

10-21-2020

## 'Blithering Nonsense': The Open University and its Academic Dress

Philip Goff  
phildress@icloud.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/burgonsociety>



Part of the [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Goff, Philip (2020) "'Blithering Nonsense': The Open University and its Academic Dress," *Transactions of the Burgon Society*. Vol. 19. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1160>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Transactions of the Burgon Society* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## ‘Blithering Nonsense’: The Open University and its Academic Dress

With the largest number of students in Britain, one of its younger academic institutions celebrates an important milestone, *Philip Goff writes*

The news that the Open University was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary<sup>1</sup> provided a golden opportunity to examine its academic costume, quite literally, in fact, since the colour gold plays a primary role in its hoods and gowns, along with various shades of blue, to form a pleasing if somewhat illogical system of dress.<sup>2</sup>

The Open University is one of the largest academic institutions in Europe. Currently, it has over 174,800 students, including more than 15,000 from overseas and is a world leader in flexible distance learning. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than two million students worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

### Primary Source

*Wherein a Fellow's expertise and the outside world meet*

Ideas about using the broadcast media to reach those unable to attend a conventional university had been discussed from the early decades of the twentieth century, in various forms, such as a ‘wireless university’, a ‘tele-university’ and a ‘university of the air’, but it was Prime Minister Harold Wilson, in 1969, who brought it to birth with the indefatigable Jenny Lee as midwife.<sup>4</sup>

The Open University received its charter at a ceremony at the Royal Society in 1969 during which the first Chancellor, Geoffrey Crowther was installed—a fitting tribute to the man whose report had pointed out how many had missed the opportunity of a university education.<sup>5</sup> Launched as part of a plan to ‘democratize education’, the Open University was the first of its kind in the world, glimpsing something, perhaps, of the rapid changes that advances in communications technology would bring. Certainly, there must be very few children of 1970s Britain who can forget the television broadcasts of lectures by bearded professors, assisted by flipcharts, on BBC2, particularly on wet Saturday afternoons!

Not everyone greeted the new university with joy, however: the MP Ian Macleod described it as ‘blithering nonsense’ and ‘... in his brief time as Chancellor of the Exchequer

1 September 2019.

2 Blue and gold were the original official colours of the university and publications used to incorporate them.

3 Figures as of May 2020, from the OU website: [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk).

4 James Harold Wilson, Baron Wilson of Rievaulx, KG, OBE, PC, FRS, FSS (11 March 1916–24 May 1995) was a British Labour politician who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1964 to 1970 and 1974 to 1976. Janet (Jennie) Lee, Baroness Lee of Asheridge PC, LLD, Hon-FRA (1904–88), was a Scottish Labour MP and Minister for the Arts in Harold Wilson’s government (1964–70). The inspiration for the OU however, came from Michael Dunlop Young, (1915–2002), later Baron Young of Darlington, a ‘Utopian Socialist’ who coined the word ‘meritocracy’. He was inspired by the Russian model of providing further education to the masses and in 1960 began the National Extension College and the Dawn University on Anglia television. These served as prototypes of the OU.

5 Baron Crowther (1907–72), economist, journalist and educationalist. Author of *The Crowther Report*, 1959.

wanted to kill it off 'as one of Harold Wilson's gimmicks'.<sup>6</sup> There was also disdain from the Establishment with Who's Who querying the use of BA (Open) by the Bishop of Dunwich, the Rt Revd Eric Nash Devenport.

Evolving in step with the acceleration of change in technology, the University continued on its way through the ages of television, tape recorder, tape cassette, video cassette, personal computer and internet and, no doubt, will embrace anything still to come. In 2003 it was ranked above Oxford for teaching quality<sup>7</sup> and has out-performed Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London in the government's teaching assessment for general engineering. Latest figures<sup>8</sup> rate the OU as 36th in national ranking out of some 130 universities currently in the UK.<sup>9</sup> The point is that the OU is a vast and successful enterprise and two million people have graduated from it in its fifty years of operation. It is little wonder that the gold and blue of its academic dress seem to pop up somewhere amongst the staff in attendance at nearly every graduation or presentation ceremony in the land; and the light, royal or navy blue gowns of the degrees it offers are instantly recognizable to anyone who has even a rudimentary knowledge of British academical dress.

### Academic dress and its devotees

Attempting to tell the story of the origins and development of the Open University's academic dress is not helped by the absence of any official regulations in its ordinances or on its website, such as those published by most universities. Fortunately, at the time the University was created, a new generation of academic dress enthusiasts was busy collecting information on the subject and following each new scheme with great interest.<sup>10</sup> Of enormous importance in this endeavour was the publication in 1966 of *Academical Dress of British Universities* by George Shaw.<sup>11</sup> Although it predated the Open University, and so did not include it, the book made many aware of the subject and inspired others to take it up as a hobby.<sup>12</sup>

### The original scheme

In the beginning the Open University offered the following degrees: Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil), Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Doctor of Philosophy

---

6 Tam Dalyell in his obituary of Baroness Carnegy of Lour, *The Independent*, 17 Nov. 2010.

7 *The Sunday Times Universities Guide*.

8 As at late 2019 the figures available were from the 2018 Centre for World University Rankings.

9 This is not a precise figure. It is generally agreed that there are around 150 higher education institutions in the UK but around 130 universities. There are also university college institutions to be counted and the fact that some colleges of federal universities have their own charters.

10 In just a few decades followers of this somewhat arcane area of costume interest had spread from a small number of independent scholars, authors and devotees, relying on the few published works, encyclopedia entries and visits to libraries, into a network of people sharing typewritten and duplicated notes, and writing letters to robemakers and universities; then early internet chatgroups, the Burgon Society, founded in 2000 to promote and study the subject and now the Academical Dress Facebook Group and Twitter account.

11 George Wenham Shaw, MA, MSc, DPhil, DSc, FIBiol, FBS (1928–2006). The book was published by W. Heffer & Sons Ltd, Cambridge.

12 I remember receiving a copy of it, from my parents, for my fourteenth birthday and colleagues tell similar stories.

(PhD), Doctor of Science (DSc), Doctor of Letters (DLitt), and Doctor of the University (DUniv), the last of these awarded only *honoris causa*. At first it seemed that the Open University would break with eight centuries of tradition and be the first university in England to dispense with the gown, hood, and cap.<sup>13</sup> Similarly the University of London, 126 years earlier, had made no provision for academic dress until a graduate wrote a letter about it to the Academic Registrar.<sup>14</sup> The early OU students were having none of it either.<sup>15</sup> An approach was made to Ede & Ravenscroft most probably at the start of the New Year 1972, by the then University Secretary, Anastasios Christodoulou.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately one of the present day University archivists, Matthew Taylor, was able to find a letter to the Secretary from John Austin, Director of Ede & Ravenscroft, following a meeting at the Chancery Lane premises to discuss academic dress for the OU, and it is reproduced together with details of proposals for the new robes (see Fig. 1).<sup>17</sup>

Following receipt of the letter and details of the proposed OU academic dress, Dr Christodoulou wrote the following memo to the Open University's General Purposes Committee on 3 March 1972:

I enclose suggestions put forward by Messrs. Ede & Ravenscroft Ltd., official robe makers to the University, concerning academic dress for Open University graduates. I would welcome the Committee's comments on these proposals.

It has not been possible to find any record of suggested changes to John Austin's proposals by members of the Committee, but later descriptions of the dress reveal that the linings of the hoods for the MPhil and DUniv degrees were carried over to form a binding around the cape and the cowl. About this there is some contradiction in the lists provided by the robemaker and those appearing in publications or set out by the University in degree ceremony booklets, but this is not unusual. Nevertheless, the OU adopted this fairly straightforward and traditional system of dress based on its official colours of gold and blue.<sup>18</sup> There was an innovation in the scheme however, namely the shorter bag sleeves for the gowns.<sup>19</sup> The reference in the letter to the 'power cuts' is a reminder of those days

---

13 L. W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 11–12; Philip Goff, *University of London Academic Dress* (London: University of London Press, 1999), p. 13; W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academic Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 4–5. In the event the OU did dispense with the cap at ceremonies but it continues to be part of the scheme.

14 The Revd F. Harrison Rankin wrote to the Registrar of the University of London on 18 Oct. 1843, asking which hood he might wear upon his surplice to fulfil the provisions of Church of England Canon Law. This precipitated the appointment of the inevitable committee.

15 See comments by Peter Thornton-Pett, *infra*.

16 Anastasios Christadoulou CBE, MA, DUniv (1932–2002). Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and Foundation Secretary of the Open University. He played a huge part in turning the idea of a 'university of the air' into a reality (*Guardian* obituary, 28 May 2002).

17 John Austin's real name was (interestingly) John Francis Ravenscroft. Despite enquiries I have not been able to discover his floruit dates although there is a London entry for someone of this name who died in 2006. The letter implies more than one meeting.

18 The colours, gold and blue, are used in hoods of many universities around the world. Amongst those in the UK are Abertay, Anglia Ruskin, Cranfield, Chichester, Harper Adams, Lincoln, Northumbria, Plymouth, Salford and Strathclyde.

19 It has not been possible to find any evidence of this sleeve being used elsewhere.

Fig 2. The first Open University degree ceremony, 23 June 1973, Alexandra Palace.



Fig. 1. The suggested scheme (the letter continues on the next page).

TELEPHONE 01-405 0402  
TELEGRAMS: EDE 01-405 0402  
CHAURMANS, LONDON

**EDE & RAVENSCROFT LTD**  
FOUNDED IN THE REIGN OF WILLIAM & MARY 1689  
ROBE MAKERS & TAILORS  
93 & 94 CHANCERY LANE LONDON W.C.2A 1DN

COURT, DIPLOMATIC & CIVIL DRESS  
PEERS' ACADEMIC, LEGAL & MUNICIPAL ROBES & WIGS  
THE FIRM HAS BEEN THE RECOGNISED AUTHORITY ON COURT DRESS AND ROBES FOR UPWARDS OF 180 YEARS

JFA/RJS  
25th February, 1972.

