

Andy: Hello, and welcome to Episode 2 of the Association Conversation Station, the official podcast of the Open University Students Association. This is the place to hear about the things that we do and the things that inspire us. We hope you'll enjoy it.

Georgia: Now, this is a special extra episode to celebrate our 50th birthday. The approval was given for the formation of an OU Students Association on the 16th of May 1972. So, this is a very special time for us, and we thought we'd market with an extra podcast.

Andy: You'll be hearing from Sir John Daniel, the former Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, our former President, Chris Roworth, and the association's Chief Executive Officer, Robert Van. Now, to warn you, there are one or two glitches in the audio, but fear not, there are some fascinating stories to enjoy. Trust us. It's a really special podcast.

Georgia: Our host is our president, Sarah Jones. Sarah, over to you.

Sarah Jones: Hello and welcome. My name is Sarah Jones, and I am the president of the Students Association, and I'd like to welcome you to the conversation station. Today we are going to be talking to some very special guests and celebrating our first 50th birthday. So, I would like to introduce you first to Chris Walters. Chris, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about who you are?

Chris Walters: Hello. During the '80s, I started studying with the OU and became involved in the fees, what was the fees, and grants campaign a long time ago. Subsequently, I became the campaign director during the petition, which I'm sure we'll talk about. And then, ultimately, I became president from 1986 to '88. And then, in the '90s, I worked for the OU in the Southwest region. I'm now up in Buxton, Derbyshire, and retired.

Sarah: Great. Thanks, Chris. John, over to you.

John: I'm John Daniel. I was the Vice-Chancellor of OU University from 1990 to 2001, which was a very interesting decade. After that, I went off to UNESCO in Paris, and I'm now in semi-retirement and living in Vancouver in Western Canada. So, it's a great place to take part in this. And I was thinking the other day that the Open University has always had a much better institutional memory than many organizations and this is a wonderful expression of that. And Chris, I mean, it's really good that you are going back to the John Hallock because I think I'm one of the ancient of days, but you bring a perspective to this. And actually, that was the wonderful thing about working at the OU that the student association and its officers had great longevity because OU students usually took a long time to graduate. So, you had the same people that you were dealing with for a good bunch of time, and that was very helpful. Compared to normal universities, where people tend to come and go every year. Anyway, pleased to be with you.

Sarah: Thank you so much, John. And Rob, would you like to introduce yourself?

Robert: Yeah. Hi, and thanks, Sarah, for inviting us all and lovely to be with Chris and John on this podcast. So, I'm Robert Van. I'm the association's current Chief Executive. My role is to be the key sort of supporter to our elected president of the day and also to manage to look after the staff group that we have here at the association and all our volunteers and student leaders as well. And I've been with the association now... This is my 10th anniversary this summer. The last eight in this current post. So yeah, a real pleasure to be here today.

Sarah: Brilliant. Thank you so much. So, I'm going to come to you first, Chris. You mentioned one of the achievements and things that you worked on when you were a student rep, can you kind of elaborate on that a little bit more for me?

Chris: Well, when I was a student, the OU was government-granted. It had a government grant, and I was involved in the fees and grants campaign to try and get part-time students some recognition. And that was when I first started to get involved, and then subsequently, we had quite a wide range of branch activists who were looking at the fees and grants campaign. We have already started to have some impact politically across the whole of the country. So, there was a good structure there and then because it was government-granted, we had a hostile government led by Mrs Thatcher, who threatened the existence of the OU. And what we were trying to do was try to make sure that the OU's pioneering work was not undervalued and also preserve the OU for future students, which we achieved because you're here today.

Sarah: Absolutely, yeah. And that kind of work was just so important, as you say, to students of our decade. It was incredibly important because I could get funding for my degree, and I've been able to do that incredibly successfully. So, it's great to hear of all that hard work that's gone into making my position a tenable position.

John, is there anything that you can think of that was a great achievement by the Students Association whilst you were vice-chancellor?

John: Oh yes. I mean, first of all, in those days, the Senate numbered over a thousand people.

