



**Y Personol a'r  
Cyfunol**

**The Personal  
and the  
Collective**

# **Cyflawni'r uchelgais o 'fyfyrwyr fel dinasyddion'; pwrpas addysg drydyddol; a'r newid sydd ei angen inni wneud**

Testun gair am air y sylwadau a draddodwyd gan **Louise Casella FLSW**, Cyfarwyddwr y Brifysgol Agored yng Nghymru, yn y digwyddiad, **Dinesydd:Myfyriwr – Cyflawni addysg drydyddol ar gyfer anghenion Cymru'r dyfodol**, ddydd Llun 22 Mai 2023 yng ngwesty'r **Radisson Blu, Caerdydd**

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# **Achieving the ambition of 'students as citizens'; the purpose of tertiary education; and the change we need to make**

Verbatim text of remarks delivered by **Louise Casella FLSW**, Director of The Open University in Wales, at the event, **Citizen:Student – Delivering tertiary education for Wales' future needs**, on **Monday 22 May 2023** at the **Radisson Blu hotel, Cardiff**

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# Introduction

Good evening.

Well, firstly, can I say thank you to Nerys for those very kind words of introduction and for being here with us this evening and agreeing to act as our chair?

And thank you all too for joining.

Tonight, we're here to explore the notion of students as citizens, and the challenge which the Minister has set to our sector to ensure our learners are contributors to society throughout their studies.

But I'd also like us to go further: to flip that narrative on its head and to say that we need to speak not just about students as citizens, but also about citizens as students.

I'd like us to examine the notion that students should be able to take their learning and use it to the advantage of the community, while also having their learning experiences enriched by the very communities which they inhabit and embody.

And we, who provide and fund tertiary education, should be challenging ourselves – do we organise learning in a manner that allows that?

Do we fund learning in a way that encourages that?

And do we measure and value our institutions and their activities in a way that drives a positive relationship between the student-citizen (or is it citizen-student?) and their community.

I'm also pleased this evening that we are joined by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles. And, Minister, I'd like to say here at the outset how grateful I and all my colleagues are for your support of The Open University in Wales.

Since you came to the Education portfolio, Minister, you have made clear that your driving mission is to make Wales a nation where education is not just a one-chance thing, but where second chances (and third and fourth) abound and where learning stretches throughout lives for the benefit of all.

That mission is the essence of what The Open University is. As our inaugural Chancellor, Geoffrey Crowther, said at our charter ceremony in July 1969<sup>1</sup>:

*"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."*

I wonder what our first Chancellor would make of where we are, half a century later?

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<sup>1</sup>The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey, Lord Crowther, 'Speech by Lord Crowther, first Chancellor of The Open University at the presentation of the charter, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1969', (1969), <https://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/pdf/script/script:5747089b4a53f>

Have we come far enough? Done enough? To realise the potential of our citizens and make our communities places where learning is seen and valued as the vehicle for social change which we know it is?

We have come far.

But the task remains unfinished.

In my remarks this evening, I'd like to focus on three themes in particular:

First, what it means to be a citizen and what it means to be a community.

Second, the need to redefine and reframe our values as they relate to tertiary education.

And finally, how I think we might grasp the opportunity the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research offers and reshape our system to deliver on the ambitions I think we all share.

# The Citizen and the Community

## What does it mean to be a citizen?

To move us forward in that work, we need to be clear about what we aim to deliver, for whom, and to what end.

Part of that surely includes going back to basics and considering what exactly we mean when we invoke that word, 'citizenship'.

What I'm talking about is the practice of citizenship:

Those things we do that tie us to each other and to the world around us; those social obligations that we each shoulder; and those things we get in return.

Indeed, if, as Raymond Williams argued, the notion of a 'common culture' is one not just commonly shared, but commonly made<sup>2</sup>, then it follows that to be a part of a living, common culture, each of us must have a hand in shaping it.

To practise citizenship is not to be a passive recipient of the external world.

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<sup>2</sup>Terry Eagleton, 'Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism', No. 1 (1998), pp. 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26920204>

Rather, it is to be an active contributor to the communities which we inhabit.

To be a citizen – a social citizen – is to do.

Yes, to volunteer, to vote, to protest – all these things, we know.

But, also, to care, to work, to create, to challenge, to think, even to learn – these things, too, I suggest, form a part of what it is to be a citizen.

Because each of these activities creates a common good, a common benefit.