A. Christodoulou, Esq., M.A.,  
Secretary,  
The Open University,  
Walton Hall,  
Bletchley,  
Buckinghamshire.

Dear Mr. Christodoulou,

As requested I am enclosing details of the suggested Scheme of Academic Dress, as discussed on our last meeting. We have, also, nearly completed a set of sample Gowns and Hoods, which will be delivered to the Reform Club on Tuesday next the 29th February.

I am sorry that there has been some delay in writing to you, but with the Power Cuts being fairly frequent, we got a little behind; however, all is now under control.

In regard to the suggested Scheme, you will notice that we have included Hats, since we feel that while Hats might not be worn at your Ceremonies, a style should be laid down, in case, any of your graduates are employed at a School or University and are required to wear Robes, a hat will often be required as well.

I hope the Scheme meets with approval and look forward to your comments.

Yours sincerely,  
J. F. Austin,  
Director.

The Open University -

Suggested Scheme of Academic Dress

University Colours : Blue and Gold.

60005 B.A., B.Phil., M.Phil., A Ph.D.

A gown of traditional Masters shape, but with short "bagging sleeves", in Dark Blue.

Bachelors

Similar shape, but in Royal Blue and faced with the University Gold.

B.Univ.

As for Bachelors, but in University Gold, and faced with Royal Blue.

B.A.

Simple shape, light Blue outside, and faced with 3" inside with University Gold.

B.Phil.

As for B.A., but with Royal Blue outside.

M.Phil.

Full shape, light Blue outside and fully lined with University Gold.

Ph.D.

Full shape, Royal Blue outside, and fully lined and edged with 1" with University Gold.

D.Sc.

Full shape, University Gold outside, and fully lined with light Blue.

HOORS CONT.

D.Litt.

Full shape, with University Gold outside, and fully lined with Royal Blue.

D.Univ.

Full shape, Royal Blue outside and fully lined with light Blue.

HATS (Not worn at the University Ceremonies).

Bachelors & Masters

Black Mortar Board.

Ph.D.

Black Cloth Bicorn with Blue cord and tassels.

Doctors

Black Velvet Bicorn with Gold cord and tassels.

of austerity resulting from the miners' strikes during the Heath government of the early 1970s,<sup>20</sup> with their shorter working week; and it is tempting to wonder whether the shorter sleeves were simply a cost saving exercise: cut down sleeves to match a cut down working week!<sup>21</sup>

The first students of the OU were admitted in 1971 and in the previous year Professor Hugh Smith's three-volume work on academic dress had already been published.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of the Open University in it at all. The editors of and contributors to *The Degrees and Hoods of the World's Universities and Colleges*,<sup>23</sup> the update of Scobie Stringer's own update of Frank Haycraft's earlier work,<sup>24</sup> were quick off the mark in following up leads to new hoods and gowns and had tried to gain information about the OU robes before going to press in 1972. However, communications were much slower then and it would have taken time for the information to have become available. A note in the addenda (clearly written by Dr Charles Franklyn) reads:

Repeated written requests for details of the hoods have met with no response and it is understood that nothing has been decided yet. A complete system could be designed in one hour. C.A.H.F.

### *A disciplined bustle*

The new robes were ready and available in time for the first degree ceremony which was held in the Great Hall of Alexandra Palace on Saturday 23 June 1973 (see Fig. 2).<sup>25</sup>

Out of the 1000 students who had sat the examinations 867 were successful. There were 40,000 students on its books at the time.<sup>26</sup>

People travelled from all over the UK and even from as far as away as Australia to attend the ceremony. Les Holloway, in the OU magazine *Sesame*, described the momentous day:

The crowds plod up the steep slopes from their cars and buses. Most are serious faced, some nervously cheerful, some deep in abstraction. Inside the faded Victorian splendour of Ally Pally there is a disciplined bustle. Most of the graduates have elected to wear gowns. Some who had rejected the formality of academic dress find their resolution weakening.

Part of the ceremony was broadcast live on BBC2 and it is still available to view.<sup>27</sup>

The ceremony included the installation of the new Chancellor, Lord Gardiner, who replaced the late Geoffrey Crowther. Amongst those who received the OU's first honorary

---

20 Sir Edward Richard George Heath, KG, MBE, (1916–2005); Prime Minister 1970–74.

21 Professor Bruce Christianson argues that the choices of blue for the gowns and the cut-down masters' sleeves are anything but 'straightforward and traditional' adding, 'having your own distinctive sleeve was still a thing in the 1960s'.

22 Hugh Smith, assisted by Kevin Sheard, *Academic Dress and Insignia of the World: Gowns, Hats, Chains of Office, Hoods, Rings, Medals and Other Degree Insignia of Universities and Other Institutions of Learning*, 3 vols (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1970).

23 Frank Haycraft, 5th edn, rev. and enlarged by Frederick Rogers, Charles Franklyn, George Shaw, Hugh Boyd (Lewes: printed privately by W. E. Baxter, March 1972).

24 4th edn (Cheshunt: The Cheshunt Press, 1927).

25 Opening in 1873, Alexandra Palace was intended to be north London's counterpart to the Crystal Palace in south London as a place of public education, entertainment and leisure.

26 'On This Day', BBC Home, 11 Jan., 1950–2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/11/default.stm>>.

27 The broadcast may be viewed online. The interview begins after 19 minutes and 50 seconds, at <[www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/program/video:JOUZ402B](http://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/program/video:JOUZ402B)> [retrieved 19 June 2020].

doctorates (DUniv) were Baroness Lee of Asheridge, Sir Peter Venables, Baron Campbell of Eskan (Chair of Milton Keynes Development Corporation), Jane Drew (Open University Architect), Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationalist and philosopher, and Michael Young.<sup>28</sup>

At the televised event the University's Archives Officer, Peter Thornton-Pett,<sup>29</sup> who co-ordinated the ceremony (and about whom we shall read more later) was interviewed by Kevin Moloney, the OU Senior Press Officer. A transcript follows:<sup>30</sup>

KEVIN MOLONEY: Well here we are, the very heart of Ally Pally, the Great Hall itself. As you can see it's large, extremely large, 400 feet long by 180 feet wide. By coincidence, this year is the centenary celebrations of the original Alexandra Palace, and the people in the background are rehearsing for some of the many events that are taking place here each evening. Peter Thornton-Pett, co-ordinator of the ceremony is here with us. Peter, what are these robes your [*sic*] wearing?

PETER THORNTON-PETT: I'm wearing the academic dress, the gown and hood of a Doctor of the University. That is, of the honorary degree which we are conferring upon ten distinguished public figures at this ceremony in June. And Anne here, is wearing the academic dress of a Batchelor [*sic*] of Arts. The colours of the academic dress are based on the colours of the university, blue and gold. My own gown is in gold faced with dark blue and with a rather lovely blue hood and Anne is wearing a dark blue gown with a hood of light blue faced in gold. Thank you, Anne.<sup>31</sup>

MOLONEY: Peter, can you give me a run down on the ceremony please?

THORNTON-PETT: Yes, the ceremony will be in three parts. First of all the installation of Lord Gardiner as our second Chancellor. Second the conferment of the degree of Doctor of the University on our first ten honorary graduates, and thirdly the presentation of our first BA graduates to the Chancellor.

MOLONEY: The Open University is unique in many ways and it doesn't follow the traditional pattern. Why are we holding this ceremony?

THORNTON-PETT: The first answer is that very many of our students requested it, and I think that that is understandable because we all like to mark the great milestones in our lives with something out of the ordinary and if I may speak as a recent graduate, graduation day is one of those milestones and it signifies a wonderful sense of achievement, in coming together in this great corporate occasion.

MOLONEY: Is the ceremony going to be different from that held in other universities at all?

THORNTON-PETT: No, we did look at the possibilities of some new twist or trend but we found that in many ways the old ways were best, at least for this first occasion.

MOLONEY: Why is the ceremony being held here and not at Walton Hall?

THORNTON-PETT: Well we were going to hold it at Walton Hall originally but so many people graduated in our first year, so many wanted to come, that it was quite beyond the resources of Walton Hall to cope with the numbers we expected and which we were so happy are coming, and the opportunity occurred to hold it here, which is both

---

28 See fn. 4.

29 The OU archives confirm his dates as 1920–97. It has been difficult to find much more information about him. As with so many who lived most of their lives before the age of the internet his details are sketchy. Searches of genealogical sites suggest that he had been a Flying Officer in the RAF and perhaps a medic. A photograph of him dressed as a Flight Lieutenant is at <[www.richdolman.files.wordpress.com](http://www.richdolman.files.wordpress.com)>. There are also references to an auction of 'English and World Coins, Including the Peter Thornton-Pett Collection of World Coins', at Glendining & Co. in April 1990.

30 Reproduced as it was written.

31 Remembering that the broadcast was in black and white.



### The Open University (Milton Keynes)

B.A.	Light blue, faced inside with 3" gold.
B.Phil.	Royal blue, faced inside with 3" gold.
M.Phil.	Light blue, full lined with gold and edged with narrow band of gold.
M.A.	Gold, fully lined with royal blue and edged with narrow band of royal blue.
Ph.D.	Royal blue, fully lined with gold and edged with 1" gold.
D.Sc.	Gold, fully lined with light blue.
D.Litt.	Gold, fully lined with royal blue.
D.Univ.	Royal blue, fully lined with light blue. The V-front to the hood is dark blue outside and light blue inside.

Fig. 3. Open University academic dress, *Pears' Cyclopaedia*, 1976.

an Open University and a BBC site. It solved all our major problems in regard to catering, parking and so on and it was ideal and it fits very nicely into the centenary year of Alexandra Palace itself.

MOLONEY: How many of our new graduates are coming?

THORNTON-PETT: About six hundred of the nine hundred or so, who have graduated. And may I add that over a hundred of those who are not coming have not really said no but a belated yes because they have opted to come after they have graduated with honours.<sup>32</sup>

MOLONEY: And Peter, will there be any music at the ceremony?

THORNTON-PETT: Oh indeed! We want to make it memorable in every way that we can. We would have liked to of course played this lovely organ, but unfortunately that, the finest of all Father Willis' instruments has been unplayable since about the end of the war, so we are bringing in a distinguished brass consort and an organ to be played by our own Professor of Music to accompany them ...

