From Lancaster to London - A brief history

As OCN London celebrate 30 years of supporting adult learners, we look back at the history of Open College Networks (OCNs) from their pioneering days in the 1980s to the present day.

The concept of an open college was first established back in the 1970s when Nelson & Coleh College set up a partnership with Lancaster University. Called the Open College of the North West, they provided courses and certificates as an alternative route for adults wishing to progress to Higher Education.

In 1981, Manchester Open College Federation was created and went on to develop the system of accreditation which became the model for all other OCNs. The model was adopted by showing that there were credit-based alternatives to conventional school and exam-based qualifications.

At the same time OCNs were developing in the rest of the country and considered a common ‘national’ model, later rationalised through the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Agreement (CATA). With the demise of the ILEA in 1990, the work of developing a comprehensive accreditation system which could also link with Access to HE was taken up by the newly formed London Open College Federation.

North and South meet

Barley was the setting for the first Open College Seminar in 1986 which brought together the Manchester Open College Federation, London Open Colleges and five other OCNs from across the country. The seminar looked at the systems of accreditation being developed in different parts of the country and considered a common ‘national’ model, later rationalised through the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Agreement (CATA).

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Key developments

Key events over the next 20 years included:

- Access to HE becoming officially accredited through the creation of Access Validating Agencies, OCN awards becoming eligible for funding, and the London Open College Federation transforming into the OCN London of today.
- Today as we face the complexities of adult learners by providing a quality learning experience, recognising achievements and providing the opportunity to progress to further and higher education.

A more detailed history of the OCNs compiled by Michael Sargent will be published as an e-book later this year.

Timeline - 1970s to 2014

- **Mid 1970s - The OCN Movement begins**
  - The term ‘Open College’ is first used for a partnership between Nelson & Coleh College and Lancaster University.
  - The ‘Manchester Model’ broke the mould by developing a credit-based alternative to conventional school and exam-based qualifications.

- **1980s**
  - **1981** The Manchester Open College Federation is created
  - The Polytechnic of the South Bank and local colleges form the OCSL to give advice and guidance to adults and support progression to HE
  - **1982** Open College of South London (OCSL) is formed
  - **1983** ALFA created
  - **1984** ILEA publish Advanced Further Education Review
  - **1985** The government announces the abolition of ILEA
  - **1986** North London follow with a collaborative group known as Access to Learning for Adults (ALFA)
  - **1987** OCSL to OCN
  - **1988** ADU set up
  - **1989** OCNLR becomes an Ofqual recognised Awarding Body

- **1990s**
  - **1990** Access to HE officially recognised
  - **1991** The Manchester Open College Federation is reconstituted as a limited company with charitable status
  - **1992** OCN funding established
  - **1993** OCNLR becomes an Ofqual recognised Awarding Body
  - **1998** Regional OCNs come together
  - **2000** OCNLR becomes an Ofqual recognised Awarding Body
  - **2005** OCNLR becomes an Ofqual recognised Awarding Body

- **2010s**
  - **2010** OCNLR becomes an Ofqual recognised Awarding Body
  - **2013** OCNLR is renamed OCN London