ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
What does the future hold... and should we be anxious?

Win OU course vouchers!
(see p14)

RECESSION HELP
OU website provides support during downturn

COURSE TASTERS
Sample OU courses with the OpenLearn website

FINANCIAL SUPPORT
Are you entitled to help with your course fees?
The journey is just the start of the adventure

...to find an ancient medieval tower sprouting trees, see the Northern Lights from above the Arctic Circle, dine in a sun-kissed vineyard with superb local cuisine, or discover 1,001 magical places.

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Welcome

A NEW YEAR, a new you? That’s the loose theme of this latest issue of Sesame.

Whether you’re thinking of studying for leisure reasons, a challenge or maybe to develop your career options, we’ve got a range of articles that will inspire and advise you.

And to help a lucky few of you get back to studying with the OU, we have four £250 prizes of OU course vouchers to be won (see p14).

Throughout Sesame you’ll find lots of detail on OU courses: ‘Course connection’ boxes accompany most of our features, which include former students’ feelings about related courses.

We have a great article on OpenLearn, the OU website which hosts a whole range of courses to sample (some of the most popular of which you can read about on p22); and our Courses section takes a peek at the latest new courses to be produced by The Open University’s academic teams.

We’ve also looked at what financial support is available to prospective students throughout the UK (see p45) and how OU fundraising activities assist students who are suffering financial hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32). Even if you’re not entitled to financial support, you could follow Julia Akehurst. The mother of two is studying for hardship (see p32).

This issue we also speak with not one but two honorary graduates, including Prue Leith – renowned cookery expert and novelist – and acclaimed journalist John Pilger. See pages 30 and 34 respectively.

If you’ve not seen Sesame for some time, then we hope you like its latest look and we’d love to hear your comments and feedback. You can contact the team at sesame@open.ac.uk For inclusion in the Letters pages please mark your subject header ‘Letters’.

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To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243
UK first identified on iSpot website

Rare moth iSpotted

New OU nature website identifies exotic moth on UK shores...

When six-year-old Katie Dobbins (above) spotted a dead moth on the windowsill of her Berkshire home, she didn’t realise the exotic-looking creature was a type that had never been seen in the UK before. Her dad posted a photo of the moth on to iSpot, The Open University’s website to help anyone identify plants and wildlife, with the following message: “My daughter found this strange moth on our windowsill. Very keen to find out what it is... and why it is so furry?”

It was then provisionally identified as being an Euonymus Leaf Notcher moth, a native of Asia, by Martin Harvey, a researcher at the OU’s Biodiversity Observatory.

Within 24 hours of it being identified on iSpot, the species was then confirmed by the Natural History Museum and also an expert in Taiwan. The museum has now taken the moth into its collection.

Martin said: “This find demonstrates the power of the internet, and iSpot in particular, in helping everyone learn about wildlife. The moth is regarded as something of a pest in the US and Asia, but its food plants are restricted to ornamental shrubs.”

www.iSpot.org.uk is open to anyone interested in wildlife and the environment, whether you’re a science student, a casual observer or an experienced wildlife watcher.

On iSpot, users can upload pictures and share observations from their local areas, and join discussion groups and forums while learning from others willing to impart their expertise and knowledge on the site. Also see Course connection, right.

“Have you ever seen a bird, an insect or a plant that you didn’t know the name of and wished you had someone there to identify it? Or you know the name but want to share the excitement of the discovery with others? Well, that’s what iSpot is all about.

“We have a related course you can take, too – Neighbourhood nature (S159) – which is specially designed for anyone who wants to take their interest in natural history a step further.”

Jonathan Silvertown, the OU’s Professor of Ecology

Registration of S159 closes 12 February for a start the same month.

Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 for more information.
Welcome pack

New OU design course

What would you create with masking tape, a T-shirt and a pencil?

The welcome pack of new creativity course U101 will receive a number of novel additions in their welcome pack, including a roll of masking tape, a paper bag, a pencil, and even a T-shirt to customise. But why?

“It’s designed to challenge our students and get them to think of creative applications for objects that will be familiar to them. The pack also represents the values behind the course: good design, playfulness and of seeing the unfamiliar in the familiar,” said Course Team Chair Peter Lloyd.

“A large element of becoming a design thinker is encouraging playfulness for creativity. Many of U101’s practical activities have a lively but challenging and satisfying aspect to them.

“The course seeks to draw out people’s natural creativity so they can apply it to many areas, such as teaching, local government, management, domestic life and, of course, the creative industries.”

Course connection

Design thinking: creativity for the 21st century (U101) registration closes 22 January for a 6 February start. For more info, call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.open.ac.uk/2010

Biggest challenge of our time

New environment book

OU community crafts new key text...

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40th celebration

An OU first!

Shetland celebrates

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Swine flu advice

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY has launched a new website which offers advice for any students who find themselves with swine flu.

The website, which can be found at www.open.ac.uk/studentservices/flu offers advice on what to do if you fall behind in your studies and what actions to take if you can’t hand in a TMA/ CMA or attend an exam.

To find out more about courses, go to www.open.ac.uk/start

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Just in...

TRIBUTES HAVE BEEN paid to former Open University Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley, who retired on 30 September.

At a reception at the OU’s headquarters at Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, University Secretary Fraser Woodburn said she has made “a huge contribution to this institution and left it in fine shape.”

Among her achievements, he listed commitment to social justice and diversity, her strategic and open forums that brought world-class thinkers to the OU, and her transformation of the University’s approach to strategic planning.

She has also reinvigorated the OU’s international role and re-established it as a world leader in open and distance learning through initiatives such as OpenLearn, and succeeded in putting part-time higher education and its funding on the political agenda.

Professor Gourley said in her farewell speech to staff: “The Open University has been for me a marvellous site of opportunity, a large canvas. I think most of us working here believe ourselves to be part of a larger endeavour, and we are.”

She added: “The Open University is in a particularly good position in this world. It has both the knowledge and the competence to extend its reach in a world hungry for education.

“Its credentials are strong and its quality, in my opinion, is unmatched.”

A History of Scotland

BBC/OU CO-PRODUCTION
A History of Scotland was nominated for Best Factual Series at Scotland’s BAFTAs. The 10-part series, presented by Neil Oliver, is a co-production between BBC Scotland and the OU.

TMA cut-off time

WITH EFFECT FROM 25 December, the cut-off time for tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) will change to 12 noon. This means that you no longer have until midnight to submit your assignment. This brings the policy for TMAs into line with end-of-course assessments (ECAs).

Arab OU expansion

THE ARAB OPEN University (AOU) is to open branches in Palestine and Yemen. With these additions, AOU will total nine branches, as it currently operates in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The University plans on opening further branches in Sudan and Syria in the future.

Tributes to Professor Gourley

Praise for ‘huge contribution’ to OU

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Student award win

OU student named joint Healthcare Assistant of the Year

OU STUDENT NATALIE Rowles has jointly won the Healthcare Assistant of the Year category in the 2009 Nursing Standard Nurse Awards.

Natalie, a Healthcare Assistant in Continuing Care at Gwent Healthcare Trust based at County Hospital in Pontypool, won the award for her holistic approach in caring for a young girl with cerebral palsy, epilepsy and learning difficulties. Not only does Natalie administer various medical procedures, she also ensures that her client enjoys a range of social activities. Natalie also instigated the redesign of her client’s home to aid her care.

Natalie, who has just completed An introduction to health and social care (K101), said: “Winning the Nursing Standard award is an honour. I hope that I may be a good example that Healthcare Support Workers are starting to be embraced as part of the nursing family.

“Studying with the OU sounds very scary, and that’s what I thought when I first started – but that could not be further from the truth. Studying with the OU is an enjoyable experience and enables you to learn while in the comfort of your own home. If I can do it then anyone can!

“My plans for the future are to complete Starting with maths (Y162) and then I’m starting my nursing training at Glamorgan University in March.”

HSC Faculty celebrates

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A whole new world

The development of a Virtual Microscope at The Open University will enable students to view high-quality images of rock samples online at a previously impossible resolution...

students can explore and enjoy many different rock types online, and the Science Faculty is digitally capturing new rocks for future use. The slides are of very high quality and the student experience is in some ways better than with traditional microscopes. Disabled students, who may have difficulty operating a microscope's controls or have visual impairments, can also benefit from the web-based microscope.

Simon Kelley, Professor of Isotope Geochemistry, said: “Students are able to explore the rocks for themselves, just like using a real microscope but tutors can also remotely guide students to locations in the slides, or they can use labels we’ve inserted in the samples. “We are also expecting students to tell us about things they have discovered about these rocks – it’s a whole new world of rock exploration.”

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The Virtual Microscope was showcased during the Charles Darwin Exhibition at the Sedgwick Museum in Cambridge during 2009.

On an earlier visit, OU Project Officer Andy Tindle noticed a box of rocks collected by Darwin on his Beagle voyage to the Galapagos Islands and Cape Verde. Andy offered to digitise the rocks and display them with the new technology. Working with lens manufacturer Leica, slides of the rocks were created and a Virtual Microscope with the resulting rock slides is on display at the museum.

Although the Virtual Microscope is the first of its kind, KMi Research Fellow Peter Whalley and others created a digital microscope about 10 years ago which was available on a CD for the Geology (S260) course. Now, said Peter, “my aim is to create a shared microscope so that students can collaborate or attend online tutorials, viewing the same sample at the same time wherever they are”.

You can see a version of the Virtual Microscope at http://bit.ly/3YZkO0

Course connection

Geology (S276)

“This course will inspire students by giving a new perspective on the landscape and how it has changed over millions of years. Anyone can enjoy geology wherever they go. As well as the Virtual Microscope, for looking at beautiful slices of rock, there’s also a Home Kit with real rocks and minerals, and a Digital Kit with superb high-resolution images.”

Peter Sheldon, Course Team Chair of S276

Registration closes 22 January. For more information call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243 7
Update VC interview

New Vice-Chancellor
Martin Bean
The Open University’s new Vice-Chancellor, Martin Bean, reflects on his time in the job so far and why he’s passionate about education…

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY’S new Vice-Chancellor Martin Bean says he sees close parallels between his own educational experiences in his native Australia and those of Open University students.

One of the most inspirational figures in his life was an English teacher at his former school in Sydney, who encouraged Martin to take up debating competitively. He draws a direct comparison between her encouragement and the learning experience at the OU.

“She gave me a sense of ‘I can do this,’” recalls Martin. “I could achieve in ways that were different from other people, but in their own right were pretty special things.

“I think that is what The Open University does for a lot of our students. It allows them to get back into education and it gives them a sense of ‘I can do this’. We surround people with our wonderful set of services, whether it is their tutors, their academic support teams or the educational advisers that look after them.

