National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia

Flexibility: Pathways to participation

Refereed papers from the
NAEEA Conference
27 – 29 November 2013
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Australia

May, J. & Bunn, R. (2013). 1974-1976: the seeds of flexibility in the pathway to tertiary participation at University of Newcastle, NSW

In Proceedings of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia Conference; Flexibility: Pathways to participation, Melbourne, Australia, 27-29 November, 2013. Accessed from http://enablingeducators.org/conference/2013.html

Published 2013 by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, C/- Open Access College, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, 4350

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1974-1976: the seeds of flexibility in the pathway to tertiary participation at University of Newcastle, NSW

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By the 1960s equality of opportunity was a dominant theme in social science research, and in keeping with this trend, the Whitlam Labor Government abolished university fees in 1974 to open university access, especially to talented women and men who otherwise would not contemplate a university career. In 1974 also the University of Newcastle instituted a radical new plan to open up its doors to the wider community of 'non traditional students'. This paper explores the history of the enabling program that resulted, the Open Foundation, focusing on the pilot program in 1974 and its first two years of full operation. Thought at the time that it would 'drain its market' within five years, the Open Foundation has flourished and grown for almost forty years. The analysis canvasses three key themes: curriculum and pedagogy, support and retention, and access and success in order to understand the seeds of this longevity.

In 1974 the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, instituted a radical new plan to open its doors to the wider community of 'non traditional students'. This paper explores the history of the enabling program that resulted, called the Open Foundation, focusing on the pilot program in 1974 and its first two years of full operation. While both authors have explored contextual aspects of the history of the Open Foundation Program in recent years), in this paper we drill down more closely into the first few years of this ground-breaking experiment in adult education within the Australian university sector at the time. We begin by outlining the institutional framework behind the establishment, then move into a consideration from the scant documentation that survives, of the curriculum and pedagogy, support and retention, and access and success in the program's earliest years. The evidence includes archival materials held by the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre and the Cultural Collections Unit of the University of Newcastle Library, survey and interview data gathered for co-author Rosalie Bunn's doctoral study, and secondary literature, historical and theoretical.

Newcastle University and the establishment of the Open Foundation

Alan Barcan (2007, p.29) commented in a recent paper on the history of Australian adult education, that 'anyone involved in adult education during the 1950s, 60s or 70s would be aware of the remarkable change that it underwent thereafter.' According to Don Anderson, adults had been admitted through various access schemes from the establishment of the universities in Australia in 1852 but that, despite early champions of wider participation such as John Woodley, Professor of Classics at the University of Sydney who said in 1865 that 'the doors of the university' should be 'open to the

intellect of the whole country' (Anderson, 1990, p. 39), the universities remained elite institutions until just after World War Two. At this time, many returned service men and women were encouraged to, and did, undertake degree studies (Dymock and Billet, 2010).[1] The movement for greater access gathered momentum in the altruistic and democratising trends after the war. For example, both the Murray (1957) and the Martin (1964) Reports on Australian higher education asserted that universities must tap into the 'under tapped pool of ability' within the Australian population and be open to all with the ability to undertake degree studies (Anderson, 1990). In response to rising demand from the population, the university sector expanded rapidly. See Table 1 below with data extracted from Chanock (2011, pp. A38-A39).

Table 1: Timeline of growth of Australian university sector to 1998 and some events.

Year	Number of Universities	Number of Students
Before 1939	6	14,000
1958	9	41, 865
1965 The binary system of higher education created with the new Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs)		
1969	15	109, 665
1974 Federal Labor abolished university fees & introduced the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS)		
1978	19	160, 035
1987 AUSTUDY created; **1988** The creation of the unified national system with the abolition of the CAEs; **1989** Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)		
1998	39	671,853

The establishment of the Open Foundation Program (OFP) at the University of Newcastle, first as a pilot in 1974, and then formally from 1975, can be viewed as part and product of this great change to open up higher education then underway (May, 2005). Locally however the creation of the Open Foundation had to await the establishment of first the autonomous University of Newcastle in 1965, and within it, the Department of Community Programs.

