

SNEAKPREVIEW



Even more open  
● pages 8-9



My founding father  
● page 11



Family in the loop  
● page 14



Are we born to gamble  
● page 15



# Sesame

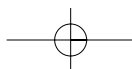
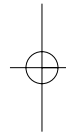
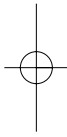
May/June 2004

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 221



Man on a mission ● page 7



# Letters letters letters letters letters letters

**£20 book token** for published *Star letter*  
**£10 book token** for published letters and  
**£5 book token** for contributions to *just a thought*

Write to: Letters, Sesame, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA  
**e-mail: M.D.France@open.ac.uk Fax: 01908 652247.**  
*Only letters supplied with full postal address can be considered for publication.*

## More TESOL?

AT the moment someone interested in getting a TEFL/ TESOL qualification from the OU is able to study course E842 *Teaching English to speakers of other languages* and to count this towards the postgraduate degrees Master of Arts in Education (Applied linguistics) or Master of Education (Applied Linguistics). However, E841 is discontinued after 2006. What is the future for TESOL at Masters level?

**Paul Carley**  
 Glyntaff, Pontypridd

### The course team replies

**E841 is being remade in a revised form and the university will continue to offer a TESOL/Applied Linguistics qualification at MA level after 2006. This has proved to be a popular area with OU students, and it is expected to be developed further.**

## Numbers game

WHAT has happened to the Open University's attitude towards pure mathematics? First there was the abandonment of the suite of four 4th level courses. The MMath degree was also discontinued. Now I understand that the main third level pure maths courses are only to be presented in alternate years in future. The reason given is that the faculty wants to improve choice in the Computing degree, and also funds are needed for two new applied maths courses MS324 and 5. So the message is clear: Computing and Applied Maths are to be expanded and Pure Maths is to be squeezed to pay for it. Whatever happened to the promised new Topology course? I hope future generations will be able to study maths for maths' sake as I have done.

**Ritchie Thomson**  
 Stockport

**David Brannan, Dean of the Mathematics and Computing Faculty, replies**

**THE Faculty serves two different markets, Computing students and Mathematics students, and we address these groups**

**separately. Pure Mathematics used to have four level 4 courses, each presented every four years. We felt that one of the courses was more appropriate to MSc level. The other courses needed updating; after some thought we decided to replace M435 with a modern self-contained level 3 course M338 Topology, scheduled for first presentation in 2006. Our Mathematics MSc degree offers seven Pure Mathematics courses.**

## We're not all PC

I AM writing about my treatment by the OU which led me to cancelling my registration for A178 *Leonardo*. The course literature stated that I needed access to the Internet. Although I have an Apple Mac computer and good conversion programmes from the PC platform, I felt however that I ought to enquire what essential material I might not be able to access. I phoned the OU Help Desk, the Regional Office (North West England) and my tutor to ask what, if any, further material would only be available on Internet. None of these sources could give me any idea. I would urge the OU to offer more help to non-PC users.

**Marion Fyfe**  
 Dunoon, Argyll

**Paul Clark, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), replies**

**WHILE most of the university's computer-based materials can be developed to run on the Macintosh as well as the Windows platform, there are significant production and support costs. These would inevitably have to be reflected in student fees. However, a number of students do successfully use the Macintosh and other computers with an operating system other than Windows. We are planning to provide information to people who do not use a Windows-based PC in a more prominent place.**

## Top marks

THANK you for the article (Sesame 219) featuring the

Student Associate Scheme. Since contacting the Scheme I have easily found placement in a local secondary school and successfully completed my first 10 days as student teacher. It has been an immensely enriching experience. I would recommend the Student Associate Scheme to students considering teaching.

**Katia Sambin Whitehead**  
 Norfolk

**Editors note: The Student Associates Scheme telephone number is: 01908 858685 or email: FELS-Student-Associates-Scheme@open.ac.uk**

## Referencing

**Our piece on referencing (issue 220) provoked a flood of comments. Here's a selection:**

THE Open University Library provides guidance on citing references via Safari ([www.open.ac.uk/safari](http://www.open.ac.uk/safari)), our interactive information skills package. There is also a guide at <http://library.open.ac.uk/help/helpsheets/cite.html> based on the style the university uses in its course materials. For students involved in higher level or project courses, we recommend the use of RefWorks or Endnote software. Whilst different academic subject areas recommend the use of different citation styles, I would welcome any move to make the process as transparent as possible for our students.

**Nicky Whited**  
 Director of OU Library Services

I AM now on my fifth OU course, and on my fifth different set of instructions for giving references in TMAs. Is it not time for a bit of 'joined-up administration' in Milton Keynes?

**Howard Pearce**  
 Bognor Regis

ONE area that appears not to have been addressed at all is the format for referencing internet sources.

**Angela Hoare**  
 Ringwood

BOTH of the courses I have studied (U210 and E300) came with guidance as to how to reference in the TMA booklet, and I would be very upset to find that I was being marked down while using these conventions because my tutors "stick to what they know, e.g. what is expected by another institution they work for". It seems that the OU is setting up a moving target for the students and then abrogating all responsibility for trying to determine what the target is.