### Hoodata

In early 1974 an occasional newsletter of academic hoods, copied onto foolscap sheets, was begun and edited by Squadron Leader Alan Birt<sup>33</sup> and later by Dr Robin Rees<sup>34</sup> and circulated amongst friends, acquaintances and others known to be interested in the subject. It includes a reference to the Open University.

#### Hoodata 1 (Spring 1974)

Open University BA Simple shape light-blue russell cord, faced inside with three inches of gold taffeta: BPhil Simple shape Royal-blue panama, faced inside with three inches of gold taffeta: MPhil Full shape light-blue Russell cord fully lined and edged with a narrow band of gold taffeta: PhD Full shape Royal-blue panama fully lined and edged with one inch of gold taffeta: DSc Full shape gold panama fully lined and edged with one inch of light blue taffeta edging [*sic*]: DLitt Full shape gold panama fully lined and edged with one inch of Royal-blue taffeta: DUniv Full shape Royal-blue panama fully lined and with one inch of light-blue taffeta edging.<sup>35</sup>

### *Pears' Cyclopaedia*

By 1976 details of the academic hoods of the Open University also appeared in the listings in *Pears' Cyclopaedia*:<sup>36</sup> 'University Degrees Colours of Hoods' another source of infor-

32 Under the OU system, an honours degree required an extra year of study.

33 Squadron Leader Alan Edward Birt, BSc, ACP, FBS.

34 Robin Rees, MSc, MPhil, PhD, FBS.

35 The Hoodata series is posted at <www.burgon.org.uk/publications/hoodata>.

36 *Academical Hoods, General Compendium*. (Think Google and Wikipedia in a single vol-

<i>Degree</i>	<i>Gown</i>	<i>Hood</i>
Bachelor of Arts (inc BA (Hons))	Dark blue russell cord	Simple shape; light blue russell cord, faced inside gold
Bachelor of Philosophy	Dark blue russell cord	Simple shape; royal blue russell cord, faced inside gold
Master of Philosophy	Dark blue russell cord	Full shape; light blue russell cord, fully lined gold; edged gold
Doctor of Philosophy	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; royal blue panama; fully lined gold; edged gold
Doctor of Science	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; gold panama; fully lined light blue
Doctor of Letters	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; gold panama; fully lined royal blue
Master of Arts (Honorary)	Dark blue russell cord	Full shape; light blue russell cord, fully lined gold; edged gold
Doctor of the University (Honorary)	Gold panama; faced royal blue	Full shape; royal blue; fully lined light blue

Hats (a mortar board for Bachelors and Masters, a bonnet for Doctors) are officially part of academic dress, but, by convention, are not worn or carried at these degree ceremonies.

Fig. 4. Open University academic dress from the 1978 graduation brochure.

mation eagerly devoured by those fascinated by this area of specialized costume. Figure 3 shows an attractive and uncomplicated system of hoods employing the colours light blue, royal blue and gold.

By this time a Master of Arts (MA) degree has been added but it should be noted that it was only awarded *honoris causa* and, as we shall see, it was later changed to the Master of the University (MUniv) degree, when the taught MA was introduced.

In 1978 the Open University included details of its academic dress in the degree ceremony booklet for the first time which confirms what we have already seen except that the Master of Arts (MA) *honoris causa* hood has been given the description belonging to the Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree, by mistake, instead of the gold hood lined and bound royal blue silk (Fig. 4).

### Keeping good records

Amongst those avidly collecting information about academic dress, from universities and robemakers, in the 1970s, was Nicholas Groves, a young man in Norfolk.<sup>37</sup> He was busily compiling lists of the robes of the various universities to augment the entries in Shaw's book and with the idea of updating it at some time in the future.<sup>38</sup>

In early 1979, having seen the entry in *Pears' Cyclopaedia*, but not knowing about the list in Hoodata, he wrote to Ede & Ravenscroft to request details of the academic dress of various universities and the OU was on his list.<sup>39</sup> On 31 January 1979, the Robe Manager of Ede & Ravenscroft, Bert Batteson,<sup>40</sup> replied to him enclosing details of Open University dress as follows (see Fig. 5):

Dear Sir,

With reference to your enquiry of 26th January regarding information on Academic Robes, as requested we enclose details of the Open University and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Please note that there is no undergraduate gown for the Open University, and that the other robes are in Blue and not Black.

For details of the University of Warwick we suggest that you contact Messrs Wip-pells of Cathedral Close, Exeter, who are their official robemakers.

ume.) Between 1953 and 2017 Pears' was a national institution.

37 Nicholas Groves, MA, BMus, PhD, FVCM, FRHistS, FBS.

38 Little did he know then that he would be editing future editions of the book with the blessing of the author.

39 Nicholas Groves did not see the Hoodata entry until 1990.

40 Died 2016.

*Ed and Rosecraft*  
1979

OPEN UNIVERSITY

<u>GOWNS</u>	
B.A.	GOWN OF TRADITIONAL MASTER'S SHAPE, BUT WITH SHORT HANGING SLEEVES (IN DARK BLUE MATERIAL) SLEEVES HAVE UPRIGHT CUTS AND LENGTH OF SLEEVE IS 10" BELOW CRESS CUT.
B.PHIL	
M.PHIL	
M.A. (HON)	
PH.D	AS B.A. GOWN BUT IN ROYAL BLUE PANAMA CLOTH WITH 3" FACINGS OF UNIVERSITY GOLD SILK.
D.LITT	AS PH.D BUT 5" FACINGS OF UNIVERSITY GOLD PANAMA CLOTH.
D.SC	
DR. OF UNIVERSITY	AS ABOVE BUT OF UNIVERSITY GOLD PANAMA CLOTH, FACED 5" ROYAL BLUE TAFFETA.
<u>HOODES</u>	
B.A.	SIMPLE SHAPE, OF LIGHT BLUE STUFF FACED 3" INSIDE UNIVERSITY GOLD.
B.PHIL	AS B.A. BUT IN ROYAL BLUE PANAMA.
M.PHIL	FULL SHAPE OF LIGHT BLUE STUFF FULLY LINED AND EDGED 1/2" ALL ROUND WITH UNIVERSITY GOLD SILK.
PH.D	FULL SHAPE OF ROYAL BLUE PANAMA FULLY LINED AND EDGED 1" ALL ROUND OF UNIVERSITY GOLD SILK.
D.SC	FULL SHAPE OF UNIVERSITY GOLD PANAMA CLOTH, FULLY LINED AND EDGED ALL ROUND 1" WITH LIGHT BLUE TAFFETA SILK.
D.LITT	(ALSO M.A. HON. HOOD) AS D.SC BUT WITH ROYAL BLUE TAFFETA SILK.
DR OF UNIVERSITY	FULL SHAPE OF ROYAL BLUE PANAMA CLOTH, FULLY LINED AND EDGED 1" ALL ROUND WITH LIGHT BLUE TAFFETA.

Fig. 5. Open University academic dress, 1979.

Trusting that this information is of assistance to you in your work.

Will you please notify the writer when your book is published as we would like to have a copy.

Your sincerely

A Batteson.

Robe Manager

At this time, a couple of decades before design programmes were available, robemakers often produced drawings of gowns and hoods on photocopied outlines and coloured them in by hand. Apart from in the few published works on the subject, some robemakers' brochures, and colour plates in some encyclopaedias,<sup>41</sup> illustrations of hoods and gowns

<sup>41</sup> Such as *The Book of Knowledge*, edited by Gordon Stowell (London: Waverley Book Co., 1955), in which I saw my first illustrations of academic hoods.

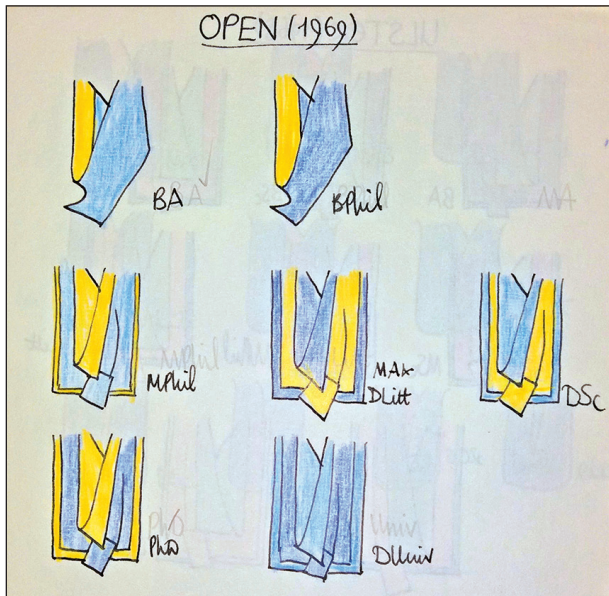


Fig. 7. BA graduands at a degree ceremony.

Fig. 6 (left). Open University hoods drawn by Nicholas Groves. (The year 1969 refers to the University's founding.)

were not easy to find. Nicholas Groves decided to make his own drawings to illustrate the information he was collecting (see Fig. 6). He had seen the description of the OU hoods in *Pears' Cyclopaedia* and together with the information from Ede & Ravenscroft, in 1979 he was able to make some drawings of them.

It is interesting to note that whereas the original specification from Ede & Ravenscroft, and the *Pears' Cyclopaedia* list give the OU higher doctors' hoods as 'lined', subsequent information from the robemaker, and in Hoodata, describe them as 'lined and edged'.<sup>42</sup>

This, no doubt, explains Dr Groves' illustration of the DLitt hood showing it as lined and bound with royal blue silk.

### A fairly tight set of conventions

At most universities there is at least one person who takes a particular interest in the history of the institution and often in its academic dress as well. In the case of the OU this seems to have been the Archives Officer, Peter Thornton-Pett, who, as we have already seen, spoke about the subject briefly in a televised interview before the University's first degree ceremony.