The Department of Community Programs: a vehicle for the Open Foundation

Within five years of its foundation as a full autonomous university, the University of Newcastle, one of the so-called gumtrees universities established in the 1960s and 70s to receive the postwar baby boomers,[2] made moves to enter the field of adult education. Meanwhile the Department of Adult Education of the University of Sydney, in conjunction with the Workers Educational Association (WEA), had been offering joint

[1] The Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme set three categories of full-time training for ex service personnel, the first of which was 'professional training—at a university, technical college, teachers' college, agricultural college leading to a degree, diploma or equivalent'. The other two categories were vocational training and rural training. While most underwent vocational training, 15,000 ex-service men and women completed diploma and degree studies out of the 270,000 returned Australians who received some training out of the scheme.

[2] The universities were Macquarie (1964), Newcastle (1965), Flinders (1966), La Trobe (1967), Griffith (1971), Murdoch (1973), Wollongong (1975) and Deakin (1976). (Moodie, 2013).

adult education classes through its Newcastle Regional Office for over fifty years when the University of Newcastle began to consider its role in adult education within its regional footprint (Turner, 1972).[3] This move to take to the field of community and adult education began with a University of Newcastle Senate Committee in 1970. L. N. Short, Professor of Education, chaired a meeting of the Committee to investigate adult education in Newcastle on 4 February 1970. The other Committee members were: Dr W. V. Doniela, Mr E. Flowers (University Librarian), Professor J. A. Keats, Professor B. Newton-John, and Associate Professor A.S. Ritchie. The Senate in April 1970 further resolved that the University would in its 1973-1975 triennium submission to the Australian Universities Commission seek approval for the foundation of a Department of Adult Education to take over and develop the adult education program offered in the Hunter Valley by the University of Sydney. The Short Committee was tasked to 'consider the contribution the university might make to (a) adult education and university extension work, (b) community development, (c) wider understanding of the function of the university in the community, and any related matters' (The Short Report', 1972).

The Short Committee reported to the Senate in 1972. It recommended that the University establish a Department of Community Programs, the name 'as suggesting a somewhat broader approach than is usually associated with "Adult Education" (The Short Report', 1972). This move coincided with the withdrawal of the University of Sydney from its joint adult education program with the WEA. The Department of Community Programs was to have a Director at the helm who should be a member ex-officio of the Senate and the Chief Executive Officer of the Board of Community Programs to be established under the general control of the Senate. The Director was to be found by open selection with a salary at the rank of Associate Professor or Professor. There was to be a minimum of four academic staff (including the Director) and one administrative assistant. It was also recommended that the staff of the Department of Adult Education of the University of Sydney – one senior lecturer, two lecturers and two secretaries - who were then 'stationed in Newcastle' be offered appointment in the new Department without loss of salary or entitlements.

In announcing these developments, the University of Newcastle Vice Chancellor, Professor J. J. Auchmuty, wrote that this 'followed from an acceptance of the proposition that the resources of the University had relevance to the needs of the community and should be readily available'. The University should promote intellectual values, provide specialised knowledge, and conduct research and development on a wide range of community problems. It should also make its facilities available for theatre, music and arts. Professor Auchmuty defined the University of Newcastle footprint, within which the Department of Community Programs would serve, as bounded by lines drawn from Taree to Murrurundi, from Murrurundi to Dunedoo and from Dunedoo to Woy Woy (*University News*, 1972).

The Department of Community Programs thus came into being in 1972 and Senior Lecturer John Turner was its acting head while the search for the Director was conducted (Archives Folder BCP 4:73, 1973). The new Director, Dr Brian Smith, a merchant seaman turned academic and philosopher who was keenly interested in adult

[3] Turner commented that the new Department should develop 'an independent image' and not be overshadowed by the WEA as had the University of Sydney's contribution to adult education in the city.

education, was appointed the first Director of the new department in 1973 (Wright, 1992).[4] Dr Smith was introduced to the University community in the University News dated 14 June 1973. In a broad ranging interview reflecting on his ideas for the new Department, Smith commented that:

> Following the success of the British Open University, strong moves are afoot to provide in Australia some effectively equivalent form of open access to tertiary education. Many people like to try universities before committing themselves, and I feel sure that special "bridge courses" demanding serious study over a full year, adapted to the attitudes and capabilities of mature people, could be both valuable and popular (*University News*, 1973).