**Claire Nurcombe**  
 Hamburg

## Appealing TMAs

**Here's a selection from our big postbag on the Fifth Column (issue 220) on TMA appeals.**

APPEALING simply means that the student wants their mark reviewed. Perhaps they don't understand the tutor's comments or feel rightly or wrongly that they have been misunderstood. Perhaps the tutor has made a simple arithmetical error. None of these reflect in any way on the tutor's professional competence.

**Niall Watts**  
 Dublin

HOW can anyone improve at anything if they are never told how to improve? When I first returned to study I remember submitting an assignment and being very disillusioned by the marks I received. About two years later, I looked back at the first assignment and realised that the tutor's comments were completely justified.

**Rachel Sharples**  
 Plymouth

IN his article 'Tutors do know best' Nathan Abrams states one reason essays fail is because "the rubric is not obeyed". Students studying the *History of film and television* (AA310) which is in its second year of operation would be delighted to obey the rubric - if it was provided!

**Audrey Pitchforth**  
 Hemel Hempstead

## Just a thought

**ONE simple suggestion you might offer John Watts (Just a thought, issue 220) who gets so-called 'writers cramp' is to use a large-diameter writing implement.**

**James Swallow**  
 Chelmsford

I HELPED the alumni at the Cheltenham graduation and made a point of asking new graduates what their degree subject was. Virtually all the Arts graduates apologised for their choice! "It's only Arts", "It's only literature" were just some of the answers. Why is this? None of the scientists felt this need to be so self-deprecating. So stand tall, Arts graduates! You have worked very hard at your chosen subjects, don't run yourselves down.

**Anne Irvine**  
 Cheltenham

I STAY in the Scottish Highlands where schools close for two weeks' holiday in October. This is when many families take an annual break. Unfortunately the exam always falls on this fortnight. My family suffer as we cannot go on holiday. My husband's busiest period is in the summer months making it difficult to take holidays then. I know of a few people who would like to study with the OU but the timing of the exam has put them off. Do other students feel the same?

**Rosemary Macleod**  
 By Kyle of Lochalsh

I THOUGHT I had the route mapped out and was confident how to get there. I embarked on my trip at midday with plenty of time to spare. The exam time was two o'clock. I had not envisaged one-way systems, major traffic and panic attacks. Finally I was there at 1.50pm! To anyone who will have to do an OU exam: make sure you get full directions before you leave your home, also a contact phone number of the exam centre. Get a map of the area and plot your route, also, give yourself plenty of time in case of problems with traffic or getting lost!

**Maxine Correya**  
 Herfordshire

**THREE of my tutorials were on a Saturday before a Wednesday deadline. I know that tutorials are not there to supply us with answers, but surely they should be used to guide us. How can this be when we have to post out TMAs by firstclass stamp on Monday?**

**Juiting Tang**  
 Surrey

## Star letter

THE OU publication 'Course Choice' for 2003/2004 indicated that AA311 *Reading political philosophy: Machiavelli to Mill* would continue until 2010. We are now told it will not be available in 2005 or 2006, that a new course AA308 *Thought and experience: themes in the philosophy of mind* will be

## Food for thought

available instead, and that AA308 and AA311 will alternate for some time thereafter. If these philosophers would come down to earth, they would discover that students plan ahead on the basis of what they are told.

**Ron Ainsworth**  
 Sheering

See the latest news on the web at: [www.open.ac.uk/sesame](http://www.open.ac.uk/sesame)  
 Produced by the Publications Team of the Open University

**Editor:** Yvonne Cook;  
**Distribution Manager/Photographer:** Sheila Forman;  
**Designer/Production Co-ordinator:** Maxine France  
**Advertising Agency:** McMillan Scott

Views expressed in signed articles are those of the contributors and not necessarily of Sesame or the Open University. Publication of an advertisement or loose insert in Sesame should not be taken to imply University approval or recognition of the goods or services advertised. In particular courses advertised by other institutions relating to Open University courses are not in any sense part of those courses; nor, in the University's opinion, is attendance at any privately arranged course necessary for the successful completion of Open University studies. Students should decide for themselves whether they wish to attend such courses. Sesame is printed on paper made from trees of managed forests or waste-based products.

**Sesame**  
 The Open University Milton Keynes MK7 6AA  
 Tel (01908) 652585 (Sesame only)  
 email (editorial only): [Sesame@open.ac.uk](mailto:Sesame@open.ac.uk)  
 Advertising - Tel: 020 7878 2316, email: [sesame@mcmlondon.co.uk](mailto:sesame@mcmlondon.co.uk)

newsnewsnewsnewsnewsnewsnewsnews **News**

# Tutor's winning tip

**W**hen Chris Payne came unstuck on TV's *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* he had the perfect 'phone-a-friend' – his OU tutor.

And it proved the right choice as Sheila Lawes provided the correct answer – and helped Chris to win £125,000.

The 44-year-old maths teacher hesitated when he was faced with a question about English poets. But he thought Sheila ought to know the answer, as she's teaching him *A210 Approaching Literature*.

"It was fantastic," said 44-year-old Chris, who plans to quit his job as a maths teacher and use part of his winnings to train as a driving instructor.

**I knew my tutor Sheila would be able to confirm the answer**

After Chris rang a telephone number to enter the ITV1 game show, the programme's producers rang him back to say he'd be on air in just 48 hours' time – and had to choose who he would call if he needed to 'phone a friend'.

