



RT HON CHRIS SMITH MP
Labour Member of Parliament for Islington South
and Finsbury

10/4/02

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Professor Stephen Heppell
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8 April 2002

Dear Stephen,

Ultraversity

It was a pleasure (as always) to see you again recently, and to hear about your rather exciting plans. I've since had a chance to read through the draft document you kindly left me with, and to think further about the ideas you are putting together.

It seems to me that you have included three brilliant ideas in the document. First, the entire focus of the proposal on a teaching/learning vehicle that deliberately sets out to "reach the people that normal residential universities can't". Second, the "exhibition", peer-reviewed, as the final test for students. And third, the use of mentors, many of them part-time or voluntary or with a lifetime of experience to share, as teachers. These are new, and winning, ideas.

It also seems to me that there are some parts of the vision set out in the document that still lack clarity. How does the actual learning happen?: will it be by internet discussion, by dialogue/debate between numbers of people, by the presentation of papers, by individual tuition, by testing of some kind during the whole of a course – or by a mixture of methods? It would be good to have some of this spelt out. How can the teaching or learning be guaranteed to be of a sufficiently high standard? Where are the measurements of excellence to come from? It must, after all, be more than just one number of people talking – by however sophisticated their technological means – to another number of people. And how is the whole thing to be financed?

These are some initial reactions, meant to be helpful. I'd be interested to talk further as your plans crystallise. The more I think about it, the more essential a very positive attitude from DfES becomes.

With best wishes,

Yours ever
Chris

Rt Hon Chris Smith MP

reply