Fortunately, he also put pen to paper on the subject after the University decided to introduce taught masters' degrees in the early 1980s and asked him to fit them into the existing scheme of dress. He replied, with his proposals, in an extensive internal memorandum, dated 20 January 1984. The document is of importance in that it looks back to the existing system of dress and then makes recommendations for additions to the scheme. This memorandum, which might seem rather pedantic to readers now, seems to belong to a pre-1980's world but the precise nature of the wording is rather welcome for the purposes of this paper given the absence of documents on the subject which have been preserved.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> In fact the DLitt hood is lined but not bound and the DSc hood is lined and bound 1" around all edges.

<sup>43</sup> Punctuation as it appears in the document.

From Archives Officer  
Ext No 3821

Internal Memorandum  
Ref SA/163

To Senior Assistant Registrar, Undergraduate Students  
c.c. Graduate Officer Info Academic Registrar  
Subject New Academic Dress Requirements

Date 20 January 1984

### Introduction

1. You asked me some time ago, to offer some ideas for the academic dress required for the proposed new, and altered, degree structure, namely:
- (a) change of the present honorary MA to MUniv;
  - (b) introduction of new (taught) MA and MSc;
  - (c) possible introduction of new (taught) MEd.

### Background

2. I first analysed the present degree structure, and all aspects of the academic dress therein.
3. On the former, I found that our existing academic distinctions fell into two major groups:
- (A) what, for want of a better term, I have called 'Earned degrees'; and
  - (B) Honorary degrees.
4. (A) subdivides further into:
- (A.1) Non-doctoral
  - (A.2) Doctoral
5. Looking at our existing scheme of academic dress (as shown on page 3 of the individual ceremony programmes) it immediately became apparent that it operated within a fairly tight set of conventions as regards materials (Russell cord,<sup>44</sup> and panama<sup>45</sup>) and colours (light, dark, and royal blue, and gold).
6. It also revealed certain affinities within each group, and also within each grade (Bachelor, Master, Doctor).
7. The object then became to devise the new academic dress as far as possible within the broad conventions just mentioned.

### Visual Presentation (Chart) (see Fig 9)

8. The attached chart shows:
- (i) the existing state of things; plus
  - (ii) my proposal to alter this in one respect; and
  - (iii) my suggestions for the new dress.
- The chart has been informally discussed with the Graduate Officer.
9. Items under (ii) and (iii) are underlined.

### Description and Discussion

10. The following paragraphs describe and discuss these changes and additions (it need hardly be stressed that the idea was to keep the present excellent scheme as far as possible).
11. It is obvious, from paragraph 1, that the Masters' degrees are at the heart of the new requirements, and that the problem was not just one of new academic dress ideas for new degrees, as will be evident from what follows.
12. Hitherto, Masters have been a conspicuous minority at ceremonies : one (or, at most, two) honorary MAs who are invariably on the platform; and a handful of MPhils (an average of 4 or 5 a year, spread among 13 ceremonies), in the body of the Hall. Very often there are none, of either category.
13. But if the programme of taught Masters' degrees goes ahead, one can expect an increasingly substantial gathering of Masters at most, if not all, degree ceremonies. It is

---

44 A durable corded fabric: a blend of wool and cotton.

45 A closely woven fabric traditionally of wool but, these days, often of polyester.

therefore both imperative and fitting that they should have their own distinctive features of academic dress, as Masters, and this has actuated much of my thinking in this matter.

#### The Proposals

14. The first thing to consider was the gown. Consistent with the old (Honorary) MA and MPhil conventions (which were very helpful as a general yardstick) I propose that all Masters' gowns should continue to be of Russell cord.

15. The problem is, the colour. Bachelors (the overwhelmingly majority at ceremonies) have dark blue; Doctors (the select few), royal blue or gold. Given the situation at 13 above, the only possible colour for Masters, within our overall scheme, is light blue, and this I propose "across the board", including the MUnivs. (This is the only alteration envisaged in the changeover from Honorary MA to MUniv.)

16. For the hoods: these, like those for MPhil and Honorary MA, should be of full shape. MA/MSc/MEd should, like MPhil, be of Russell cord; MUniv, like the old hon. MA, of panama.

17. For colours, I suggest:

dark blue for MA and MSc;

light blue for MEd and (vice dark blue) for MPhil

The chart shows, by reference to the colours in these and other columns, the overall differentiation between the various degrees and grades.

18. The use of light blue for both the MPhil gown and hood is paralleled by the precedent of royal blue for those of the PhD; but, as implied in the previous paragraph, one relies on all the elements in a particular scheme to give a pleasing, dignified and distinctive appearance to the dress concerned.<sup>46</sup>

19. It will be noticed that there are no facings for Masters' gowns, nor for their hoods. This should continue.

20. There is, however, the question of "full lining" and edging.<sup>47</sup> For honorary MAs (now MUnivs) these are both royal blue; for MPhils, both gold. That leaves the (new) MA, MSc and MEd to sort out.

21. I have left light blue and royal blue (lined with or without edging) for most Doctors and the MUnivs, and propose gold for the 3 new degrees, as is found for the MPhils and PhDs. (Again, the chart shows the overall differentiations).

22. It will be noticed that the DLitt has full lining and no edging. Because of representing a broadly cognate field, I propose the same for the MA (and also for the MEd). That leaves gold for both for the MSc, on the analogy of royal blue for both for the DSc

23. I must caution that all the above "juggling" just about exhausts the potentialities of the present colour/material conventions. If further degrees are devised (e.g. in law or an MBA) we will almost certainly have to think in terms of including a further colour in the scheme (e.g. white or silver). Red or green would probably "screech" if associated too closely with our various shades of blue, though one or other at a time might go with the gold.

24. Our manufacturers<sup>48</sup> will, I take it, need to be consulted on the professional feasibility of the ideas propounded here.

25. The head-dress for the new Masters' degrees, when used, will of course be a mortarboard, as with the existing ones.

26. I would like to make one small point in conclusion : the description of our academic dress, mentioned in paragraph 5, and which we show in every degree programme, needs to be amended as follows:

"Doctor of the University", col. 3: read 'Full shape; royal blue panama; fully lined...'

Peter Thornton-Pett

Archives Officer

---

46 Academic dress enthusiasts will, no doubt, recognize a familiar voice in this sentiment!

47 Where the lining is bound over onto the cape or cowl or both.

48 Ede & Ravenscroft Ltd.

DEGREE	DEGREE	GOWN				HOOD					REMARKS	
		MATERIAL	COLOUR	FACINGS	SHAPE	MATERIAL	COLOUR	FACINGS (inside)	FULLY LINED	EDGED		
<b>A. EARNED DEGREES</b>												
1. <u>NON-DOCTORAL</u>	BA (inc Hons)	Russell Cord	Dark Blue	-	Simple	Russell Cord	Light Blue	Gold	-	-		
	Taught	MA	"	Light Blue	-	Full	"	Dark Blue	-	Gold	-	New Entry
		MSc	"	"	-	"	"	"	-	Gold	Gold	" "
		MEd	"	"	-	"	"	Light Blue	-	Gold	-	" "
	9 Research	B Phil	"	Dark Blue	-	Simple	"	Royal Blue	Gold	-	-	
		M Phil	"	Light Blue	-	Full	"	Light Blue	-	Gold	Gold	* Vice Dark Blue
<b>2. DOCTORAL</b>												
	Ph D	Panama	Royal Blue	Gold	"	Panama	Royal Blue	-	"	"		
	Doc	"	"	"	"	"	Gold	-	Light Blue	Light Blue		
	D Litt	"	"	"	"	"	"	-	Royal Blue	-		
<b>B. HONORARY DEGREES</b>												
	M UNIV	Russell Cord	Light Blue	-	"	"	"	-	"	Royal Blue	As original Hon MA, except for proposed gown colour	
	D UNIV	Panama	Gold	Royal Blue	"	"	Royal Blue	-	Light Blue	-		

The dignity and ceremonial of these occasions are enhanced by the colourful variety of the academic dress in evidence. A distinctive feature which unifies Open University academic dress is that it is based entirely on the University colours of blue and gold. To aid identification of Open University graduates present today, the scheme of academic dress follows.

DEGREE	GOWN	HOOD
Bachelor of Arts (inc. BA (Hons))	Dark blue russell cord/ polyester	Simple shape; light blue russell cord faced inside gold
Master of Science	Light blue polyester	Full shape; dark blue panama; fully lined gold; edged gold
Master of Arts	Light blue polyester	Full shape; dark blue panama; fully lined gold; edged gold
Bachelor of Philosophy	Dark blue russell cord/ polyester	Simple shape; royal blue russell cord faced inside gold
Master of Philosophy	Light blue polyester	Full shape; light blue russell cord fully lined gold; edged gold
Doctor of Philosophy	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; royal blue panama; fully lined gold; edged gold
Doctor of Science	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; gold panama; fully lined light blue; edged light blue
Doctor of Letters	Royal blue panama; gold facings	Full shape; gold panama; fully lined royal blue
Master of the University (Honorary)	Light blue polyester	Full shape; gold panama; fully lined royal blue; edged royal blue
Doctor of the University (Honorary)	Gold panama; faced royal blue	Full shape; royal blue panama; fully lined light blue

Hats (a mortar board for Bachelors and Masters, a bonnet for Doctors) are officially part of academic dress but, by convention, are not worn or carried at these degree ceremonies.

Fig. 8. Thornton-Pett's proposed changes to OU academic dress, 1984.

Fig. 9 (left). Open University academic dress, 1984.

Included with his memorandum is the chart to which Thornton-Pett refers, which sets out his proposed changes to the Open University dress scheme, principally for the insertion of the taught masters' degrees into the scheme (see Fig. 8).

It has not been possible to find papers relating to any discussion that followed Thornton-Pett's proposals of 1984 but a scan of details

of OU academic dress from the 1986 ceremonies brochure gives us the outcome<sup>49</sup> (see Fig. 9).