"You're allowed a choice of five. It's hard to choose because you want to ensure you've covered as many subjects as possible," said Chris, from Billingham, Cleveland.

But Sheila's place was never in doubt, even though Chris, in



Chris Payne: planning a new lifestyle

Picture: Middlesbrough Evening Gazette

his first year as an OU student, had met her only twice.

And she proved her worth when Chris, who had answered 11 questions on subjects as diverse as TV, soul music and Swiss cheese, was asked to name the poet from whose work Thomas Hardy took the name of his novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

"With hindsight, if I'd thought calmly about it I'd have worked out that there was only one possible answer," said Chris, who had to choose from Robert Burns, WH Auden, Thomas Gray and Shelley.

"But I knew Sheila would be able to confirm the answer (Gray) – and she did."

Chris turned down the next question, worth £250,000, about

visual illusions artist Escher – but he's more than happy with £125,000. He's planning a whole new lifestyle – although he's determined to continue his studies. "I love studying with the OU," he said. "This is only my first year but I'm really, really enjoying it. I will work all the way through to get my degree, I'm certain of that."

And what about the tutor who gave him the life-changing answer? "I'm delighted to have helped Chris," said Sheila. "But I had urged him to call me only if it was a literature question. I'm just glad I knew it straight away without hearing the options. It must be desperate if you think you know but you're not 100 per cent. Luckily I was certain as soon as I heard it."

# Marking 'back on track' as dispute ends

The dispute between university lecturers and management, over changes to pay scales, ended in April but left a backlog of students' work waiting to be marked. This has now been cleared, but not without a few problems, reports **Peter Taylor-Whiffen**.

THE backlog in TMA and exam results caused by recent industrial action at the OU and other UK universities, has now been cleared.

The action by some associate lecturers in the Association of University Teachers (AUT), which included refusal to mark certain papers, left several students in limbo for weeks as they awaited crucial results.

But head of Assessment, Credit and Awards Ben Palmer said the situation is now "back on track".

"Every unmarked assessment has now been cleared," he said. "One of the problems was also not necessarily the marking itself, but the fact that the industrial action delayed award meetings. Most of these have now taken place."

He said he was aware that the delays caused by the dispute, which ended in April when the AUT accepted a revised pay offer, had caused problems for some students. "Some wanted to know their results before they chose their next

course," he added. "However, many students have a long-term plan and would have already known in which direction their studies would be going."

But the resolution did not come in time for everyone. Kathleen Moore missed her May graduation because she didn't have the results of her final 10-point course, despite submitting her work in January.

**Two students were unable to be given their degree**

"I was told I would get my results by the middle of February, which came and went," said the Chesterfield-based student. "Then I was told it would be the middle of March, the end of March, the beginning of April and all of these dates came and went. I'd paid for my

graduation gown, the photographers and tickets for the ceremony."

Mr Palmer said Kathleen was one of only two students who were unable to be presented with their degree. "It is important to note that the Awards and Ceremonies Centre carried out a very large amount of additional work in assisting students with the consequences of the dispute for graduation and ceremonies. That only two students were unable to attend a presentation is an extremely good result given the disruption the dispute has caused."

"I would like to pay tribute to the excellent response by staff, particularly those in the Examinations and Assessment Section and Awards and Ceremonies Centre, in dealing with the large additional workload."

Kathleen's results finally came through on the day she was due to graduate but, she said: "After all the fuss I am not sure I will bother going to a ceremony." The university has said it will reimburse her for the money she paid out.

# Funding up in Scotland

FUNDING for Scottish students is up by 4.7 per cent to just over £15.7 million, 'slightly better than expected', according to the OU in Scotland.

The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) grant for 2004/5 funds the OU for a total of 3638 full-time equivalent (FTE) students living in Scotland, including 180 postgraduates. The actual recruitment target set by the OU is 3735 FTEs, which will include a small number of 'fees only' students who are not supported by SHEFC.

Director of the OU in Scotland Peter Syme said demand for supported open learning in Scotland is still buoyant. "In each of the past three years recruitment has exceeded targets and growth rates are running ahead of institutional plans," he said. "The biggest growth sector has been health and social welfare where numbers have increased by 50 per cent over the past three years," he said.

SHEFC does not fund for growth in student numbers because in Scotland – unlike the rest of the UK – the government's goal of achieving 50 per cent participation in higher education has already been reached. Its priority is not to expand numbers, but to increase the proportion of students from economically disadvantaged groups. The OU's SHEFC grant for 2004/5 includes £201,000 for developing further education links and, for the first time, a Widening Access Premium of £277,000 to support students from under-represented areas.

Ultimately, because there is no big growth in SHEFC funding forthcoming, it may be necessary for the OU to give priority to government-preferred subject areas – such as maths, computing, engineering and health and social welfare – when admitting students, said Peter Syme.

# Support supportsupportsupportsupport

## Put team in the picture

The *Sesame Screensaver* has attracted more than 3,000 students and graduates since its launch almost six months ago.

During this time the innovative news and information service – which runs like a slide carousel featuring OU news, events, services, projects, study tips, course information and TV programmes – has received very positive feedback. The overall response has been that it is an ‘excellent service’. Comments from students include: “Congratulations on an excellent service” TJ Craig, S103; and “Excellent idea – great way to keep abreast of the news” Jan Watson, S280.