“I believe the OU is unique in higher education because of the notion of feeding forward and helping students to be successful, rather than feeding back and just being critical. So I draw a lot of parallels with how I was inspired to really get on and be successful in life, and I hope our students do as well.”

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Martin is the first Vice-Chancellor in the OU’s 40-year history to come directly from a corporate environment. He has spent the past 20 years working in training and education, holding senior executive positions in Asia-Pacific and Europe, and most recently North America, where he has been General Manager of the Education Products Group at Microsoft.

While he says he had to make a few adjustments after moving from the private sector to a British higher education institution, the transition has been a smooth one.

In the eight weeks prior to beginning his role as Vice-Chancellor on 1 October 2009, Martin visited all 13 of the OU’s regional and national centres in the UK. He also attended an OU summer school, taking part in a geological dig, and was a subject of a psychology experiment.

“I can’t tell you how reaffirming those eight weeks have been,” he said.

“There are many people you talk to who take a new role or a new position and have what I call ‘buyer’s remorse’. They suddenly find out all the things that no one was prepared to tell them until they signed on the dotted line.

“But mine was quite a different experience. Mine was an experience where I have come to understand the levels of dedication, service, enthusiasm and innovation that is demonstrated by OU staff everywhere. And the only word to sum that up: inspiring.”

Martin has also been appointed to the government’s new online distance learning task force announced by David Lammy in June. The task force is to advise on a broader strategy to help UK universities build on their reputations to access and engage future markets, which are expected to be worth around £15 billion. This follows his work in the US actively promoting the advancement of educational policy and the reform of education to meet industry’s needs. The appropriate use of technology in providing high-quality education is at the heart of Martin’s mission. He is particularly enthusiastic about the OU’s ‘informal learning’ platforms such as YouTube, iTunes U, the virtual world Second Life, and the University’s open educational resource website OpenLearn.

Since it was launched in October 2006, 7.2 million people have accessed OpenLearn (see p22 for more information), 50 per cent of whom are outside the UK. iTunes U has had more than 10 million downloads – more than 87 per cent outside of the UK.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Martin is interested in bridging the gap between informal and formal education so people around the world can use education as and when they need it. He said: “As we look ahead, I get even more excited because we can continue to embrace the technology of the day and open ourselves up to even more people in the UK and populations around the world.

“To me the idea of being able to knit together the informal with the formal learning will create journeys for people that the University is able to lead during the next few years.”

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Martin also challenges the image of the OU sending boxes of course materials to students who then spend the duration of the course living like hermits.

“When you talk to our students, and believe me, I have spoken to many, and you ask them to say what it is that makes The Open University unique, they will talk about a personal experience.

“It’s that relationship with their Associate Lecturer that is the experience for the vast majority of our students in The Open University. “The work our Associate Lecturers do to provide support, to create the goodwill they do in the roles that they perform, and to bring to life the magic of The Open University is something we need to guard and cherish.

“For some students it is that phone call they get from us just at the right time. They were just about to bail out, just about to chuck it in, and they get that call which says ‘you know what – hang in there, there is a way you can do it’. For some there are the tutorials and for others it is that ongoing in the forums that we create.

“However the connection is made, I was struck by the close attention we pay our students. That personal connection is extremely important.”

Visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 to find out more about OU courses.
We’ve got mail!

If you’d like your letter or email to Sesame to be considered for inclusion in the Letters pages, then please email your correspondence to sesame@open.ac.uk or Sesame, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. Please include your name, address and daytime telephone number. We reserve the right to edit letters and letters may be permanently available to read online at www.open.ac.uk/platform

GRADUATION DAY

I was one of the many graduates who received a degree in April at The Open University degree ceremony in Ireland. It was a very special and moving day for me. My goal had always been me in my gown at the Helix in Dublin with my mam and family cheering me on. Unfortunately my mam passed away in January and missed the day.

I cried from the moment I arrived to the moment I saw Roddy Doyle waiting for his honorary degree. It was by far one of the best days of my life. To see Roddy Doyle there... words cannot express what it meant to me, I am a huge fan and loved his speech, as did my sisters. I wished at the time I had a video camera to capture it.

Imagine my joy when I opened the recent issue of Sesame and saw it transcribed in its entirety. I am sure as he sat there watching all of us ‘yokes’ he never realised the impact his speech was having on me. I loved it all.

Thank you to The Open University for a fantastic day and thank you to Roddy Doyle for making it extra special for me. I will keep the memories of that day in my heart forever. (I wish I had the nerve to shake his hand.) I am so proud to have been part of the ceremony. Thank you also to everyone involved.

JACINTA DIXON BA (HONS), VIA EMAIL

Scott Russon, Editor of Sesame, responds: Congratulations Jacinta and I’m glad you enjoyed your day.

And for those that missed it, Roddy Doyle’s speech can also be found on www.open.ac.uk/platform along with more graduate day stories.

WHY THE MYSTERY?

I recently visited my city library to view some OU materials to help in deciding the future direction of my degree. I always preferred this method as opposed to simply reading the prospectuses, as I found them inadequate. Imagine my surprise to find that all course materials had been withdrawn and I would now have to visit my regional centre, which is too far away, to view them.

I contacted my regional office to enquire as to why this valuable facility had been withdrawn, only to be told by the course adviser that she was not prepared to answer that question. I am surprised that as one who is paying for these courses I cannot even be informed as to why course materials have been withdrawn.

Therefore perhaps you could shed some light on why this service has been withdrawn, or at least why The Open University is so secretive regarding the reason for ending access to course materials in public libraries?

CHRIStopher OWENS, VIA EMAIL

Mary Kirby, Office of the Director, Students, responds: The University decided to stop providing course materials in the majority of libraries in 2008. I am sorry that you were not provided with an answer to your question on why this decision was taken.

We have over 500 courses on offer to students and as libraries have limited display space, the collections had reduced to a small sample of material available in the form of course units. In a few venues the service has been retained where we have a broader arrangement with a library to hold events to let students

EYE SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE...

In the previous issue of Sesame (Autumn 2009) you mentioned a new Open University/BBC series called Eyewitness.

However, I cannot find any mention of when it will be shown on the BBC listings. Where can I find information on this programme and details of when it will be screened on TV?

MARY TILLET, VIA EMAIL

Polly Frazer, Viewer and Listener Information Officer at the OU, responds: Thank you for contacting us, Mary. The BBC gives us anticipated dates of programmes but their schedulers only confirm up to 15 days before broadcast. Thus Sesame’s quarterly issues often go to press with features about series we expect to be shown during the relevant period of the magazine.

Eyewitness is now planned for early 2010 but do keep an eye on updates at www.open.ac.uk/platform and www.open2.net
know about the range of courses and services that The Open University offers. Some of our course materials are provided to students online and interaction with fellow students and tutors is delivered through a virtual learning environment. The printed material remains a core part of our provision for some courses but is not completely representative of the blended learning approach we provide.

The University has created the OpenLearn website which gives free access to Open University course materials. This is the LearningSpace, where you’ll find hundreds of free study units, each with a discussion forum. http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/

Study at The Open University www.open.ac.uk/study also holds a great deal of information about our courses. Prospectuses are also a good source of information and can be ordered by contacting +44(0)845 300 6090. The Learner Advisory Service staff at our regional and national centres are available to discuss courses with potential students and can provide information about course content and study paths.

AN APPEAL ABOUT THE ISSUE OF APPEALING
I take issue with Barry Lees’ letter in the previous issue of Sesame regarding TMA appeals. In particular his phrase: “can anyone imagine their tutor admitting that their original mark was inaccurate?”

The answer is yes, I can indeed imagine that. As both Open University student and tutor, I feel rather insulted that anyone might not.

There is a robust set of procedures to try to ensure equivalence in marking, but ultimately marking a TMA is not an exact science. When I mark TMAs I cannot achieve perfection and if a student genuinely felt I had, for example, missed a key point they had made, then I would positively encourage them to challenge the mark. This would be a good thing – it shows the student has confidence in their work, which is a part of the academic learning process.

Tutors with the OU are all professionals (either academics or practising in their field) and part of being a professional is objectivity.

Having said that, this should not be trivialised. The tutor student relationship depends on a level of trust (in both directions) and the first response of the student when they get a mark they did not expect should be to consider thoroughly why this might be. Read the tutor’s comments, re-read the question, and perhaps telephone the tutor to talk it through informally.

Finally, why not look at the procedures for marking on the OU web pages? As a student I was oblivious to these for many years, but when I became a tutor I found out just how rigorous the processes are. This is another way in which the OU guarantees the quality of its courses in a way that outstrips many conventional universities.

As an OU graduate you can be proud to hold a qualification not an exact science. When I mark TMAs I cannot achieve perfection and if a student genuinely felt I had, for example, missed a key point they had made, then I would positively encourage them to challenge the mark. This would be a good thing – it shows the student has confidence in their work, which is a part of the academic learning process. Tutors with the OU are all professionals (either academics or practising in their field) and part of being a professional is objectivity.

Having said that, this should not be trivialised. The tutor student relationship depends on a level of trust (in both directions) and the first response of the student when they get a mark they did not expect should be to consider thoroughly why this might be. Read the tutor’s comments, re-read the question, and perhaps telephone the tutor to talk it through informally.

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As an OU graduate you can be proud to hold a qualification which has to be earned with such a high level of assessment. As both Open University student and tutor, I feel rather insulted that anyone might not.

There is a robust set of procedures to try to ensure equivalence in marking, but ultimately marking a TMA is not an exact science. When I mark TMAs I cannot achieve perfection and if a student genuinely felt I had, for example, missed a key point they had made, then I would positively encourage them to challenge the mark. This would be a good thing – it shows the student has confidence in their work, which is a part of the academic learning process. Tutors with the OU are all professionals (either academics or practising in their field) and part of being a professional is objectivity.

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TIMESCALES WERE TIGHT
I always enjoy reading Sesame but the recent issue arrived at my house late in September. After looking at the new courses on pp18-19, I visited your website [www.open.ac.uk/courses] and found that the registration close dates were also late September, which gave me little time to consider signing up. Why is it that Sesame included courses that gave readers next to no time to register for?

TERRY HUGHES, VIA EMAIL

Scott Russon, Editor of Sesame, responds: Sorry to hear your Sesame arrived late, Terry. You should have received it between Saturday 12 and Friday 18 September. Unfortunately, there were a series of 24-hour postal strikes which commenced throughout the UK during the week of 14 September, which may have resulted in your copy being received late.

