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Opportunities and challenges for children and young people studying at a distance in a university primarily for adults

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DEUTSCHE GESELLSCHAFT FÜR WISSENSCHAFTLICHE WEITERBILDUNG UND FERNSTUDIUM E.V.
GERMAN ASSOCIATION FOR UNIVERSITY CONTINUING AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

HOCHSCHULE UND WEITERBILDUNG

SCHWERPUNKTTHEMA:

**ERFOLGSKONZEPT FERNSTUDIUM:
BETREUUNG,
INDIVIDUALISIERUNG,
METHODENMIX UND VIRTUALITÄT**

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Opportunities and challenges for children and young people studying at a distance in a university primarily for adults

ELIZABETH MANNING

1. Introduction

The Open University was set up in 1969 to provide a 'second chance' to adults who had not had, or taken up, the opportunity to study for a degree. The minimum age of entry for OU students at that time was 21, reduced in 1974 to 18. In 2006 the University's Senate approved the further lowering of the minimum age to 16 following the introduction of new Age Discrimination legislation. This legislation had greater impact on the OU compared with other higher education institutions because of our open access policy, and more recently we have been receiving enquiries and applications from students under the age of 16.

How do children and young people fare in a university that was set up primarily for adults? The first Vice-Chancellor of The Open University, Sir Walter Perry, believed that 'to follow such a course of study in isolation demands qualities of maturity that would usually be lacking in people as young as 18'.

His assumption that distance learning equates with studying in isolation might be considered questionable because of the personal support available from both tutors and contacts with fellow students, both course-specific and social - increasingly possible with the new digital technologies. The concept of the 'independent learner' is a more positive description and recognised as a particular strength by employers. The question of 'maturity' is more complex and is something that will be covered later in this paper.

2. The Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS)

Perry's view seemed to be borne out by the early relatively low success rates of younger students at the time of his statement, but in 1996 a group of ten 16 year-olds proved him wrong and were to set the scene for an experiment which resulted in the subsequent successful involvement of around 25,000 students of that young age. The original group registered for an OU module while still at school - Monkseaton High School in

north-east England - and studying for their A level examinations. The students were highly motivated, bright young people who had ambitions to apply to one of the more prestigious universities which are highly competitive. They were treated the same as any other OU student, with no additional support, and their tutor group contained students of all ages. Among those studying in that first group was a History teacher, who bravely registered alongside her pupils to study Mathematics. She was able to discover what studying at a distance meant in practice and to keep an eye on their progress, making sure, for instance, that they knew when their deadlines were and how important it was to meet them. All ten students passed, half of those with a distinction.

This pilot project was soon expanded across the UK to attract over 700 schools (Scotland, where the education system is significantly different, joined at a later point but is enjoying similar success). Schools, in consultation with parents, selected the students they wished to register, and they were not necessarily those who were academic high-flyers, but those who had demonstrated a particular interest in the subject and who were self-motivated. Parents often expressed unease about the extra work-load when their child was already under pressure to gain high grades in their school examinations, but this did not seem to be an issue once the module started. The in-school support referred to above was strongly recommended to the other schools who joined the Scheme. The pass rates remained high, indeed 18% higher than for traditional new students registering on the same modules.

A number of factors contributed to this success, where for several years registrations grew year on year by 40%:

- a) Successive **Governments** were committed to offering what was termed 'stretch and challenge' opportunities to 'gifted and talented' young students. A National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth was established, with which the OU quickly liaised. A review of post-16 study in schools was also underway, the author

of which report, Sir Mike Tomlinson, was keen to promote 'stage, not age'. What was so sacrosanct about moving from school to university at 18? There was considerable interest in what had become the OU's Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS). While other universities were offering a taste of higher education with school visits and summer schools, YASS offered a real, accredited, experience where students had to take responsibility for their studies. YASS led to a change in the law, and the Education Act, 2005, officially allows school students to study a first year undergraduate level module alongside the school curriculum, and for that study to be funded.

- b) The OU's **Science Faculty** created a new programme of short modules, lasting between 10 and 12 weeks, where it was possible to defer the final assignment. They were offered more frequently than the traditional 30 and 60 point modules¹, and it was soon discovered that May was the most popular start date, allowing for study during the summer holidays. Concerns that the young people would have other priorities outside school term-time proved unfounded. Over three-quarters of YASS students were registered for these modules which we found to be particularly helpful to those applying to the major schools of medicine.
- c) **Schools** were delighted with their association with The Open University. They were able to offer additional opportunities to their brightest students without increasing their own workload. Studying with the OU offered both breadth and depth to the school curriculum. It also provided their students with an edge over other applicants to the more prestigious universities, and there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that university admissions officers were impressed by the articulacy of these young applicants and their capability for independent learning.