However, the project team is keen to ensure that the *Sesame Screensaver* constantly evolves alongside the needs of the student and alumni communities and would like to hear from you. All comments, queries or ideas are welcome and will help shape the future direction of this service.

Richard Potter who is studying for an MA in Classical Studies, informed the team that the screensaver is ‘brilliant’, but added: “Some of

the pages disappear before I’ve finished reading them.”

In response to Richard’s comments project manager Claudia Sargent explained: “The service was launched in partnership with an external company, Oxigen, who developed the software. They carried out extensive research on the average time a slide should appear, to keep readers visually stimulated.

“Although we cannot vary the speed at which slides appear, the editorial team is experimenting with the amount of text which appears.”

Claudia added: “Another issue which has also been raised is the ability to ‘click-through’

from the screensaver to different websites for more information. We are now looking into this and hope to be able to achieve it by the end of the year.”

Please email your comments, ideas, views on the *Sesame Screensaver* to: [sesame\\_screensaver@open.ac.uk](mailto:sesame_screensaver@open.ac.uk). If you haven’t downloaded the screensaver yet, don’t miss out, visit [www.open.ac.uk/sesame\\_screensaver](http://www.open.ac.uk/sesame_screensaver)

**All comments will help shape the future direction of the screensaver**



The *Sesame Screensaver* team: (l to r) Malini Sen, Maxine France and Claudia Sargent

# OUSA Conference conferenceconference

## New focus on service

Appropriate courses, good customer service and building better relationships with students are the key to improving student retention, Conference was told by Will Swann, the new Director, Students.

This is a brand-new post which will bring together responsibility for developing student policy and for implementing it – responsibilities which used to be spread between two posts, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) and Director, Student Services, explained Professor Swann.

No stranger to the OU – he has been a student, associate lecturer and an academic, his last post being Dean of the faculty of Education and Language Studies – Professor Swann said the student body is changing, becoming younger and increasingly vocationally-oriented.

In 2002 only 51 per cent of students who took a first course progressed to their second year. “The challenge is to build the kind of relationships with students which make it much more difficult for them to join and not stay with us,” he said.

“The university needs to make sure courses on offer are pitched at the right level and the right workload,” he added.

“In student services it should aim for excellence, coherence and to eliminate variation in service across the regions, unless there is a sound reason for it.”

He underlined the importance of a strong student association such as OUSA in helping to bring about change. “We need a student association that challenges us when it needs to do so, and supports us when it is right to do so,” he said.

But OUSA needs to ask itself, he added, ‘are you satisfied you speak for the diversity of the student body as a whole?’

Conference also heard from Professor Allan Cochrane, the retiring PVC (Students), who said

that we need to work collectively to shed the university’s ‘worthy but rather dull’ image, born of the era of black-and-white broadcasting, and kipper ties. “We are an exciting place to learn, but it is not always recognised,” he said.

“The university is realising that student expectations are rising and the notion that ‘we know best’ is no longer appropriate. There will be a lot of things happening over the next few months, including a greater emphasis in building better relationships with students,” he added.

“It is not just a question of changing our image. It is about what we do and the way we behave.”

*Sesame* will be interviewing the Director, Students, for its next issue. If you have any questions you would like to put to him, please email them to [y.m.cook@open.ac.uk](mailto:y.m.cook@open.ac.uk) entitling your email ‘Director, Students’.

**It is not just a question of changing our image**

## All OU life is here

EVERYTHING from the conduct of FirstClass conferences to the rise in advertising costs in *Sesame* was hotly debated at the 2004 OUSA Conference.

The topics discussed by more than 300 delegates, representing students from all the regions in the UK, Ireland and Europe, fell broadly into three sections: OUSA’s constitution, OUSA’s activities and Open University policy as a whole.

Below are a few of the 2004 hot topics which led to Conference passing resolutions asking the university to:

- instruct all students in a standard method of referencing
- continue to maintain the distance-learning database created by the International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL), which lost its funding in April this year.
- arrange for a second associate lecturer to re-mark TMA or exam scripts at the student’s request.
- look at the feasibility of allowing students to submit all TMAs, not just eTMAs, by email.
- improve the distribution of course materials to ensure the service is consistent across the country and the distributors are complying with their contract.

Resolutions are taken forward by OUSA reps sitting on OU boards and committees, and by the OUSA President writing to the relevant Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

## Smart but sprawling

“SPRAWLING”, “cut off” and “better than Eastbourne” were just a few of the oft-heard views about the Walton Hall campus at Milton Keynes, hosting its first ever OUSA Conference.

The Berrill Lecture Theatre where the main conference business took place was too small to accommodate everyone who wanted to be there, so a giant screen was set up outside where anyone could sit and follow the debates.

This came in for criticism from some who preferred to be where the action was, but not all. “It’s nice to talk to a full hall, rather than tiers of empty seats,”

said Past President Alison Ryan.

Doug Paulley, a wheelchair user who endured a ‘mammoth’ seven-hour journey from Leeds to be there, was one of those impressed by campus size and facilities, and the many new buildings such as the Library. “I thought it would be just a lot of old Nissen huts,” he said.

