Peter Horrocks Charter Day speech
23rd April 2015

Walton Hall, Milton Keynes

Introduction

Many thanks, Tim. And good morning Open University.

I can’t tell you all how thrilled and overwhelmed I feel to be speaking to the University for the first time as your VC to-be, especially on this annual day of celebration.

This morning I will share some of my first impressions and I will outline my initial priorities and some early thinking on how, together, we build a future for the OU that is as transformational for our students as it has been in the past.

But first let me take you behind scenes of the first time I came to Walton Hall, just before Christmas.

Before the interview with the somewhat daunting 11-person panel, all of the candidates were given a helpful opportunity for a tour and to meet staff, students and bosses.

But with all the candidates on campus, and the need for confidentiality, it was important we didn’t bump into each other. So an elaborate route (probably devised through some devious algorithm from MCT) was prescribed.

And to ensure we didn’t stray we were each given a chaperone. In reality – a minder.

But I’d never met a minder more warm and welcoming than this one – the delightful Lesley Green from the governance team in the Secretary’s Office.
By a quirk of timing, there were to be two potential bosses on the panel – Lord Haskins and Richard Gillingwater.

In a gap before I met them I took the chance to quiz Lesley – so, what shall I say to them?

I think she was mildly taken aback that a candidate had asked her that. But she told me, enthusiastically, what a motivating place the OU is to work in and, above all, the wonderful things it does for its students. And how much emotion that inspires.

She also told me the University faces some real challenges and someone needs to tackle that.

In other words, Lesley was telling me, as many other people have since, that the Vice-Chancellor must – love the OU and be prepared to fight for it

And that is what I resolved to do. Although I didn’t put it as directly as that with the interview panel, it seemed to work for them.

I am deeply grateful to Richard Gillingwater and Chris Haskins and their colleagues for giving me this opportunity and the privilege of a lifetime.

First days

So, how’s it going so far?

The best way I can think to put it, I’m embarrassed to say, is that I’ve fallen head over heels for the OU. I have been greeted warmly wherever I have been – at reception on my first day, when I went to the security lodge, when I park my bicycle in the bike sheds, even popping in to see the OU chess club last week.

But I was really smitten when I attended my first graduation.
I carved out time in week 1 to attend this year’s degree ceremony in Dublin. You don’t need me to tell you how stunning and uplifting those ceremonies are.

In my former life I was a BBC producer, producing everything from election night results programmes to the funeral coverage of Diana Princess of Wales.

But I’ve never been involved in anything as deftly and movingly produced as that graduation ceremony. It had just the right blend of formality and unrestrained personal joy.

However, the ceremony was nothing compared to the experience of mixing subsequently with dozens of beaming graduates.

Let me just tell you about one student’s experience – as it happens the very first newly-minted OU graduate I have ever spoken to – which epitomises what we can achieve for our students.

She had been studying with dogged determination for many years but failing to progress. However the OU was by her side to provide the kind of persistent support for student success which Tim just described.

One of her regular staff contacts in Belfast suggested that she might have dyslexia. As a result she was diagnosed.

We then provided audio materials that enabled her to absorb materials properly for the first time and eventually to get over the previously impossible hurdle of exams.

Now she is succeeding in her job, expecting promotion and brimming with confidence – and praise for the OU.

But not just that. As a result of her diagnosis other members of her family, many of whom had also underachieved, were diagnosed with dyslexia and will now be able to receive the support they need.
As a result of the OU, the lives of a whole family had been transformed.

Isn’t that something to celebrate?

Who wouldn’t love an organisation that could do that?

And who wouldn’t want to fight for an organisation that can do that?

And, make no mistake: we now all need to fight for all that story stands for.

I’m sorry to say the type of education we deliver – part-time education – is facing severe challenges, particularly in England.

Since the various reforms to the funding of higher education in the last ten years the number of conventional full time students has, fortunately, stayed pretty stable and that has been the focus of public attention. Much less remarked upon has been the impact of those reforms in causing a significant reduction in part time numbers.

As Tim said, we are doing well within that declining part-time sector – in fact we are now sustaining part-time education. And although we face tough financial challenges, we will deal with those because we are determined and smart.

Part-time sector

But that’s not really the point. It is not about us. It is about our would-be students; the many individuals who have yet to unlock their potential through part-time study.

You don’t need me to tell you that the part-time sector is facing a challenging time – the figures speak for themselves. Last year, there were almost 370,000 people studying for an undergraduate degree on a part-time basis in the UK. But five years ago, there were more than 580,000. That’s a decline of 37% in just five years.
And more than 200,000 life-changing opportunities that have been lost.

I think each of those lost opportunities is a tragedy.

A tragedy for those individual lives.

A tragedy for their families.

But also a tragedy for our wider society and economy.

Research that we commissioned last year told us that by studying with The Open University, students’ lifetime earning potential increases by up to £105,000 for those who come to us without traditional entry qualifications. It also told us that The Open University alone significantly widens the net in terms of who participates in higher education in the UK. And – crucially – it showed that the OU delivers over 3 billion pounds to the UK economy every year.