Each represents a contribution to the creation of that common culture, which Raymond Williams advocated.

## **What is community?**

Perhaps another way of conveying that notion of a ‘common culture’ is the word ‘community’.

Each of us has a community.

It may be our physical locality – our village, our town, our city.

But communities transcend geography.

A community can be one of interest, or experience. Of common barriers, and aspirations.

When we speak of underprivileged communities, rural communities, Valleys communities... we may define them – nominally, at least – by their location, but what we are really talking about are their circumstances, their cultures, and their shared experiences.



It is, of course, these common experiences which bind communities together, whether geographical or not:

Those common experiences are the connective tissue between us.

It may be the family for whom you care.

The neighbour for whom you are a helping hand.

It may be the course-mates with whom you learn.

Or the employer for whom you labour.

Community is, and always has been, multi-layered. We are each a part of countless communities, bound together by geography, identity, circumstance, and experience.

And yes, by hope, and by struggle.

All of these things come together to form that common culture of human society, and we form our communities by what we do not by where we are located.

## **What is the purpose of education?**

And if our communities are made by each of us, then surely it follows that they are built upon the institutions we create around them, for they are the machinery of our communities.

The charities, the businesses, the public services and, importantly, our education providers.

I don't need to convince this audience that education providers are crucial components of our communities. We know the vital role they play in enriching people's lives, and how essential they are to the economy.

I say 'essential to the economy' because they expand skills, they generate opportunities for innovation, they create employment and wealth.

But, I suggest: we have now got to a point where we define the value – indeed, the purpose – of education far too heavily in the direction of the economic.

We focus, I think, too much on outcomes, and not enough on impacts.

The truth is: if economic good is on one side of the value scale and social good the other, then the balance has, for some time, been too far in favour of the economic.

Because – and this is something I think we all know intrinsically – education is about so much more than getting a job.

Learning expands our horizons. It gives us the opportunity to see the world in a different way. To think differently about our communities, and our place in them and our contribution to them.

And in so doing, we become social citizens. People who have the capacity to contribute to the collective good. People who, through our actions, are ready to play our part in shaping our common culture.

Far beyond employability statistics and pounds generated, our education providers are vital features of our social infrastructure, whose reach extends

deeply into, and beyond, each of our lives and communities, shaping them, and being shaped by them in turn.

# Choosing our values

## A new values system for higher education

How we think of our education providers, and how we judge their worth and their performance, is a question of values.

What is it about our education providers that we value most?

And what are the values we hold, individually and collectively, that determine the value we in turn place on those education providers?

We talk often of the learning and teaching which leads to a qualification and increases a student's employability and earning prospects.

We celebrate the research and innovation that connects globally to drive economic growth or advancements in healthcare.

And we recognise the role held as large employers, providing generally secure and well-paying work to a local population.

Less frequently, I think, do we consider the space our education providers hold for thoughtful consideration and connection across our communities?

The truth, I think, is that each of these is a valuable component of what our education providers do.

But, too often these days, our discourse, and particularly our funding and planning decisions, place emphasis almost exclusively on the economic role of universities and the earning potential of the individual graduate.

Should we do that at the expense of all the other parts of what we do?

Should we do that at the expense of all the other experiences a student gets beyond their core learning?

Surely not. Education is so much more than that.

But I believe we are now at a point where our view of education, particularly tertiary education, and perhaps especially higher education, has become reductive.

Do that course; get that job. Get that job; have that money.

I am not arguing that the economic impact of education is unimportant, nor that that individual economic benefit is unimportant.

Indeed, there are plenty of students who enter tertiary education every year, motivated by the potential financial return of further learning.

But what about those who don't?

What I am saying is that I think we have focussed too much on the individual takeaway of education, and not enough on the good it brings to the community.

## **The Personal Good and The Collective Good**

This isn't just a philosophical question.

Because, of course, our attitude to answering that question contributes to how we organise our system. It helps us decide how to shape our curriculum, how we structure the way we deliver our core activities, where we put our money, how

we govern ourselves, and the priority we afford to our broader social contract, our civic mission and our responsibilities as institutions to question, challenge and innovate.

By focussing on the individual takeaway of education, we can end up prioritising only those subjects where a student has the greatest capacity for higher future income.

And see that borne out too in the value we place on the speed at which a student completes, the grades with which a student exits, and the job they get in the first year post-graduation.

We embed the idea that the only important part of our learning is what we each get at the end of it.