The dearth of bars and nightlife was compared unfavourably to the Manchester venue, but, as Leamington Spa delegate Ursula Rutherford said: “It focuses your mind on Conference business.”

newsnewsnewsnewsnews **News** **News in Brief**

# Help for more

**C**hanges in the Government's higher education funding arrangements in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, could double the number of Open University students entitled to financial support.

The majority of students who currently receive support towards courses fees and study costs will continue to receive it under the new support package for part-time students, announced in the White Paper *The future of higher education*.

And support thresholds have been extended so that students who fell just outside the criteria for support will now be eligible to apply for a series of partial

awards to help with course fees and study costs.

**Students who fell just outside will now be eligible**

The new scheme will give access to financial support for 60,000 - 80,000 part-time students, many of these being Open University students. It is estimated that an additional 20,000 Open University students will be entitled to some form of support, doubling the numbers of

OU students who currently receive financial aid.

These changes will affect Open University students resident in the UK, *except Scotland*, wishing to study undergraduate courses of 30 credit points or more that start from September 2004 onwards.

However the OU also puts some of its own money to provide support for those studying courses worth less than 30 points.

For more details about the changes to financial support which come into force in September see page 19. More details about the different schemes of financial support available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are in the leaflet included in this *Sesame*.

# New Library is open

OVER 400 OU students have been to Walton Hall to join the Library since the new Library building was opened in February of this year.

Membership allows you to borrow from the Library's collection of 200,000 books and 2,000 journals. Students wondering what to study next can check out the OU's course materials here too, including the DVDs and multimedia.

There are also PCs to connect to the internet and a total of 150 study spaces for those who want somewhere quiet to work.

For those who can visit Walton Hall, guided tours of the Library facilities are being organised. If you'd like a tour, please contact Learner Support to find out the dates, or if you'd like to come as a group, the Library can arrange a tour specially for you. Students are also welcome just come and explore.

Those who don't live near enough to Walton Hall to take advantage of the physical Library can still make use of the "virtual library" online, [www.open.ac.uk/library](http://www.open.ac.uk/library). This includes access to around 7,000 electronic journals and thousands of e-books. If you need help with the online Open Library, just contact the Learner Support helpdesk on 01908 659001.



Two hundred thousand books under one roof

## Name deserving

STUDENTS and associate lecturers are being invited to put forward names of people they believe are deserving of an Open University honorary degree.

A list of names is compiled each year by the university's Honorary Degrees Committee for the consideration of Senate, the university governing body. All members of the university - full-time staff, associate lecturers and students - are eligible and encouraged to make nominations.

"We are now entering the period for receipt of nominations for awards to be made at degree ceremonies in 2006," said Tony Barker, who is secretary to the committee.

"We also have available details of the criteria against which each nomination is considered and the list of those who have been honoured previously, which can be helpful in judging the sort of people the university would wish to be looking at.

"To give an idea, this year, those to be honoured include the artist Jack Vettriano, wheelchair athlete Tanni Grey-Thompson, journalist and broadcaster Kirsty Wark and poet Benjamin Zephaniah.

"We try to cover a wide spectrum of achievement and the criteria are deliberately phrased to be as inclusive as possible."

The closing date for this round is Friday September 24. Nomination forms are available from Jane FitzGerald in the Awards and Ceremonies centre at Walton Hall (01908 652903 or email [j.fitzgerald@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.fitzgerald@open.ac.uk)).

## H806 safety net

STUDENTS on the course H806 *Learning in the connected economy* WILL be able to complete their studies, says The Open University, despite the question mark over the future of the UK e-Universities (UKeU) initiative.

The OU Masters-level course H806, produced in association with Cambridge University, is offered through UKeU and is now in its second year of operation.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has announced that it is 'restructuring' UKeU after the venture failed to attract target student numbers. The UK Government set up UKeU in 2000 to provide a public/private infrastructure to establish the UK higher education community as a leading player in e-learning worldwide.

Peter Wilson of the OU's Learning and Teaching Office said: "We know that UKeU has wound up its sales and marketing operation, but discussions are still ongoing on the future of the e-learning platform that UKeU have developed, which is used to deliver H806 materials and activities to students.

"We will know more about the future of the e-learning platform following the next HEFCE Board meeting in June, but in the meantime, we are putting in place contingency plans so that if the plug is pulled on the platform our students will be able to complete their studies."

## Gladstone prize

MYRA Chapman's excellent results have earned her the university's inaugural Gladstone Memorial Prize, awarded to the highest-marked student of A221 *State, economy and nation in nineteenth century Europe*. The £400 award is sponsored by the Gladstone Memorial Trust, which offers a series of prizes to individual universities for students who have excelled in work with a William Gladstone theme. Myra, who lives in South London, received the prize at the Guildhall, Portsmouth graduation ceremony on May 22.

## OU in the news

THE Open University features in newspapers and on TV more often than any other university except Oxford. The OU has just enjoyed its most positive year ever for media coverage, with more than 4,000 stories about the university and its activities appearing in UK news outlets during 2003 - an increase of 13 per cent on the previous year.

## Child workers

MILLIONS of children worldwide miss out on education because they have to work to survive. The lives of a few of them are featured in *A mile in their shoes*, a documentary produced by the OU for BBC 1 to support Sport Relief in June/July this year. See listings nearer the time for more details.

