

Changing Landscapes Conference

'This door is alarmed' – 35 years of
attempting to widen participation
in the Open University

Ormond Simpson
Senior Lecturer in Institutional Research
OU Institute of Educational Technology

o.p.simpson@open.ac.uk



The Open University



- no entry qualifications needed
- distance learning using correspondence, phone, video, CDRom, DVD, internet, email, some face to face tuition

The Open University

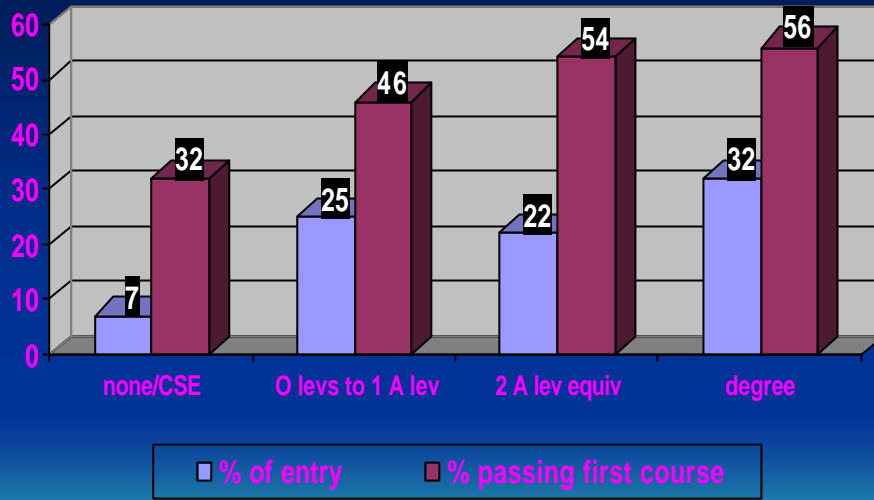
- the 'Paradox of the Title'

(Halsey et al. 1980)

- the 'Open' - opportunities for the educationally disadvantaged
- the 'University' - academic standards and comparability with other universities