YASS has been popular with the students. It has stretched our more able students. Studying an OU module has helped them to develop time management and organisational skills that they can carry forward.

There have been significant benefits for students. The modules give able young people a real and rewarding challenge. Studying an OU module allows them to work at a different level, as undergraduates while still in the sixth form. This is genuine enrichment.

- d) The **students** themselves really enjoyed the experience:

I loved my Open University module as it allowed me to be creative. I started it in November and finished it in January which fitted in well with my school work. I was really pleased and proud when I passed and would definitely do it again.

I liked not having a teacher and not being in the classroom. My OU module reinforced my understanding of Maths and Physics. I particularly like the flexibility to study when it suited me – in my case late at night.

3. Applications from individuals

YASS students are not the only cohort of under 18s who study at the OU. 1500 16 and 17 year-olds are now regularly applying as individuals. Any individual applicant of 16 or 17 is routinely contacted by an adviser before they register, to check that they have chosen an appropriate module and that they know what studying at a distance will entail. Their success rate is lower than YASS students who are selected and registered as a group by their school, but reflects the average for new students.

A separate group has been the small number (around 110) of exceptionally gifted under 16s, many of whom are home educated. A special admissions process exists for them, and their acceptance is discretionary. The vast majority, however, are accepted and they have been particularly successful, choosing to work towards a degree rather than taking a standalone module. The OU works well for them because they are still studying in the safety of their home environment.

4. Issues for the University

The focus of this paper so far has been on the students and schools. What are the issues for The Open University itself?

The OU has always prided itself on its mission of openness and for reaching those students who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to study for a degree. There was some concern in the early days of YASS that this was an 'elite' scheme, OU modules being offered to advantaged students from ambitious private schools. In fact, the Scheme was launched at a time when the Government was aiming to raise aspirations among disadvantaged young people and providing funding through a project called AimHigher. This funding was frequently used to support such students, who, of course, were no less 'gifted and talented' than those from more privileged backgrounds but who perhaps had less confidence in their abilities.

¹ OU modules are either 30 or 60 CATS points; 60 points (600 hours) representing half-time study.

Neither was YASS supported solely by the private school sector: 80% of participating schools came from the state sector.

It became clear that YASS students did not consider themselves to be 'OU students'. Only 4% went on to immediate further study with the OU. Practically all of them, however, applied to traditional university, and a longitudinal study run jointly in 2010 with the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) demonstrated how useful YASS had been, not just in the admissions process but in bridging the gap between school and university. There has been considerable discussion in recent years concerning the preparedness of school leavers for university. (Indeed a further review of A levels has been proposed in June 2012.)

A further focus group activity run by the OU with UCAS with university admissions officers again showed the value of YASS in preparing students for full time higher education, although the research also showed less awareness about the Scheme than we had hoped. The Scheme had always been promoted both to improve chances in applying to traditional university and to develop skills to help in the transition to full-time higher education study.

There have been some notable instances where YASS students have gone on to complete their OU degree, having taken on an apprenticeship, and have gained a head-start in their career at a time when it is increasingly difficult for graduates, and young people generally, to find employment. Such opportunities are now being increasingly promoted to schools and their students. The OU becomes an increasingly valid option. The concern that they would not be able to enjoy the 'student experience' - an increasingly vague term - becomes less of an issue as students at traditional university take on part-time jobs and live at home to save money and continue with their existing social networks.

The Open University has always welcomed a wide diversity of students. It is part of our open mission. Breadth of age is one aspect of that diversity, and our tutors are accustomed to having students up to the age of 80 or over. However, the inclusion of very young students (some as young as 12) has presented challenges. A small number of tutors have said that they joined The Open University to teach adults and not children, but the majority seem to enjoy having under 18s in their groups.

I've found that my young students are often brighter than the rest of the student cohort.

At a time of massive external and internal change, the Open University is having to identify its priorities. Why do we then admit those who are under 16, especially as they are only accepted after a relatively time-consuming selection process involving the setting of a task and an interview? It could be argued that as we have an open access policy, to refuse admis-

sion on grounds of (very young) age goes against our mission. But to accept every application could have reputational repercussions and, perhaps more importantly, not be in the best interest of a child whose decision to apply to the University is not their wish but that of their parents. To state that we do not accept applications from students under the age of 16 could open us up to challenges of age discrimination, again because of our open access policy.

Here we come to the issue of maturity. Maturity is not something easily measured and is not necessarily age-related. It cannot be used as a reason - nor should it be - for example, not to admit a young person under 18 to an institution of higher education:

the requirement of demonstrating personal maturity is more contestablepersonal maturity does not by itself justify a hard and fast minimum age requirement².