Sarah: Oh, wow.

John: They didn't all show up at the meetings, but a good attendance was about 300. But what was quite determined in those days was that the most assiduous attendees were the student members, of which are a fairly large number, and the associate lecturers. And if you got the associate lecturers and the students to sing from the same sheet, if they were pushing for the same thing, it was pretty short to pass because of the academics, especially the ones who came in and out. And, I mean, I'm not trying to be precious, but I think, certainly, it was a very strong policy of mine too, if in doubt, back what the students want. And also, if in doubt, support government initiatives I think it's interesting Chris's comment, just to give a little historical perspective.

If you look at the first 30 years of the OU, you had, first of all, Walter Perry as Vice-Chancellor. He was a brilliant sort of conceiver of the whole thing on the back of an envelope and so on. And then you had John Hallock, who had the toughest time. Chris has said the Thatcher era was not only a time when all universities got hit by funding cuts. But there was also this whole question of Marxist bias. Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State, had set up in bed, selectively reading OU course units, and came up with the conclusion that there was a serious Marxist farce problem. So, he set up a visiting committee to sort of chase this rabbit through the thing, and it was quite unpleasant. I say all that because when I pitched up in 1990, first of all, I'd come from many years in Canada. So, I was sort of new to the system, but I knew the OU very well indeed because I'd spent three months there as a visiting lecturer way back in 1971.

So, I felt very much at home there. And looking at it from an overseas perspective, I thought this was probably the most important thing that Britain had done in higher education since the Second World War. So, I couldn't understand why the government would not appreciate that. When I arrived soon after, they said they were going to do a review of the OU. Probably because of the sort of work that Christian people had done to raise consciousness. We thought because that's what they told us, that the idea was to see whether they should give the OU more money to take more students. We later discovered that what it was about was that they were preparing a big major reform of higher education in Britain, which resulted in the Higher Education Reform Act of 1992. And they wanted to figure out how they should

position the OU within that. Anyway, as I said, because I came with a completely different perspective, I hadn't lived through the Thatcher years. I took the view that the OU had everything to gain by putting its cards on the table, cooperating fully with this review, and so on.

I think the results speak for themselves. I think it's interesting. Walter Perry, the pioneer, John Hallock, the hard slog, and frankly, I came in in a decade in which all the lights were green. When I arrived, I think there were 100,000 students; when I left 11 years later, there were over 200,000. So, it was a great decade of expansion.

Sarah: Wow. That's interesting. It's really interesting.

Chris: I've got an anecdote about Keith Joseph if you want to hear it. Well, John Hallock had asked the students to put forward some people to meet Keith Joseph because he eventually came to visit the campus. I and Iris Price, who is now a key team and was the president at the time, and a few others met Keith Joseph. And before that, the Vice-Chancellor said to us, "Right, what you want to know is what you are studying and what you are doing." So, they got to me, and I said, "Oh, well, I'm doing modern art and modernism." And they said, "Uh oh, that's the one he's looking at for Marxist bias." They also said to me, "Just say you're doing social science." Then, I said, "Right, okay, fine." It came to me, and I said, "I'm doing art and social science." He said, "Which social science?" At that point, I had to tell him. He said, "We're looking at that for Marxist bias." So, I said, "Well, there isn't any Marxist bias. I can tell you there is a Marxist perspective, but that's different.", and then I came out. I wasn't quite sure where we were going exactly but anyway, he took it in the group part, I think so.

Sarah: Oh, good. It's just so interesting hearing all these stories and before I move on to Rob, I just wanted to say that my dad studied with the Open University right near its conception and was in one of the first cohorts of students that graduated. I remember growing up hearing about how wonderful the Open University was. And every time we drove into Wigan, we'd drive past his tutor's house, and he'd go, "That's where my tutor lives," and all of this kind of stuff. I remembered because my dad was a teacher and so he recorded the middle-of-the-night programs. And in school holidays, we'd be made to sit and watch them because it was educational. So, I remember all that from growing up, which probably led to me wanting to be an Open University student. So yeah, it's really interesting hearing other stories around that as well. So, thank you so much for those, and more of them in a minute.