## Sorry, Katharine

CORRECTION to the announcement of the winners of the Stanley Collings Prize in the last issue of *Sesame* (page 5); the recipient of an Honourable Mention was KATHARINE Ruffell. We apologise to her.

## Shell suits OU

SHELL employees and their partners living outside the UK will be offered a range of online courses under a partnership deal announced in March between Shell International Exploration and Production BV and the OU. Business, computing, German, Spanish and environmental studies are among the subjects on offer.

## Mars calling

RESEARCHERS at the OU's Knowledge Media Institute (KMI) are deploying their communications software expertise to support NASA's 'Hab' experiment. The Hab (habitat) is a prototype Mars research station in the Utah desert. It simulates conditions under which Martian-based humans and robots will work with experts back on earth using virtual meetings, text messaging and other technologies to enable teamworking across barriers of time and space.

## Beagle inquiry

THE lessons to be learned from Beagle 2 Mars mission were published in May in a report by the Commission of Inquiry, commissioned by UK science minister Lord Sainsbury and the European Space Agency (ESA). The mission, whose lead scientist is the OU's Professor Colin Pillinger, aimed to put a lander on the Mars surface, but the craft failed to make contact after its scheduled landing on Christmas Day.

## Ten out of ten

A GOVERNMENT report on teaching maths has singled out the OU's training programme for maths teachers for particular praise. The inquiry into post-14 mathematics education recommends that 'in the detailed planning of the national support infrastructure for the teaching and learning of mathematics particular attention should be given to involving the relevant experience and expertise of The Open University'.

## Get Open Eye

MORE than 220,000 OU graduates and other qualified alumni are currently receiving the Spring 2004 edition of *Open Eye* magazine direct to their doorsteps. This edition continues the history of the OU into the 1970s. If you can't wait until you complete your studies and would like a copy send in a self-addressed A4 envelope marked 'Open Eye' to Alumni Office, Open University, Walton Hall, MK7 6AA, UK. The next edition of *Open Eye* magazine will be published in the autumn. Contact us if you have ideas for articles or would like to post a small advertisement - email [alum@open.ac.uk](mailto:alum@open.ac.uk) entitling your email *Open Eye*.

**Courses** coursescoursescoursescoursescourses

# Art history from Picasso to post-modernism

**A**t a time when 'A' level art history has been seriously scaled down, it's encouraging that The Open University is feeding a positive and growing demand for the study of modern art.

So said OU Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley at an event to mark the launch of AA318 *Art of the Twentieth Century*, held at London's Whitechapel Gallery.

AA318 is the OU's third course on modern

art, but the only one which deals with a range of contemporary art practices since the 1980s.

The feedback on the course, launched this year, has been 'excellent', said the Vice-Chancellor, and it looks set to repeat the success of the previous courses.

AA318 covers a huge range of subjects from the last 100 years, including Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Pollock and Warhol, as well as movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Pop Art,

Minimal Art, Conceptual Art and the 'post-modernism' of the late 20th century.

Unlike previous courses it deals not only with modernist painting, but the more varied and unorthodox practices of installation and performance, photography and video.

Whitechapel Gallery director Iwona Blazwick compared the OU to the Gallery in its 'avant garde' approach. "It [the OU] has certainly pioneered a radically expanded

idea of modern art history that many historians wouldn't have recognised, even 20 years ago," she said. "These courses and publications chart not one, but a whole multiplicity of modernisms."

The launch event also celebrated the publication of five illustrated course books, co-published with Yale University press, all available in the shops from the end of May. The first highlights issues of contemporary art practices, contrasting the year 2000 opening of London's Tate Modern with that of the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. It then shows four individual works of art which highlight 20th century themes and issues.

**The OU has pioneered a radically expanded idea of art history**



The subsequent books take students through avant-garde work via Cubism, Expressionism and Dada, European and American modernism and finally post-modernism and "time-based" art.

AA318 students Donna Donovan and Marilyn Casford told *Sesame* they are finding the course complex but interesting and very enjoyable. "I had been told to steer clear of first year presentation courses, but both of us have found the course has run very smoothly," said Donna.

"What I am disappointed in is that it is impossible to get an OU degree totally in Art History. I think there should be an Art History diploma."

For further details go to [www.open.ac.uk/courses](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses)

Modern art is no mystery to AA318 students Donna (left) and Marilyn

## Workers' rights and the law

WORKERS' rights are at the heart of a new online course available from November.

*Employment law and practice* (W221) covers a variety of workplace issues. Students will consider the theories and philosophies which lie behind the legal relationship of the worker and the 'worked-for' as they study subjects including contracts of employment, claims of breach of contract, unfair dismissal and redundancy. Other topics include health and safety, discrimination and maternity and other family rights as well as the impact that EC law has on the rights of employees.

"The new course is the first in a series of additional courses to the OU Law programme, which is already recognised as a major innovation in legal education," said director of the OU's Centre For Law Professor Gary Slapper.

"Employment law and practice is a rapidly developing area and this course may be of particular interest to professionals both in the legal sector and other areas, who are seeking to build on their experience and further develop their understanding."

The course has been designed for people "interested in both the academic and practical aspects of employment law", he added. Students will need a good knowledge of the English legal system as well as a computer and internet access. For further details call 0845 300 6090 or log on at [www.open.ac.uk/courses](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses) and click on the *Law and Criminology* section.

