

# **A change for the better; a response to the challenge of funding and accreditation**

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## **The Programme and the Problem**

The new logo on our newsletter to students is an open door. The symbolism is obvious, open doors equate with ease of entry and access; open to everyone, and possibly the opening up of important new areas of life. This is the message we, in common with many similar programmes around the country wish to give to our students. These students are adult, some are older learners, some are very intelligent, many are lacking in confidence, but all wish to experience a great deal of enjoyment with their learning. These students are the next generation (and in some cases the same generation) liberal adult education students from which our present programme entitled 'Open Studies' derives.

By 'our' I mean the Department of Adult and Continuing Education in the School of Arts in the University of Surrey. By 'our students' I mean a wonderfully eclectic mix of adults wanting part time courses which fit into their busy lives to bring them stimulation, pleasure, challenge and companionship. In other words the social capital which comes from 'the social context of education.' (Putnam 2002 pp.19-20). We inherited a somewhat inchoate programme in the liberal adult education tradition which over the passed ten years has become fully accredited. Five years ago, it was transformed into three new programmes, two modular part time degrees in Combined Studies (a B.A. and a B.Sc.), and one (Open Studies) as an award bearing, county wide programme at Higher Education Level One, that is the equivalent of the first year of a first degree. We offer subjects such as archaeology, art history, computing, counselling, environmental studies, history, languages, literature and creative writing, music and religious studies. They are offered not only in Guildford where the University is based, but in centres across Surrey. The provision of venues is greatly helped by our two main partners, Surrey Community Services, the division of Surrey County Council which also provides adult education, and the London District of the Workers Education Association which of course this year (2003) celebrates its centenary.

For this programme we receive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC). This is essential to our survival. In Autumn 2002 we received clarification from HEFC that funding was conditional on students being fully completing; that is, only students gaining the full award from their course would be funded. (Letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> November 2002 from Sir Howard Newby of HEFC to Dr. Michael Richardson of UACE). Our courses consist of forty, twenty or ten contact hours and the credits awarded are twenty, ten or five. The mathematical simplicity of this system may reflect the arts background of most of us who devise and deliver it. Until this point, funding had seemed to be co-terminus with enrolments rather than achieving credit. We had encouraged students to gain as much as they could from the classes by working for credits, but only about 35% of them had done so. Many had completed assessed work, but not really enough for the full number of credits. This percentage was of course an average, some tutors were much better at achieving high rates of completion than others. From now on, we decided, every student must gain the full amount of credits and therefore become a completing student. We would work towards turning that miserable 35% into as close to 100% as it is possible to achieve.

I, as manager of the programme in my role as Director of Studies, had primary responsibility. It did not seem to be a very comfortable position in which to find myself. The symbol of the open door at this point may well have been drawn with the personification of HEFC standing as a doorkeeper who would step aside only after the magic key of accreditation had been inserted.

## **The Panic and the Preparation**

The full implications of the HEFC clarification meant that in the midst of the first term of an academic year, we had to put strategies in place very quickly if we were to introduce a redefined policy which had changed from being desirable to essential. A timetable of class visits was assembled. A few colleagues and myself would visit all the classes in the next three weeks. There were over a hundred courses, some in places as far from the University as it is possible to be without changing counties. Some in difficult to find local halls, parish rooms, community centres etc. There were nearly sixty tutors and about two thousand students. There were nine of us who had to fit these visits into our usual busy timetables.

The visits were planned carefully. We spoke to the tutors first to try to ensure that they were well briefed and 'on our side'. We were not successful in all cases, and indeed several of the associate lecturers (I prefer to call them 'tutors') took the opportunity to air old grievances and to rehearse new ones. However, most were very supportive.

We then spoke to the students. In many cases taking the start of the class or the coffee break in which to do so. We explained the HEFC requirements but increasingly in such a way that made them seem both desirable and indeed essential to the teaching and learning process. I do not think that we managed to convince all the students, but by the end of the exercise I was beginning to be genuinely enthusiastic about the changes we would have to make.

