foundation, and seeing as one of their rules of thumb, is never to fund anybody for more than 10 years. At 20 years later, we're still getting it shows the relationship that spun off from that. So a major success of OpenLearn is that after two years, it didn't take more funding from the Hewlett Foundation. It was sustained on the benefit it gives to the university as part of its range of missions, and indeed sitting alongside the BBC as a route through for people who actually become our students.

JANE ROBERTS: When I get the opportunity to look after the OpenLearn team and the OpenLearn platform, I knew it was a huge privilege. It's a fantastic resource. They're a fantastic bunch of people. Could I look after them in the way they need to be looked after?

We did have massive challenges during that period with COVID-19. None of us expected it, but I think, I'm really proud of the fact that both I and the rest of the team, who showed huge resilience during that period, and I think it just helped the platform to grow and grow.

PATRICK MCANDREW: There's a big challenge at the moment with the internet. It's being spoiled to a large extent by noise and irrelevance and awkward advertising. And OpenLearn remains an oasis where people can come and properly spend some decent amount of time looking at decent content.

In 2026, what's the big question? The arrival of AI, and I think we've got to seriously think about whether content is going to have much value from now on. And that's a big problem for OpenLearn making sure that there's a service that people want from that and that I think in the end is about the certification of that learning.

ANDY LANE: There are both opportunities and challenges for OpenLearn in the future. I mean, the opportunities, I think are for strengthening further partnerships and networking. There's many ways in which we can use OpenLearn to expand out and extend the reach and success of OpenLearn to ever more people. But I think the big challenge we've got is how do we deal with artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is going to change things quite a lot in terms of will OpenLearn still be seen as a reputable, trusted source?

PATRINA LAW: I like to think that OpenLearn still has a really important role in supporting people with their career choices, particularly in allowing people to feel that they are able to learn and that they can show their skills in different ways. And perhaps they left school with.

LAURA DEWIS: When I think about OpenLearn now, 20 years on, and the fact that it still survives. In this much larger ecosystem of information out there, I think it's amazing. I am so proud that it's out there showing what quality looks like, particularly in the age of AI and what we're currently dealing with online.

ANDY LANE: OpenLearn is very much one of the biggest projects and activities I worked on in my time at The Open University, and it's had such a big impact. I think it's still been going strong for another 20 years to come.

PATRINA LAW: OpenLearn is turning 20. I can't believe that the time has gone so quickly from when it was not called OpenLearn, and it was just a sort of free endeavor with some content put out there that had a few years of funding, and it's now this incredible thing that it is today.
PATRICK MCANDREW: So OpenLearn, well done for 20 years. And I very much hope it's got another 20, 30, 40 years in it.

SIMON ASHBY: So it's been really exciting to see the platform grow over these first 20 years of operation, and how OpenLearn has brought all of this amazing Open University content to the world for free. And really excited to see what happens in the next 20 years and how we can grow and develop the platform beyond.

[MUSIC PLAYING]