Homage to Lord Crowther
50th anniversary of the UK Open University Foundation

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ABSTRACT. On July 23, 1969, the Chancellor Lord Geoffrey Crowther gave the inaugural speech of the UK Open University, renowned for the words starting its four paragraphs: "we are open as to people, as to places, as to methods, as to ideas", stating a concept of openness which characterized the mission of the Open University and still does so. The concept of this institution has been set since 1963 with another name, "university of the air", aiming to take advantage of the new technologies in order to allow higher education to reach a wider public, namely adult students. In this paper we focus on the switch that took place from 1963 to 1969 to the new concept, "openness", that linked the two traditional aspects, "people" and "places", with the methodological issue, coming in the same years from the curriculum theories. We then discuss how the concept of openness evolved thereafter, with the introduction, in the last 15 years, of the Open Educational Resources and the Massive Open Online Courses. We then report an extract of the transcript of Lord Crowther's speech, after highlighting its importance in the history of Distance Education.

KEYWORDS: *Distance education, higher education, open distance learning, openness*

The UK Open University was born on April 23, 1969, when the Queen approved the Royal Charter. This is an important date in the history of distance education. Although it is not the first University to deliver distance courses (1), it introduces several innovative elements, which have promoted the development of distance education from both a qualitative and quantitative point of view (Keegan, 1990).

"Openness" is the new main concept: this new distance university qualifies itself as an Open University by integrating a multi-perspective vision of this adjective, which clearly emerges from the inaugural speech given by Chancellor Lord Geoffrey Crowther in the presence of Prime Minister Harold Wilson on July 23, 1969. This

fundamental discourse is usually summarized in the words starting the four paragraphs: "we are open as to people, as to places, as to methods, as to ideas".

We find, in this simple wording, that there are social changes – with the pressure on higher education of ever-widening population groups – technological innovations, didactic theories originating from the curricular theories and an overall rethinking that was taking place in those years of the role of higher education and of the cultural and cognitive profile to be developed. Fifty years on, this contribution therefore intends to reread this brief but important speech, identifying how much survives in the current era.

After the end of World War II, Western societies experienced important reforms in the field of education, aimed at favoring the participation of an increasing part of the population. This occurred in particular in the early part of the 1960s. Some reforms have affected the school; in Italy we remember the reform of the "unified middle school" of 1963 (2). The inevitable effect, in the second part of the decade, was to accentuate the pressure on higher education that arose mainly with the revolts of 1968, and the subsequent reforms of the university system, especially in the continental countries (we recall, in France, the Loi Faure of November 1968) (3). Some other reforms concerned higher education even before then, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In the United Kingdom, the country in which we are interested here, the so-called *Robbins Report* was published in 1963, aimed at giving greater impetus to both quantitative and qualitative renewal of higher education.

In the same year, on October 1st, 1963, during his party's annual conference in Scarborough (Wilson, 1963), the Labor Prime Minister Harold Wilson revamped the plans for building what at the time was called the "university of the air", designed not as a substitute but as a supplement to the traditional one, "designed to provide an opportunity for those who, for one reason or another, have not been able to take advantage of higher education, now to do so with all that TV and radio and the State-sponsored correspondence course […] can provide" (Wilson, 1963, p. 4). The link was explicit, even in the title, between the Higher Education evolutions and the technological ones, above all in the television field, but also radio and, not least, the greater accessibility of printing and correspondence. Once again, as happened during the industrial revolution with the development of the railways and the postal service, technological evolution in communications allowed a greater diffusion of education by means of Distance Education.

A third important element in this context is the methodological one, which did not enter into the political discourses of the time, but which aimed to transform pedagogy precisely in order to allow the great majority of students to achieve most of the educational objectives. In fact, since the end of the 1940s, the curriculum theories were progressively established, originating from the fundamental work of Ralph W. Tyler (1949) and the subsequent publication by the working group coordinated by Benjamin Samuel Bloom of the taxonomy of the cognitive area educational objectives (Bloom et al., 1956).

In the 1960s these theories consolidated the link between social needs to guarantee quality education to all students and educational tools aimed at providing appropriate feedback to students. We are talking about the Mastery Learning theory, developed by Benjamin Samuel Bloom himself in 1968 based on the work of John B. Carroll of 1963 and the formative function of evaluation which, although *in nuce*, was present from the beginning in curriculum theories (Visalberghi, 1955), and then became known under this name in 1967 thanks to the works of Michael Scriven.