We can see from this list that Thornton-Pett's proposals were broadly adopted except that no distinction was made in the hoods for the new taught Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MSc) degrees:<sup>50</sup> the beginning of a move away from degree specific

49 I am grateful to Matthew Taylor in the OU archive for supplying this scan.

50 Both were assigned dark blue hoods, lined and bound with gold silk and the MSc hood

hoods to a grade specific system. Curiously, no mention is made of his proposal of a light blue hood for the Master of Education (MEd)<sup>51</sup> but the degree was awarded and it seems to have been given a dark blue hood similar to that for the MA/MSc except that it had a white binding around the cowl.<sup>52</sup> Later, however, it was assigned the same dress as for the MA/MSc.<sup>53</sup>

It will be noticed that, following the recommendation made by Thornton-Pett, the old MA (Hon) degree, now the Master of the University (MUniv) continued with the Doctor of Letters (DLitt) hood with a binding of the royal blue silk around the cape and cowl. It might have been tidier to have given the DLitt the lined and bound hood (as other doctors) and to have assigned the lined hood to the MUniv.

As for the gowns, the early scheme had the dark blue gown for the BA, BPhil, MPhil, PhD and MA (Hon); the royal blue gown for higher doctors and the gold gown for the DUniv.

By 1978 the PhD had been given the royal blue gown but with 3" gold facings whereas the higher doctors' gowns had 5" facings.

Following the Thornton-Pett memorandum all masters (including the new MUniv) were to wear the light blue gown.

It is unusual to see such detailed emphasis on the materials used for the OU robes in Thornton-Pett's proposals. His directive on the use of Russell cord and wool Panama did not hold for long, as may be seen by comparing it with the materials specified in the extract from the graduation brochure above. Inevitably, polyester soon joined the other fabrics.

## What do the robes look like?

### Gowns

The gown shape used for all degrees was, and is, that traditionally used for masters: an open gown with gathered yoke and hanging or bag sleeves, but they are cut shorter giving a rather curious, amputated effect. The OU gown sleeves have an upright T-shape cut at the elbow and the panel of the sleeve continues for only 10" below the cut. The bottom of the sleeve is squared off.<sup>54</sup>

Seeing the dark and light blue gowns together (see Figs. 10 and 11) instantly brings to mind the light and dark blue colours of Oxford and Cambridge respectively.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps this was intentional on the part of Peter Thornton-Pett, who proposed the light blue gowns for masters—a nod to the ancient universities but, of course, there are also the royal blue and gold gowns in the scheme.

### Hoods

Bachelors' hoods are of the Oxford simple shape [s1], masters' and doctors' hoods are of the Cambridge full shape [f1]. All the hoods have a V-shaped neckband. (See Figs 12 and 13.)

---

prevailed as the model.

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps there were no MEd graduands in the 1986 ceremonies.

<sup>52</sup> See Fig. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Gemma Field, the archivist at Ede & Ravenscroft, kindly searched the ledgers and found that the MEd hood, with the white binding, was withdrawn in 2009.

<sup>54</sup> [m14] in the Groves classification.

<sup>55</sup> The wearing of dark blue by Oxford was established at the first Boat Race in 1829, while Cambridge adopted their lighter hue in this annual sporting contest in 1836. Cambridge blue is much lighter than OU light blue, of course, but I couldn't resist this rather fanciful idea.





Fig. 10. Bachelors.



Fig. 11. Masters.

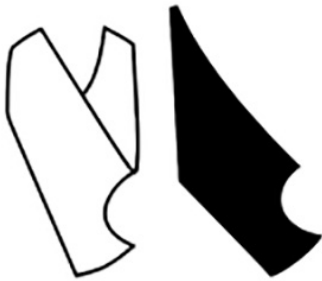


Fig. 12. Diplomas and bachelors.



Fig. 13. Masters and doctors.



Fig. 14 (above). OU Bachelor wearing the blue square.

Fig. 15 (right). OU Doctor of Philosophy wearing the bonnet.



## Hats

Hats are prescribed in the Open University regulations for academic dress but from the beginning have been forbidden at ceremonies. However, photographers keep a stock of them for the purposes of graduation photography.

The cap for diplomates, bachelors and masters is the traditional mortarboard or square cap [h1] but made from dark blue Melton cloth, with the customary black grosgrain binding around the crown and a dark blue tassel (see Fig. 14).

The cap for doctors is the Tudor bonnet [h2]. This is of royal blue Panama with a gold silk cord and tassel for the PhD, and professional doctorates, and gold velvet with a blue silk cord and tassel for higher doctors (DLitt, DSc, and DUniv), as in Figure 15.

As part of a series of articles celebrating the University's fiftieth anniversary the following comments about hats at OU graduation ceremonies were posted on the OU blogsite.<sup>56</sup>

### 50 objects for 50 years. No 3. Hats off or full board?

The week's object is present through being absent. In the 1960s new universities sought to adopt the rituals and traditions of an older establishment. Essex, which opened its doors in 1964, got Hardy Amies to design its gowns while the University of Bath was presented with a four-foot long mace at the installation of its first Chancellor in 1966. Initially the University of the Air (the original name for the OU) was to be the University of the Hair, with heads uncovered at graduations and no gowns to be worn at award ceremonies. Sir John Daniel, when OU Vice Chancellor, perhaps recalling that the OU received its Royal Charter in 1969, felt this was a reflection of the 'free-wheeling and informal spirit of the 1960s' when the university was founded. However, the first students to graduate, in 1973, argued that they should be permitted to be seen to be graduates, with gowns. At the ceremony, held at Alexandra Palace in London not Milton Keynes and filmed by the BBC, most of the 867 graduates elected to wear gowns. Moreover, there was a procession, accompanied by Copland's 1942 Fanfare for the Common Man. This year the University will hold 29 degree ceremonies, in 15 different locations. Norman Woods, Regional Director of the East Midlands, recalled the graduation ceremony in a local prison: 'You used to put on your glad rags and go and hand them their diploma and certificate, whatever. And their families used to come in. You know, it was quite good. And the prison would provide some cakes and cup of tea.' It remains the case that academic dress for wear at degree ceremonies consists of a gown and a hood. The OU website makes it clear in bold, that 'hats (mortarboards or bonnets) are not worn at Open University degree ceremonies'. However, a concession has been offered 'a hat (mortarboard or bonnet) may be hired for personal use during the day'.

## The age of the Internet

The World Wide Web, invented in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee, was first made available to the public in 1991 but it was not until the middle of the decade that the early search engines began to reveal information about academic dress and those interested in it. Frustratingly slow and expensive, the dial-up connection would often be lost, putting off seekers of information. However, the accompanying revolution in design technology during the decade also allowed robemaking companies to turn from photocopied outlines of robes (which would be coloured in by hand) to the use of ever more sophisticated artwork programs such as Illustrator. Although expensive to purchase initially, the possibility of generating

---

<sup>56</sup> At <[www.open.ac.uk/blogs/History-of-the-OU/?p=2715](http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/History-of-the-OU/?p=2715)> [retrieved 29 June 2020]; the entry was posted on Monday, 7 May 2018, at 6:18 p.m. by Daniel Weinbren.

first-rate images of robes obviated the need to produce actual made-up samples and therefore saved money and time.

Meanwhile amateur academic dress enthusiasts continued to add to their collections of gowns and hoods<sup>57</sup> and some were collecting what illustrations they could find in portraiture and published works. Among them, Nicholas Groves, continued to update his illustrations of entire schemes of hoods, such as his drawings of OU hoods in 1990, before he had found the information on the new taught masters' degrees. He has left spaces for them to be inserted into his plate of hoods not knowing at the time that the Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MSc) degrees were to share the same dress (see Fig. 16).

### Adding to the scheme

Naturally, as the University grew so new degrees were added and these required new costumes. One of the helpful things about pursuing additions to dress schemes is that, as a general rule, when one university introduces a new degree many of the others will as well. This is true

<sup>57</sup> Amateur in the best sense of the word: dedicated, fascinated and knowledgeable. For example, my own collection as a sixteen-year-old included some 150 hoods and my English O-Level project, 'The Degree Hoods of British Universities' was written up between 1966 and 1968, unfortunately before the Open University began. Nicholas Groves began collecting information from various 1950s editions of *Pears' Cyclopaedia* whilst a schoolboy, and then more seriously after Shaw's first work on the subject in 1966.

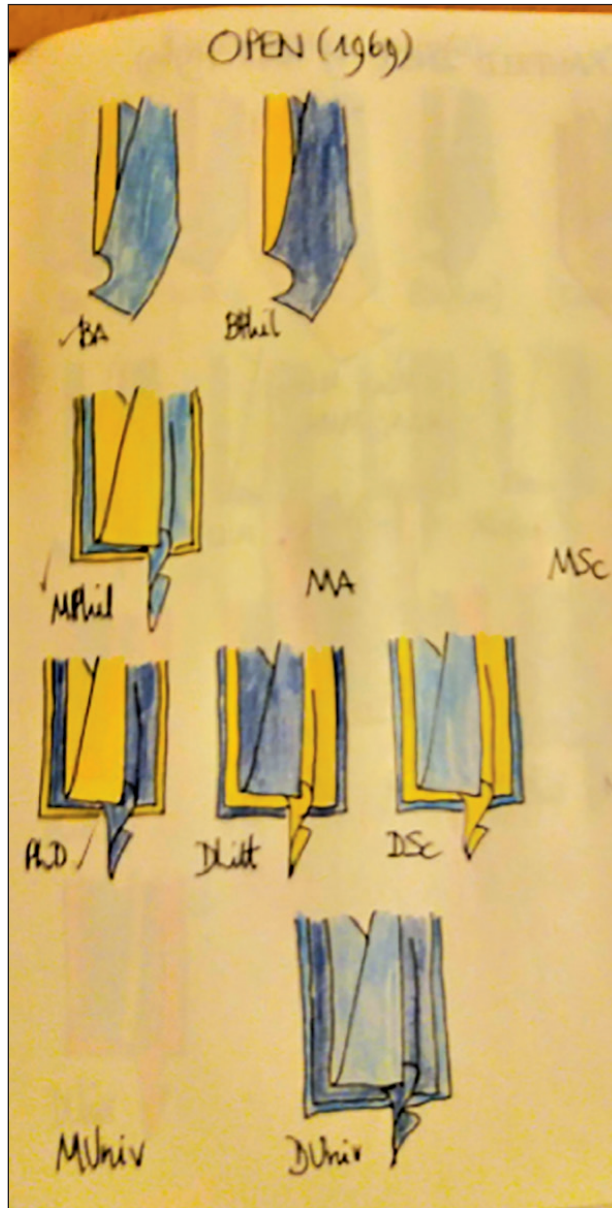


Fig. 16. Open University hoods drawn by Nicholas Groves, 1990

of the Master of Business Administration degree and a handwritten entry into the Ede & Ravenscroft work-book records the MBA dress, which was needed for the 1992 ceremonies.