Are there any achievements that you would like to kind of say are great achievements that the Open University Students Association has had in your time?

Robert: Well, so it's really interesting hearing John and Chris talk about the sort of government policy issues of the day because that's sort of continued. It feels like a theme and a thread that's almost run through the association's 50 years in effect because it's always been there no matter what the government of the day or the policy issues around it. So, when I first joined the association in 2012, it was just after the tuition fee arrangements were coming into place. That was the year that they were introduced. And, of course, for the association, and us at that time, there was a lot of discussion with the university around maintaining transitional arrangements to allow students who were studying on the old fee regime to complete their studies on those existing fees rather than the new fee arrangements. And that was a huge discussion. Huge amounts of work went on from both sides in partnership to get that done and achieved.

But also, we can't help but look at the fact that that took out so many students who were lifelong learners, that were the one sort of the core area of the student population that effectively the university and the association had to sort of lose over the coming years. And I think we're still reeling from that a little bit, as the student body is changing, and it's getting

younger, and new students now have very different concerns and very different challenges, and we've got to respond to those moving forward in the future. So, I think that policy arena, and obviously, it's a big strand of what we're doing right now. But it's always been there, and it's sort of been a theme, right? So, I think if you looked at the themes of the 50 years, that's right near the top of things that come out. I think just on a wider sort of level, and this isn't during my time here but one of the big achievements I think for the association and one of the things that stands out to me is having the student's educational trust, because OUSET was introduced in 1982, and it's still here now. I'm proud to be a trustee of that at the moment and Sarah, I know you are proud to be adjoining that after you've completed your current role.

Sarah: I can't wait.

Robert: So, it's really interesting, and it's a hugely important part of what we do, but greatly under sum. We don't do enough to talk about the benefits that had to lots of students. They wouldn't be able to complete their studies if it wasn't for the financial support of OUSET. So that, to me, stands out as one of the big ones.

Sarah: Yeah, and I think you're right about that, Rob. We don't shout about the difference that OUSET has made to so many students, and I'm hoping that throughout our 50th celebration, we're aiming to raise 50,000 pounds for OUSET over this year. We will start to raise awareness of what OUSET can do for our students. I think it will make a really big difference, which is one of the reasons that I'm so excited to kind of be moving into that role when I finish my term. So, I'm excited about that. Moving on slightly, I'm just kind of if there are any bumps that you think maybe the Students Association had along the way. Are there any bumps in the relationship with the OU that maybe we kind of want to just touch on, albeit very briefly, on that? Because bumps just don't happen. We have a wonderful relationship.

Chris: Well, I think.

Sarah: No, fine.

Chris: I couldn't remember a slight bump. It was when I was president. So, John's mentioned the Senate. Well, it was a senate discussion by the technology faculty wanting to bring in home computing. It seems like a million miles away now, but it was the first move to bring home computing onto a foundation course at the Open University. It was innovative, but we, as students, were concerned about the transfer of costs to students. Because at that point in the proceedings, to get that technology in your own home was still very expensive. So, we ganged up with the associate lecturers and agreed that what we'd be pushing for in the Senate was the costs of home computing, if brought in, should not exceed the set books allowance for students. I don't know whether you have a set books allowance now, but we used to then. There was a limit to how much you would expect students to pay for books. So, we hung it on that hanger if you like and said, "That's what we wanted." Well, we got it through the Senate, as John mentioned. We did get it through the Senate. But the OU newspaper at the time called it a wrecking amendment. So, it wasn't a great bump, but the tech, we weren't the flavour of the months of this technology faculty.

Sarah: I can imagine.