## Masters in Engineering

ENGINEERING graduates can now advance their knowledge with the OU's new Masters of Engineering degree.

The MEng is open to OU BEng graduates and anyone who has recently graduated with an accredited UK honours in the subject, and aims "to meet professional development needs" as specified by the Engineering Council and institutions in the UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC).

To achieve the MEng students must complete a minimum

120 points of postgraduate study, 90 points of which can be selected from a range of courses including T837 *Systems engineering*, T838 *Design and manufacture with polymers* and T839 *Forensic engineering*. The final course, T885 *Team engineering*, is compulsory and will be offered from 2006.

Further details of the programme, presented by the faculty of Technology, can be obtained at [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk) or by emailing [engineering@open.ac.uk](mailto:engineering@open.ac.uk)

## Management for accountants

ACCOUNTANTS in commerce and industry looking to step up the career ladder could benefit from a new OU Masters degree.

The MSc in International Finance and Management, offered by the university's Business School, begins by focusing on management issues for company directors.

It then explores financial strategy and eventual investment decisions and financial reporting to international capital markets.

The postgraduate programme will "provide a specialist knowledge base for senior financial managers in major companies" and coincides with increasing moves towards global international financial reporting standards.

"This will be of particular interest to those who have specialist financial roles who are looking to advance as senior managers," said programme chair Professor Peter Walton.

"To do so, they are likely to need a

qualification of this kind to get beyond the glass ceiling they may encounter.

"For a number of reasons, senior accountants may not want to take a year out to update their studies, so this new course is an ideal option for them."

Students on the programme, which was launched in April, will be assumed to have practical experience of accounting or finance. For further details call 0845 300 6090.

**OUlifeOUlife OU Life**

# First new PGCE grads

The first people to complete the OU's flexible Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for secondary school teachers have received their awards. Among them are Sheeja Cherian and Carole Lyttle (pictured below) who were presented with their certificates at a degree ceremony at the International Convention Centre, Birmingham, in May.

The flexible PGCE offers training in one of six National Curriculum subjects – mathematics; modern foreign languages; science; design and technology; music; and geography.

The programme offers an open learning route with a range of start and completion dates and the option of full- or part-time study.



Sheeja (left) has qualified to teach science; Carole's subject is music

**FRONT PAGE STORY**

## It's a long way to Tipperary...

MARATHON charity walker Martyn King is making good progress on his round-Ireland journey. He contacted *Sesame* from Ballycotton Lifeboat Station 15 days into his 2,000 mile walk.

Summer school teacher Martyn set off from Dublin on May 1 on a 2,000-mile clockwise circuit of the Irish coast that will take him to every one of the country's lifeboat stations (see *Sesame* 220). He is raising money for lifeboat crews, in an Irish version of the round-Britain walk he undertook with his late wife (then fiancée) Alison Shaw, two years ago.

"He is looking very fit and I think enjoying his trip," Bláthnaid Lane Walsh of Ballycotton Lifeboat Station told *Sesame*. "He has been fortunate with our weather, only getting wet once."

Martyn checked his emails and stayed the night in Ballycotton before moving on to his next goal, Crosshaven Lifeboat Station, where he hoped to arrive on May 18.

Martyn's email is [martynking@talk21.com](mailto:martynking@talk21.com). Readers who have the *Sesame* screensaver can keep track of his progress through this.

## Sesame holidays

### Corfu

from £299 for seven nights

Arillas is reached through peaceful hillside villages and olive groves. It is the perfect setting for an ideal family holiday or romantic getaway. A gentle curve of sand offers a safe bathing beach where water sports are available. Your holiday price includes an escorted half-day walk and a full-day boat excursion to one of the unspoilt offshore islands. You will stay in a privately-owned apartment or studio, with a balcony, bathroom, and dining area, not more than 800 metres from the beach and close to free swimming pools. Two-week holidays also include a shopping trip to historic Corfu Old Town or Sidari. Ref: C155/OU

### Cornwall - Garden breaks

3, 4 or 7 nights B&B from £69 per person for 4 nights

4 nights for the price of 3 on selected dates

Staying at the popular Tregurrian Hotel or apartments in Watergate Bay, this self-drive holiday offers superb value. The deluxe apartments have two bedrooms, bathroom, lounge with wide-screen tv, separate dining area and kitchen. Guests have full access to the facilities of the Tregurrian Hotel (opposite) which offers rooms with private facilities, TV and tea/coffee maker. The famous Eden project is a short drive away as are a wide range of very good golf courses and surfing



beaches. Price based on the hotel, includes admission ticket to the Eden Project and the Lost Gardens of Heligan. Ref: C151/OU

### Jersey camping

from £79 per person

Free car by sea or free car hire by air Plus free child places

Jersey, with its enviable sunshine record enjoys a prolonged holiday season. Beuvelande Campsite, a member of a small elite group of 5-pennant Premier Parks, has modern facilities including a superb shower and washroom complex, a café/licensed bar and a swimming pool with sun patio. It enjoys a secluded spot in the beautiful countryside on the eastern side of the island. Price includes quality ready-erected, well-equipped tents, return travel to Jersey, (free car by sea or free hire-car by air) plus the services of Travelsmith representatives. Ref: D152/OU

### Glorious Guernsey

3 nights or more by sea or air from £159 per person

Car goes free when travelling by sea 4 nights for the price of 3 on selected dates.

