Reflections on my tenure as Vice-Chancellor of the Open University 1990-2001
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The Appointment Process

The post of OU VC was advertised in the spring of 1989. I applied knowing that this was a long shot because by then I had been working outside the UK for 24 years. It seemed to me unlikely that the Brits would appoint as head of their largest university someone who had not had a pukka UK academic career - and who they could not readily evaluate using the establishment grapevine.

However, the OU had caused me to reorient my career in a very positive direction after I spent a three-month internship at Walton Hall in 1972. This was part of a Master's programme in Educational Technology that I took at Sir George Williams University while in my first academic job at Ecole Polytechnique. As I worked at the Télé-université, Athabasca, Concordia and Laurentian in subsequent years, I felt that the OU had retained the leadership of the modern open learning movement that it had pioneered. To be the OU's VC sounded like the world's most exciting academic job and I decided take a run at it. I imagined that my chances were slim but I knew that if I didn't apply they would be zero. My referees were David Johnston, then at McGill; Sam Smith, ex-president of Athabasca; and Chris Christodoulou, Secretary-General of the ACU and founding University Secretary at the OU.

At the time of my application I was one of Canada's representatives on the Council of the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute and I had some very useful conversations with David Murray, a Council member from the UK and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the OU. Another useful coach was David Sewart, whom I had known since the seventies from conferences of the International Council for Correspondence Education.

I was called for an informal meeting with members of the OU's advisory nominating committee in late August. This took place in a restaurant near the Palace of Westminster and I remember Baroness Carnegy, the chair of the committee, being very sympathetic about the problem of trying to eat when you are being bombarded with questions from around a big table.

In September of that year (1989) I had been granted nine months leave, before coming back for a second 5-year term as president of Laurentian University. The purpose of the leave was to take the senior executive course in international affairs run by the National Defence College (NDC) in Kingston, Ontario (now, alas, closed).

Subsequent to the August dinner the committee began to take my candidacy seriously but wanted to check out my form in Canada more thoroughly. By chance one of the members of the committee, Paul Clark, then OU Dean of Science, is Canadian. He was despatched to Canada to talk to a few people and to visit Laurentian (by this time I was on leave from Laurentian at the National Defence College).

When Paul arrived at Laurentian the Faculty were on strike, a not infrequent occurrence at the beginning of the school year. I assumed that when the committee learned of this my goose would be cooked. The OU branch of the Association of University Teachers was well represented on the nominating committee and I knew that a little research would show that during my time at Concordia and Laurentian I had acquired the reputation of having a robust attitude to unions and academic industrial relations!

We were on one of the course's field trips to the Maritime Provinces in October when the final interviews were scheduled. I flew from Halifax to London with Kristin (who happened to have drawn this visit in the lottery for spouses to join one of the NDC field trips).

The interviews took place over two days at the Royal Society and, adding in the previous experience at the restaurant, I estimate that I was interviewed for a total of 8½ hours by the panel and its sub-groups. It was all very well done and Joe Clinch ensured that the three candidates (the others were Norman Gowar, then Deputy VC of the OU, and John Tomlinson) never met as we were moved around the building. On the evening of the second day Sir Kenneth Berrill, then

OU Chairman of Council and Pro-Chancellor, called me at my mother's house in Henley to tell me I had got the job. It was a great moment.

The only weakness in their process was that they left almost a month between the final interviews and the meeting of Council to ratify the recommendation. It had been a leaky process all along and the Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES) provided regular updates about the candidates still in the running. I was on another NDC field trip in Winnipeg in late November when Joe Clinch faxed me the formal decision after the Council meeting. Just before that the THES had leaked the result on an inside page. However, in Canada only a hawk-eyed colleague at the Council of Ontario Universities noticed it, so I was able to tell the Chairman of Council at Laurentian the news myself.

Kristin and I made a quick trip to the OU soon after that so that I could show myself. David Sewart said rumours were circulating that I was a French-Canadian who spoke little English. There was also a comedy series on the BBC at the time about an American, called Jack Daniel, who was appointed VC of a UK university and caused general mayhem.