For marketing reasons Sesame also mailed a month earlier than planned, resulting in the time between the mail date and course closures being reduced significantly. It was deemed, however, that 12 days was sufficient for the readership to consider studying the courses that had close dates at the end of September. Also, current or previous students are usually able to register a week after the close dates listed on the courses website as less administration time is required. This is subject to availability, so it is always advisable to register as early as possible.
OU/BBC co-production Seven Ages Of Britain sees David Dimbleby set out to prove that while history may be ‘static’, there are still plenty of things to learn about the past…

The idea is to let the past speak for itself, through objects ranging from the Anglo-Saxon Sutton Hoo treasure to the Maxim gun – all chosen as a window into the age in which they were created. Academic adviser for the series is Dr Rachel Gibbons, a historian who worked on the OU/BBC history series Inside The Medieval Mind. “When I saw the proposal for this series I was very excited,” said Rachel. “I saw that it mapped quite strongly on to the material we cover in several OU history courses – most particularly Exploring history: medieval to modern 1400-1900 (A200), which I was then chairing in its first year of presentation. There is also a clear overlap with Empire: 1492-1975 (A326).”

People tend to think of historical sources in terms of documents, but objects are also part of a historian’s remit, she says. “It is something we explore in A200. Texts are one form of source, but there is a range of visual source material. Artefacts may fill in the gaps in the texts, or tell a different story. Anyone watching this series will be learning to think about history in terms of visual sources and what we can read from them – and the skills historians use in interpreting them.

“The series is aimed at the type of person who might become an OU student – or is already an OU student. It’s not just ‘here’s this stuff, look at it’. One of the things we’re at pains to stress is that there is a strong narrative running through it. It is not just the artefact but what it tells us that’s important.”

Some of the artefacts are singled out for more in-depth examination. David Dimbleby tries his hand at making a stained-glass window in one episode with the assistance of an expert in Canterbury. In another episode he’s filmed with artist Damien Hirst in the process of creating an artwork.

Among Rachel’s own favourite artefacts are the medieval pilgrim badges which are barely noted in written records. “Medieval pilgrimage badges were sold at shrines. The fact that so many have been found indicates people wanted to collect them, like modern tourist souvenirs.”

History is a popular subject for TV, but with the number of programmes being screened, is there really anything new to be learnt? Rachel is adamant there is. “The past is static, but history isn’t. The Staffordshire hoard found last...
summer demonstrates there are still new things to discover.” And focusing on artefacts can call into question what you thought you knew, she says. “Even from a period as well known as the Tudors, by exploring the way that Henry VIII and Elizabeth chose to have themselves portrayed in works of art, what sort of image they chose to project, you can get a different perspective.”

Seven Ages Of Britain will be shown on BBC One early in the new year. Check listings for details.

Course connection

Exploring history: medieval to modern 1400-1900 (A200)

“I would strongly recommend the course to anyone who wants an overall grasp of European history and what history is about. A key sign of the interest it inspired is that as soon as it finished, I started to read other histories related to the course. I now have a much better understanding of the creation of the Europe we know today.”

Student Ian Ross

Registration closes 22 January for a 6 February start. Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 for more information.

Sanity takes a look at Nottinghamshire’s mental health services

Mental health

Matters of the mind

Two new OU/BBC TV productions examine mental health services of today and the past...

● HOW DO YOU live with mental health problems? And how useful are mainstream support services? These are the key questions posed by a new OU/BBC documentary.

The production team of Sanity (title TBC) has gained unparalleled access to Nottinghamshire’s mental health services to track the experiences of service users, said Mick McCormick, Lecturer in the OU’s Faculty of Health and Social Care. As academic advisor to the series, his job is to ensure the programmes reflect the OU’s teaching and learning on mental health.

“Mind estimates one in four people will be affected by mental health issues during their lives,” he says. “The programme will bring these issues into the open, hopefully opening up a debate which will be continued later. There is still a stigma attached to mental health issues, which needs to be constantly challenged.”

MENTAL: A History of the Madhouse (BBC Four) is a complementary programme to Sanity looking at the changing trends in mental health services over the past 50 years. In the past those labelled ‘mentally ill’ could be locked away, forcibly given electric shocks or have bits of their brain surgically removed.

“It’s not saying everything in the past was bad, and everything now is good,” says Mick McCormick. “One of the questions it should be raising is ‘Have we actually arrived at the New Jerusalem of mental health services? Or is there something more needed?’”

See www.open2.net for up-to-date listings details.

The OU/BBC website www.open2.net has information about all OU/BBC series. You can also discuss issues raised in programmes on the online forums and follow up a topic of interest with more in-depth information.
OU GIFT VOUCHERS

Four prizes of £250 in OU study vouchers up for grabs!

To help you on your way to study with the OU, we’re giving away a total of £1,000 in study vouchers (four prizes of £250). To be in with a chance of winning, simply head to www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 and click on the link to enter the prize draw. Don’t forget to submit your name, address and telephone number in the body of the email before 12 February 2010.

Winners will be drawn at random. Vouchers must be used by 31 July 2010. See below for full terms and conditions.

OU course vouchers: solve the perennial problem of finding original presents by giving friends and family OU gift vouchers. Perfect for all occasions. OU gift vouchers can be used to register on any OU course or pay towards existing course fees. You can buy gift vouchers for £10, £20, £50 or £100 and can order by phone (+44 (0)1908 858793) or online at www.openuniversity.co.uk/vouchers

Terms and conditions: This competition closes on 12/02/2010. Prizes must be taken as offered and are not transferable or exchangeable for a cash equivalent. The prize winners will be four entries with all the required details that are drawn at random after the closing date and will be notified within 28 days by email, post or telephone. Entries are taken as acceptance of these terms and conditions. The name and town of the winners will be published in Sesame, including online. The editor’s decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Only one entry per person per competition is allowed. Competition entries must be made in the manner and by the closing date specified. Vouchers must be used to register for a course by 31 July 2010.

We’ve just brought distance learning even closer…

If you’ve been away from Open University study for a while, you might be surprised to discover just how much our study style has improved.

Our continuous investment in technology allows you to do even more online, from downloading free course materials and chatting with your tutor, to submitting assignments quickly and easily. And have you seen our new presence on iTunes U and YouTube? You can now access free resources whenever and wherever you go!

“I love the fact that you can chat online in real time – if I ask a question about something I’m struggling with, so many people will instantaneously help me.”

Sarah Witts, Childhood and Youth Studies student

The innovation doesn’t stop with technology…

We’ve recently added new courses – everything from counselling to Chinese – and a new flexible study option which allows you to take a study break and resume your course where you left off.

Making learning more affordable

We’re doing more to help make learning more affordable too, with free places available for those earning less than £16,510*. Ready for your next challenge?

You’ll need to act fast – February course registration closes on 22nd January and you don’t want to miss out.

www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010
0845 366 6038

INSPIRING LEARNING

*If you are a student in England, Wales or Northern Ireland studying a 30 or 60 credit point course. For further information on Scotland call or visit our website today.

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Theo Paphitis interview

In good company

High-profile businessman Theo Paphitis departs from his den to witness how British businesses fare as they take their first steps into the markets of India, Brazil and Vietnam...

with this programme. It’s been an incredible education. It just goes to show how much you can learn by getting your butt off the chair and getting over there. As a result, are you tempted to develop business links in the featured countries? I have to say I did feel rather guilty learning so much on the back of others, but I don’t apologise for it. It was awesome. I liked Brazil, but from a business perspective India and Vietnam were incredible. It was certainly a learning curve for me and it will be for the viewer. And it was a learning curve for the companies involved, that’s for sure. What is the difference between a British entrepreneur looking at domestic opportunities and one looking at foreign opportunities? What makes anyone think they can go into someone’s backyard and kick their butts? Is it arrogance or confidence? That’s the question you ask yourself. You’re either going to do what they do already but better than them, or you’re going to take something there that they can’t do or haven’t thought about doing. So it should be confidence and a huge amount of research, homework and adaptation. So you’d have thought our companies would have done their homework...

“I’ve not had an education like the one I had doing this programme”

So I had to do my homework alongside the companies. So has it been a valuable experience doing the show? When I was approached about doing the programme I thought do I really have time to do it? The time spent in different countries; working in different time zones; all of the stuff beforehand. And you know what? I’m so pleased I agreed to do it. I’ve not had an education like the one I had big dining table and the corporates’ crumbs can be huge for small businesses, and the crumbs are definitely there to be picked up. I’d be staggered if, from the lessons learnt and opportunities from this recession, we don’t see a new generation of business people who do things differently to what we’ve always known. OU graduates earn their degrees while juggling work and family commitments. Do you think this makes them more attractive employees? There’s a lot going on in their lives, and that’s when you know that they’re going to be able to do a lot for your business.

Theo’s Adventure Capitalists, BBC Two, early spring.

Course connection

Investigating entrepreneurial opportunities (B322)

“Even if I struggled and managed to get a very tight pass, the result is that I am now earning a living from my online travel consultancy – the idea I developed during the course. I’m pretty sure the course helped me focus on what had to be done.”

Student Daniel Alonso

Registration closes 14 October to start November. For more information call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243 15
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* As many hotels this offer is not available during Bank Holidays. Some hotels require a minimum stay of two nights and may not take bookings in certain months e.g. A few of our Scottish hotels close in the winter. The room is FREE - you must pay for dinner and breakfast, all hotel bookings are subject to availability.
A new counselling course from the OU examines fear and sadness, two of the most common but distressing emotions that we experience, and explores the different ways of coping with them...

COUnselling is currently one of the few growth industries in the UK and more people seek counselling for feelings of depression and anxiety than anything else. The OU’s new course Counselling: exploring fear and sadness (D240) offers a comprehensive insight into how to help people work through these common issues.

It’s a core course in a new Foundation Degree in Counselling, developed in association with the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB).

The course is ideal for those aiming at or considering working or volunteering as a counsellor, said course team academic Dr Andreas Vossler.

“It might also appeal to people who want to develop their awareness and sensitivity of these emotions to help others, or even to those who are struggling with these feelings themselves.

“Those who sign up for the course need to be prepared to do some self-reflection,” he warns, “as well as reflecting on other people’s experiences.”

The course has been created in collaboration with leading academics, practitioners and expert in the UK, and Dr Vossler said it has been a very exciting opportunity to develop the course with a new approach.

“Potential students need to be prepared to do some self-reflection”

“We are trying to present a picture of how fear and sadness can be understood, how this has changed during the past 100 years, and the leading approaches used in counselling. We don’t just cover them in a general way; there’s a lot of illustrative material giving specific examples so students can compare the way the different approaches work.

“Fear and sadness are very normal. Everyone will experience them during their lives – they are natural reactions to certain events. But if you have a situation where they become dominant and difficult to handle, and you are unable to cope, then this is where counselling might be very useful.”

Examples of different counselling approaches in action are a feature of the course’s online Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which uses video and audio material to bring the theory to life. Students get to watch a role-play scenario of a real counselling session with a therapist in each of the three main approaches (cognitive-behavioural; psychoanalytic; and person-centred/humanistic) followed by an interview with the therapist analysing the way they conducted the session and the rationale behind their approach.