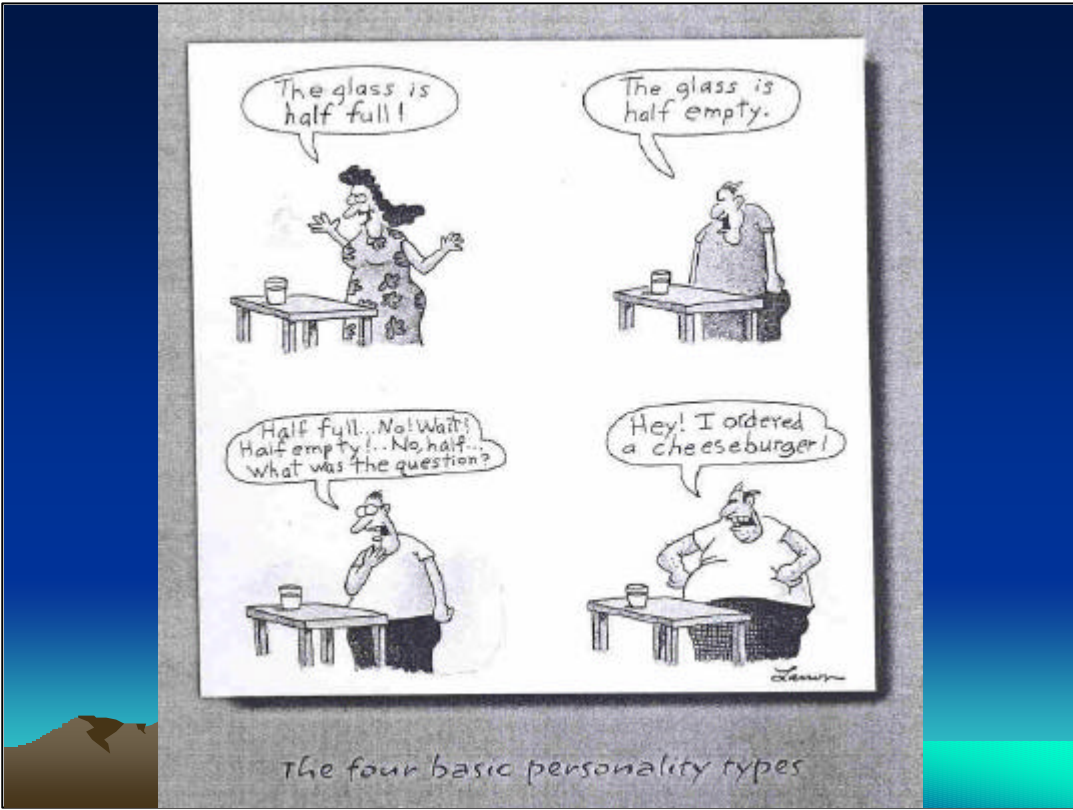


Access and Retention



Access and Retention
- 'the revolving door'





The four basic personality types

Increasing Access

- 1. Marketing** – the 'marketing paradox'
- 2. Local activities through the OU's 13 Regions**
 - working with local communities
 - local publicity
 - Aim Higher and other HE/FE groups
- 3. Course development**
 - Community Programme courses
 - 'Openings' courses

Local activities

Up to 2000 - local widening participation activities tended to be

- Ad hoc
- Low budget
- Sporadic
- Short-term
- not well -evaluated

2000 onwards - projects were

- systematically evaluated
- £250,000 allocated
- devoted to 12 projects

Latest Projects – 3 types

1. Gathering intelligence

- mapping
- understanding literacy issues
- Students and employers' perceptions of learning

2. Innovative methods

- 'Robofesta'
- chat rooms for enquirers

3. Reachout projects

- targeting FE students / disabled / school students / parents/ethnic minorities
- partnerships: UNI SON / Surestart / 'ambassadors' /

Latest Projects – results

1. **Unevaluable**

- Robofesta

2. **Unsuccessful**

- chat rooms for enquirers
- recruiting FE students

3. **Unclear**

- some reachout projects had some success but records not clear – they 'raised awareness'

4. **Successful – at a price**

- some reachout projects had clear results especially those involving partnerships with organisations with educational aims.

NB Cost per student recruited was high - £800 per student

Courses – ‘Openings’

- recruits 3000-4000 students/yr with modest(?) success

Intake - % of overall intake	- into Openings	- into level 1 courses
Intake from low peq group	18%	9%
Intake from 'not in employment' group	30%	25%

Success on subsequent courses - % passing	- entering from Openings	- entering direct
Low peq students	47	36
All students	58	47

Lessons for the OU

- Staffing in WP must be continuous and long term
- Student led rather than provider led - again!
- Collaborative but use the WIIFM factor
- Cost-effectiveness must be measured
- Contradictions in marketing must be addressed
- E-learning must be approached cautiously
- Continue to develop course materials

1. Why keep trying to widen participation?
- the cost/benefits argument

- Costs to student - money / time / loss of self-esteem
- Benefits to student - increased earnings / better mental and physical health / enhanced self-esteem

2. Return on investment = benefits ÷ cost

- for OU RoI = 2200% (no loss of earnings whilst studying)
- for conventional H.E. RoI = 600%

But...



- Education is a risky business

- dropout in OU amongst low peq students on average = 60%
- for some students with combination of risk factors (male, young, unemployed, black etc) predicated probability of failure = >80%
- dropout in conventional HE average 20% but higher for some institutions and students - up to 38%.

So...



- Investing in higher education
is riskier than wildcat oil well drilling





'THIS DOOR IS ALARMED'

- What are our obligations to potential students in widening participation?
- What warnings should we give and how?
- Should there be an educators' 'Hippocratic oath' - 'at least to do no harm?'