To gain full credits, students would have to carry out assessment tasks which would demonstrate the learning outcomes which were written at the beginning of every validated syllabus. They would then have to pass them at HE level one. The pass mark is 35%. It seemed that we were not describing Einstein's progress or the literary achievements of the young Virginia Woolf, but rather a level of attainment which most of our admittedly self selecting students could achieve. Attendance at creative writing courses for example, would assume a fair level of literacy, while our booming art history courses attract adults whose passion is galleries. My idealistic musings however, were interrupted by a chorus of, 'We have not come here to do written work' and 'You cannot expect someone of seventy plus to write an essay' and 'We have come to these classes to enjoy ourselves, please do not spoil it.' Clearly there was a gap between HEFC's assumptions and our students' perceptions. This had to be closed and we were in the middle. At this point, the door looked in danger of slamming shut with my fingers being squashed as a result.

## **The Professionals**

For some time we have been working with tutors over the question of more imaginative assessment procedures. Clearly most adult learners participating in an open access course primarily for pleasure are not going to take the production of a fifteen hundred word essay in their stride. The essay is only one form of assessment. To most academics however, it still seems to be the only one. Some years ago we began to use the important phrase 'or equivalent' next to essays in our syllabus requirements, now it was time to find out what we meant by that. Of course this approach is not confined to adult education. A change in the way in which universities assess the traditional eighteen to twenty one year old student has been discussed for some time and the desirability of some of the alternative methods promulgated. (Jarvis 2001 p.71.)

In our various staff development sessions we had been examining student assessment in the form of learning journals, portfolios of short pieces, oral methods including formal presentations, question and answer sheets involving an increasing amount of extra mural research, book reviews, peer reviews, peer assessment, but not quite continuous assessment. That was to come.

In the midst of our difficulties, we were helped considerably by a Workshop Day organised by the University of Reading which took place at Reading on 5<sup>th</sup>.December 2002. Colleagues from the University of Warwick also took part. Together, practitioners from Reading and Warwick who had turned their own programmes around a few years earlier, offered very helpful advice, and I shall always be grateful to them.

Their advice ranged from encouraging us to produce a regular student newsletter, to reminding us that students with no learning pre-requisites may not be at HE level at the start, but might well reach it by the end of the course. There was much more, most of which I have subsequently put into practice. The key to the whole process is, of course, assessment, and it was in the techniques of continuous assessment that the Reading day was most useful. This has informed our concentrated tutor training which has followed.

Using a modified version of the paper given at the Workshop, *Going SOLO ; integrating learning and assessment* (University of Warwick 2002) we began to design one of many possible models for tutors to consider when designing a course which would incorporate continuous assessment into every class. Indeed it should be impossible to do the course without it. From the first class students need to find assessment methods a natural consequence of advancing their learning. The SOLO Taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcomes) “advances a generic framework of educational objectives that moves from the concrete to the abstract (University of Warwick 2002). One of my colleagues, who is an archaeologist, used the original to design an art history course. This showed its versatility for any subject. Using the Learning Outcomes in the syllabus, it was quite possible to design a course which would entail students in providing simple factual responses to the material given in the first class, through the contextual and the comparative, to the more theoretical and abstract towards the end of the course. Responses would be classed based initially, but then move with the students’ gain in knowledge and confidence to the outside research via library and gallery. This is of course, only one possible model. We explored many others.

We then held a series of Staff Development sessions to which every tutor was expected to attend. In the Spring term 2003 we ran three main sessions on continuous assessment to which every tutor was expected to attend. Those tutors who could not attend, received a phone call to arrange a one to one session at their convenience and sometimes (but not often) at my own.

Most tutors were very supportive and were pleased that we were prepared to support them and to listen to their difficulties in a way which was, I hope, not only sympathetic, but helpful and practical. One innovation which helped considerably in these sessions was the introduction of a new form for the recording of each students’ assessment tasks.

### **The Paperwork**

I had spent some time in re-designing forms from a tutor’s point of view. I always teach at least one course on my own programme, not only because I enjoy it, but also so that I can experience the difficulties at first hand. My new form therefore was designed to be simple and convenient for both tutor and student and to be custom made for each student. They can be filled in at first by the student who writes the syllabus learning outcomes at the top, and then in sections labelled ‘oral’ and ‘written’ describes the assessment tasks completed during the course. The tutor then checks these for accuracy and to add any further comments before awarding the credits. There is also a separate sheet for recording comments about any formal oral presentations. Samples from the range of written work produced by the class are also required.