After that I stayed away from the OU, except for a meeting in London with some of the Deans during an NDC trip to the UK, until the end of the NDC course. The graduation ceremony took place in Kingston on June 29, 1990. We flew out of Toronto that evening and I had a day to recover before starting work at the OU on July 1. This happened to be a Saturday and the biennial OU Open Day when students are invited to visit the campus. It's a great event with something of the atmosphere of a village fête.

Horlock and Daniel compared

I give this background in order to explain that I came to the OU with very little experience of the UK HE system. I knew the OU well, because I had followed its development in detail when I was at the Télé-université and Athabasca and then as president of the International Council for Distance Education. In this and other respects I was almost a mirror image of my predecessor, John Horlock. This helps to explain why my arrival created an atmosphere of change without my making any special effort to do so.

John was a highly-regarded conventional engineering academic from Cambridge. He came from a working-class background and fully identified with the OU's mission to ordinary people. However, he saw universities through the lens of a Cambridge academic and judged that the OU had a long way to go, not just in research but also in parts of its curriculum, notably his own discipline of technology. I imagine that he saw his mission as helping the OU to become a real university.

By contrast, I had worked outside the UK for 25 years. From this perspective I felt that conventional British universities were losing ground against the international competition and that the OU was the only UK initiative in higher education to have had a real impact on the world academic scene since WW II. Although I wanted the OU to be a good university in purely academic terms, I saw my challenge as ensuring that it maintained its global intellectual and technological leadership in the now burgeoning field of HE at a distance.

Looking back from 2001 over thirty years of the OU's existence and the decade-long terms of each of the three VCs, it is clear that circumstances dealt John Horlock the toughest hand. He came into office in 1980 just after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. For many in the OU the Thatcher era marked the end of civilisation as they knew it – and I suspect John sympathised with this view. The University of Salford, of which he had been VC, was singled out, along with Aston, for especially savage cuts in what was a tough decade for all universities. At that point the OU was funded directly by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and highly subject to ministerial whim.

John also had to deal with the crisis created when Minister Keith Joseph set running the hare of 'Marxist bias in the OU' and set up a Visiting Committee to chase it through the OU's courses. Against this background it is not surprising that John was deeply suspicious and apprehensive of governmental interest in the OU and any initiatives that might result.

However, I came to the OU fresh from the experience of working with a benign government. I had moved to Ontario as president of Laurentian in 1984. Before I had even started on the hard task of trying to break into the provincial establishment, centred round the Ontario Tory party that had been in power for 40 years, everything changed. David Peterson's Liberal Party was elected and proved to be extremely friendly both to universities and to Northern Ontario. I gained on both fronts and developed excellent relations with Peterson himself, with his key ministers and with the officials at Queen's Park. Against this background it was a natural reflex, when I was a candidate for the OU job, to go and see Nicolas Summers, the official at the UK's Department of Education and Science (DES) who had the OU 'dossier', to get some background.

John Horlock was extremely considerate and professional about the hand-over to me. Walter Perry had made John's entry difficult by publishing a report recommending controversial changes just before John arrived and by continuing to be very present in the OU (with an office in the Edinburgh Regional Centre). John and I decided we would do a clean 'butt joint'. He said he would let me know if he ever planned to come on campus to use the library, etc. although I told him I thought that was going a bit far. All John's subsequent communications with me were positive whereas Walter would call from time to time to berate me about some development of which he disapproved or to ask me whether the OU would reimburse club class travel to a conference he wanted to attend!

I intend to follow John's approach, rather than Walter's, with Brenda Gourley, my own successor.

Issues during my tenure as VC

1. The National Funding Framework

The first issue on my desk when I arrived at Walton Hall was a review of the OU being carried out by the DES. Ostensibly its purpose was to help the government determine whether to give the OU more funds to take more students. We later realised, however, that the deeper reason was to guide officials in making recommendations to ministers about how to deal with the OU in the total restructuring of UK HE that was to take place through the HE Reform Act of 1991-92.

Coming from the background described above I took an optimistic view of this review and instructed staff to collaborate fully with the DES. I believed we had nothing to hide and that any objective analysis of the OU would remind those conducting it what a precious and successful asset the OU was to the UK. I remember going out to lunch with the Permanent Secretary of the DES, Sir John Caines, at this time. He became a good friend, stayed over at Wednesden when he visited the OU, joined the OU Council after his retirement, and became a robust chair of the Audit Committee.