New and growing trends such as online counselling and even computerised counselling forms are covered, said Dr Vossler.

“On the VLE is an online counselling chat. It is in real time, giving students a taste of the rather specific challenges of online counselling – you might not get a response from your client for 10 or 20 seconds, for example. The waiting periods also gives them a chance to reflect on what their own responses would be.”

The VLE also features celebrities Stephen Fry and Trisha Goddard talking about their own experiences of fear and sadness, and the strategies they’ve used to overcome them during difficult periods.

Course connection Counselling: exploring fear and sadness (D240): registration closes 9 April. For more info, call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

PHOTO: Rex Features

NEW COURSE Courses
The latest information on new and exciting courses

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243 17
New courses

Whether you want to develop your career path, retrain or just wish to broaden your horizons, then the OU has more than 570 courses for you to try. Here are some of the newest available...

English communication skills for global managers (LB720) is aimed at managers around the world who wish to enhance their language skills in order to study successfully at MBA level and carry out their jobs effectively in an international context.

Course connection

English for academic purposes online (L185) begins 1 February; registration closes 22 January.

English communication skills for global managers (LB720) begins in May; registration closes 9 April. For more information on both courses call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

Mind your language

There are two new courses aimed at enhancing students’ English language skills to help them improve their academic performance.

“English for academic purposes online (L185) is a course which draws on you, the student, as an explorer, who has been tasked with researching and writing about how English is written academically in the different subject areas at The Open University,” says co-Chair David Donnarumma.

“The course is aimed at both home and international students, and draws on a range of different texts to meet these needs.”

English communication skills for global managers (LB720) is aimed at managers around the world who wish to enhance their language skills in order to study successfully at MBA level and carry out their jobs effectively in an international context.

Course connection

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English communication skills for global managers (LB720) begins in May; registration closes 9 April. For more information on both courses call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

Back by popular demand

Delve deep into music with course encore

Love music? Want to study it in a bit more depth? The good news is that the Level 3 course From composition to performance: musicians at work (AA302) is back by popular demand after a year’s break and a retune of the course content.

Course Chair Bob Samuels enthuses: “AA302 is a rich, varied course for students who have studied music already, but now want to go into it in real depth. “After 11 years of presentations, the course was so popular with students that the Arts Faculty has decided to bring it back in this new, updated version.

“You study old music and new music, music from close to home and music from far away, music from the concert hall and music from the jazz club.

“There’s something to intrigue, fascinate and surprise everyone within this course.”

Course connection

From composition to performance: musicians at work (AA302) begins 6 February with registration closing on 22 January. For more info, call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

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Improve your English language and writing skills with L185 and LB720

Whether you want to develop your career path, retrain or just wish to broaden your horizons, then the OU has more than 570 courses for you to try. Here are some of the newest available...
Scotland’s sustainability
Waste, food, transport and energy...

NEW SHORT COURSE
Sustainable Scotland (T123) looks into key areas of the sustainability agenda, including how we manage waste, how we produce and use food, our choice of energy sources, how we use IT, and transport issues. “The course also considers some less well-explored aspects including cultural and community sustainability,” says Course Chair Jacky Crook.

“It encourages students to explore issues in the context of their own area or their particular interests. The tensions between sustainable development and sustainable economic growth are also examined.”

Course connection
Registration closes on 25 January for a 1 February start. For more info, call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

Postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE)
Flexible teacher training
Train with full-time school placements

"IF IT WAS not for the OU Professional Graduate Certificate of Education, I would have never become a teacher!" So say many Open University PGCE students after they graduate.

“It’s ideal for students who are looking for a route to Qualified Teacher Status but need flexibility,” says PGCE Director Michele Deane.

“Each student is guided through a needs analysis at the beginning of the course, through which an individual training plan is created for each student – and students who have prior experience of teaching may be exempted from parts of the course.”

The training programme involves the study of multimedia materials, alternating with full-time school placements in OU partnership schools.

Course connection
For more information call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

Social responsibility
The Centre for Professional Learning and Development (CPLD) now has more than 70 CPD courses available for online study. While the majority of these courses are targeted to meet the needs of managers, some have been designed to meet social agendas. They include Social marketing (GB017), Corporate social responsibility in practice (GB070) and Sustainability at work: how to go green (GT048).

Top up to a degree
A variety of optional and compulsory courses that will count towards the new BA (Hons) Social Work Studies (B59) begin in February.

If you are a qualified and registered social worker, the OU’s Social Work Studies degree puts an honours level qualification within your grasp – and in line with government requirements that all new social workers have to be educated to degree standard.

Courses that count towards the degree include Communication in health and social care (K309), Research with children and young people (EK310) and Working together for children (KE312).

New nursing pathways
The new BSc in Nursing Practice (B53) has a new award structure with two new pathways – leadership and public health. These pathways are highly relevant to current the government agenda, with nurses increasingly taking on new and demanding roles and exercising leadership in continually changing health and social care environments.

Courses that count towards the degree include Death and dying (K260), Making a difference to child health nursing (K335) and Human biology (SK277).

For more information on all of the above courses, including registration dates and applicable fees, please call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010
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“I’ve achieved so much more than I ever thought I would, both professionally and personally, thanks to my Open University qualification.”

June Arnold, Open University graduate

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INSPIRING LEARNING
Jurassic start

How two OU graduates used their MBA experience to set up a dinosaur-themed business

Mike then went on to do the MBA, studying finance as the last part of his course which helped in his decision to go full time with the company.

The business evolved quite naturally, coming at a time when internet shopping and mail order were booming alongside the pressing need to take science into schools. And there is the seemingly insatiable appetite from children and adults for everything dinosaur.

“It’s a very simple marketing model,” said Mike. “We specialise in dinosaurs. We source products from all over the world, design some, act as consultants making sure manufacturers have their facts straight, and we are bombarded with people to work on products and stock their merchandise. We also write our own fact sheets, so they have to be well researched and accurate.

“Anyone can be a retailer, but we know a lot about the subject and it gives us a real insight. Everyone in the company is able to talk from a real position of authority.”

Mike says he has not looked back since giving up a well-paid job in the chemical industry to embark on his own business.

“People say I am less stressed now, but I have different stress. I have to keep everyone happy, paying bills and making sure it is successful. In terms of personal satisfaction it’s far more personally enriching being the master of your own destiny than being an employee for an organisation.”

Fossils and the history of life (S193)

“This was my first course with the OU and the first studying I have done since having my children. I really enjoyed it and would recommend it to anyone. The books and materials were easy to work with, I looked forward to studying, and I’ve learned lots about fossils.”

Student Jacky Pearce

Registration closes 12 February. For more information call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010.
Get a taste

Sample some of the OU’s most popular courses for free online with OpenLearn...

- **For many students** their first taste of OU study is when they visit OpenLearn, the University’s open educational resource. Visitors get access to free bite-sized units, taken from full-length OU courses, which they can study as and when they want.

  The material is made available under a flexible Creative Commons copyright licence, which means learners can share and even remix it to suit their own needs.

  Each unit in the site’s LearningSpace has learning outcomes and self-assessment activities, as well as suggested learning pathways. In addition there are learning support and social networking tools in the LabSpace, where users can access particular areas of knowledge and educational expertise, as well as join discussion forums, write blogs and contribute to wikis.

  The website has had 6.25 million visitors since its launch in 2006 and hosts more than 8,000 hours of course material.

  Below are some of the most popular courses viewed on OpenLearn and details of what you can expect from the full course presentation...

- **Start writing fiction (A174)** is a popular 10-point online creative writing course, which aims to fire the imagination and harness students’ creativity. It is an enjoyable opportunity for students to experience OU study without committing themselves to a full 60-point course. “You’ll learn about plot, narrative strategies and ‘genres’, and the course will give you a lead into studying creative writing,” says Course Manager Andrea Mills. “You will learn from the works of well known writers as well as listening to the advice they give on starting to write fiction.”

- **Portales: beginners’ Spanish (L194)** not only helps students develop their Spanish language skills in everyday contexts – it also gives an insight into Hispanic culture. The entry-level course uses the theme of a journey, taking students through a range of situations they would encounter while visiting Spanish-speaking countries, including shopping, working and eating.

  “It is a fantastic way to learn a language if you can’t commit to an evening class,” said one former student. “I’d started learning Spanish from books while on holiday and wanted to ‘formalise’ and deepen my ability.”

- **Managing performance and change (B700)** is a stage 1 route to the MBA (Master of Business Administration) qualification. At the end of the course students will gain a Professional Diploma in Management. The course helps managers gain the skills to improve their team, department, organisation or project’s performance.

  “Students tell me again and again that their studies improve their chances of promotion and getting a job,” says Course Team Chair Alan Davidson. “They also tell me they are more confident of their business knowledge and this gives them more respect at work.”

- **Essay and report writing skills (LDT_5)** gives invaluable advice in honing a vital study skill. This 15-hour OpenLearn course helps new or potential students overcome any apprehension they may have about writing essays or assignments, by breaking down the process into individual components. The free course uses instructions and activities to highlight exactly what is required from academic work and gives helpful tips to plan, structure and write assignments or reports. It takes students through each stage from preparation, planning and drafting an essay to ‘polishing’ before submission. It introduces students to principles of good practice that can be applied to any type of writing.

- **Rules, rights and justice: an introduction to law (W100)** is a Level 1 course offering basic knowledge of the English legal system. Students are introduced to the nature and function of rules and law, exploring civil and criminal sanctions; issues raised by human rights legislation; and the concepts of rights and justice. It also looks at the distinctiveness of legal reasoning and the way in which law responds to events and contributes to the development of different social, business and economic institutions.

  Senior Lecturer Carol Howells said: “By exploring the relationship between law, life and society, W100 considers how rules, rights and justice help shape the society in which we live.”
Issues in the brain and behaviour (SD805) is an interdisciplinary module which fits into either a Masters in Science programme or a Masters in Psychology. The course investigates two topics, addiction and neural ageing, and the way that different disciplines can contribute to an explanation of issues in brain and behaviour. “It is only by taking a holistic approach that we can truly engage with the cutting-edge debates about the fascinating topic of neural ageing,” said Senior Lecturer Heather McLannahan.

Engineering the future (T173) examines the idea of ‘engineering’, from design concepts to the manufacture of products. It also looks at developments in engineering methods and applications that will shape the future. Professor Mike Fitzpatrick said: “The course is a key component of the OU’s engineering teaching programme, but will be of interest and value to students studying a range of subjects, including design, environment, and information technology. “The course examines the breadth of human activity that is described as ‘engineering’ and is richly illustrated with case studies.”