So it seems that Brian Smith had from the start of his tenure a very clear idea of what he wanted to achieve in the area of widening participation for adults in Newcastle.

In a document entitled 'Special Bridge Course' that Brian Smith wrote as a draft publicity release for the Open Foundation Course in 1973, he stated that in his view: 'We are moving into an era of "open education"' where age was no barrier to higher education and may even be an advantage. He wrote though that:

> This does not mean that everybody should take a university degree, or even that everybody has the capacity to do so. It does mean that people who feel the urge to do so, for whatever reason, should be given encouragement and opportunity (Smith, 1974).

He went on to outline a comprehensive plan for the curriculum, staffing and mode of study in the program for a suggested pilot of the Open Foundation in 1974. As will be shown the Open Foundation was predicated on the assumption that what adults needed most in an access program was flexibility in terms of access, mode of study, curriculum and engagement strategies, all factors clearly identified in the current literature. These factors it is argued here are the basis of the program's flexibility, and in turn its longevity, as one of the oldest and largest continuously operating such program in Australia.

The Open Foundation Course in Operation: curriculum and pedagogy

As has been noted elsewhere, the 'trial run' of the Open Foundation occurred in 1974 with a quota of eighty students (Wright, 1992). Smith described the course as 'a year of intensive study at university level but adopting modern multidisciplinary approaches … designed to appeal to enquiring mature minds' (Smith, 1974). The overall theme of the course was Society and Humanity, which was also the name originally given to the core course or 'lecture series' which all students had to attend (this course became 'Political Man' in 1975). The topics within the core course were to be wide ranging and challenging, they were in order:

1. The Origins of Western Traditions and Attitudes
2. The Significance of the Renaissance

[4] Smith's qualifications were BA with First Class Honours (WA), PhD (ANU). His PhD was entitled "An Essay on Memory with Particular reference to the Role of Imagery". He had been Senior Extension Officer for the University of Western Australia.

3. The Dawnings of Modern Political Thinking
4. The Impact of Philosophical Scepticism
5. Industrial Revolution: Its Economic and Ideological Implications
6. The World of Dickens
7. The Psychological Revolution
8. Modern Socio-Economic Organisation
9. Re-Assessing Values – The Environment and the Quality of Life
10. Communicating

Society and Humanity/Political Man was interdisciplinary in a fashion rarely seen at the time. It contained topics on classical, medieval and modern history, politics and literary analysis. It was indeed a crash course in foundational Western knowledge as it was seen at the time.

The final examination in 'Political Man' from 1975 was three hours in length. Students were required to answer four questions, no more than two from any of three sections A, B and C. Some brief samples of the fifteen final examination questions from 1976 gives some of flavour of this expansive and ambitious course:

- Section A, Question 5: What features of Late Roman Imperial military organisation conditioned the forms and interrelations of Church and State in the Byzantine Empire?
- Section B, Question 7: Some themes explored in Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain have been identified as: "the drift of Germany towards the First World War, the conflict of liberal and totalitarian ideals, the relationship of Life to Art, Art and Society, Love and Death, the meaning of music, and the contrast between the contemplative and the active life." Discuss at least two of these themes, describing how they are interrelated and how they are developed in the course of the novel.
- Section C, Question 14 (b): Discuss the influence of Hobson's theory of Imperialism.

As well as the compulsory course, students were offered one elective study from a small range of subjects, namely: in 1974 Philosophy, English, Economics and Politics; in 1975, Politics was dropped and Social Enquiry added; and in 1976 Geology and Mathematics were included bringing the subject offerings to seven with Political Man.