There is no doubt about their academic ability, and they are very familiar with studying and with sitting an examination, much more so than the majority of their adult counterparts. They are required to juggle their studies around other activities, just the same as adults, choosing the most effective time to do so. Many also have part-time jobs. One, for example, studied in the back room of her parents' Chinese takeaway restaurant in the small hours of the morning. Some have significant caring responsibilities, while others suffer extremely difficult home circumstances, and yet still complete their module.

Where 'maturity' is an issue, it is most apparent in tutorial discussion when a student under 18 may not have developed the skills to respond appropriately in a discussion which may, for instance in a Philosophy tutorial, also require some life experience. Some of our extremely gifted students who are under 16 have Asperger's Syndrome, which significantly affects their social interaction and which is not easy to manage in a group situation. It is important that the adults in the group - clearly the majority - do not have an unrewarding experience.

It is easy to stereotype young students: it is not possible to say they are less confident, less likely to meet deadlines or take note of tutor feedback, less likely to want to contact their tutor, more likely to adopt a strategic approach to their studies or more likely to collude, compared with the majority of students who are over 25. The following experience cited by one tutor could apply to any student, whose last experience of formal teaching was at school:

Some of the students who have been used to classroom teaching have trouble getting started with distance learning and may need guidance from their

² The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006. General Guidance Note on Age and Student Issues (Equality Challenge Unit)

tutor. This might lead them to drop out, so it's important to check, quite early on, that they are ok.

The Open University has always adopted a student-centred approach to its teaching and learning, and tutors are encouraged to meet the individual needs of their students. An online staff development tool has been produced to support tutors with their young students, and, in asking them to challenge their assumptions about them, it emphasises that in most respects their very young students have the same support needs as any other.

At a risk of immediately contradicting myself, it is perhaps helpful briefly to consider young students' use of digital technologies compared with that of older students. A recent research project undertaken by the OU's Institute of Educational Technology³ has reported that *younger students seem to have more access to digital technology and more positive attitudes to such technology than older students*. The use of the word 'seem' is significant in the context of the above discussion. Teaching and learning in school to an increasing extent involves engagement with digital technologies: students study online texts, submit work and receive feedback electronically, are encouraged to undertake research for projects online. Engagement with the internet, social networking sites and Twitter are second nature to them. A positive attitude to digital technologies, which is said in the report to lead to deeper approach to learning, must be redressing the balance from a more surface approach adopted by students who are studying for extrinsic reasons.⁴ And the latter is what these young students have largely been encouraged to do in order to pass their exams. The IET research also showed that younger students spend more time than their older counterparts in using the new technologies for other purposes. There is a suggestion that, despite their comfortableness with online forums, they are reluctant to engage in formal online tutorial discussions. But again, this may not be an age-related phenomenon.

There may be significant challenges for both the student and the institution in respect of modules which either require either some experience of life or involve discussions on 'adult' topics which, in the case of the latter, are not easily resolved. Autobiographical modules in Creative Writing can be particularly problematic when adults take the opportunity to divest themselves for the first time of some painful episode in their lives. It is not so much that the youngsters need protecting from such revelations, but it is very much a challenge for the tutor in managing the online discussion of a piece of writing and the vulnerability of the writer who may not necessarily be aware that he or she has disclosed such experiences to a 16 year-old, or someone younger.

The safeguarding of students who are under 18 is a requirement under British law. New modules are checked to make sure they are suitable for this age group. They are not able to study modules which relate to professional qualifications such as nursing or social work where the entry is 18, and a decision has also been taken not to allow under 18s to study counselling modules as there was an increased likelihood that their fellow students were vulnerable adults hoping to confront their issues. Otherwise the University aims to empower these young people to engage as fully as possible with the full range of activities. A set of safety guidelines is sent to their parents/guardians/carers at the time of registration, which they are asked to sign to confirm that they recognise that their child will be studying in what is primarily an adult institution. Procedures are also in place promptly to refer to a child protection agency any concerns arising, for example, an online forum or information given in an assignment.

5. Conclusion

To everyone's regret, a decision was taken at the beginning of 2012 to cease YASS in schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland from the end of July. This was the result of a survey to schools in England to assess the impact of fee increases from September 2012 over which the University had no control. The opportunity for schools to continue registering students on OU modules will still exist, but the Scheme as such will no longer be promoted. In the meantime, for increasing numbers of young students, and school leavers in particular, The Open University in their university of choice. We should perhaps stop referring to them as 'younger students'. They do not see themselves as such; they see themselves as 'students'. I hope I have demonstrated that their needs are not that different from others.

Autorin

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³ Older students' use of digital technologies, Chetz Colwell, Anne Jelfs and John T. Richardson (IET. 2012)

⁴ GIBBS, G. (2003) Open University in the North regional staff development conference, *Motivating Students*, Durham 2002 (internal publication)