Data, computing and information (M150), a 30-point Level 1 course, helps students understand the mysterious world of computer programming. The course explains the mechanisms used by computers to take on different tasks, how they are embedded into hardware and software, and teaches students how to write simple programs. One student said: “If you want to do this course to improve your chances at job hunting, saying you can program a computer (and being able to prove it) will go a long way.”

Innovation: designing for a sustainable future (T307) investigates how successful innovations emerge and how new ideas, designs and inventions are translated into marketable products. Rather than focusing on innovation for profit, the course looks at how it can ensure a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable future. One student said: “The course is nicely presented and the TMAs force you to think about what you have read and apply it to the world around you.”

Croeso: beginners’ Welsh (L196) is a Level 1 course which gives students the confidence to use the language in realistic everyday contexts. It covers a range of practical situations including socialising, shopping and travelling, as well as looking at aspects of Welsh society and culture. The main teaching text is a form of South Wales Welsh, although there will be opportunities to hear speakers from other parts of the country.

For more information on these courses and others, and to sample the content of OpenLearn, visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010
Every little helps

Since its launch in 2007, the OU’s Tesco Clubcard Partnership has helped thousands of students pay for their study. Here’s how one shopper has funded her degree…

JULIA AKEHURST IS literally shopping her way towards an Open University degree. The 36-year-old environmental studies student from Ringmer, East Sussex, has funded more than half the costs of her past two courses through her Tesco Clubcard.

“We don’t spend an inordinate amount on shopping,” says Julia, who is a full-time mother of two. “We have a budget of £350 a month for food and petrol, which is not huge, which I stick to. Also when I make other purchases, even if it’s only pennies, I put them on my Clubcard credit card.

“I get about £100 of Clubcard vouchers in a year, which if you spend it on Clubcard Deals rather than in the store, translates into £400, which all goes to the OU.”

Julia started her OU degree back in 2000 when she was in full-time work and did three years of study before meeting her husband and becoming pregnant with their first child, Toby. She took a study break, during which time she had a second child, Harry. Then after five years away from study, she says, “I realised one of my courses was going to expire. I only had four years to finish my degree or I’d have to do an extra year.”

The problem was how to afford it. “We’re a single-income family and we have a big mortgage, so I couldn’t really go to my husband and say ‘Can I have £600 for a degree course, please?’”

“I’ve always saved my Clubcard vouchers, and spent them on Clubcard Deals rather than in the store. When you get your Clubcard points you also get the Deals brochure. In the past I’ve bought a bed, and some jewellery.

“I was looking through and thinking ‘what shall I spend my money on this time?’– and the OU was there, under the Lifestyle section. And I thought ‘Great! I can finish my degree!’”

The icing on the cake was when she discovered that her household income was below the government’s threshold for financial assistance and she was entitled to £200 towards her course. “With that and the Clubcard Deals I ended up only having to pay £5.”

So far Julia has funded two courses this way: in 2008, Understanding systems: making sense of complexity (T214) and The Environmental web (U316) in 2009. For this year she has signed up for Innovation: designing for a sustainable future (T307), which she also plans to fund through her shopping. If she passes, she’ll have achieved a BSc in Environmental Studies.

“To be able to have a degree is my objective, but I will also go back to work one day and would hope to be able to earn more than doing something without a degree. I’ve started volunteering at my local school and I hope to do a teaching assistant qualification with The Open University after my degree is finished. Harry starts school this September and hopefully I can get a job as a teaching assistant – I don’t want to be too far from my children.”

Currently, Clubcard Deals tokens can be used as full or part payment for all OU undergraduate courses.

More information about current offers can be found at www.openuniversity.co.uk/clubcarddeals

Tesco Clubcard Deals tokens can be used as full or part payment for all OU undergraduate courses

£350 a month for food and petrol, which is not huge, which I stick to. Also when I make other purchases, even if it’s only pennies, I put them on my Clubcard credit card.

For those thinking of moving into youth work, or for those who are already in youth work but do not hold any formal qualifications, this course is superb. It equips you with a thorough conceptual understanding of youth work and gives you the confidence and tools to improve your practice.

“Introduction to working with young people (E131)"

For those thinking of moving into youth work, or for those who are already in youth work but do not hold any formal qualifications, this course is superb. It equips you with a thorough conceptual understanding of youth work and gives you the confidence and tools to improve your practice.

I cannot recommend E131 highly enough.”

Student Jonathan Hill

Registration closes 9 September for an October start. Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 for more details.
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(Required for credit card purchases)
Graduate interview

On police business

Frank Whiteley, Chief Constable of Hertfordshire, has managed responses to the Buncefield explosion, mass floodings and a nationwide fuel crisis. So why did he feel the need to study for an MBA?

Frank says he also chose the OU because it fitted in around his job and bringing up three young children.

“Rightly a compulsory component of the MBA programme: challenging and thoroughly rewarding – helps you to step away from the noise and detail of day-to-day operations and build up a clearer high-level view of an organisation and the context of its operation.”

Student Andrew Flint

Registration closes 31 March. For more information call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243
Crisis or opportunity?

Losing your job is always a shock, but it can be a springboard for positive change. Sesame talks to two people funding Open University degrees with their redundancy money...

AFTER 11 YEARS working for Norwich Union (now Aviva), Stuart King, 31, from York, was made redundant in 2008. He signed up for Environment (U216), and it led to a new business venture. Stuart said: “I’d done a couple of Level 1 Open University courses and hoped to do a degree in my spare time, just for interest. But when redundancy came up it was an opportunity to do something closer to my heart.

“I was keen to change the direction of my career and try to do something a little more positive and socially responsible. I’d been out of work for a few months and was looking around. I was studying the environment, and my brother-in-law works in a similar field – he owns an acoustic consultancy firm. So I went to him with a proposal to expand the existing business to offer environmental consultancy services as well.”

Stuart completed U216 last year and is about to start Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context (DU311). His goal is a Diploma in Environmental Policy and ultimately a degree in environmental studies. Meanwhile the new business is “ready to hit the ground running”, he says.

“Stuart, I’ve a long way to go with my degree but it’s helping to give me the background I need. I’ve also been doing a number of more vocational courses as well, and my OU study is backing up the theory. “My redundancy pay funded my courses and is helping to subsidise me while I get this new venture off the ground. It would have been nice to pack everything in and take a few years out to study full time, but I have a wife and a 20-month-old son to support.”

See Stuart and his brother-in-law’s new venture at www.environmentaluk.co.uk

REduNDANCY MOney

Juliet Hickling, 34, from Grantham, Lincs, had worked for the same food retailer for nearly 17 years when redundancy hit. She is studying for an OU degree at the rate of 120 points a year while supporting herself with redundancy money and a part-time job.

Juliet said: “I went to Sheffield Hallam University when I was 18 but made a poor course choice and dropped out. When redundancy came on the horizon, my first thought was ‘I’m going to go back and get a degree’.

“I’d done two OU courses a few years before, and I thought the OU provided much better value for money than conventional universities – I could see myself coming out of a redbrick university with lots of debt. I’m now earning about a quarter of what I did before.

“Being made redundant was a shock. My study put some structure back into my day and gave me a purpose. It started out as something for me, it gave me something to focus on, but I also feel I am doing something active towards my career. At my age, when you go for a job interview you are competing with graduates who’ve just come out of university and people who have years of experience. You’re going to be at a disadvantage if you don’t have a degree.”

Last year Julie completed Welfare, crime, and society (DD208), and Medicine and society in Europe 1500-1930 (A218), and is now studying Crime and justice (DD301) and Personal lives and social policy (DD305). Her ambition is to work in the criminal justice system. She also works as a Station Co-ordinator for a local community radio station.

If you’re worried about your employment prospects in the recession, check out the OU’s Outsmart the Recession website. There’s practical career-planning and skills advice, tips on growth areas and links to free courses – as well as information on what the OU has to offer. Visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

STUDYING WITH THE OU MAY IMPROVE YOUR CAREER PROSPECTS IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR WORK OR A NEW CHALLENGE
For Walsall couple Peter and Carolyn Gough, studying for an open university degree would lead to many things: a sense of achievement, a self-proclaimed opening of minds, two BA Hons degrees and, last but by no means least, marriage.

Peter, 54, and Carolyn, 58, were both divorcees when they met in 2002 at their first tutorial, for the course An introduction to the humanities (A103).

“I'd always had an interest in history,” explains Peter, a painter and decorator since leaving school. “I became more intrigued when I looked at my son’s homework and he suggested that I take my interest further. I was single with four children, and I thought, ‘why not?’”

Peter and Carolyn, who also has a daughter, first met when they and their fellow students were asked by their tutor to introduce one another. The pair happened to be sitting next to each other and soon discovered that they had friends in common.

“From that point on we went to tutorials together and began studying together,” explains Carolyn, a primary school teaching assistant who gained a humanities with art history degree. “From there our relationship blossomed.”

Added Peter: “Our social lives definitely improved as a result of studying – especially during our first course, when discussions would often continue at the pub after tutorials.

“During the years we also both made friends with other students as we pursued our different courses.”

The pair studied two of their six courses together and found that they also enjoyed discussing the courses that they were studying separately.

“We went to tutorials together and began studying together... and from there our relationship blossomed”

“My interest in history still exists, but I am interested in all disciplines now,” says Peter. “We both seem to have developed a wider perspective on life.”

Married for nearly three years, both think they will study again, despite finding it difficult to find the time. Which poses the question of how they found time for romance?

“Well, we combined the two!”

FOR WALSALL COUPLE Peter and Carolyn Gough, studying for an Open University degree would lead to many things: a sense of achievement, a self-proclaimed opening of minds, two BA Hons degrees and, last but by no means least, marriage.

Mr and Mrs Gough at the 2009 graduation ceremony in Birmingham

The road to romance

For two Open University students from the Midlands, embarking on their student journey would lead to more than just graduating together...
People Interview

Prue Leith

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start
Recipe for success

Former restaurateur, renowned cookery writer and novelist Prue Leith talks to Scott Russon about being an honorary graduate of The Open University, her love of Jamie Oliver, her spats with Gordon Ramsay and why she doesn’t like Masterchef...

PRUE LEITH BEGAN her career as cookery correspondent on the Daily Mail, Sunday Express and Guardian. She established a catering company, as well as Leith’s School of Food and Wine, and Leith’s restaurant, which won a coveted Michelin star. She decided to quit writing about food to concentrate on her dream of publishing a novel, something she has achieved four times over. She has more recently held the position of chair of the School Food Trust and a judge on the popular BBC food contest show that pits some of the UK’s best chefs against one another, The Great British Menu...

How would you describe yourself?
I would say I’m broad and shallow (laughs). Professionally, I am mostly a bossy woman. I’m a very good organiser. All my life I’ve joined quangos and committees. I think I’ve started three charities, all of them still going strong. I suppose I could be called an enthusiast.

