Preface

In 1976 a *Times Higher Education Supplement* journalist argued that ‘the establishment and success of the OU will be remembered as one of the greatest achievements of this century’. He went on to suggest that ‘it is a difficult task to evaluate its contribution to British Higher Education ... the book which can do this is still to be written’.¹ A generation later, the requirement for a considered, full-length history is still greater. The Open University has been called the ‘greatest innovation’ of the 1964–70 governments.² The Professor of Education and Vice-Chancellor of Keele University, Campbell Stewart, argued that the OU was innovative in nine different ways.³ While the dramas of its earlier years have received attention, the long-run impact of what is much the largest and still the most distinctive British university requires a new study. New materials and analytical frameworks have permitted this account to explore other areas. A time of rapid change within the higher education sector makes this an appropriate moment for an assessment of the influence of the OU as it nears the end of its first half-century.

David Sewart, a former Director of Student Services and Professor in Distance Education, felt that the OU was ‘like Athena springing fully grown and fully armed from the head of Zeus’; it ‘appeared to have no mother and never to have had the opportunity to have been an adolescent, let alone a child’.⁴ The passage of time has enabled us to view the OU within a longer context. The depth of its roots in correspondence courses, commercial television, adult education and the post-war social democratic settlement helps to explain its original ethos, distinctive culture and its continued growth and vibrancy. However novel the institution may have appeared, it had many parents. As Hilary Perraton has argued, an understanding of ‘the British invention of The Open University is impoverished if we know nothing of ... 20th century British social history’.⁵ Even this view may underplay the importance of distinct Scottish traditions and American influence.

This account is informed by scholarship in the social sciences, and in

educational and business studies. Christensen's model of 'disruptive innovation' is critically deployed as is Warner's notion of 'spaces of discourse'.⁶ Etienne Wenger's use of the concept of 'communities of practice' has also been useful.⁷ More generally, the perspectives of those social historians who have placed education within a wide framework have informed the text. Historian J. F. C. Harrison sought to examine the attitudes of those taking part in adult education and concluded that the history of adult education should be approached 'primarily in terms of social purpose rather than institutional form'.⁸ There is also a debt to those who looked beyond official institutions in the analysis of how students learned, and assessed the links between informal learning and wider social formations.⁹ In its use of interview material the book has also benefited from the considerable literature on biography and personal testimony.

The materials for this study include official minutes of OU meetings and the accounts of a range of staff members and students. Many people have written about the OU over the years in the popular press, in scholarly journals and online. Uniquely for a history of a university, there has been access to a complete set of teaching materials over the whole period of its existence, including the broadcasts, books, posted experiment kits and the videos, cassettes and digitised resources. From the outset the institution generated survey data to assess the impact of its teaching, and this has been reviewed. Attention has been paid to archives in the USA, notably the private papers of the US Senator William Benton. Numerous previously unconsidered contemporary and sources which have only recently been made available at the BBC and The National Archives have been considered. The archive staff in The National Archives, Kew, the BBC Written Archive, Caversham, the University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, and, in particular, The Open University Archive, Milton Keynes have been helpful and supportive.

The text has benefited from access to thousands of recordings and photographs in the OU's own archive and to the recent recordings made for The Open University Oral History Project. As its principal interviewer noted, 'oral history allows other stories of universities as places of pedagogy, culture, social change and personal relationships to be told'.¹⁰ The project would particularly like to thank (Lord) Asa Briggs, who was interviewed for this book at the end of the most singular and comprehensive service to the university, which began in its planning phase and culminated in his Chancellorship of the institution. In addition, students have written accounts and posted them on a specially created History of the Open University website. This open source reflects the scope of popular narratives and understandings of the OU.

It is available for others to use. There are also personal accounts written by a number of those involved in the foundation and early years of the university.

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I have grown up with The Open University. I first heard of it in the 1970s when my mother began her journey towards an OU degree by studying the entry-level mathematics module. I took my first job at the university in 1986. Since then I have been an OU student, and I have worked full-time for the OU since 1999. My wife has a PhD from the OU, where she teaches, and our children attended the OU nursery. Writing about the OU has been a pleasure which has also had an impact on the lives of others. My personal thanks go to my immediate family, Rebecca, Jacob, Bethany and Miriam for so readily living with this book, and for distracting me from it. Thanks also to Jill Weinbren for introducing me to The Open University and, of course, a lot more.

Daniel Weinbren, Milton Keynes, 2014

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