Because of the loss in potential increased earnings this dramatic decline in part-time might even be regarded as a tragedy for the Treasury.

Part-time higher education is just too valuable – to society, to the economy and to those citizens who should have equal access to that opportunity to study – to let it wither.

We need to fight to make sure that people continue to have that opportunity. We need to make sure we do more than just get part-time noticed. We need it to be cherished and valued. And most importantly - sustained.

Today, I call on the whole OU community – staff, students and our hundreds of thousands of former students to join me and help fight for part time education. You all know how valuable it is. Tell friends, family and anyone of influence about the frightening fall in part-time numbers and create an imperative to tackle the problem.
I promise to work with all the allies we can find to create a wave of support for part-time and a determination to fix the problem.

It is heartening to see that senior politicians have recently expressed support both for part-time and distance education. Now we need to put part-time front and centre of the new UK government’s HE agenda in order to harness the potential of all those tens of thousands of lost part time students.

**Partnership.**

Whether in our external influencing or in our internal effectiveness, working in partnership is paramount.

And effective partnership externally has to start with brilliant internal collaboration. If we get this right we can make a commitment to always be outward looking, rather than being too internally focussed.

Partnerships make the most of different types of expertise and resources. Working in partnership makes us more adaptable and more able to find solutions.

Partnership can help us attract students. It strengthens our position in a competitive marketplace, acting as a spur to innovate and adapt to the changing demands of the sector.

In MCT for example. The OU and Cisco Systems – working together to give over 7000 students an industry-leading certification that can be put to use immediately in the workplace.
In health, the OU and the NHS pre-registration nursing programme - helping healthcare workers from over 100 employers take their core skills and develop into the qualified nurses that our health care service needs.

Internationally (and this is an inspiring project I’ve seen first hand) the OU’s English in Action programme – giving 25 million Bangladeshis the English language skills that will help them get the jobs they want and their country needs.

And last Friday I popped into the Hub to chat to scientists from around the world who were collaborating to share expensive lab equipment via remote robotics. Soon our students could be controlling experiments in Brazil or Spain, while their international counterparts use our labs during the overnight downtime. How brilliant is that? You can see some of that experimentation from eSTEeM and others over at the Learn About Fair, just after the speeches.

Through partnerships there are so many extensions of our expertise where we can take our mission further.

Take FutureLearn for example.

FutureLearn combines the OU’s pedagogic and technical know-how with the academic expertise of 55 world leading partners, including major contributions from our own faculties.
And bringing people and skills together in this way has enabled FutureLearn to do something massive, something that would have been improbable on our own.

Since 2013, more than 2.5 million FutureLearn courses have been taken – in over 190 countries around the world. And in addition to the sheer numbers of learners, FutureLearn helps us address global challenges in the tradition of our mission - for instance with the Ebola crisis being faced in Sierra Leone, a country I care greatly for. Front-line health care workers from Médecins Sans Frontières were able to access a two week Ebola in Context course produced by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, taking their
learning and applying it immediately in – quite literally – life and death circumstances. This is just one way in which FutureLearn is taking shared expertise to where it is needed most.

There is so much potential for us to do more and I ask each of you to think outwards and imagine what more you can achieve through partnership.

Close

So, making the case for part-time education and throwing yourself into appropriate partnerships are things I ask you all to do for the OU.

But what about me and what will I do for the OU, you may well be asking?

Today, I’m not going to give you my plan for the OU.

That’s because, in my third week, I don’t yet have one. But I soon will, with your input.

What I can do today is tell you a bit about myself, what I stand for and what will guide me as your VC.

I am from a journalistic background. In many quarters journalists are not respected. But the best of journalism is something to believe in and inspire. And it should share much with academia.

I protected and fought for the most respected news in the world – that produced by the BBC World Service.

I will continue to hold true to the personal imperatives that guided me then:

Be accurate.
Be fair.
Respect everyone.
Face the evidence unflinchingly.
Put simply, I intend to tell it as it is.

What else matters to me?
Show your emotions, but don’t be a soft touch.
Be tough. When you need to be.

And....
Try to run to work... or cycle.

Those are watchwords for me personally, but I also want to develop some broader organisational principles, principles that will help steer the institution over the coming years. To develop them, I'm getting out and about – asking questions of teams and listening closely to what they tell me. Already there are some recurring themes.

You’ve asked me to:

Reduce complexity.
Stop duplication.
Focus on our distinctiveness
Clarify accountability.
Be more transparent, especially about how money is used.

And people are also saying we should:
Be faster.
More innovative.
Put digital first

It is clear to me that we must be
One Open University

And most importantly we should put
Students First.

You may have other suggestions for such principles. If so, I want to hear them. Because our plan for the OU will be built on them, with your engagement.

I hope you enjoy the rest of our Charter Day celebrations. I will be in touch again on my first proper day at the helm. Five. Five. One Five. The fifth of May 2015.

For now, I expect you will have questions for your brand new team since last year – our shrewd Pro Chancellor Richard, our inspirational Chancellor, Martha and our accomplished current VC, Tim.

I look forward to serving all of you, in this manner:

I will love The Open University. And I will fight for The Open University.

ENDS