John: I remember that very well indeed because I remember going to the OUSA conference. It must have been sometime in the early to mid-'90s, probably about 1994, when this issue was really hot and it so happened, they usually ask me every year to come and make a little speech. When I made speeches in those days, I always did it with a laptop as my prompter. So, in the middle of this debate about the home computing policy, I went up to the lectern and opened my computer and started talking about all the wonders of the OU and a very

hostile reception because the great slogan was, "If everyone can't have it, no one should have it.", which is a bit of an obstacle to progress.

Let them cause the irony, the two ironies. The first was I went back two years later to the same OUSA conference and was chastised because we weren't moving fast enough by this time, the whole world scene was changing and, of course, in a way, the OU was hoisted on its own petard because what we did to try and persuade OUSA was a good thing to provide all the OUSA executives with computers at home so they could see how wonderful it was. But of course, what we hadn't realised was this would enable OUSA to canvass the whole student body very efficiently to find out what the beefs were. So instead of just sort of complaining about things, they could say, "This is a problem, and here are several people who think it's a problem. Well, why don't you do something about it?". So, we were riding this roller coaster. The figures are quite interesting.

In 1995, there were 5,000 students online. In 1999, there were 50,000 students online. And in 2000, there were 110,000 students online. So, it was a huge sort of movement that was taking place. While we're talking about Senate, again, it seems peculiar to look back on this but the main campaigns that OUSA was running in the '90s were to get rid of what we used to call the paternalist attitudes of the OU that we now call parentalist attitudes, which obliged students to do a whole bunch of things, which they began to feel were not necessary.

Number one was in the early '90s still. Everyone was required to do two foundation courses before they did anything else, and this was beginning to be a bit sort of not necessary. So, they campaigned against that, but it was not an easy battle to win because there was a deep sort of parentalist attitude among some of the OU academics who said, "This was good for their souls." and so on. Another issue was what we called name degrees because, in the early '90s, everyone got a BA. So, we introduced the BSC, and then there were named degrees where you could have all kinds of names for your degrees. Then, I think the third one I mentioned was the ability to start your studies at level two. Now, this seems ridiculous today, where everything is much free for all but in those days, these were really big issues. So, I don't think they were bumps because I was very much on the side of the students and the associate lecturers. And because they were closer to the students, we knew that these were issues, and we couldn't persist with these attitudes of knowing what's good for you, but they're interesting reflections.

Sarah: Thanks, John. That's interesting. My dad got annoyed with my nan because my nan was on every birthday card and wrote his name in BSC and my dad's degree was not a BSC. It was a BA, and she just couldn't get ahead around the fact that it'd done it in sciences, yet it was a BA, and they argue about it. So, on every birthday card, it said BSC. She was determined it was a BSC.

John: Well, this was another example of the OU despite being very innovative, copying Oxbridge. I mean, I did science at Oxford, and I got a BA so that was what you did but life moves on.

Sarah: Very interesting. Thank you.

Rob, are there any bumps that have happened during your time?

Robert: Yes. I think there are lots of things around the OU relationship and things that we work through together over time. Although I'd say, on the whole, you sort of look back at them and think, "Actually, the two parties work together really well, really strongly, and always have." In the time that I've been here and been involved. So even though there have been disagreements over things at times, I don't think it's ever sprawled into affecting the overall relationship has been pretty positive and pretty good. I think for me, a bump for the

association during and quite a recent one has been dealing with the pandemic because, looking at that, only two years ago at the very outset. We were planning for the conference 2020 that would've been on campus as usual and would've been face-to-face, even with a virtual element conference, and we were knee-deep in the planning for that as a team and as a wider, student volunteers, et cetera. Of course, we had to make that change because looking at the timeline, we'd sort of started in November or December, the year before 2019 started and planning.

The announcement of the working at-home sort of took place in March 2020 and we were due to hold the conference in June. So very quickly, we had to sort of move and make a big change toward holding conference completely online and doing it for the first time and using new technology to do it that we'd not done before. We'd not tested before. So, it was pretty scary but also exciting to do. I think it's one of the things that I'm proudest of looking back in terms of the things that we've achieved. One of those memories that sort of stands out is that for us as a team and as a wider group around us, to do that and deliver it successfully and to have amazing speakers that we had like Professor Brian Cox and all the different things had our part in that. We did that in less than 12 weeks sort of turnaround between knowing we needed to do it and delivering it. So that, for me, sort of stands out as getting over quite a major bump and still delivering it.