The Open Foundation Course was to be staffed by academics in the University and be offered only in the evenings. The staff originally named as involved in lecturing the core course of Society and Humanity were highly qualified and experienced men. They included two full professors (K.R. Dutton Head of the Department of French and A.M. Ritchie, Head of the Department of Philosophy), two Associate Professors (Dr J.W. Staines from Psychology and Dr A. Herzog from Civil Engineering), three Senior Lecturers (Drs L.E. Fredman from History and N.C. Talbot from English, and Mr. E.J. Burke from Commerce), two Lecturers (Dr J.R. Fisher from Economics and Mr. R.P. Laidlaw from English) and one Senior Tutor (Mr. T.J. Ryan from Classics). Only three out of the ten staff did not have PhDs.

The age of threshold learning outcomes, rubrics and graduate attributes had not yet arrived and the favoured pedagogic style was of the 'Sage on the Stage' where costume

and manner were an integral part of the teaching armoury. Classics lecturer, Terry Ryan, recalled that they were exciting times to be teaching and that the staff were 'characters'. He spoke of Professor of Classics, Godfrey Tanner, who always wore his academic gown to lectures and spoke with an upper class British accent even though he was from Brisbane! Ryan himself appeared before his first Open Foundation class in Political Man dressed in:

> a paisley coloured kaftan (laughs) that went all the way down to the ankles, thin leather headband, and hair down to my shoulders. … (laughs) and I wore a pair of leather sandals, and swaned in to start talking about the Greeks and the Romans. So I can still see the whites of their eyes as they sort of widened as this creature came in (laughs) (Ryan Interview, 2013)

And perhaps Brian Smith, who led this stellar array of 'luminaries' as John Collins called them, was the most unusual of all. Collins remembered:

> [Brian] was in his element. He was the gang leader. And he played that role to the hilt. He was leading way out in front, and he enjoyed doing that. … He was always available for students … He kept no lecture notes whatsoever, and for an hour or so before a lecture he would get a scrap of paper and it might even be the back of something that had something roneoed on it, or a notice, and he would scribble and … scribble in the smallest writing that would be legible. At that time he wasn't wearing pince-nez, but within a couple of years he was wearing reading glasses and he favoured the pince-nez (laughs). He was this thin, painfully thin man, with a shock of red hair and a grey-red beard, looking not unlike the Man from La Mancha or, not Rumplestiltskin … Catweazel! That's right. Yeah. Scribbling away with a tiny cigarette in his mouth, well usually much shorter than the hairs on his moustache and we never understood how he didn't go up in flames (laughs). And, ah, occasionally rubbing his hand through his hair, pushing his shock of hair back, which would fall over his face, and scribbling away and puffing away and then rushing off (Collins Interview, 2013).

Former 1976 Open Foundation student Angela Cowan, recalled how all of this flamboyance affected her:

> And I remember being quite overawed in Political Man when I realized we had a Professor who was teaching us. And I thought "That's amazing, fancy a Professor coming and teaching us, and particularly me, when I don't know anything". (Cowan Interview, 2013)

Cowan remembered that Classics Professor Godfrey Tanner 'had this amazing knowledge', but that his Political Man lectures seemed like that they were in some sort of code:

> What am I supposed to write down, what was it I was supposed to write down? Do I write everything down? Do I write nothing down? How can you listen, how can you take it down. And then after a time I realized that when Godfrey sort of leapt up and got to the board and picked up a bit of chalk and wrote a name or wrote a few things down, that was your central point. You had to write that down. And it was like cracking a code, it's like there was a code into this sort of wealth of knowledge and how did you sort of crack the code? And it was like they [the lecturers] knew so much, and it was like what's the pathway into this huge hall of

> knowledge that they seemed to be able to access at any point in time, all of this classical history.

She sought the help of librarians and instituted a program of reading so that she could build her knowledge. Her memory inscribes her admiration for her teachers:

> And so you'd get a different lecturer coming in, and he'd have a different body of knowledge and he'd be telling you about a different part of ancient history. But they'd be drilling down into, it was almost like they were going down into a vault and pulling out sort of ancient tomes, as though they'd almost been there or time travelled, and been there and then they'd brought it back, were coming back to tell you about these time travels, but there were books on it. And so the books gave you some insight. But it was like they were privy to some knowledge that I'd never had, and it was intriguing.