(Caines was unusual in the civil service in being a Thatcherite. It was said that he owed his elevation to the DES to having given Thatcher the idea of channelling the UK contribution to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) through the OU. This happened at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987 when Caines was Permanent Secretary of the UK's Overseas Development Administration (ODA). Rajiv Gandhi's support for COL at the CHOGM meant that Thatcher could not veto the project but she was determined not to put UK money directly into a new multi-lateral organisation. This created a personal irony for me. During 1988 I was the chair of the Planning Committee for COL that was set up after the CHOGM. Whenever funding issues arose I joined the other members in giving Roger Iredale, who represented the ODA on the committee, a hard time about the earmarking of the UK contribution. A year later I found myself the beneficiary of this largesse when I joined the OU. However, it was not really a benefit since it meant I had to spend several years fighting with James Maraj, COL's first president.))

The DES review of the OU did turn out to be favourable and resulted in a little extra money immediately. I continued to cite the cost comparisons that it made between the OU and other UK universities a decade later. However, the key influence of the Review was on the 1991-92 HE reforms. I was extremely lucky in having David Murray at my side for the first part of this process and Geoff Peters for the second part.

The main issue for government was whether the OU should be fully integrated into the new federal HE system that was going to be set up. I am sure that keeping the OU outside the new system was never a serious option. Indeed, part of the OU's problem at the time was that it was now the UK's largest university, absorbing very large amounts of public funds. This scared the civil servants, who had some difficulty trying to translate, into policy for the OU, the policies being made for the rest of the HE sector by the Universities Funding Council (UFC) and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). However, there were people at the OU who distrusted the rest of the sector even more than they feared the government, so I had to convince some waverers that our policy should be to support the notion of joining the new system.

Part of my co-operative approach to government had been to take a positive attitude to the Visiting Committee, now chaired by Ken Dixon. With the OU's integration into the rest of the system there would be no further need for this body but we persuaded its members to give us a good send off with some very helpful recommendations about funding and transfer mechanisms.

Around this time David Murray and I began to make contact with the UFC and the PCFC and I developed friendly links with key figures such as Ron Dearing and Bill Stubbs that stood me in good stead for the decade. There were also two clandestine meetings of the heads of what we called the 'royal peculiars', the three oddly matched institutions that then had a direct funding relationship to the DES (the OU, the Royal College of Art, and Cranfield Institute of Technology). Although we were fearful of what could go wrong in the transfer of our institutions into the new funding framework, we realised that the game was up. Having decided not to campaign against inclusion there was nothing further we could usefully do together because our institutional interests in issues such as the nature of the new funding formula were very different.

One of the OU's key successes, for which Geoff Peters should take the credit, was to convince the DES (then headed by Kenneth Clarke as Secretary of State) to require the new funding council to have a single funding formula for all institutions. This was the key to the considerable financial success that the OU enjoyed for most of the 1990s. In at least two of the years the OU had the highest percentage grant increase in the HE system and was rarely, if ever, out of the top ten.

Another issue, which was meat and drink to David Murray, was the federal nature of the new system, with separate funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales. David made sure that, on the one hand, the OU was written into the legislation of each funding council as an eligible institution. On the other, he persuaded government that for the time being it would be better for the OU to be funded by the English body (HEFCE) for all its activities. This was the right place to start and, as the funding policies began to diverge between England and Scotland in the late 1990s, we were able to make an easy transfer to funding from Scotland (SHEFC) for teaching activities in Scotland.

(In the case of Wales we made ourselves very unpopular in 1999-2000 by pointing out that the Welsh constitutional settlement was different and refusing to ask to be funded by HEFCW. Given the divergence of policy between Wales and England at that time the OU would have been several million pounds a year worse off if it had made the transfer. The battle across Offa's Dyke will be rejoined one day.)