### *Master of Business Administration (MBA)*

Gown: Light blue Russell cord.

Hood: Dark blue Russell cord lined and bound around the cape with 1" University gold silk and also bound around the cowl with  $\frac{3}{8}$ " outside and 1" inside with pale blue polyester. The blue binding continues around the top edge of the neckband.

### **Grateful for your thoughts**

By this time UK universities were beginning to include the holders of diplomas and certificates in their graduation and presentation ceremonies. Apart from giving satisfaction to students achieving these qualifications, and their families and friends, universities and robemakers would have seen the financial opportunities that this afforded them. Ede & Ravenscroft would have had experience of this and were not slow in passing this information around as the following letter of 2 February 1994 shows.

From the Graduate Officer, The Open University,<sup>58</sup>  
To the Managing Director of Ede & Ravenscroft Ltd:

Dear Mr Keen.<sup>59</sup>

I believe you recently spoke to Doug Jordan<sup>60</sup> regarding the number of universities which have an academic dress for their diplomate award holders. As you may know, the Open University is considering including its diplomate holders in the annual round of degree ceremonies, and we are looking to develop a separate academic dress for our diplomates. We would wish to use the navy blue bachelors gown, most probably in conjunction with a simple hood, and it is about this that I am writing to you now.

In order that the University may come to a decision about this matter I wonder whether it would be possible for you to provide us with a couple of sample diplomate hoods?

We would envisage them being perhaps of the same blue as our bachelors hoods, but plain, and perhaps even of a different shape.

I would be grateful for your thoughts on this and look forward to hearing from you.  
Yours sincerely,

With the letter the Graduate Officer had attached an outline drawing of the simple shaped hood used by the OU (see Fig. 17).<sup>61</sup>

Bill Keen sent off instructions for the sample hoods to be made up (see Fig. 19) on 25 July and later visited the Open University in Milton Keynes in person, with the samples, following which the Graduate Officer sent him another letter on 5 August 1994.

Dear Mr Keen,

It was good to see you when you called in with the two sample Diplomate hoods for our consideration.

Our conclusions are very much in line with your thinking at the time; this is that the navy blue (simple) shape is the better colour, to be the same colour as our diploma/bachelor gown. I am enclosing the hood matching this description, for information.

---

<sup>58</sup> The OU requested that I redact the name of the Graduate Officer.

<sup>59</sup> William Robert Keen (1932–96).

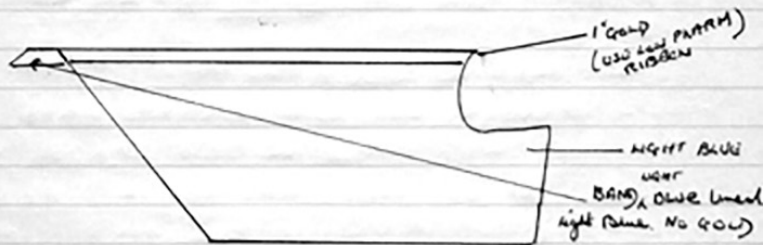
<sup>60</sup> Senior Assistant Registrar (retired 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Ede & Ravenscroft would hardly have needed the drawing: perhaps the officer was just returning it.

Schedule for Samples  
proposed Open University Diplomates  
Hoods:

Please use current Open University Bachelors Hood pattern on both samples. Drawing may not be accurate.

Sample No 1



Sample No 2

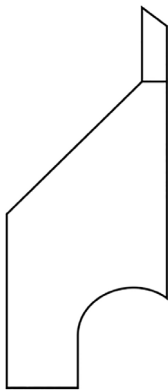
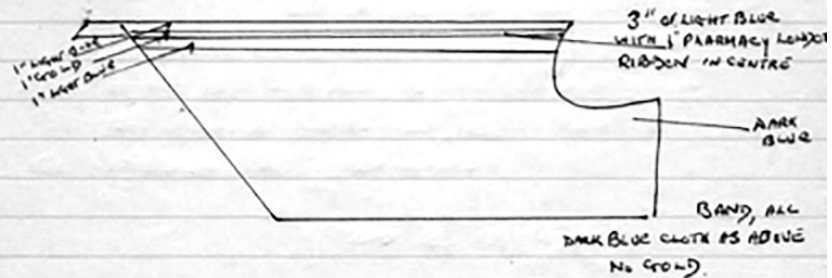


Fig. 17. Outline of Open University hood [s1].

Fig.19. Proposed Open University diplomates' hoods.

We would like to ask for one change to this hood, if possible, please. A 3" coloured facing, inside, is requested, but in plain light blue only (i.e. no stripe).

Would it be possible for you to let us have a sample of this style please, for us to obtain final approval, We will then be in a position to place the appropriate order with you.

I would also lodge with you that we shall in due course be awarding two types of taught doctorates and will wish to have a separate academic dress for both of these. We shall be in touch with you later this year about these.

With every good wish,

Yours sincerely,

Graduate Officer

Bill Keen replied to the letter on 14 August 1994, as follows:

Thank you for your letter of 5 August 1994 and I have passed the sample hood on to our making department in order that they can produce a hood with a plain blue lining, omitting the one inch of gold ribbon.

As I will be away shortly, I have asked them to make a special effort to get this pushed through next week, although the majority of staff are on holiday, and if they are able to do this I will be able to send it up to you fairly quickly. If not they will start work on it week commencing 23 August when they return.

We hope that this will be convenient for your plans and that you will be able to make a fairly speedy decision once you have the final sample.

Yours sincerely,

Bill

W R Keen

Managing Director.

The sample came back two days later and was adopted. The academic dress for diplomates is therefore:

### *Diplomas*

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord.

Hood: Dark blue polyester faced inside with 3" light blue terylene wool.

### **A new publication**

By the time that *Academical Dress of British and Irish Universities*, Dr George Shaw's second edition of his work, was published in 1995, an entry for the Open University had been included, and records the changes to the scheme of dress proposed by Thornton-Pett.

The book contains many inaccuracies but nevertheless is an important contribution to the published works, containing as it does, listings for several new universities.<sup>62</sup>

### **New awards**

Following Bill Keen's sudden death in 1996, correspondence between Ede & Ravenscroft, Chancery Lane, and the Open University was continued by Compton de Souza, an assistant in the ceremonies' office. The Assistant Registrar wrote to Ede & Ravenscroft on 19 August 1996.

Dear Mr de Souza,

I am writing to request samples of academic hoods which are described below, for four new awards being offered by the Open University: MMath, MEng, EdD and D.Clin.

<sup>62</sup> The distinguished author, meanwhile, had been admitted to hospital for major surgery and was mortified that his volume had been published without the extensive proofing he had planned.

Psychol (a validated award).<sup>63</sup> These samples will be presented at the University's Council on 20 September 1996 for their approval, therefore it would be most helpful if we could have the samples well in advance of this date. The hoods will be used with existing undergraduate<sup>64</sup> and doctorate gowns.

We require the following samples.

(a) Open University taught (or practice-based doctorate).

Full shape,<sup>65</sup> gold panama hood which is fully lined with light blue.

(b) Validated taught (or practice-based) doctorate.

Full shape, gold panama fully lined and edged with cream brocade hood.

(old CNAAs higher doctorate hood).

(c) Open University taught MMath and MEng.

Full shape, gold panama faced 3" inside light blue hood.

(d) Validated MMath and MEng.

Full shape, gold panama fully lined with turquoise and edged in white hood (old CNAAs MEng hood).

Thank you for your help with this matter.

## Ready for the Millennium

By 1998 new degrees had been added to the OU scheme of dress and some new, man-made fabrics were introduced. The scheme of academic dress looked like this:

### Diploma (Dip HE).

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord or polyester

Hood: Dark blue polyester, faced inside the cowl with 3" light blue terylene wool.

### Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science (BA/BSc)

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord or polyester.

Hood: Light blue, faced inside the cowl with 3" gold silk.

### Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil)

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord or polyester.

Hood: Royal blue, faced inside the cowl with 3" gold silk.

### Master of Mathematics/Master of Engineering (MMath/MEng) (Taught)

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord or polyester.

Hood: Gold wool Panama faced inside the cowl with 3" light blue terylene wool.

### Master of Mathematics/Master of Engineering (MMath/MEng) (Validated)\*

Gown: Dark blue Russell cord or polyester.

Hood: Gold Panama lined turquoise. Bound 1" inside and outside with white. Top edge of neckband bound white.

### Post Graduate Diploma (DipPG)

Gown: Light blue terylene wool.

Hood: Dark blue polyester, faced inside the cowl with 3" light blue terylene wool.

---

<sup>63</sup> Established in 1992, the Open University Validations Partnerships took over from the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAAs) and validates around 390 programmes in over forty partnership institutions worldwide through its Open University Validation Service (OUVS). /

<sup>64</sup> This is confusing university-speak for the bachelors' gown.

<sup>65</sup> 'Full shape' in (a) and (c) refers to the [f1] shape, whereas in (b) and (d) it refers to the CNAAs shape, a version of the Aberdeen shape [a1]. Whether the [a1] shape may be regarded as a full shape is a matter of dispute.

Master of Arts/Master of Science (MA/MSc) (Taught Masters)

Gown: Light blue terylene wool.

Hood: Dark blue polyester lined and bound 3/8" around the cape and cowl with gold silk. Neckband lined and bound 3/8" gold.

Master of Business Administration (MBA)

Gown: Light blue terylene wool.

Hood: Dark blue polyester lined and the cape bound 1" gold. Cowl bound 1" inside and 3/8" outside with light blue terylene wool continuing around top edge of neckband. Bottom edge bound 3/8" gold.

Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

Gown: Light blue terylene wool.

Hood: Light blue terylene wool lined and bound around cape and cowl 3/8" gold.

Master of the University (MUniv)

Gown: Light blue terylene wool.