Today such 'intrigue' and opacity and the theatre of teacher-centred classrooms would be judged more harshly.

Open Foundation students were to attend two evenings per week for about two hours. They would have lectures and tutorials. As far as assessment goes, they would have guided readings and some written assignments including two essays and numerous tutorial papers. Surprisingly regarding the turn towards 50% examinations and 50% continuous assessment policy later enforced in the Open Foundation, at the start it was envisaged that there would be no examinations in the Open Foundation 'but lecturers and tutors will be asked at the conclusion of the course to give an assessment of each student's potentialities' (Smith, 1974). This was quickly overturned and in 1975 all Open Foundation students sat a final examination – and have done ever since.

The pedagogy of assessment was carefully thought out. In 1976 Brian Smith reported to the University's Admissions Committee that assessments had commenced immediately and that in each subject regular assignments and/or tests made it possible to build 'a student achievement record throughout the year'. In the final examinations, all assessments were marked by the staff member who taught the subject and set the questions. Because the examination answers were divided between four markers in the compulsory course, Political Man, this tended to make for slightly lower marks overall. Further, all markers marked to a 50% pass mark and at first year undergraduate level. In most instances the 50% continuous and 50% examination scores were, he commented, effectively commensurate. In the few cases, however, where the examinations mark was markedly lower than the other, he said that this was usually due to 'the candidate's inexperience in working under time-pressure' of the examination (Smith 1977).

Access and success

Who were the students who attended the first three years of the Open Foundation? Some of the details of the students who completed the 1974 Pilot have been preserved. Their average age was just over 36 years. They mainly possessed third year high school qualifications, while a very few had completed high school (four in Australia, and one in Malaya). At the conclusion of the course, the Director with assistance from the teaching staff, rated each student's ability to undertake University study and each student had a comment recorded. For example, for one student, the Director recorded: 'Regular Attendance, has imagination and balance, some lack of rigour. Literature

Essay 68%. A "safe" undergraduate student." This student went on to an Arts Degree and recorded two passes in their first undergraduate year, vindicating the judgement. Notes for another student to the effect that the person not only regularly attended but that he was the 'Brightest of his group in discussion. Very good written work. One of the best. Highly recommended', also proved prescient when the student achieved High/Distinctions in Psychology 1 and 2B, the only one of his Open Foundation cohort to achieve this level of performance. One person recommended with comments such as – 'Exceptionally keen and lively in discussion but tends to be dogmatic. Writes very fluently. Two essays indicate University standard; no shortage of ideas but needs to organise them better. Recommended' – failed in their first year studies (OFC Results, 1974).

The 1974 cohort enabled a taxonomy of final rankings of students at the end of the Open Foundation to be created which were used in the subsequent years under review here. These rankings were based on a complicated formula consisting of rankings in the compulsory course Political Man added to the rankings in each elective course to give a final ranking of all students. These rankings were then divided into subgroups so that students' likelihood of success in their degree studies could be calibrated as:

- Predictably very successful at University
- Predictably 'safe' to pass degree requirements
- Would strongly recommend admission
- Would not recommend admission

We know a little more about the 1975 cohort because Smith analysed their performance quite closely based on variables of sex, age and economic class. Their average age was 37 years. He found that the older students, over 40 years, from 'white collar' backgrounds tended to complete at a higher rate than others. Females performed slightly better than males (Smith, 1976). Those who went into the university almost all took an Arts Degree, with four only choosing Economics and Commence. There is very little data available on the much larger 1976 cohort as a group but we do know that individuals made the most of the opportunity afforded by the program. For example, Angela Cowan went on to take her doctorate and become a lecturer in the Open Foundation Social Enquiry course for many years and that another student became a lecturer in Sociology.