The immediate effect of the transfer to the new system was to release the OU from the constraints of Treasury annuality, which obliged it to end the year with neither a surplus nor a deficit. However, the cautious habits imposed by annuality, coupled with a funding formula designed to encourage growth in student numbers, meant that the OU started to enjoy some large budget surpluses and build up significant reserves. A hiccup when the state grant fell in real terms in 1997 did not alter this trend, and neither did a subsequent change in the funding formula aimed at giving all universities similar per capita grants for students in similar programmes. The net effect was that the OU began the decade of the 1990s with no money in the bank and ended it in the top decile of UK universities on the criterion of financial strength.

2. The BBC

David Murray also played a robust and helpful role in updating the relationship with the BBC. At the time I arrived it was clear that the fixed costs of running the OU/BBC Production Centre would very soon absorb the entire sum of money the OU paid them, leaving nothing over for programming. A review was conducted which led to substantial downsizing. I believe that this was the only time in my tenure that an emergency meeting of Senate was asked for, the BBC and OU unions having got together. However, we held our ground. The then DG of the BBC, Michael Checkland, was the DG with whom I had the closest relationship during my tenure. His successor, John Birt, had bigger fish than the OU to fry and I felt that the OU had no choice but to follow the commissioning model that he introduced across the BBC.

We rationalised this decision to ourselves but it destabilised the OU/BBC relationship in the late 1990s and the OU has not fully recovered from that. However, it must be said that the OU is much more stable and slow moving than the BBC, which does not have an institutional memory. The wonder is not that the relationship with the BBC is high maintenance, but that it managed to survive at all as the media industry went through turmoil. I owe much to Diana Laurillard's calm wisdom in developing policy in this area because she was always clear about what the OU's needs were.

3. Decentralisation (distribution)

Another interesting minefield into which I wandered as a new VC in 1990 was the issue of decentralisation. Should the OU continue to conduct all its registrarial operations centrally or take advantage of its regional centres (and networked computers) to do some of the work locally? This issue was mixed up with the tensions between two titanic personalities, Chris Batten, the Academic Registrar, and David Sewart, Director of Regional Academic Services. They also had different views on the seemingly arcane issue of whether the OU should move to course-based registration, to reflect its increasing scope, scale and diversity, or stick with programme-based registration. (The definition of 'programme' in this case was more administrative than academic).

In the end David Sewart won on both counts. One of my tactics in resolving such hassles is to change the vocabulary, so I introduced the term 'distribution of registration' as smoke to cover a considerable decentralisation of functions. No one was fooled but a little face was saved. I am clear that it was the right decision and some years later, when registrations rose in number and became more concentrated in time, it was really helpful to be able to ship them around the country to mop up spare capacity in the regions.

I think the move to course-based registration was also right. When, at the end of the decade, the OU adopted named degrees some people remarked that we should have stuck with programme registration. However, this type of programme registration is quite different from the administratively defined programme registration we had in the early 1990s so a major change would have been required anyway. As I look back after a decade of major change on all fronts I am amazed that these issues should have caused such anguish only ten years ago.

4. Taking over the CNAA

One of the developments of which I am proud, and in which I can claim some personal investment, is the absorption of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) into the OU as OU Validation Services. The government felt that it had to abolish the CNAA in order to make credible the independence given to the polytechnics in the 1992 HE reforms. However, almost as soon as it had announced the winding up of the CNAA it realised that it was left with the major problem of the fifty institutions (colleges, etc) that awarded degrees through the CNAA. Most of these were not at all eager to fall into the arms of their local polytechnic.

The head of CNAA, Malcolm Frazer, handled the situation with impeccable professionalism. With its national mandate the OU was the obvious candidate to continue its work but I like to think that his decision to come and proposition the OU owed something to my own outward-looking style.

My greatest surprise in this episode was how readily Senate approved the idea of continuing the CNAA's work. At this time, despite their commitment to widening access to HE, many OU staff were pretty snobbish about the rest of the system. Furthermore, the CNAA family of institutions

included some confessional and theological colleges which were very foreign to the OU's secular (pagan?) culture. Nevertheless Senate bought the idea with enthusiasm and Chris Batten did an outstanding job of planning and thinking through the transfer, helped by Derek Pollard, the CNAA's best senior director, whom we hired as Director of OU Validation Services.

Quite apart from the service we rendered to the institutions and their thousands of students I believe that the CNAA take-over had the effect of putting the OU in the middle of the UK HE map in a way that few OU people then understood. By taking over the Quality Support Centre (now CHERI) at the same time we absorbed the intellectual centre of gravity of the polytechnic system, not to mention its excellent art collection.