Why did you decide to stop writing about food?
Writers have so much energy to write. I used to take Fridays off to write cookbooks and business reports, and check proofs. That used up my obsession with writing. I woke up to the fact that I had always wanted to write a novel but the years were passing by. Everyone wanted me to go on writing about cookery because it was so successful, but I thought if I did then I would never write a novel. So one day I said I’m never writing another recipe.

What tempted you to become involved with The Great British Menu (TGBM)?
I did think a lot about it. I was tempted because I like my fellow judges, Matthew Fort and Oliver Peyton. I liked the idea of a programme that was about real skill and surprise. I liked the fact that it was about excellence rather than about showing off and camping about. So many cookery programmes are like children’s TV with people bouncing around saying “wow, wow, delicious, yum, yum” a lot. I also thought it would be good for the School Food Trust because if I have a higher profile then it’s much easier for me to speak to people, such as, for example, a group of head teachers.

Do you think you’ll continue to be part of TGBM?
No, I have to stop. I’m going to be 70 in February so I think it’s time to stop. I’ve said I’ll do one more series.

There is a glut of cookery shows on TV – do you think they all have value?
No, some of them are actually damaging. I think we spend far too much time in front of the TV watching cooking and not enough time actually cooking.

On one hand these TV chefs, particularly Jamie Oliver, have got young people wanting to become cooks. It’s become cool to be a cook. What I don’t like about the television programmes, though, is that if you ask most young people why they want to be chefs, they admire Gordon Ramsay because he’s rich, famous and on telly. I have had many a spat with Gordon about his portrayal of the way kitchens work. He does it entirely for the TV. If he behaved like that in his kitchens he wouldn’t have loyal workers like Angela Hartnett. In a way he has been trapped by this persona. There is no question that he is a great chef.

Other than Jamie Oliver, which chefs would you say are good role models?
Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall because he is so extreme and alternative. Nigel Slater is wonderful because he makes cooking simple and fast. And I think James Martin on Saturday Kitchen is great. What I really don’t like is Masterchef. Though it’s fascinating to watch amateurs get so far, it’s that ridiculous stuff that John Torode and co have to go through about “cooking’s never been so tough”!

Why do you think so few female chefs make it to the highest industry level?
If you look at the catering world, all the jobs that are in the daytime are done by women – school cooks, catering companies, teaching, hospitals, etc. Michelin-starred restaurants have to operate at night. The only women who work at night are like Angela Hartnett, who are not married and don’t have children. The truth is, and it comes back to bashing men I’m afraid, that if a woman is married to a chef she accepts the fact that he is out at night and she looks after the children. If a man is married to a chef, he does not accept that she is out at night and he looks after the children.

How did it feel to be awarded an OU honorary degree?
I have a lot of honorary degrees but I am particularly proud of that one. The point about the OU is that it wants everyone and it’s not elitist. But that doesn’t mean that the academic standards aren’t there. I do think it’s Harold Wilson’s finest achievement. www.prue-leith.com

Course connection

Start writing fiction

(A174)

“This course was my first experience with The Open University and I enjoyed it very much. It’s an excellent starting point for someone who wants to go back to the academic life and also excellent for someone who just wants to keep the brain active. The assignments were original and pushed me to be creative.”

Student Teresa Rohner
Registration closes 22 January for a 6 February start. Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 for more details.

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243 31
Financial assistance

Time to strike out?

Open University students come from all walks of life and study for numerous reasons. Many are assisted by fundraising activities that provide help to students experiencing financial hardship...

Karen Train with her daughter

OPEN UNIVERSITY student Karen Train is elated. She has just achieved something she had always dreamed of – earning a BA in Childhood and Youth Studies.

Before becoming a student, Karen was a single parent and a full-time mum – attending a study with the OU, please see pages 45 and 46.

“Open university was not an option for her. So, like so many in her situation, she looked into studying with the OU.

Being in receipt of benefits at the time meant Karen was able to apply for financial assistance towards the courses as well as receiving a grant. Having researched the financial assistance available, she found it easy to apply.

“I used the funding to update my computer and fund my broadband and I was even able to put some money towards my stationery,” says Karen. “If it wasn’t for the Student Assistance Fund I wouldn’t have been able to study with the OU”.

In 2003 Karen decided to take the initiative and make the most of the opportunity to start studying while she was based at home looking after her young daughter.

“I’ve always wanted a degree and at that point my little one was only 18 months old. Some of the courses were hard, particularly during the summer holidays, and time management was a nightmare. In the summer you just want to be outside.”

To help with juggling family life and studying, Karen’s parents provided her with childcare and her mum also helped by proofreading her assignments. Referring to her daughter, Karen said: “I basically studied while she was in bed or at school.”

Karen is already a fully qualified karate instructor, but her ambition now is to become a teacher of children up to the age of 11. Alongside the studying she has been busy volunteering to gain some experience to help with her teaching.

When her daughter started at playschool aged three, Karen volunteered at the same school – which helped with childcare as well. Her support has been so valued that she has now become a key worker for some of the children.

Karen admits gaining her degree has been tough and a lot of work, but she feels so much better for doing it.

Six years of studying has now given way to planning her wedding this year and also moving house. But as soon as she’s settled she hopes to start her teacher training course.

“I’d like to encourage anyone who is a volunteer in a school and who is thinking of doing this course to go for it. I started to volunteer two and a half days a week to be able to take this course and I found it interesting and rewarding. The workload was very manageable.”

Student Russell Beavon

E111 is the first course in the new Foundation Degree in Primary Teaching and Learning. Registration closes 9 September. Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010

SUPPORTING THE OU

Many students and alumni of The Open University feel that they enjoyed their studies or achieved so much thanks to their OU experience that they want to give something back by supporting future students with their studies.

By donating to The Open University’s Supporters’ Fund, you could help students like Karen achieve their goals.

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is offering a 10 per cent discount on gift items. Treat someone to a little something chocolatey – a gift you know they will really enjoy. The discount will be applied to gift items only (excluding postage & packing).

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is an expert in capturing those ‘special’ moments. They’re offering a £200 discount on any wedding package, plus a free engagement shoot when you book your wedding with them (available throughout the UK only).

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Get great discounts on a host of outdoor clothing and equipment from top brands, including Berghaus and The North Face.

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The UK’s largest publisher of children’s books and magazines is offering OU members a 20 per cent discount on all books bought online, as well as free P&P.

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Interview

An agent of the people

World-renowned journalist, author and documentary filmmaker John Pilger talks to Richard Cooper about the pitfalls of modern-day journalism, the changes in the industry and why he thinks President Obama isn’t that different to his predecessors…

John Pilger began his career in his native Australia, before moving to London in the 1960s, where he still lives.

He is an impassioned critic of what he calls “Western economic and military campaigns around the world”, and came to international prominence while reporting from the frontline during the Vietnam War in 1967. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Pilger marched with America’s poor from Alabama to Washington; he was present when Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968; and his exclusive dispatches from Cambodia in the aftermath of Pol Pot’s reign resulted in $40 million being raised for the country’s people.

The honorary graduate of the OU talks to Sesame about his uncompromising approach to his trade.

What has been your experience of the OU as an honorary graduate, and what are your thoughts on it as an institution?

I was delighted to have been honoured by The Open University, an institution I have long admired along with Britain’s other great people’s institutions, such as the National Health Service and the National Film Theatre. What has been my experience as an honorary graduate? Pride!

Why did you choose to become a journalist?

As a boy growing up in Sydney, Australia, I sold newspapers on trams, in pubs, at the races. And I read them from cover to cover. It was probably romance at first sight. At Sydney High School I started my own paper, The Messenger which, I hasten to say, was not the crusader the title suggests. I gained something of a reputation for securing interviews with famous people regarded then as celebrities (though the word had yet to be invented). The day I was accepted as a cadet journalist on the Sydney Daily Telegraph was one of the happiest of my life; and I have never lost that sense of privilege and, dare I say, vocation, that serious journalism bestows – the privilege to be an agent of people, never of power.

How do you avoid having your work compromised?

And is it possible today for a journalist working within a large commercial news organisation to keep their integrity intact? It is difficult to maintain the way you want to work: yes, to keep your principles. But too many journalists give in too quickly, or they are seduced by the myths of an institution that flatters them by promoting them within its structures; I am thinking of the BBC. It really is a matter of will. Nothing is more precious than one’s professional independence, however imperfect.

Do you think the collapse of the newspaper industry will eventually reinvigorate journalism?

Newspapers will never ‘collapse’. As the current economic burden grows, what we may see is a return to the days when newspapers were labours of love, not merely expensive cogs in an empire such as [Rupert] Murdoch’s. People relish newspapers; look at the readership in the days that followed 9/11, even though it was all over television.

You’ve said Barack Obama has joined the unbroken Democratic tradition of hawkish and expansionist presidents. Do you think there will ever be an American president who will break from this tradition?

Not while the system remains as it is. Merely to become a serious candidate in the presidential primaries, you need to raise a vast fortune and to press some nasty flesh. Waging war on behalf of a hugely powerful military industry is obligatory.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am developing a documentary on war and media, a subject close to my heart. British and American governments are ‘allowed’ to invade countries when journalists do not do a basic job of keeping the record straight and of challenging authority instead of amplifying and echoing its deceptions. So I shall be looking at that and perhaps suggesting to young practitioners that an embedded state does not ordain them as journalists. I am also planning my first work of fiction – a long-delayed ambition. The problem with that is every time I sit down to write I realise, yet again, that fiction barely compares with fact.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking about becoming a journalist?

I would not be anything else. To be allowed into people’s lives, to tell the stories of their struggles and triumphs is, as I say, a privilege. In that role, I believe serious journalists have never been more necessary.

www.johnpilger.com
“It is now a great deal easier to use plagiarism-detection software to identify similar pieces of text”

4’s All In The Mind, retracted articles he had ‘written’. And in 1987 the current US Vice-President Joe Biden famously ‘borrowed’ stirring words from a Neil Kinnock speech made earlier that same year. Even university lecturers have been dismissed for plagiarism.

Is this need to ‘out’ plagiarists a new media trend? Well, no. An issue of The Liverpool Mercury in 1829 refers to: “Plagiarists whom we have denounced as a vile compound of thief and liar, a thief for stealing other people’s literary property and a liar for calling it his own.” And there are plenty of other examples in the papers of the day, such as this from the Belfast Newsletter a decade later: “Mr Williams has been guilty in his Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands… 20th and 30th chapters… has been taken almost verbatim, without acknowledgement, from a previous publication of Dr Lang on The Origin and Migration of the Polynesian Nations.”

History is full of examples of blatant plagiarism, but then there are lots of grey areas. As Isaac Newton said: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

All new ideas build upon the work of others and it is important to acknowledge from accusations of plagiarism, just as people in other fields, such as authors Dan Brown and JK Rowling, are today.