Sarah: Yeah, it's an incredible achievement, and coming back to Rob on this one, because I think you've kind of touched on kind of things that are moving forward. What do you see as the future of the association?

Robert: So, I think the association has got to rethink for the future moving forward and it's interesting talking about this now because I finish with the association in July and move on to another role elsewhere. So, I suppose looking back at what we've gone through and then where we're going next. There's a key point for the association now in thinking about the next strategy and the next elected group about to come in place from August this year and what they will move forward with. And the way the student body has changed and the fact that we shouldn't let up the sort of desire to reach out to many more students because I think the biggest problem for us, and one of our biggest Achilles heels in the time that I've been there, has been that awareness amongst all students and the fact that we are trying to represent a body of 170,000 students. A super huge body of incredibly diverse students that spread to the wind everywhere that is so important but always overlooked, knowing government policy debates in the national press.

Whenever there's higher education debated, our students are not there and are not part of it. I think for us as the association, both that sort of reaching out to our members and getting much more involved than we currently do but also not forgetting that voice and sort of public policy stuff that we've touched on today that is going to be a theme moving on into the future. And I hope that we continue to be sort of a force in terms of actually representing that distance and part-time learning student population because nobody else is doing it other than the association and the OU. We are best placed to be that voice. So, I hope that we continue doing that in the future.

Sarah: I agree, and I know that that's part of one of our strategy projects at the minute. Creating that manifesto for lifelong learning so that we can have that space in policy and public affairs to talk about what it means to be a part-time distance learner. And I think that it's really important that we carry on focusing on that moving forward. It's going to be exciting times with all the changes in government policy again, and it's how we best support and represent our students and make sure that they are as engaged with us as they can be and reaching them and making sure that we take into account their views.

So just a few closing remarks from all of you, if you don't mind. I'd like to just hear one of

your favourite memories of your time working with the association, whether it be as you were John as vice chancellor or you were as a student rep, Chris. Or you as CEO, Rob. I'd just like to hear your kind of favourite memories. So I'll go to Chris, then John, and then Rob. So, Chris, John, and Rob, you've got a little bit more thinking time. Sorry, Chris.

Chris: Well, that's alright. Can I have two?

Sarah: Yes.

Chris: One is to say that Rob, you sound like John Needham. Our permanent secretary when I was involved in OUSA. Because John said to the OU that without the students, there'd be no OU, and that's what you've just been saying. That's a favourite moment for me, for now, but my other favourite moment has got to be taking the petition down 10 Downing Street. One hundred sixty thousand signatures piled high on a stretcher. We made a stretcher so that people would know that the OU was in danger of losing its life. And also, took honorary vice presidents with us. We took Jack Ashley from the Labor Party, Bill Benyon, who was then the Tory MP for Milton Keynes and Iris. I remember Iris saying, "Am I supposed to knock on this door, or did they know we're coming?"

So, she knocked on the door, and we handed in this petition, one bundle at a time. All of us, a chain of us. And she turned to me and said, "Look at the back there. There's a great big cloud of smoke coming out. She's burning it at the back." But she wasn't. We won in the end. So that's my very favourite moment. And the colleagues that I worked with. As I say, John, Iris, and all the other presidents and activists that were around at the time. It was teamwork. It was team collaboration and a commitment to the OU, and you can't get better than that.

Sarah: John, what about you?

John: Well, I think I've already mentioned this 180 that the OUSA did on the home computing policy, and this on a space for a few years. I think one of my memories and I tried to be geography-blind when responding to invitations to meet OUSA groups around the country. So, I remember on this principle, going up to Shetland to meet the students in Shetland to show that all students were our students so that was a great moment. I'm glad you mentioned John Needham, the late John Needham. He was a great man and a wonderful spokesman. I don't remember any unpleasant discussions with John. He was just so obeying and pleasant but so effective at the same time. So, it's good that we should honour his memory in this podcast.