Derek Pollard did a super job and what I had at first expected to be a *'pro-bono'* wind-down of the CNAA service, as institutions made other arrangements or obtained degree-awarding powers, started to grow again. Chris Batten and Derek Pollard recommended some outstanding appointments to the Validation Board (David Watson, Harold Silver, Malcolm Frazer, Gavin Ross, Janet Springer, etc.) with the result that it became one of the most interesting and forward-looking bodies in the whole HE system. It was certainly the most interesting body that I chaired. As well as putting the OU in the centre of things it also helped the senior OU people who served on it to understand many wider HE issues. A good example of this was OUVS's commitment to National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQs). The OU was the first university to become an awarding body for these qualifications.

At the beginning, and for most of the 1990s, I consciously kept OUVS somewhat separate from the rest of the OU. For example, OUVS recruited its institutional visiting teams in the whole national and international pool of academic expertise rather than concentrating on OU academics. By the end of the decade this separation had served its purpose and the review that Derek Pollard encouraged me to conduct when he announced that he would stand down as Director at the end of 1999 came down solidly in favour of closer integration. This involved winding up the Validation Board and dealing with OUVS issues in the new sub-structure of the Academic Board. By a nice coincidence my last meeting of the Validation Board was also its last meeting and by then the new Director of OUVS, Kate Clarke, was firmly in the saddle.

In summary, I was very pleased with the way things turned out and much enjoyed this aspect of my time as VC. It brought me into contact, through degree ceremonies and visits, with an extraordinary range of institutions and some wonderful people. The OUVS's Grays Inn Road building became a key meeting place for UK HE with some 25,000 people from outside OUVS attending meetings there each year.

5. Curriculum and Programmes

Good universities – and the OU is one – have solid collegial processes for overseeing the development of the curriculum. The proper role for the VC is normally a nudge here and a comment there. Only when there is controversy or when the established academic barons object to the creation of a new programme does the VC need to intervene.

The two key principles of my own interventions were to support changes requested by the students and to look favourably on new government initiatives. The first led me to support, behind the scenes but in Senate if necessary, moves such as: the abolition of the second foundation course requirement, the BSc, the freedom to begin study with Level 2 courses, and named degrees. In each case there was significant resistance from the parentalist tendency among OU academics. The second principle led me to support anything to do with credit transfer, N/SVQs and, at the end of the decade, foundation degrees.

As regards specific programmes I had most involvement in the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Modern Languages and Law. The PGCE found itself in 1996 in the odd position of winning the Queen's Anniversary Prize and then getting a bad report from OFSTED for its Primary Teacher programme. I decided that we should close the programme and redesign it from scratch rather than revise it as we went along. This made the OU unpopular with government because it removed several hundred teacher-training places from the system. However, by this time the OU was ranked 10th out of 100 UK universities in the league table of

programme excellence that *The Daily Telegraph* constructed from Quality Assurance Agency data. I judged that stern measures were necessary when programmes received poor ratings. Of all the decisions I took at the OU this is the one I later revisited most frequently in my mind. If I had it to do over again I would probably have toughed it out and revised the programme as we went along.

In the Modern Language programme I simply gave moral support to Director Anne Stevens, who had the difficult task of starting a new unit with some fractious colleagues and systematic opposition from the OUAUT to the many innovations she had to make to teach languages effectively.

Ann Floyd takes the credit for getting the Law programme going. I just tried to help her take on the barons (deans) who didn't like the idea of creating a new programme and, in particular, of doing it in partnership with the College of Law.

I also pushed the more rapid development of taught master's degrees because it was clear that the OU had been slow off the mark in this activity.

6. Overseas Developments

I am often given credit for having masterminded the OU's expansion outside the UK. All I really did was to introduce some system and consistency into developments that were happening spontaneously. It was not until the end of the 1990s that the OU got serious about an international strategy and it is still finding it hard to get a grip on. The creation of OU Worldwide in 1997 was a step in this direction but achieving a proper balance between academic control, financial viability and administrative effectiveness will always be difficult.