Plagiarism also depends upon the context: the US Declaration of Independence borrowed heavily from the Virginia Declaration of Rights and other sources, reflecting an evolution of ideas and clarity.

So plagiarism isn’t new, isn’t a result of the internet age, and isn’t always simple to define. Of course, cutting and pasting is so much easier with computers and it is easy to forget to reference appropriately. And there now exist companies on the web which provide essay-writing services. You select the topic, the desired grade and other sources, reflecting an evolution of ideas and clarity. However, I don’t believe many students go out of their way to deliberately cheat, but there are many who don’t understand the rules. Which is why it is so important that our students are informed of the complexities of good academic practice.
Charging infrastructure for electric cars

Plugging the gap

OU assists with electric transport revolution...

- THE OU is a partner in Milton Keynes’ successful application to be part of the £11m pioneering Joined Cities Plan. The initiative aims to provide a national network of plug-in sites so that people can use electric vehicles for work and personal transport needs.

- The Milton Keynes venture will provide a charging infrastructure to support 1,000 vehicles. Many of these will be hire cars, allowing people to get a taste of what it is like to drive a modern electric plug-in car.

- Stephen Potter, Professor of Transport Strategy at the OU, said: “We hope that this will be an important step in the climate change action plan for Milton Keynes, in which the University will play a significant role.

- “This electric vehicle infrastructure programme links closely with our transport studies research. The five-year project also sits in the middle of some of the long-term strategic research themes being supported by the research councils and other major agencies, in particular the cross-disciplinary themes of energy and sustainability.

- “Our participation in the Joined Cities Plan may become a catalyst for researchers across the OU to work together to be part of major upcoming research programmes,” he added.

Other news

OU research on iTunes U

- THE LATEST RELEASE of OU research albums are now online at iTunes U – the global-reach education environment. The eight additions feature OU academics talking about a variety of OU research activities. Topics include Black British jazz; the Church’s identity in the face of religious decline; search engines of the future; learning difficulties; and more. www.open.ac.uk/itunes

Global change research

- DR VINCENT GAUCI has secured urgent funding to extend OU research into carbon losses in the tropical peat swamp forests of Borneo. The swamps are an ancient store of carbon which, due to regional fires, is now being released. The research will measure the carbon entering the river system, an aspect neglected in carbon release estimates. http://cepsar.open.ac.uk/

Music to your ears

- THE OU ACOUSTICS Research Group is investigating the consistency and quality of musical wind instrument manufacture. Despite tight production tolerances, musicians are often able to discern small differences between identical instruments. The findings should help make mass-produced instrument manufacture more finely honed. http://acoustics.open.ac.uk/

Tech-savvy in later life?

- THE OU IS part of a European team that has been awarded funding to study how older people deal with new innovations and existing technology, such as the internet, in their everyday lives.

- The aim is to enhance older people’s confidence and opportunities to use so-called ‘new’ technologies that younger people often take for granted. www.open.ac.uk/hsc

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243 37
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Scholar's address

Innovate to stimulate?

Mariana Mazzucato, Professor in the Economics of Innovation at the OU and Director of the OU’s inter-faculty research centre Innovation, Knowledge and Development (IKD), asks do the best firms always win?

“Understanding the degree to which markets really do select more innovative firms is central to justify national and international policies that are increasingly concerned with winning the innovation game,” said Professor Mazzucato.

Innovation has been a feature of capitalism for the past 200 years and innovations developed by competitive firms, from the motor car to the mobile phone, have transformed our lives. Innovation affects investors’ expectations about the future growth of firms. Stocks and shares are more volatile when lots of firms compete to capture the market for the latest innovation, and innovation is often one of the sources of financial bubbles such as the ‘dotcom’ boom and bust.

Although the early ‘classical’ economists appreciated the role of innovation in the evolution of capitalism, modern-day economic theory has largely ignored it, though it is now having something of a revival.

But although this renewal has successfully brought innovation back into the core of economic theory, it has not yet shown that the most innovative firms are the most successful. Some studies find a positive impact on firms’ growth, some find none, and some even find innovation has a negative impact, possibly due to the high costs of research and development.

Research by Professor Mazzucato looking at the pharmaceutical industry has found the relationship between growth and innovation to be extremely complex. Most firms do not benefit from research and development, only firms with certain characteristics. The firms that do achieve growth are those that patent innovations, had it not also have alliances in the biotechnology sector.

Importantly, the research also shows that firms with these structural characteristics are more likely to have above-average growth. According to Professor Mazzucato: “It is not that innovation does not lead to growth, but to do so it must be combined with these other factors. These factors differ in different industries.” She said that national and EC economic policies will greatly benefit from future research that uncovers more firm-specific and sector-specific differences in the link between innovation and growth, and the role of selection in industrial and financial markets in rewarding, or sometimes penalising, innovation.

Professor Mazzucato ended by asking if evolutionary economists have been guilty of over-emphasising the positive aspects of innovation and down-playing effects such as job losses and workforce exploitation. She gave the example of the success of US firm Walmart: “It has been very innovative in terms of inventory control, store layout and distribution channels, but would it have achieved growth from just those organisational innovations, had it not also paid its workers so little?”

To see Professor Mazzucato’s inaugural lecture, visit http://stadium.open.ac.uk/berrill

Course connection

Creativity, innovation and change (B822)

“Fantastic course that’s really well thought out. The requirement to apply the course at work really brings the topic to life. It’s hard work, but fun. Approach everything with an open mind – what seems odd at first makes lots of sense in the end.”

Student Brian John Barker

Registration closes 31 March for a May start. For more information please call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010
“It’s ALIVE!”

Dr Neil Smith of the OU’s Maths, Computing and Technology Faculty discusses artificial intelligence (AI). Does AI already exist? Can AI help mankind? What makes AI different from robotics? And should we be concerned by Terminator-like creations?

The idea of artificial intelligence (AI) fascinated people even before the term was coined – think The Wizard of Oz’s Tin Man. Now grounded in the realm of science and computing, it wasn’t until 1956 that American computer and cognitive scientist John McCarthy defined artificial intelligence as “the science and engineering of making intelligent machines”.

Through science fiction books, TV series and classic films such as The Terminator, Blade Runner and 2001: A Space Odyssey, the idea has captivated our imagination as well as heightened our anxiety. But what is AI? What are the potential gains and losses from its rapid development? And is AI already here?

Dr Neil Smith, Course Chair of Natural and artificial intelligence (M366), offers his thoughts on the subject...

Tell us about your interest in artificial intelligence (AI). AI asks the big questions. What does it mean to be human? What is intelligence? Creativity? Empathy? What is an emotion? We’ll develop better and better answers to these questions as we create machines that are more and more intelligent.

AI has also been described as the forcing function of computer science. Most of the big advances in computer science have come about as either products or side-effects of AI research. AI problems are hard, and very often there aren’t any tools powerful enough to solve them. So we have to create new tools, and they often have applications outside AI. For instance, the whole idea of object-oriented [computer] programming came out of research on how people make commonsense deductions.

Finally, the more immediate problems that AI research is concerned with are fascinating in their own right. Things like getting machines to understand speech and text, learn new skills, operate as robots in the real world (and on other worlds) are all intriguing questions...

When people think of AI most people think of sci-fi film characters such as in the Terminator, Blade Runner, and 2001: A Space Odyssey, all examples of machine turning against humankind. Should these fictional warnings be taken seriously? It isn’t really in anyone’s immediate interest to create a generally intelligent computer like HAL (2001: A Space Odyssey) or Blade Runner’s replicants [cyborg-like figures].

You get far more bang from the buck by creating a machine that has a narrower range of applications, as it tends to perform much better in that domain than if you tried to get it to do everything.

But there are situations where we should be concerned about what intelligent machines are up to. Various advanced militaries are using unmanned vehicles on the battlefield and the trend is to make them more autonomous. It won’t be long before these devices are capable of identifying their own targets and making their own decisions about whether to attack them.

What about concerns that criminals would be able to manipulate advancements in artificial intelligence? Criminals will always be able to exploit technological advances for their own ends, and AI is no different. But a lot of the time, criminals can only get away with it if there are no witnesses to see them. If we can develop intelligent agents that can recognise crimes in progress, they can watch for criminal activity and alert someone to check it out. For example, I got a letter from my credit card company a few days ago. Their computer system had learnt my usual spending habits and noticed something unusual. It sent the letter to check if my card details had been stolen. They hadn’t, but it’s reassuring to know that someone (or something) is checking for fraud. Another example is computer vision systems that can spot people behaving suspiciously in crowds. At present, they can spot people loitering on train platforms contemplating suicide, but perhaps they may be able to spot muggers sizing up a mark. Whether this constant surveillance is a price worth paying is a different question.

As well as the worst case scenario examples, there is the idea that machines can aid the future of humanity. What are the areas where AI could assist? Machines are good candidates for replacing humans in jobs that are dangerous, unpleasant...
Research Focus

or just plain boring. They are also capable of performing jobs that humans just can’t, perhaps because things simply happen too fast for human reactions.

Much development comes from the military, which wants to replace soldiers on the front line with machines. Designs for new US Air Force aircraft must now come with a justification of why the task can’t be performed by an unmanned vehicle. Navies around the world are in the same position. The US Army has active projects under way for powered exoskeletons for soldiers so they can carry more kit. There’s a project to develop a robo-mule which can carry heavy items in places where a wheeled or tracked vehicle can’t. All of these devices need intelligence to control them. It’s a matter of debate whether this will make wars more humane (because there are fewer people on the front line to get injured or killed) or less humane (because there’s less to restrain people from launching a new war). Some of this technology will spin out into the civilian world. For instance, something very much like the exoskeleton is being developed in Japan to help care workers lift and move patients without needing several nurses and hoists. Again in the medical world, robots have undertaken several operations on people, because the robot has a more delicate and precise touch than any human surgeon.

Another military spin-off is autonomous cars. The recent US Department of Defence Grand Challenge involved autonomous cars driving around a town, driving from place to place, obeying the rules of the road, and dealing with other road users. Similar technology is appearing in civilian cars, which is able to anticipate collisions and so activate the brakes beforehand.

Autonomous space probes have already been deployed by NASA and other agencies. The international space station is routinely resupplied by robotic spacecraft that dock themselves. There are several probes on the drawing board that are able to plan their own actions and spot opportunities for interesting science, useful for when they’re out of contact with Earth.

I can’t see anything that will stop any of these trends in the future, and lots of reasons why they’ll all continue.