However, these theories, which were later criticized for their excess of technicality and engineering, found fertile ground in the world of distance education where "nothing could be left to intuition" (Palomba, 1975, p. 56), and materials had to be carefully designed in order to be delivered to a hypothetical user who would use them only later.

Finally, the first years of the second post-war period also saw the establishment of the role of training, knowledge and aptitude for work as a driving force in a productivistic key. By way of example, we cite the theory of Human Capital, developed by Jacob Mincer and then by Gary Becker in the 1960s (Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1962; 1964). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was founded in the same decade, taking an interest from the beginning in educational issues by means of what would become the CERI in 1968 (4). As higher education was widening its boundaries to adult students, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, it could not ignore these instances, even though Prime Minister Wilson, in the aforementioned Scarborough speech in which he launched the idea of establishing the "university of the air", clarified that a "properly planned university of the air could make an immeasurable contribution to the cultural life of our country, to the enrichment of our standard of living" (Wilson, 1963, p. 4).

As mentioned, the UK Open University was formally established in 1969, actually 6 years after the first idea launched by Harold Wilson. The fundamental step that we want to emphasize here is the introduction of the concept of "openness" that overwhelmingly emerges from Lord Crowther's inaugural speech, as it draws its origins from the four contextual elements we introduced to bring them together under one roof. From the original idea of reaching wider segments of the population thanks to television (hence the reference to the "air") we can see an evolution towards a more general concept of openness: certainly "as to people", who constitute the main focus of the University. The Open University did not have limits on incoming qualifications – "there are no limits on persons" – setting a discontinuity with the British higher education system of the time; however, it was necessary to be 21 years old: the Open University did not intend to address school leavers. This openness in the access constraints corresponded to an active openness in terms of space – "there are no boundaries of space" – and, we add, of time, guaranteeing maximum flexibility of use and therefore a certain independence and autonomy (Keegan, 1990). These elements have always constituted the boon and the bane of Distance Education, as they grant on the one hand the maximum benefit, but on the other hand they greatly increase the risk of drop out.

It is precisely for this reason that these two "opennesses", which were already inherent in the primitive idea of a "university of the air", cannot be separated from a strong methodological structure. Hence the fundamental importance of the connection with the openness "as to methods". To tell the truth, Crowther refers above all to technological innovations in terms of communications to go somehow "beyond" the television medium. There is no doubt that among the contextual elements there was also an evolution in the use of computers for education (5). It is also true that over the years the Open University would always play a pioneering role in the research regarding new ways to integrate distance education with Computer Mediated Communication: we especially recall the "Mindweave" project (Mason, Kaye, 1989), concerning the third generation distance education, that allowed the "many to many" communication, namely between students; the phrase "online learning" was also introduced even before the invention of the World Wide Web in the early Nineties, that would make it commonly adopted thanks to the spread of the Internet connections in many homes.

But maybe paradoxically, the true innovation from an educational point of view was constituted by the correspondence and the written material. Thanks also to the important role of the technologist of education, in fact, the materials proposed by the Open University had to satisfy a rationalization of the whole teaching-learning process (Palomba, 1975, pp. 53-57), with an explicit structure and the presence of prompt feedback. Formalized at a theoretical level by Bloom just a year before, the link between the formative function of evaluation and equal educational opportunities therefore finds its first structural application in the "university of the air", despite the bad reputation that often accompanies distance education compared to traditional one, with on-site attendance, which continues to be considered the ideal reference (6). It should be noted in this regard that, despite the fact that the Open University was actually established in 1969, it began to deliver its courses only in 1971 (a year that is often referred to as the year of birth of the Open University), for the precise purpose of allowing all the necessary materials to be prepared.

The last point, the "openness as to ideas", recalls a more general rethinking occurring in those years with respect to the contexts of education, regarding the contents and the cultural systems. Consistently with the approach stated by Wilson in his 1963 speech, Lord Crowther, using suggestive metaphors, clarifies the dual value of the openness of the University in this sense, associating the more technical work-oriented elements – more prudently the Chancellor speaks of "Knowledge and experience by which Human Society lives and moves" – to those of opening minds, seen "as a fire that has to be set alight and blown with the divine efflatus". Lord Crowther concludes his speech with an explicit reference to the landing of man on the moon, which took place on 20 July 1969, that is just three days before (7).