But I look back, and I think that the '90s were a golden decade because we had lots of money. When we went into the system with the others, there was the federalization of the system in Scotland, Wales, and so on, which was a bit of a bump, but we got over that. But we also achieved a common funding policy and a common quality assurance policy for nearly all of the '90s that was enormously helpful. You might say we made out like bandits when we started the '90s. There was no money in the bank because we weren't allowed to have surpluses or deficits. I think, by the time, by the end of the '90s, we had 100 million pounds in the bank, so it was quite a turnaround.

Sarah: Oh, that's brilliant. Thank you, John. And Rob?

Robert: Well, it's interesting for me because I mean, what amazing memories both from Chris and John so I feel blessed to be in such sort of esteemed company really because my memories sort of don't match up to yours. But I think for me, I think some of the things that I've enjoyed most have been around things like conferences, to be honest. There's been sort of one of the highlights for me of seeing conferences and particularly when we did them on campus and seeing our students come to campus and realise that it's not a warehouse in

the sky that just sends you books. It's a real living university place that has lecture theatres and a library, and all the things that make them feel like students. And to have that one weekend where they felt students at another university to see them out on the Marbury lawn and enjoying the company and making new friends and things around it.

I think for me, seeing us as a staff group supporting that and supporting those memories. And it is inclusive having a full variety of students there. No matter their challenges or disabilities or other or the distance, the location they've come from to travel to a conference. I think they're some of the things that stand out to me as being particular memories and for us as staff, I think they're some of the things we enjoy most. To see those things along the way and sort of have those touch points with students properly when you're typically in a distance environment. Otherwise, you don't have that same sort of emotional connection that you would have when you come together face-to-face. So, I think that stands out for me.

Sarah: Yeah, and I think you've touched on one of my favourite and enduring memories of the conference. I got elected to be the faculty rep for well-being education and language studies. And I had never been to campus at this point. I knew it was there somewhere in the distance, but I had no idea at all. I came to the conference, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is an amazing place." And for the first time, I felt like a student, and I felt like I belonged and that was an incredible feeling. Incredible feeling. I made friends there that I'd seen cross the stage at graduations only just a couple of weeks ago and that, to me, is just incredible. It's such a special privilege as well and as president to be able to see people cross the stage in so many different places. And I get to go to my graduation in about two and a half weeks to join in with other amazing students, 600 students graduating.

One of my favourite memories this year, though, was going to Northern Island, going to Belfast. I went two times in 10 days. The first time was to go to the graduation and see a hundred nurses go across the stage graduating who I'd supported during the pandemic as the faculty rep for well-being education and language studies. So that was incredibly special. And the shoes, my goodness. The shoes those people wore. Then, my second one was about ten days later when I left my house, and 19 hours later came back to my house has gone to Belfast and gave a speech at Stormont to celebrate students as part of the Northern Islands and manifesto launch. So, there's so much variation. There are so many things that I could take away from this experience of being present and being a student rep. It's such a special organization to be part of.

As I move on in my student journey, it's an organization that I will hold incredibly dear to my heart. I think I will do it for many years to come. As I'm sure and having listened to you, you already do. So, I want to say a huge thank you for joining me today. I appreciate it, and I wish that we could carry on because I'm sure you could tell me many more things. I appreciate it. So, thank you, Rob. Thank you, John and Chris, for joining us. Thank you, everybody, for listening.

Chris: Thanks very much.

Robert: Thank you.

John: Thank you.

Georgia: Our thanks go to Chris, Sir John, and Rob for their inspirational thoughts and, of course, to Sarah for hosting.

Andy: We hope you enjoyed this extra episode, and happy 50th birthday to us. The best is yet to come.



Georgia: This has been the Association Conversation Station. It was hosted by our president, Sarah Jones. Produced by Andy Evans and me, Georgia Delepoulle. See you next time.

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