What level of AI already exists in contemporary society? AI is everywhere! The trouble is, it’s very rarely labelled as such. A lot of this is to do with the so-called ‘AI Effect’. When we see someone do something we don’t understand, like a magic trick, we marvel at the intelligence required to perform it. But when we learn the knack, it doesn’t seem that clever any more. The same thing is true in AI research. All the time we don’t know how to make a machine do something (such as identify an object in a picture), we assume that it requires intelligence to perform it. But when we do work it out, and create a machine that performs the task, people say it’s “just programming” and don’t think it’s that clever any more. You can buy cameras now that not only identify faces in a picture, they pick out the faces of your loved ones and make sure they’re in focus. That’s a task that seems to require intelligence. Less than £180 on the high street!

Intelligence is everywhere on the web. Services such as Babel Fish and Google translate will translate text in any of a dozen or so languages into any other of those languages.

You’ll be hard pressed to find a washing machine now that doesn’t use an AI technique called fuzzy logic to control how to wash and how much water to use. Computer games, particularly shooting games, use AI to control opponents. They’re bright enough to use tactics. And the scale of the gaming industry is staggering. A lot of web stores use machine learning techniques to identify patterns of behaviour in their customers. For instance, Amazon not only does the “people who bought this also bought” recommendations, it...
“One idea is to create an AI that’s clever enough to create another machine that’s even cleverer. That machine can create another and so on and so on...”

also tries to learn about your tastes to provide individual recommendations. Netflix, a US-based online DVD rental company, recently awarded a $1 million prize in a competition to improve its recommendation algorithm by 10 per cent.

What is the difference between robotics and AI? Robotics is a subset of AI which includes putting an intelligence in a body. There are a couple of things that make robotics special, though. One is that many AI practitioners have rejected the idea of ‘top-down’ intelligence in favour of a ‘bottom-up’ approach that is based on ways that organisms such as insects move and interact with their environment. Insects aren’t ‘intelligent’ in the everyday sense of the word, but they are good at doing things that AI researchers have found difficult, like walking over rough ground. Another is that some people propose that we can never develop full, human-like intelligence without the intelligence being embodied in the world and constantly interacting with it. If this is true, we’ll need to follow this approach if we ever want to develop a human-like intelligence. I must admit, I’m not convinced by this argument.

“I think, therefore I am.” Can machines ever be creative, or ever feel emotion? The real problem with answering this question is how we define ‘creative’ and ‘emotion’, and even ‘think’ and ‘intelligent’. For example, birds and planes both move through the air, but they do it in quite different ways; we say that both birds and planes ‘fly’. Fish and submarines both move through the water, but in quite different ways; we say that fish ‘swim’, but submarines don’t. Both people and computers process information, but in quite different ways. We say that people ‘think’. Do computers think? The same applies to creativity and emotion: is a machine that produces unexpected results ‘creative’? Is a simulation of an emotion a real emotion? After all, people are simply meat machines; we can induce emotional states in people by stimulating electrodes in the brain. Are those real emotions?

Both creativity and emotion have a long experience of being investigated by AI researchers. There are systems that analyse a person’s style (in music composition, say) and produce new pieces in that style. Some systems are learning from feedback and developing their own style. Is that creativity? Emotions are similar. There are robots like Kismet that read, respond to, and exhibit facial expressions; and Cog, a robot with a child-like mind that often gets bored or over-stimulated, just like a real child. Are these emotional robots? These questions are problematic because we don’t have objective definitions of ‘creativity’ or ‘emotion’. We’re quite happy to ascribe creativity or emotions to a person, mainly because we’re used to doing it. We haven’t had time to think through the implications of what machines can now do. But we’re good at anthropomorphising, so I think we’ll eventually accept that machines can be creative, emotional and intelligent.

Is the ultimate aim for AI practitioners to build machines that can match the level of human intelligence? General human intelligence, no. The goal of most AI research is to create machines that can solve difficult problems, and ideally to do it better than people. General intelligence doesn’t help in those cases, so few people are working on it. I doubt that a generally intelligent human-scale AI will come out of any research project in the foreseeable future. There is, though, a movement called transhumanism, which is all about using technology to extend human capabilities. Some of that is using machines to augment humans, particularly human cognition, and part of it is creating artificial intelligences. One of its ideas is to create an AI that’s clever enough to create another machine that’s even cleverer. That machine can create another, even cleverer, and so on until we end up with a machine that’s so capable that it can only be described as a god. Much as this would be fascinating to watch and participate in, I can’t see it happening any time soon.

Tell us about the OU course (M366) that touches on AI. It’s the one course specifically concerned with AI. It takes an overview of AI but draws most of its examples from natural examples of intelligence and our attempts to replicate them through technologies such as artificial neural networks and genetic algorithms. It’s a very hand-on experience. You don’t just learn about artificial neural networks, you build them!

Course connection

Natural and artificial intelligence (M366)

“Before I started this course I had a few (largely misinformed) ideas about artificial intelligence. Now I have a grounding in what is a fascinating field that takes in computer science, biology, philosophy, mathematics and various other disciplines. M366 is undoubtedly the best course I have taken with The Open University since I began my BSc in Computing.”

Student James Trotman

Registration closes 22 January for a 6 February start. Call 0845 366 6038 or visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/2010 for more information.
The spring issue will be available to view online from 1 March

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How The Open University opens up learning for all

Study assistance

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Allow plenty of time to apply for financial support. If you want to apply for financial support, you should reserve a place on your chosen course and send us your financial support application as soon as possible (please note that, with the exception of Scotland, this needs to be at least six weeks before the final registration date).

GOT MORE QUESTIONS?

The Financial Support website (address below) has answers to many financial support questions. If you have a question not addressed on the website, you can contact the OU by telephone or email. For contact details see page 46.

www.open.ac.uk/financialsupport

Support available for students in England and N Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Financial support available based on a single student, with no dependants, studying an undergraduate 60-point course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under £16,510</td>
<td>Full course fees paid, full course grant and help with additional study costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£16,510 – £25,520</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid, full course grant and help with additional study costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£25,521 – £27,505</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid, partial course grant and help with additional study costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£27,506 – £30,000</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PHOTO: Stock

Many people are eligible for financial support

To find out more about courses, go to www.openuniversity.co.uk/start Winter 2009 | Sesame 243
The level of financial support to help you study varies depending on where you live in the UK

Support available for students in Wales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Financial support available based on a single student, with no dependants, studying an undergraduate 60-point course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under £16,530</td>
<td>Full course fees paid, full course grant and help with additional study costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£16,530 – £25,576.99</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid, full course grant and help with additional study costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£25,577 – £27,615</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid, partial course grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£27,616 – £30,000</td>
<td>Partial course fees paid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scotland learner account of either £200 or £500 depending on the amount of study. You could be eligible if your personal income is £22,000 or less. The £500 learner account can also be used towards postgraduate fees for 2009/10 in the first instance.

SUPPORT IN SCOTLAND
The financial support arrangements in Scotland differ quite substantially from those in the rest of the UK owing to different funding structures. The OU has two main types of financial help towards the cost of University fees for undergraduates in Scotland.

Firstly, a full fee-waiver scheme offers a free place to students on certain benefits or with a low household income (currently £16,510). If you are studying a 30- or 60-point Level 1 course, you could also be eligible for our PC scheme.

Secondly, students at the OU can apply for an ILA if you have a disability, mental health condition or a specific learning condition, such as dyslexia, and are studying a course of 30 points or more (60 points or more in Scotland), you could qualify for a Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA), regardless of your income.

See the Support section of the Summer edition of Sesame at www.open.ac.uk/sesame for more detail on the DSA.

CONTACT DETAILS
Student Registration & Enquiry Service (England, Wales and N Ireland) 0845 366 6051 general-enquiries@open.ac.uk

OU in Scotland (For enquirers in Scotland, including Disabled Students’ Allowances) 0131 226 3851 scotland@open.ac.uk

Disabled Students’ Allowance (England, Wales and N Ireland) 01908 654136 dsa-queries@open.ac.uk

* Please note that all figures quoted are based on the 2009/10 academic year and may be subject to change for future years. Please see the Financial Support website for the most up-to-date figures.
Case study

Employer focus

Rhonda Calder, Head of Marketing and Diversity, Civil Service Fast Stream

Tell us about your job role. I work in the Cabinet Office promoting the Fast Stream graduate programme. I also manage and run the Civil Service Fast Stream summer internship programme for ethnic minority and disabled undergraduates and graduates.

Tell us a few key facts about your organisation. There are around 490,000 civil servants working across the Civil Service, working directly with the public, ministers and senior civil servants.

How does your graduate programme work? The Civil Service Fast Stream is around a four/five-year accelerated training and development graduate programme, which seeks people who want to make a difference and have a visible impact on society through working for the government.

In what areas of the Civil Service does it operate? There are five schemes: Graduate Fast Stream, the largest scheme, which is made up of five options (Central Departments, Diplomatic Service, Houses of Parliament, European Fast Stream and Business Fast Stream, part of the Government IT Profession; and HR Fast Stream. The programme allocates graduates to a department where they will be exposed to opportunities to develop themselves and learn.

What attributes do you look for in applicants? There’s no such thing as a ‘typical’ Fast Streamer, but we look for a passion for working for the Civil Service and wanting to make a difference.

Who can apply for the Fast Stream? It’s for people who have a degree. We don’t distinguish between recent or previous graduates, and we welcome career changers who completed their degree some years ago and have some work experience. The Fast Stream welcomes diversity, as life and work experience will enrich the Civil Service. If you are still part-way through your OU degree, it is worth looking at other general positions in the Civil Service. You can then apply for the Fast Stream via the In-Service route after one year’s service.

What kind of relationship do you have with the OU? The figures we have for 2007/08 applications for the Fast Stream tells us that there were 51 OU applicants out of a total of over 13,500. We would encourage more people who have done OU study to consider the Civil Service.

The OU Careers Advisory Service advertises Fast Stream opportunities and also the Civil Service Fast Stream summer internship offers to students who are disabled or from ethnic minority backgrounds. Representatives from Fast Stream also took part in the Public Sector online forum in March 2009 (see www.open.ac.uk/careers/forum). Also, the Government Economic Service has an entry on the careers website.

“The OU Careers Advisory Service advertises Fast Stream opportunities”

Science and Engineering); Economist Fast Stream, working in the Government Economic Service; Statistician Fast Stream, working for the Government Statistical Service; Technology in

2010 recruitment campaign image for the Civil Service

For more information, go to: http://www.open.ac.uk/careers/which-career-might-suit-you.php

Internships

AN INTERNSHIP IS A temporary position with an employer, which allows you to get to know the industry, the job role and the working culture. Graduate internships can provide opportunities for graduates to explore their interest in a particular career, make useful contacts and develop skills to help them gain future employment.

Internships have been increasingly promoted to graduates in these times of recession as a good way to gain experience.

The government has since developed the Graduate Talent Pool website as a way of helping graduates find internship opportunities. For more information, go to: http://graduatetalentpool.direct.gov.uk

www.open.ac.uk/careers
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