Support, retention and performance in degrees

While Brian Smith's idea that adults would be admitted to the Open Foundation freely, it was by no means assured as the pilot ran in 1974, that successful students who were deemed university material would actually gain access to degree studies. The Board of Community Programs had given permission for the pilot to run even as there were misgivings in the University about granting such access from the start. Early lecturer (he started in May 1974), and later Director of Community Programs, John Collins, recalled:

> The University of Newcastle was not quite so (laughs) so keen on the 'rabble'. And there was enormous resistance to the establishment of the Open Foundation Course at the time. And … the Vice Chancellor at the time, kept delaying decisions that Brian had been asking him to make about whether or not the

> students, at the end of the course, would be allowed access, or entry, to the University (Collins, 2012).

Indeed, by the July Board meeting in 1974, Smith reported that he had 'some misgivings that entrants could be given no idea of whether the course would lead them to provisional admission to degree courses.' He said that to divorce the course from possible admission was to undercut its purpose. He suggested that, in order to assuage the Board's concerns, the course be made 'examination- oriented in liaison with the Departments concerned.' It is clear that Brian Smith's arguments were heeded because thirty people of the pilot class of the original 80 admitted to the Open Foundation in 1974 were offered places in degree studies in 1975. Twenty-four accepted places: five in Economics and Commerce and nineteen in Arts. Six withdrew from their studies and one failed to sit final exams. The remaining seventeen students sat a total of twenty-nine examination units and they collectively achieved three Fails, nine Credits, two Distinctions and one High Distinction. Smith observed that the failure rate was 10% and that this compared favourably with the first year failure rate of 16% (Smith, 1976).

Furthermore, in his report on the 1976 cohort, which had risen to 160 with the removal of the 80 quota of the first two years, Director Smith commented that people tended to self-select regarding their fitness for university study. He wrote:

> The style and manner of the course is such that people who are unlikely to be suitable University students tend to fall away during the course of the year. It is not surprising, therefore, that a very high proportion of those who go the full distance are in fact suitable people to continue tertiary studies (Smith, 1976).

Table 2 below shows the results of research in the available records for the first three years of operation of the program. It reveals that, after the pilot, just over 55% of students who started the Open Foundation in the first two years, finished the program. In terms of outcomes, over 90% of those who finished achieved university places.

Table 2. The first three years of the Open Foundation - numbers on access, retention, and university admission

Year	Initial student number	Finishing student number with % retention	Student number admitted to university with % success rate
1974	80 (quota)	30 (30/80 or 37.5%)	27 (3 to other unis) (27/30 or 90%)
1975	80 (quota)	45 (45/80 or 56%)	42 (42/45 or 93%)
1976	160 (no quota)	92 (92/160 or 57.5%)	85 (85/92 or 92%)

Conclusion: The seeds of flexibility

John Collins recalled that Brian Smith was 'always very nervous about the Open Foundation Course' (Collins Interview, 2012). Smith thought that it wouldn't last long and that Newcastle was too small a place to support it over the long term. Brian Smith needn't have worried. Over the years demand for the Open Foundation has grown

dramatically. In 2012 over 2,000 people enrolled in the program. How can we account for this longevity and growth? Part of the answer seems to lie in the original conception and performance of the program. The Open Foundation was as 'open' as Brian Smith could make it and the University at the time could tolerate. Adults could try their hand at university with no requirements and no repercussions. They were to be treated with respect as exemplified by the serious quality of the curriculum but they were not swamped by quantity of attendance so that their busy adult lives could be accommodated, having only to attend for two, two hour sessions per week in two subjects. Adults in Smith's view self-selected in and self-selected out. Nevertheless the retention rates after the pilot year showed that the students who stayed in, almost without exception, were enabled and capable of university level study. The early flexibility of this prototype continued to be expanded from the start. In 1976 the quota of 80 students was removed and the program doubled that year, a harbinger of later demand. In that year also the compulsory course was abandoned and students could thenceforth take any two courses they wished. In 1977 Smith argued long and hard – and successfully - to have the definition of 'mature-age' for admission to the Open Foundation reduced from 25 to 23 years (today it is 20 years). Finally Smith experimented with the Open Foundation by radio broadcast in 1978. These early years established the seeds of flexibility that have enabled the Open Foundation to flourish for over 40 years with little overt change in its basic structure – it remains to be seen though if the course can withstand the massive challenges that lie ahead in the cyber world.

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