Hood: Gold wool Panama lined and bound 1" around cape and cowl with royal blue silk taffeta.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Robe: Royal blue wool Panama with 3" facings of gold silk.

Hood: Royal blue Panama, lined and bound around cape and cowl with 1" gold silk.

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Robe: Royal blue wool Panama with 3" facings of gold silk.

Hood: Gold wool Panama lined and bound around cape and cowl with 1" light blue silk.<sup>66</sup>

Doctor of Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy)\*

Robe: Royal blue wool Panama with 3" facings of gold silk.

Hood: Gold wool Panama lined and bound around cape 1" cream brocade. Cowl edge bound 1" inside and outside with light blue terylene wool continuing around the top edge of the neckband.

Doctor of Letters (DLitt)

Robe: Royal blue wool Panama with 5" facings of gold silk.

Hood: Gold wool Panama lined royal blue silk.

Doctor of Science (DSc)

Robe: Royal blue wool Panama with 5" facings of gold silk.

Hood: Gold wool Panama lined light blue silk.<sup>67</sup>

Doctor of the University (DUniv)

Robe: Gold wool Panama with 5" facings of royal blue silk.

Hood: Royal blue wool Panama, lined and bound around cape and cowl 1" with light blue silk taffeta.

\* These degrees are validated by the OU (see fn. 63) but the hoods are those of the former Council for Academic Awards (CNA) 1963–92 and were made in a version of the Aberdeen shape [a1] (see Fig. 18).

<sup>66</sup> It is curious, perhaps, that the Doctor of Education (EdD) should have been given a gold hood, like the higher doctors, when the PhD has the royal blue hood

<sup>67</sup> Note that the binding around cape and cowl is not mentioned.



**Fig. 18. Open University hood for validated awards.**



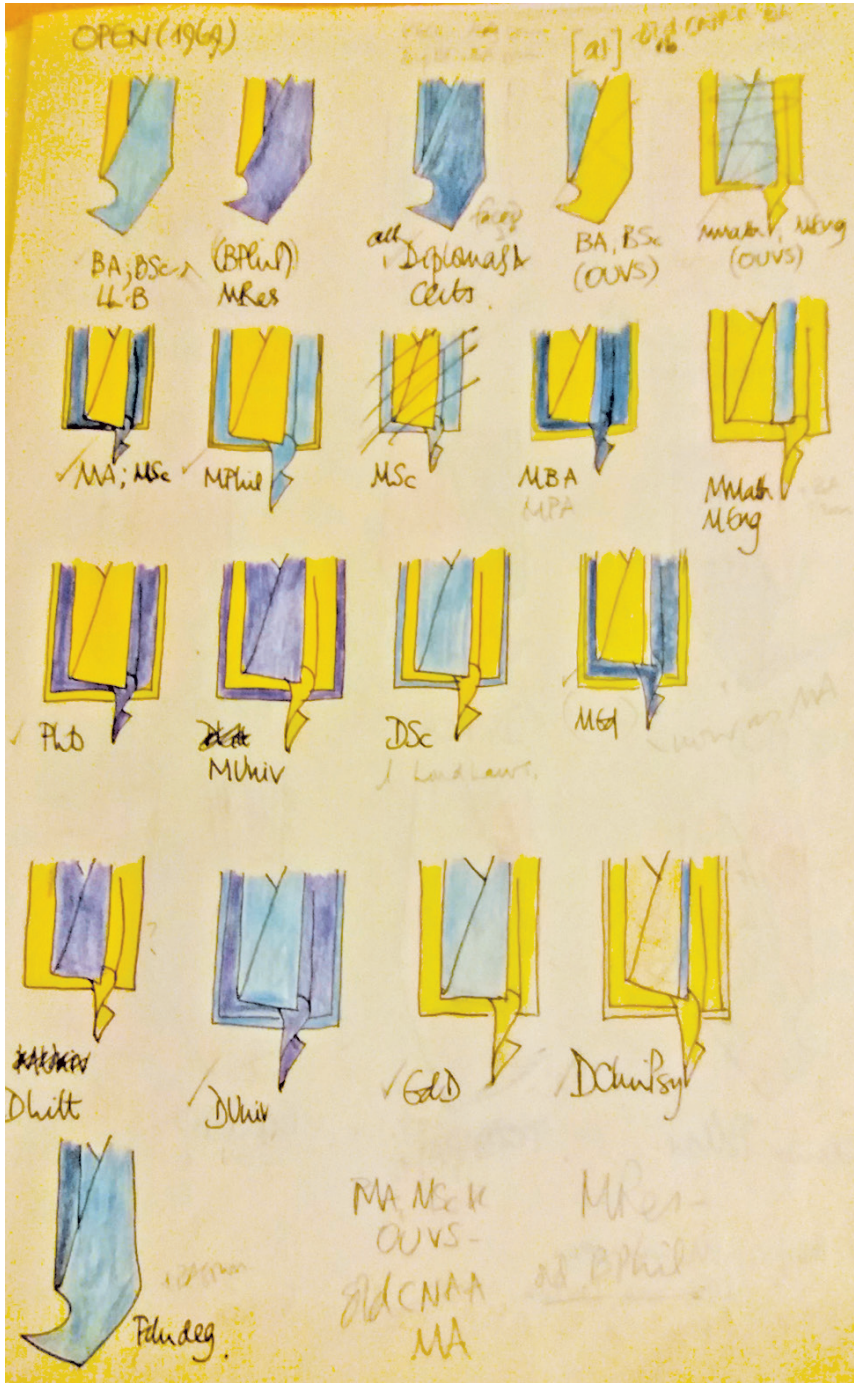


Fig. 19. Open University hoods drawn by Nicholas Groves between 1991 and 1996.



**Fig. 20. Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of the University, and Vice-Chancellor.**

### Foundation degrees

Finding information about the introduction of academic dress for these degrees had appeared fruitless until Matthew Taylor,<sup>68</sup> archive assistant at the OU, found the following OU Council minute of December 2003. It refers to ‘proposed colours for Foundation Degree graduation’:

Academic Dress – it has been agreed that the University should prescribe a form of academic dress for the award of the Open University and Open University Validated Foundation Degree. It is recommended that the prescribed form of academic dress should be:

Gown – dark blue gown as currently worn by Bachelors graduates.

Hood – Simple shape, light blue faced 3” inside dark blue which continues onto the top of the neckband.

A sample provided by Ede & Ravenscroft, the University’s gown manufacturers is submitted for the Council’s examination.

Matthew Taylor also provided help in dating the introduction of the degrees: ‘So if that is being discussed in late 2003 one would assume that Foundation Degrees were introduced at the OU not long after the government introduced them in September 2001? This hopefully narrows it down a little at least.’

### Comings and goings

By the time that the 3rd edition of Shaw was published in 2011<sup>69</sup> the academic dress scheme of the OU had been tidied up somewhat: new degrees were assigned to existing dress and, as mentioned above, new dress added for Foundation degrees. The Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree had been dropped and the outfit reassigned to the Master of Research (MRes); the Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree was given the same dress as the BA/BSc; the Master of Laws (LLM), was given the same dress as the MA/MSc/MEd;<sup>70</sup>

68 I am grateful to Mr Taylor for his kind help in finding this information. The minute is reproduced as written.

69 Nicholas Groves, ed., *Shaw’s Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn (London: Burgon Society, 2011).

70 See Fig. 21, the illustration of the earlier MEd hood, with white binding around the cowl.

the Master of Public Administration (MPA) was assigned the same dress as the Master of Business Administration (MBA); and the hood for first degree Masters: Master of Mathematics (MMath) and Master of Engineering (MEng) added to the scheme. The OU's academic dress had changed from its degree specific origins into much more of a grade specific system and is now set up so that new degrees can be slotted into existing categories. It remains an attractive scheme but the insertion of later degrees has lessened its relational logic somewhat.

We can see the comings and goings of the hoods of the OU scheme in Nicholas Groves' illustration in Figure 19, begun in 1991 and revised as new information came to hand, for example, he added the MBA drawing after 1992; the diploma hood in 1994; and the MMath/MEng, DCLinPsy and EdD hoods in 1996 and the DLitt illustration has lost its binding.

### Fellows of the Open University

Dress for Honorary Fellows of the University was introduced in 2013. They were assigned the robe of the Doctor of the University (DUniv), namely a gold wool Panama robe with 5" facings of royal blue silk. In March 2013 a sash or 'stole' was added to be worn with the robe and this is gold edged blue and with the OU logo at the ends as can be seen in Figure 21.

### OU academic dress fifty years on

The academic dress of the OU is attractive and distinctive when hoods and gowns are seen together and the colours of the gowns, for the various degrees, have preserved a reasonable logic. Indeed, it is to the gowns that one must look to crack the dress code because the additions to degrees in the scheme over the years have played havoc with the relational logic of the hoods. For example, the MRes was given the old BPhil simple shape [s1] hood, and whilst this surely has allowed the recycling of the BPhil hoods, it is odd given that all the other masters (even those awarded as first degrees such as the MMath/MEng) use the full-shaped hood [f1]. In the early system bachelors had a light blue hood; masters a dark or light blue hood; the PhD was royal blue and higher doctors had gold except for the DUniv (awarded *honoris causa*) which was dark blue. Moreover the EdD has the DSc hood without any binding whilst the MUniv has the DLitt hood with binding around cape and cowl

Now the scheme looks confusing: the first degrees MMath/MEng have a gold hood, previously reserved for higher doctors (and the MUniv, awarded *honoris causa*). One might have expected the MUniv to have the blue hood and the DUniv to have the gold. As noted previously, the professional doctorate, the EdD (since 2019 sharing its hood with the Doctor in Health and Social Care (DHSC)), also has a gold hood but the PhD hood is royal blue.

Although the Open University does not publish official dress regulations it does have some helpful illustrations on its website.

Figure 23 illustrates present-day Open University academic dress but note that it doesn't show the robes for higher doctors' degrees: Doctor of Science (DSc) and Doctor of Letters (DLitt); but does show the robe and hood for the Doctor of the University (DUniv).