When I arrived the OU had several projects going in Brussels and Benelux. Taking the broader approach of making the whole of the EC (now the EU) our parish seemed the natural next step. Similarly the expansion of the Business School into Central and Eastern Europe had already started before 1990. However, I did take a keen personal interest in this and am proud that no other western university had a fraction of the impact of the OU in helping the countries of the former Soviet bloc adapt their education and training to new realities. As part of this same attempt to play a constructive part in one of the great historic changes of our times I became personally involved in the creation of EDEN, the European Distance Education Network. I did this with the hope (largely realised) of developing a professional community of distance education across the continent.

The most significant overseas development in the latter half of the decade was the creation of the United States Open University (USOU). Here again my main contribution was to try to channel moves that were happening spontaneously. USOU is undoubtedly one of the most difficult issues I left for my successor. I am convinced that it will come good because enrolments have doubled in each of the last three sessions. However, because enrolments in 2000 started from a lower base than the original UK planners predicted, the loan from the OU will be uncomfortably large, for a public institution, by the time breakeven is achieved.

Creating USOU is something that I would certainly do again. However, I should have got Americans involved even earlier and avoided some of the more opportunistic alliances (e.g. The American University). In an era of globalisation the OU has to be a global player to retain its leadership in distance learning. USOU has helped to make the OU less UK-centric, even if this has sometimes been a painful process.

7. Technology for Teaching and Learning

Maintaining its leadership in university distance learning at scale also requires the OU to be very good at assessing and applying new technologies. In this case I did try to get out in front and pull Senate and the student body along faster than they wished to go. It was gratifying when they caught up and overtook me.

I remember making a speech to the annual conference of the OU Student Association (OUSA) early in the 1990s. My appearance happened to come in the middle of a debate whose tenor was

hostile to technology and when I made my speech, using my laptop as a prompter as I usually did, I attracted various comments that the OU was moving too fast and leaving the poorer students behind. Three years later, when the OUSA Executive had started using online communication extensively in its own work, I was berated at the same conference for not moving fast enough! Similarly the Social Science faculty realised, sometime in 2000, that its students wanted to use online communication more than the academics had expected.

The growth figures were impressive – but mirrored the spread of the Internet in the wider society. 5,000 OU students were online in 1995; 50,000 in 1999; and 110,000 in 2000.

My most important contribution came in 1995 with a paper called INSTILL (Integrating New Systems and Technologies into Lifelong Learning) which I wrote during the Christmas break at the end of 1994. The proposition was to take advantage of the OU's healthy reserves to invest £10 million in various initiatives that would advance our use of technology in teaching and learning. This was the first time in OU history that there had been the possibility of investing serious money like this from outside the normal budgeting process and it did not pass unnoticed.

Senate was a bit sceptical because Deans and others could think of lots of things other than technology to spend money on. However, by this time there were many people who felt that the OU needed to raise its game in its use of technology and, of course, some individuals stood to benefit from particular parts of the investment. Council, on the other hand, was very enthusiastic and various lay members told me I should have asked for more than $10 million. This suggests that I hit about the right point in balancing the views of Senate and Council – a key goal for any VC.

INSTILL was formally assessed by the Finance Committee some years later, which concluded that this had been a worthwhile and well-targeted investment. Its highest profile component was the creation of the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi). This was really put together by Kitty Chisholm who persuaded Tom Vincent and Marc Eisenstadt to pool their efforts and urged me to support a new unit for them. KMi's success exceeded my wildest expectations. It put the OU on the map as a place where leading edge research and development of the Internet was being conducted. But, equally importantly, it continued to be deeply rooted in the OU and helped many units to implement some of its developments at scale and showed them how to use online technology in new ways. Of all the organisational additions to the OU in my time this is the one of which I am most proud.

The key theme of INSTILL had been the *integration* of online technology into the OU's evolving teaching and learning system. Evolution, not revolution, was the name of our game. I was therefore seriously rattled by the dot.com frenzy that lasted from autumn 1999 to spring 2000. During this time the press was full of stories about the Internet sweeping away all previous approaches to education. Ambitious dot.com start-ups threatened to bury institutions like the OU and one aggressive American dot.com said it wanted to buy the OU. Fortunately Diana Laurillard, who is very wise in these matters, kept me calm and reassured me the evolution was right. This was the time when the number of OU students connected to the Internet more than doubled in the year, from 50,000 to 110,000.

