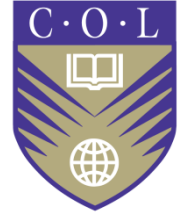


Confessions of a Part-time Extramural Student



Massey University

*Extra-mural Students' Society Dinner
Wellington, New Zealand
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*After-dinner remarks by
Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight. I shall simply add to your own moving accounts of your studies at Massey by sharing my own experiences as a part-time extramural student for 25 years.

I start with some background. I did my full-time university studies in medieval universities with walls. They also had cloisters – a word derived from Latin, meaning closed. Four years of undergraduate work at Oxford University and four years for a doctorate at the University of Paris led me to an appointment as assistant professor of metallurgical engineering at the University of Montreal.

Seeing that my long immersion in intra-mural study had led me into a career as a university teacher I thought that I ought to learn something about education. Before I realised that this was a peculiar idea for an eager young engineering academic, I had enrolled in a part-time master's programme in Educational Technology at another university in Montreal. It required coursework, a research thesis and an internship.

All aspects of the programme were very stimulating, but the internship changed my life. We had to spend three months in an organisation that was using educational technology. When I started thinking about where to do this in 1971, the press was full of reports about an amazing innovation, by the Brits of all people, called the Open University. It was using educational technology at scale and they agreed to take me on for my internship.

That summer of 1972 in the UK was a conversion experience. I saw the future of higher education and wanted to be part of it. Everything was hugely impressive and stimulating.

First there was the scale: the Open University already had 40,000 students in its second year of operation.

Second came the idealism: here were people who walked the talk on access and student-centred pedagogy.

Third, there was palpable love of learning: the students were unbelievably motivated by the opportunity presented to them. I went to one of the residential summer schools where students spent a full day in labs, seminars and field trips and then most of the night in the bar; continuing the academic discourse.

Fourth, I was captivated by the media and technology: my key task was to help develop computer-marked assignments that tested advanced cognitive skills, but I spent every spare moment viewing the brilliant BBC television programmes.

This exposure to the future of higher education infected me with the virus of open and distance learning. I was thrilled by the vision of openness articulated by Geoffrey Crowther, speaking as the Open University's first chancellor at the inauguration ceremony that took place in the week of the first landing on the moon in 1969. I quote:

*This is the **Open** University. We are open, first, as to **people**. Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education... there is our constituency. There are no limits on persons.*

*We are open as to **places**. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed. There are no boundaries of space.*

*We are open as to **methods**. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. There is no restriction on techniques.*

*We are open, finally, as 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 it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human society lives and moves. But the other regards the human mind rather as a fire which has to set alight and blown with the divine afflatus. This also we take as our ambition.*

That is a powerful statement about opening up higher education. It is hard to believe that it was penned – not word-processed – over four decades ago.

For me the direct result of the internship was a move from Montreal to a post at the Télé-université, an open university being set up in Quebec City. Four years later I moved to another new open university: Athabasca University in Alberta.

However, at that time I dropped out of my Master's programme in Educational Technology because doing the thesis no longer seemed very important. But I did continue as an extramural student. I took distance courses in history and information technology from the Télé-université and courses in ancient history and management from Athabasca.

Apart from the interest of the courses themselves, taking them gave me the opportunity to find out directly whether the service to our students was as good as we claimed.

Some years later I found myself president of Laurentian University in Ontario and I enrolled as an extramural student there, taking five years to complete a diploma in theology.

By the time I finished that diploma I had moved to the UK Open University as vice-chancellor and I thought of enrolling for a law degree. At this point my long-suffering wife sat me down and suggested

rather robustly that if I wanted to become a student again I should first finish the Master's in Educational Technology that I had abandoned nearly twenty years earlier.

That seemed like a great idea. The university took a little persuading to let me back into the programme after nearly 20 years, but they did. I wrote a thesis on mega-universities and 25 years after my first registration I received my degree at convocation in Montreal in 1996.

I don't know if taking 25 years to get a degree is a record, but I hope it encourages those of you who think your degrees took a long time to complete.

Later I took a couple of distance learning courses in IT and international development from the UK Open University when I was vice-chancellor there. I'm not taking any courses at the moment but I'm sure I will once the pressure of work lets up a bit.

I share two conclusions from my long experience as an extramural student. The first is that it has been a wonderfully varied and enriching part of my life. The second is that my extramural studies have had a greater impact on my career than my original degrees as a full-time student. They are the reason that I am with you tonight.

Thank you.