We focus on the destination and forget the journey. We prioritise the self, at the expense of the community.

Do that course; get that job. Get that job; have that money

But, what if, instead we choose to focus on the collective good? What if we reframe what is valued? We can make different decisions.

We can create space for more people, with different experiences, aspirations, and motivations.

We can create space for more, and different, kinds of learning.

We can create a more adaptive system with space for more flexibility, and we can better reflect the way of life we now adopt.

# The case for a values shift

I recognise, of course, that what I am suggesting is not something that can be done at the flick of a switch, or, for that matter, in one Ministerial remit letter alone!

What I am suggesting is a significant cultural shift.

And no matter what kind of institution or organisation we are, we all have a role to play in reframing the narrative of education.

Because, thinking about education only in terms of the personal good, the individual takeaway, is actually a blocker to us achieving economic development, and ignores the crucial social infrastructure and development that is fundamental to a healthy and vibrant society.

We need to rebalance: less on the personal, and more on the collective.

# Making it happen

## A different model

In his speech, *A Vision for Higher Education*, in June last year, the Minister set out his vision for a national ‘students as citizens’ offer as part of a new social contract between students, universities and the nation<sup>3</sup>.

To my mind, our collective way of thinking about tertiary education today does not provide the platform we need to be able to deliver that national offer.

Even today, we providers too often think territorially about our remits – and our funding.

I bet all of us have either said or heard something along the lines of, ‘but that’s our money’, at some point.

We are still picking sides and adopting a defensive formation, when we need to come together and set out new pathways.

And, it’s not that that there isn’t some brilliant thinking and reimagining going on among educationalists, but too often those provocative and exciting ideas die a

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Miles MS, ‘A vision for Higher Education’, (2002), <https://www.gov.wales/vision-higher-education>



death when they come up against defensive ways of institutional thinking and embedded patterns of funding.

How often does the way we receive our funding tie us into short-term delivery?

How often does the kind of reporting we have to complete make us hesitate about innovation, and drive the traditional kinds of delivery we prioritise?

And how often have we all, at some point or another, felt constrained not just by what we must do, but also what we can be funded for?

Still too often, it is all but impossible to disrupt the status quo.

But, colleagues, don't you think it's about time that status quo had a bit of disruption?

Our education system – and particularly higher education – is founded on the idea that a student should 'come' to a place of learning to receive the wisdom of the few.

We've been using that model since the 12<sup>th</sup> Century!

We expect students, during 3 or 4 years, to take in all of the information and knowledge they will need for the rest of their lives.

We funnel them into this rigid model, and then send them on their way.

But what if you didn't get into that funnel – you were a young carer, needing to look after a family member?

Or you just didn't quite know at age 17 what you wanted to do?

Or any other of a myriad of 'what ifs'.

Well then, our system is going to make it inordinately more difficult for you to get into higher education later in life.

Because the reality is that if you miss the boat when you're 18, the on-ramps for you later are really very few and far between.

That may not be a problem for the students for whom that model works.

But for those for whom it does not, and for our communities, and our prosperity, it is very bad news indeed.

What I don't understand is that... It's not like we don't know the direction of travel here!

We know that beyond those initial experience of tertiary education, adults are going to need to be able to dip in and dip out of learning throughout life.

They are going to need lifelong loops to learning.

And that idea of 'open loop learning'<sup>4</sup> is an interesting one.

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<sup>4</sup> Stanford University, 'Open Loop University', (2100), <http://www.stanford2025.com/open-loop-university>

Stanford University were thinking about this ten years ago – reimagining their undergraduate education in a new framework, asking: what would you design and offer if you accepted that students should be able to apply to university when they are ready – not just at the traditional age of 17 or 18?

What would you design if you accepted that different learners wanted different approaches?

How about starting from the premise that when they enrolled, students would expect to access six years of learning opportunities distributed across their lives as they see fit.

So, if its right for you, you can still choose to concentrate a few years of study at a young age, have your right of passage and the campus experience.

For others a different pathway may be much more attractive: take the opportunity to travel, take internships, learn new languages, work, and contribute socially. And pace your learning on a more individual and more periodic model.

And crucially, bring these experiences back to the learning environment when it suits you: as an active contributor and a shaper of your own learning.

In this model, we no longer have students and then alumni, but an engaged community of lifelong learners. An Open Loop model, and a spiral of engagement.

This is the kind of thinking we can build upon here in Wales – and we need to stretch it and imagine it working beyond institutional boundaries and interests.