Less glamorous, but possibly more important, was the development of administrative systems for student support. Back in 1992 we had started the CIRCE project, which was a complete redevelopment of those systems. Indeed, it was CIRCE that had obliged us to clarify our business processes and to resolve the issues of the distribution of registrarial work and course-based registration that I referred to earlier. In the course of the 1990s CIRCE caused some upheavals but in 1999 it was completed on schedule and on budget, a rarity for such a large software development programme in any institution. The complaints quickly fell away because the staff using it found CIRCE to be a brilliant system. But CIRCE had started, of course, when the World Wide Web was still a gleam in the eye. In the late 1990s we began another project, OUTIS (daughter of CIRCE) in order to put CIRCE's student support and administrative processes on the web. This project is not complete but seems to be going well and is producing systems that are very popular with students (for example a facility for students to consult their academic records that has 35,000 users every week).

8. Development and fund-raising

John Horlock had laid the foundations of a fund-raising operation during his time as VC and I built on these. This work with Kitty Chisholm, Director of Development, was great fun. My teamwork with Kitty was the most enjoyable of the many productive working relationships I had with senior colleagues. She was much more than a conventional Director of Development. Her role in getting the KMi going was just one example of her ability to detect important new initiatives within the OU and cajole and assist those involved in doing something about them.

In 1996 the Council addressed the issue of fund-raising during its residential meeting and set us the target of bringing in £2 million annually by 2001. We achieved this a year early, in 2000, thanks to Kitty's excellent work. £2 million is a tiny sum by North American university standards, but the important thing is that the systems and structures that will generate steady growth from this figure are now in place. Part of this is the creation of an effective alumni operation addressed not just at graduates but at the huge diaspora of people who have a link to the OU as former students or even as TV viewers.

Conclusions

The 1990s were a good period for the OU. For most of the decade funding mechanisms and government policy were more than benign. It was a good environment in which to pursue my objective of maintaining the OU's world leadership in university distance education at scale. Others must judge how far this objective was attained but there were some encouraging indicators.

- The OU increased significantly in scale. Its 100,000th degree was awarded in 1990, the year I arrived, and the 200,000th followed in 1998. Student numbers almost doubled during my tenure.
- Integrating the OU into the national research support structure in the 1992 HE reforms gave a great boost to research. By placing in the top third of UK universities in the research league tables the OU notably enhanced its credibility with other UK universities.
- The Teaching Quality Assessment results were especially helpful in building the OU's reputation overseas. Americans were amazed to learn that *The Daily Telegraph* ranked the OU in 10th position out of 100 UK universities for the quality of its academic programmes.
- Although the OU took a cautious and evolutionary approach to use of the Internet in teaching and learning it could fairly claim, with 150,000 students online in 2001, to be the world's largest 'virtual' university (not a term I like!)

All this was a huge team effort and I enjoyed conducting the orchestra. The essence of my personal contribution was to try to blend traditional OU values with modern developments. One key vehicle for this was the strategic planning process, developed by Geoff Peters, which drew plaudits from the Funding Council. I repeatedly related new developments to the 'four opens' in my speeches and press columns so that no one could be in any doubt about their consistency with the OU's mission. I became a firm defender of the value of a 1000-member Senate in upholding the tradition of collegiality that was fast disappearing in other UK universities, both old and new.

I tried to respond to invitations from student organisations in a way that was blind to geography – treating Shetland and London as equally important. The tour that I made of all the OU's outposts in the UK as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations in 1994 – and which ended with a memorable live broadcast from Walton Hall at midnight on Charter Day is a special memory.

I attached great importance to personal attendance at degree ceremonies, where I made a comment or put a question to every graduate as they shook my hand. Over the eleven years I officiated at nearly 150 such ceremonies and estimate that I must have talked individually to some 50,000 graduates. Quite apart from the pleasure of working with two great Chancellors, Asa Briggs and Betty Boothroyd, this contact with students, and their gratitude for the new confidence that the OU had given them, made the job immensely worthwhile.