To my astonishment tutors were full of praise for my new forms. They felt that for the first time the forms had been designed with the tutor and student in mind rather than for the

convenience of the office staff. I had hoped to be remembered for other things, but if it is to be for the clarity of my forms, then so be it. I felt that tutors needed to be reassured that all the many different ways of assessing students for credits could also be recorded in a way that would give them meaning and be acceptable to any quality assurance audit. I hope that that may prove to be the case.

### **The Practice and the Personalities**

Tutors are now embarking on many different kinds of imaginative assessment which will, I hope be acceptable to both students and quality assurance. Two slightly unusual examples, both derived from the serendipity of misfortune will have to represent the many others. I was visiting an art history class in which a student was participating who had provided the tutor with an assessment problem. She was in her early forties, had had several breakdowns, was severely dyslexic, had left school after O levels and was, of course, lacking in confidence. However, she had contributed to class discussions in a way which had showed that she was highly intelligent. The tutor had been supportive and friendly as had other members of the group, but 'Pat' would not feel able to take part in any obvious assessment programme. During my visit the class, which was studying portraiture, had taken advantage of being held in part of Guildford's gallery, to view an exhibition of one of the town's famous sons, the artist John Russell, and to focus on pastels that week. During the coffee break one of the students had brought in her own box of pastels and invited us to try them. My own contribution was so bad that it overcame the formalities of my visit well, and I was soon included in a kindly if somewhat pitying response. While we were talking, 'Pat' had taken the opportunity to use the pastels and swiftly and deftly to draw her own self portrait in the style of John Russell. We gasped in admiration and the problem had been solved. A portfolio of her pastel portraiture would demonstrate the learning outcomes far more eloquently than perhaps an essay on the subject. What could be more appropriate for a visual art class ?

The second example is from my own class. It is a page to stage literature/theatre studies course which focuses on attending current performances while studying the text and critically evaluating the visited production. Terence Rattigan's *After the Dance* was being revived at our local Yvonne Arnaud Theatre for the first time since its opening production in 1939. To my consternation I discovered that the play text would not be available in time. After a slight panic, I photocopied a synopsis of the play from a recent biography and distributed it to the class. We had been studying Rattigan's style and so I announced to the group that we would write our own scenes from the play in his style. After a brief hesitation, they complied. The results were better than I could have hoped for and several members of the group were recognised as budding dramatists. My only regret was when viewing the play I subconsciously expected to see our scenes. However, Rattigan was good enough, and my students had produced high quality work which certainly demonstrated some of the syllabus learning outcomes.

### **The Present and the Future**

And what of the future? At the time of writing we have not completed the academic year in which these changes were begun. However figures from the first term show an increase in completion rates from an average 35% to 50%. This was achieved in only half a term after the initial HEFC clarification and so I am hopeful that by next year we will be achieving 80% or more. Tutors are changing their teaching styles and assessment methods. We have arranged a formal celebration for students gaining Certificates in Higher Education (120 credits) on the same day as students on our other programmes graduate. They will receive their certificates from the University's Director of External Academic Relationships. The Mayor of Guildford will also be present, thus symbolising the continuing relationship of Town and Gown and the high value we place on these awards.

This value is, I believe, not just the achieving of completion rates, but in the final transformation from extra-mural adult education programme to an award bearing system of courses which is of value in this fast changing twenty-first century. Lifelong Learning is not a passive process, but embraces dynamic change. The changes we have made to our programme of Open Studies have improved their educational value to our students. We are all living longer and experiencing changing patterns of work, childcare and retirement. We must be prepared to accept these changes by having lively and flexible minds. The community has a right to look to the universities not just for the traditional younger students, but for the whole community which is growing older but needs to be kept younger.

The door to the University for mature students is wide open. As one student said to me recently when she had completed her assessed work, "But it was so enjoyable, I did not realise that learning could be such fun."

### **Bibliography**

Jarvis P (2001), *Universities and Corporate Universities*, Kogan Page, London.

Puttnam R (2001), *Bowling Alone*, Touchstone, New York.

University of Warwick (2002), *Going SOLO; integrating learning and assessment*, Unpublished paper.

### **Letter**

Sir Howard Newby to Dr. Michael Richardson Letter dated 4<sup>th</sup>. November 2002