Because over the course of the last decades, the way we live our lives has changed beyond recognition. Not just because of COVID, although of course the pandemic has magnified our rapid social change, but because what matters to us has changed and our expectations have changed.

So, what do we need to do differently?

For starters, we could build a system which has flexibility as a core, defining principle.

A system which incentivises, and enables, flexibility – both for the institution and the student.

And when I say flexibility, I don't just mean in terms of mode of study, although clearly that is part of what I mean.

But I also mean flexibility in the way we deliver learning and teaching... in the qualifications we offer... in the way we structure our curricula... and importantly, in the way we value, then fund, and then measure the impact of our education providers.

When you build in flexibility, you not only give providers licence to be more creative, but you also create space for students to practise citizenship.

We know that at the OU because our students are already doing it. They are working, they are caring, they're volunteering.

And as well as making space for students to be citizens, you then open right up the possibilities for citizens to be students.

You give students permission, space, and encouragement to explore the contribution they can make to their community beyond their learning.

And you give citizens permission, space, and encouragement to embrace the opportunity of learning, no matter what their circumstances.

For too long, flexibility has been an add-on. A nice to have.

We can't afford to carry on like that.

## **The cost of inaction**

But the trouble is that the way we distribute our resources at the moment prioritises, and cements, all our traditional ways of thinking. And as funding has got tighter, we are in danger of holding on ever tighter to the familiar, as we have so little spare capacity to even consider innovation.

The way our system works makes it extremely difficult for institutions to think radically about the opportunities they offer.

The funding agreements we enter into... The qualifications we provide... The reporting we have to complete... The KPIs we are measured against

All these and more tie us to a model which provides no leeway or space in which to create and deliver what Wales needs for the future.

And I'm afraid the reality is that, even if institutions want to offer more flexibility, in universities at least, the finances of that are deeply unattractive.

For while the reform of the student finance system in Wales uncovered massive latent demand for flexible higher learning, and stimulated amazing growth in

part-time learners from the widest of backgrounds, with no new money invested for providers to meet that demand, we find ourselves in a position where one institution is providing most of those flexible, stretching and life changing opportunities to Wales' citizens.

And the financial reality of that looks equally stark to us. We at the OU are now at a point where we need wholesale system change.

Because, the system just doesn't work for us, and neither does it work for our colleagues in the full-time sector.

And here I am, back at the economics of the model, back with funding and finance, with values and innovation and user need fast disappearing over the horizon.

We will miss massive opportunities for social and economic advancement if we are not prepared to be brave and bold and view the system through the lens of future learners rather than our vested institutional perspectives – to face up to what we all know.

Let me ask you to imagine that you are a parent, perhaps in Caernarfon, who wants to fulfil a lifelong ambition to get a degree but can't afford to give up work to study full-time because you have a family to support.

Or... imagine that you are already a graduate, say in Newport, with 20 years' experience in the workplace, but you need to refresh your skills and knowledge with some bite-sized learning.

Imagine that you are a student already embarked on a full-time course, and inspired by something you've learned, and you want to take a year to go and try it out in practice, and then come back to finish your studies.

Can any of us say, with hand on heart, that we have built an ecosystem of tertiary education that allows us to provide the kind of opportunities that adequately meet these needs?

Even as you point to the odd course here or there, or even at The Open University, the fundamental problem would still exist.

Those opportunities would still be pretty rigid.

They would still cling to our traditional ways of thinking.

They would offer the learner very few, if any, choices in shaping their learning around their life or bringing their life and experiences into their learning.

They would all be built on a model of climbing up the learning ladder rather than exploring the climbing frame.

So, I'm led to ask: is it now time to start again?

Because, I'm afraid, our funding system not only drives, but even cements, some institutional behaviours and attitudes that are now so entrenched that, for many, it is impossible to imagine anything different.

And, for as long as we defend and protect this golden model of a three-year, 18-21 year old, experience of higher education as being 'the norm' and anything else being a deviation, it will always be preferable – at least financially – to

funnel people down that traditional path; to concentrate on patterns of prior learning which lead them to that funnel; to spit them out into the workforce; and to shy away even from thinking about what we as providers might do differently.

And more importantly, what the learner and what society desperately needs from us.

So, colleagues, while the 18–21-year-old full-time student moving away for university may continue to be an important part of what we as a sector provide, isn't it time to tear down the protective fences we have built around this model and think radically?