50 years later, the Open University, as it appears on the official website itself, considers this quadruple openness "a mission that remains in place 50 years later" (8). However, many things have changed as well as the concept of openness. So what lesson can we learn from it after half a century?

The first few years have actually also seen a certain amount of criticism, especially from an operational point of view. Openness was considered to be a slogan. Keegan (1990) refers to the well-known work by McKenzie, Postgate and Scuphan (1975) in which it was said that "Open Learning is an imprecise phrase […] but as an inscription to be carried in procession on a banner, gathering adherents and enthusiasms, it has a great potential. For its very imprecision enables to accommodate many different ideas and aims" (MacKenzie et al., 1975, p. 15) and concludes that the expression cannot be used in an administrative context. One of the reasons for this inaccuracy was the possibility of having open programs even when not at a distance. In the 1990s, maybe also for this reason, the compound phrase Open and Distance Education (then Open and Distance Learning) was promoted, in particular thanks to a specific *Memorandum* of the European Commission (1991). In it, the concept of open learning was strongly linked to flexibility of use which "arises variously from the content of the course and the way in which it is structured, the place of provision, the mode, medium or timing of its delivery, the pace at which the student proceeds " (European Commission, 1991, p. 5), leading to the formula "Any time, any place, any pace". This flexibility has accompanied the switch, also terminological, from education to learning, and, in the continental context, from *Istruzione-Instruction* to *Formazione-Formation*, which corresponded to the affirmation of cognitive learning paradigms first and then constructivist ones, with an ever greater centration on the learner.

We often mention, as a mature definition of Open Distance Learning, the one established in France by the Chasseneuil Collective in 2000: "Une Formation Ouverte et A Distance est un dispositif organisé, finalisé, reconnu comme tel par les acteurs, qui prend en compte la singularité des personnes dans leurs dimensions individuelle et collective et repose sur des situations d'apprentissage complémentaires et plurielles en termes de temps, de lieux, de médiations pédagogiques humaines et technologiques, et de ressources" (Collectif de Chasseneuil, 2000, p. 4). In this case the organizational dimension (Ugolini, 2015) is strongly affirmed, overcoming in some way the perplexities that were put forward regarding the administrative issue.

The Open Distance Learning phrase was abandoned in the very early years of the new millennium: the *dotcom* speculative bubble of 1998-2000 bequeathed us with another expression – e-learning – much more focused on technological aspects and, due to the bubble, also on economic and financial ones, as well as being rather a simplification on a pedagogical level (Galliani, 2003). The European Union itself, which in the 1990s promoted Open Distance Learning, adopted the term eLearning within a specific action plan in 2001. In the definition it contains, the use of technologies was explicitly linked to the improvement of the quality of learning; not by chance, in our opinion, as the quality systems had developed in the previous decade and were to affect the world of higher education thereafter (9).

The concept of "openness", in the context of ICT in higher education, was subsequently taken up with another meaning, linked to the free access to content and resources, in the wake of similar movements in the field of software development.

First, the Open Educational Resources were introduced, defined by UNESCO in 2002 as "The open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes" (UNESCO, 2002, p. 24) (10) and then promoted above all by the MIT with the Open CourseWare project (11). In the following years, there was the success of the Massive Open Online Courses, MOOC, which were actually entire courses allowing exams to be taken and the related certificates to be obtained (Yuan, Powell, 2013; Ghislandi, Raffaghelli, 2013).

Taking up Lord Crowther's four points, this new conception of openness undoubtedly recalls the one "as to people", even with a planetary vocation (12), and, of course, the one "as to places" that are ever more reachable, above all with the spread of mobile devices which attenuate the effects of what, in the early days of the spread of the Internet, was called the "digital divide". It is also possible to resume the "openness as to ideas", maybe going beyond the wishes of the politicians of the 1960s, given the vast content of the MOOC resources and courses present on the net today. One thing remains lacking: something that has always characterized the UK Open University and that we would like to see still featured in Open Distance Learning, even if today the expression has lost its driving force. This is the centration on the learner thanks to a plurality of methods and learning situations; we mean that "openness to methods" that characterized the 1960s evolution from the "university of the air" to the Open University, and which, except for some significant experiences (13), is totally lacking in Open Education as it is currently understood, now centered more on a massive dissemination of content than on a pedagogical approach designed for the learner.