### Age shall not weary them

When I went to university in 1970 there were forty-two of them in the United Kingdom and I had memorized most of their schemes of academic dress without much difficulty, which is why, from the age of fifteen I had worked at various robemaking companies during

# THE OPEN UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC DRESS



Fig. 21. Open University academic dress showing the Fellow's gown and sash (bottom left).

my school holidays and assisted at presentation ceremonies. Aside from the novelty value of having someone around with enthusiasm for the subject, there was good practical sense in employing someone who might instantly know what a customer was looking for. Additionally, I knew most of the Indian, Canadian and South African schemes of dress in existence at the time and some of the more interesting US academic dress although I never could muster huge interest in the Intercollegiate Code with its gaudy chevrons and wide facings of faculty coloured velvet.<sup>71</sup> At the start of 2020, as I write this, there are around 130 universities in the UK and perhaps hundreds of other non-university institutions that prescribe dress for their fellows and members.<sup>72</sup> Despite having designed academic dress for several new universities and other institutions, I long since stopped learning the details by heart and suspect that I couldn't now even if I wished to. This is due in part to age and a diminishing capacity for learning long lists of things but also because of the sheer number of new universities with ever-expanding lists of the degrees they award, often with discrete items of dress in different colour combinations. There are other reasons too: the wonderful textiles woven and used in my youth have been almost completely replaced with modern man-made fabrics which seem far less attractive and with rare exceptions the garments lack the cut, look and feel of those made in earlier times. Perhaps also the Christmas factor plays a part: the memories of youth retain a special charge which gets lost somewhat as we get older. Finally, and to be blunt, I find some latter-day academic dress really boring (my own designs excepted, of course!).

For now, each university in the UK has its own scheme of dress although revising it seems to be a growing trend.<sup>73</sup> A few even share academic dress for joint awards.<sup>74</sup> Admittedly there has been some unintentional overlap but widespread duplication of colour and shape has thus far been avoided. Within the overall picture of academic dress in the UK the Open University system is neat, attractive, easy to recognize, and should continue to age well for at least another fifty years. The same cannot be said for some other universities, however, and I expect some more complete overhauls to follow. It is an interesting thought that the academic dress of our oldest universities (with one or two rather odd recent innovations to their panoply of costumes) seems timeless and fresh in every new generation whereas, as with buildings, some of the newer designs already look jaded or inappropriate. Perhaps the time will come when the UK will adopt a system such as that in the USA with standard features to denote the degree, subject, level and institution but with the ancient universities opting out. This idea has indeed been thought about by academic dress enthusiasts from time to time and who knows if it will ever come to pass?<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, here's to fifty very successful years of blue and gold!

## Official Dress

The Open University also prescribes handsome robes for its officers. The originals were made by Ede & Ravenscroft in its Chancery Lane workroom, for the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor, Treasurer and Secretary (Registrar). The robes of the principal offi-

---

<sup>71</sup> Now referred to as 'The Academic Costume Code' published by ACE (the American Council on Education). <[www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Academic-Costume-Code.aspx](http://www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Academic-Costume-Code.aspx)>. See also: Stephen L. Wolgast, *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 9–37, doi 10.4148/2475-7799.1070.

<sup>72</sup> <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_universities\\_in\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_universities_in_England)>.

<sup>73</sup> The University of Sussex for example.

<sup>74</sup> Such as Exeter and Plymouth.

<sup>75</sup> Nicholas Groves, 'Towards a Standard Terminology for Describing Academic Dress', *Burgon Society Annual 2001*, pp. 9–12.



**Fig. 22. Senior OU staff on the occasion of the installation of Betty Boothroyd as Chancellor at the Open University degree ceremony held at Birmingham on 18 March 1995. Back row L-R: Lord Perry of Walton (Former Vice-Chancellor); Joe Clinch (University Secretary); Keith Todd (University Treasurer); Sir John Horlock (Former Vice-Chancellor). Front row L-R: Baroness Carnegy of Lour; Sir Kenneth Berrill (Pro-Chancellor); Baroness Boothroyd (Chancellor); Sir John Daniel (Vice-Chancellor); Lord Briggs (Former Chancellor). Baroness Carnegy of Lour is, in fact, wearing her University of Dundee LLD (Doctor of Law) robes in this photograph, which blend in rather well with those of the other officers.**

cers are made from a high-quality indigo blue silk satin damask<sup>76</sup> sometimes called ‘Chan-cery’ which has a floral pattern. The same pattern, but in black silk satin, is often seen in the robes of the great officers of state. The Treasurer’s robe is made from Indigo blue silk without any pattern.

A faint note, from the late 1960s, in the robemaker’s work-book, shed some light on the origin of the silks used to make the Open University officers’ robes. It reads ‘Warners Indigo Blue Carabinees’. A quick internet search for ‘Carabinees’ was fruitless but a search for ‘Warners’ led to much information about the silk weaving company, Warner & Sons.

<sup>76</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gives: Damask, patterned textile, deriving its name from the fine patterned fabrics produced in Damascus (Syria) in the European Middle Ages. True damask was originally wholly of silk, but gradually the name came to be applied to a certain type of patterned fabric regardless of fibre. Single damask has one set each of warps and wefts, or fillings, and may be woven in one or two colours; compound or double damask has a greater number of fillings. Damask is woven on a Jacquard loom, the satin field being produced by floats of warp that pass over from two to seven and in some instances nine fillings. The design is a plain or taffeta weave, the warp and filling being at right angles that create less lustre than the satin areas (15th edn, 1985–2010).



Fig. 23 (left).  
Baroness Lane  
Fox, Chancellor.  
Below, the Open  
University logo.



Fig. 24. Professor Tim Blackman,  
Vice-Chancellor.

The website tells us that ‘the Warner family’s connections with the textile industry date back at least to the late seventeenth century, when William Warner worked as a scarlet dyer in Spitalfields, London.’ Subsequently, through a series of shrewd acquisitions, the company gained a Royal Warrant and produced fabrics for embassies, palaces, coronations, investitures and weddings around the world. It was a pleasure to discover that after weaving ceased in 1971 its textile archive was preserved and is now administered by the Braintree District Museum Trust which actively encourages education and research.<sup>77</sup> A conversation with Paul Beard, the archivist, confirmed that Ede & Ravenscroft had ordered 20 yards of the Indigo blue silk satin damask on 29 December 1970 and that it was specially woven. He was also able to clear up the mystery of the fabric’s name, which, it turns out, is ‘Carabinese’.

It is interesting to see that such an avant-garde institution as the Open University decided to have high quality traditional robes for its officers that were as good, if not better, than those at any other university.

### *Chancellor*

The Chancellor’s robe is of indigo blue silk satin damask of the QC shape<sup>78</sup> with 3” gold plate lace on the front facings, around the cape collar, hem, bottom of sleeves and along the back slit forming a diamond pattern at the top. The T-shaped sleeve cuts and the embroidered wings are edged with  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” gold plate lace. The sleeve cuts are decorated on either side and above with a raised cloth of gold badge which suggests a broadcast symbol. The wings of the robe are decorated similarly with three badges, on either side. The front facings have gold and blue badges on either side at the breast in the form of the Open University logo (see Figs 22 and 23).

<sup>77</sup> See <[www.warnertextilearchive.co.uk](http://www.warnertextilearchive.co.uk)>.

<sup>78</sup> Similar to the Cambridge Doctor of Law (LLD) undress gown [d4] (without lace but with back slit).

### *Vice-Chancellor*

The Vice-Chancellor's robe is of indigo blue silk satin damask of the QC shape with 3" gold plate lace on the front facings, around the cape collar, hem, bottom of sleeves and along the back slit. The T-shaped sleeve cuts and the wings are edged with ¾" gold plate lace. The sleeve cuts are decorated above, on either side, with a raised cloth of gold badge which suggests a broadcast symbol. The front facings have gold and blue badges on either side at the breast in the form of the Open University logo (see Fig. 24).

### *Pro-Chancellor*

The Pro-Chancellor's robe is of indigo blue silk satin damask of the QC shape with 3" gold plate lace on the front facings, around the cape collar, hem, bottom of sleeves and along the back slit. The T-shaped sleeve cuts and the wings are edged with ¾" gold plate lace. The sleeve cuts are decorated above, on either side, with a raised cloth of gold badge which suggests a broadcast symbol. The front facings have gold and blue badges on either side at the breast in the form of the Open University logo (see Fig. 22).

### *Treasurer and Secretary (Registrar)*

The Treasurer's robe is of Indigo blue silk of the QC shape with 1⅞" gold oak leaf lace on the front facings, around the cape collar, hem and bottom of sleeves. The T-shaped sleeve cuts and the wings are edged with ¾" gold oak leaf lace. The sleeve cuts are decorated above, on either side, with a raised cloth of gold badge which suggests a broadcast symbol. The front facings have gold and blue badges on either side at the breast in the form of the Open University logo (see Fig. 22).

## **Acknowledgements**

The early Council minutes of the Open University are not accessible to the public; nevertheless, corresponding with the Open University has been a pleasure and members of staff, both in the registry and the University library, particularly Matthew Taylor, Archive Assistant, have been most helpful and patient in providing answers to my enquiries, where possible. I should like to thank the University Secretary for permission to quote from correspondence and to use photographs and extracts from the University website. All extracts and illustrations from OU sources are © the Open University.

I am grateful to Dr Daniel Weinbren, Curriculum Manager, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, in the Open University, for permission to include the extract from his blog.

Thanks are due to Dr Nicholas Groves, FBS, for finding his copy of the 1976/7 edition of *Pears' Cyclopaedia*; for allowing me to use his sketches of Open University hoods; his letter from Bert Batteson and for productive discussions about the timeline of OU dress.

Professor Bruce Christianson, FBS, always has something positive to say by way of criticism and I should like to thank him for several careful readings of this article. Several of his suggestions have led to improvements to the text. Professor Stephen Wolgast, FBS, the Editor, is ever patient and tolerant of endless tweaking and revision.

I am grateful to the Chairman of Ede & Ravenscroft for giving his permission to quote from letters and work-books relating to the Open University and to the Ede & Ravenscroft Archivist, Gemma Field, for providing me with information that has assisted in constructing a reasonable timeline of OU dress.