If our vision for higher education is a system which supports communities and produces learners who contribute to society, the question we need urgently to answer is: how should we structure that system so that people can come and go, give and take, throughout the whole of their lives, in a way that works for them?

The answer is a much more flexible, much more responsive, much more adaptive funding system:

One in which no mode or method of delivery is the poor relation.

One which delivers equity, rather than inequity, and which allows institutions to work together to deliver for students and citizens alike the kind of learning opportunities they so dearly want.

And one which encourages us to think radically about what we offer.



To stop funnelling people into this highly restrictive, traditional model which itself is enormously stretched in funding terms.

To reimagine what is possible.

## **The opportunities we have**

To be clear, I am not saying that the OU is perfect – it isn't – and neither am I saying that everyone should be an OU.

But I think the circumstances are right for us to find a middle ground where we can create a system which does what Wales needs it to do, where learner and societal interests are at the core and the brilliant, innovative thinking that exists in our universities and colleges, is applied not to ever more defensive manoeuvres around a tired funding model, but to creating something radically different based on values, based on flexibility and based on serving society.

The creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research offers us the opportunity to think big. To think differently. Its creation is a significant system change, but we would be wrong to shy away from ever more change.

I've heard people say that the first few years of the Commission will need to be a period of bedding in. *"There won't be any appetite for major changes."*

But colleagues, now is exactly the right time to grasp the mettle of change.

If it wants to, the Commission can revolutionise our funding system.

And do you know what? It should.

Some may be uncomfortable with that suggestion.

But we have been in defensive mode in education for too long.

We need to step up to the challenge of delivering on our national mission, delivering not a second chance nation but a multi-chance nation, and open chance nation perhaps, and realising the immense capacity of our education and lifelong learning sectors to change Wales for the better.

In not too long, those universities whose largest market is the 18-year-old school leaver will be receiving thousands of young people who have been trained to think differently, and to see themselves and their place in their local, national, and global communities differently.

We have been radical in Wales in reshaping the national curriculum at primary and secondary level – why do we think we don't need to do the same in the tertiary sector?

Surely, we don't expect to be able to offer those young learners the same kind of higher education experience as we've offered their predecessors for centuries before them?

That new social contract between students, universities, and the nation which the Minister mentioned in his speech last June must accommodate the flexibility which students require to be social citizens, and which citizens require to be students – lifelong and life-wide.

The ground is ripe for change. The circumstances are right. We have the ideas.

We just need to show the will to make it happen.

# Conclusion

If we can do that ... If we are prepared to be bold and brave ... the benefits our communities will reap will be beyond our cognition.

The impact we will have – on learners, on our communities, on Wales – will be enormous.

The notion of ‘learning communities’ will be a reality.

The vision of a nation that offers multiple chances in learning will be on its way to being delivered.

Our common culture will have been strengthened by our national mission and our national commitment to the power of learning.

At our graduation ceremonies, when I’m speaking from the stage, I usually ask our graduates to raise their hands if, while completing their studies, they have been working; or raising a family; or fulfilling other caring responsibilities; or volunteering.

I am not exaggerating when I say that, wave by wave, virtually every hand in the room goes up.

The strength of purpose ... the tenacity and determination ... the sheer grit of our students is, for me and for all of my colleagues, a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

They are the embodiment of what it is we need to accomplish. They are students, yes, but they are also citizens: working, caring, volunteering ... contributing ... alongside their learning.

And more than students-as-citizens, they are citizens-as-students. Just as their learning is enriched by their lives outside the OU, their lives are enriched by their studies too.

And that is only possible because of the flexibility which underpins the OU model – a model devised and designed more than half a century ago to radically challenge the concept of ‘going up to university’.

But maybe because we at the OU have met that need for millions of people over the last 55 years, the rest of the sector has been able to leave it to us, to stick to the traditional model. Maybe we are part of the problem!

Well, I don't think that is viable or desirable for much longer – the challenge of change belongs now to all of us.

For the last 35 years I have worked in a post-16 sector that is full of dedicated, passionate, and capable people whose driving force is to improve the lives of the people they serve.

I have spent my professional career working alongside them and am enormously grateful for that collective community of support.

Together, we can do things differently if we want to.

In conclusion: It's challenging... and it will require dedication, determination, and effort... But we can redesign what we do...

And we can build sustainable, creative, and flexible models that will evolve and will serve Wales and all our multitudinous communities now and for future generations.

Diolch yn fawr.