Notes

(1) In the Anglo-Saxon countries, which focus by tradition on adult education, universities often offer University Extension courses, not necessarily full paths leading to a diploma. There had been some experiences of education by correspondence in these kinds of courses since the late XIX century in the USA and in the United Kingdom, and in countries like Canada and Australia as well where the issue of reaching people living in isolated areas also has to be dealt with (Palomba, 1988, p. 45).

(2) This is how we commonly refer to the consequences of Law 1859 of 1962 which suppressed the "scuola di avviamento professionale" (vocational middle school), whose effects started after October 1st, 1963.

(3) L. 68-978 of 12 November 1968 (*Loi d'orientation de l'enseignement supérieur*).

(4) The organization was interested in educational issues before it was formally established, that is since 1958 when it was still called OECE (Pavan, 2003).

(5) For a historical review of the Educational Technologies, see Olimpo, 1993.

(6) As proof of this permanence over the years, this reputation is denounced in three works distant in time: Donatella Palomba (1975, p. 10) said that the Open University was perceived as "a kind of second rate institution"; Desmond Keegan (1990) said that Distance Education had the status of the "Cinderella of the Education System"; Antonio Calvani (2000, p. 7), reports how "With regard to distance education, a general prevention still exists, especially in the academic world".

(7) This is also the reason for our wish to "pay homage" to this event in this journal which had honored Neil Armstrong in the previous issue, recalling the title used there.

(8) www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/exhibition/53/theme/2/page/1

(9) We recall above all the *European Standards and Guidelines*, adopted in the context of the *European Higher Education Area*, first in 2005 and then, after a revision process, in 2015. On the relationship between e-learning and quality, see Ugolini, 2014.

(10) UNESCO was dealing since the Nineties with the issue named "Education for all", with a specific focus on higher education (Baldazzi, 2009).

(11) For a historical review of OER, see Fini, 2012.

(12) However we cannot ignore some critical implications of this worldwide spread, linked to the great prevalence of content in the English language, as a kind of new imperialism of Anglo-Saxon origin.

(13) We refer here to the cMOOC, with a connectivist approach, promoted by George Siemens and Stephen Downes.

**Extracts from the transcript of Lord Geoffrey Crowther speech
at the presentation of the Charter, 23rd July 1969 ***

This is The Open University. Many men have tried, and with indifferent success, to define a University. I shall not add to their number. But we are The <u>Open</u> University, and it is fitting that I should try to outline on what that claim is based and what we take it to mean.

We are open, first, as to <u>people.</u> Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission. "We took it as axiomatic" said the Planning Committee "that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student. Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies."

The first, and most urgent task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover, sometimes, too late, that they need. […] To them we offer a further opportunity.

But if this were all, we could hardly call ourselves a university. […] Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education, supplementing the existing provision, there is our constituency.

The Open University is not the rival of the existing Universities. It is designed to take over where they are compelled to leave off.

There are no limits on persons.

We are open as to <u>places.</u> This University has no cloisters –a word meaning closed. We have no courts –or spaces enclosed by buildings. Hardly even shall we have a campus. […] From the start, it will flow all over the United Kingdom. But itis already clear that the University will rapidly become one of the most potent and persuasive, and profitable, of our invisible exports.
Wherever the English language is spoken or understood, or used as a medium of study, and wherever there are men and women seeking to develop their individual potentialities beyond the limits of the local provision – and I have defined a large part of the world – there we can offer our help. […]

There are no boundaries of space.

We are open as to <u>methods.</u> The original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. We start, it is true, in dependence on, and in grateful partnership with, the British Broadcasting Corporation. But already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that before long actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the Industrial Revolution of two centuries ago. Then, the great

advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance, is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second.[…]

Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding.

There is no restriction on techniques.

We are open, finally, to ideas. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much as it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which Human Society lives and moves. This is the Martha of education – and we shall have plenty of these tasks to perform. But the Mary regards the human mind rather as a fire that has to be set alight and blown with the divine efflatus.

This, also we take as our ambition.

What a happy chance it is that we start on this task in this very week when the Universe has opened! The word has a new meaning henceforward. The limits, not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed […].

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