Peaceful Guernsey is a million miles from the hectic pace of the 21st century. Save up to 20% with this special offer. The Abbey Court Hotel situated in a quiet area of St. Peter Port provides a relaxed, friendly and informal base from which to see this beautiful island. Included in price is return sea travel from Poole or Weymouth with free car, 3 nights or more B&B and the services of local representatives. Ref: C158/OU

For a free colour brochure or to book any of these holidays telephone Travelsmith Ltd (ABTA V1290/ATOL 1917) on 01621 784666 or 0870 748 1000 quoting the holiday reference code.

## Bookshelf

● OU STUDENT Dee Gordon describes her new book as an "exposé" of the recruitment industry – and if it's a true reflection, I suspect no one who reads it will be able to look a headhunter in the eye ever again.

*Meat Market* tells the story of two days in the lives of the employees of a fictitious firm based in London's Covent Garden. By and large they appear a professional bunch when it comes to their clients, but the temperature certainly rises when it comes to their relationships with each other.

There's Shirley the boss, a seemingly brisk, hard-nosed businesswoman and impossible manager who soon reveals her vulnerability as she begins an affair with her latest recruit, Ritchie, who is bright, arrogant, amoral and 15 years her junior. Despite living with his girlfriend, he's also got his eye on another colleague Angie, who is going through a divorce and seems ripe for his advances. Seemingly the one person he doesn't interest is Ellie, the personnel officer, partly because she tries not to get involved in her colleagues' affairs, and partly because she lives with her girlfriend Sally.

The author's inventive style – each chapter is written by one of the characters – is particularly successful, most notably when the characters disagree and the reader can see all sides of the story. But the idea could be better followed through if each character had a more individual voice to distinguish him or her from the others.

There's also a certain amount of stereotyping – but that's no bad thing if readers who work in the recruitment business recognise people they know.

On the whole *Meat Market* is a well-written work and if you're looking for a light, entertaining read – well, it's just the job.

*Meat Market* is published by Vanguard Press priced £6.99.

● READERS put off the idea of recruiting agencies by the above work can take solace from a new book which details how universities can prepare their students for the job market.

*Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education* offers a refreshingly clear and readable model to help higher education institutions to 'address the issue of graduate employability'.

OU senior lecturer Peter Knight and Liverpool John Moores University Professor Mantz Yorke explore the barriers students face when they start job-hunting, and discuss the ways in which curricula can be modified to prepare students for the big wide world while they are studying.

Such preparation is key, according to their research, which found that students' "disciplinary understanding was taken as read" by many employers, and those hunting staff are searching for graduates who can demonstrate more than academic achievement. As one interviewed employer reports sagely: "Commonsense real life isn't as in the textbooks."

The authors highlight that while successful job applicants would get nowhere without their qualifications, there's a definite need for, say, work-related organisational and interpersonal skills and an ability to cope with stress – and many graduates could gain a head start by following a study model that encourages such development.

Knight and Mantz skillfully pool research ideas and development techniques in a work that should make any institution think about the wider service it is giving its students.

For it seems unarguable that, as the authors point out, "if we aim for the development in students of good learning and of achievements that are more generic in character, success in employment (and in life generally) is likely to be greater".

*Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education* by Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke is published by Routledge-Falmer priced £22.50.



## VC's VIEW

Professor  
Brenda  
Gourley

### Distance is a plus

**M**ulticulturalism is one of the buzzwords of today's society. The term itself has been the subject of much discussion recently. It should be because not only is our country more and more cosmopolitan, but as we become increasingly part of a united Europe we need to think about what it means to live in a multicultural Europe.

Beyond that even, globalisation, migration, integration, communication and travel are bringing different races, cultures, religions and ethnicities into ever closer contact with each other. Kofi Annan and others have reminded us (since we seem to need reminding) that more than ever before we are being shaped by many cultures and influences, and "combining the familiar with the foreign can be a source of powerful knowledge and insight". He went on to tell us that "people can and should take pride in their particular faith or heritage. But we can cherish what we are, without hating what we are not".

May 1 saw the accession of ten new countries to the European Union, a move which raised the combined population from under 100 million, to over 400 million people. One does not have to look too far into Europe's past to acknowledge what an achievement this is. Sadly, one does not have to look too far either to know that we are going to have to find ways to tackle the negative attitudes of some people towards this.

#### Listening unimpeded by visual prejudices

One of the primary roles of a university is to equip its students to live in a society that is increasingly multicultural. It is hoped that students will mix with each other, learn about each other's values, concerns and world-views – and, in the process, learn to move easily and happily in a multicultural world.

One would imagine that distance learning institutions, such as The Open University, are at a disadvantage in this endeavour. On the contrary, we have some advantage.

Our students have as rich a network as one can imagine. Nearly a quarter of a million students are logged onto our conferencing system and they meet each other in 'virtual' circumstances. They have meetings, seminars, support groups and such meetings are even possible where students all access the same information, adding to a common whiteboard, and listening to each other unimpeded by visual prejudices, in real time. They come from all over the world, are from all age groups, some perhaps disabled (but who would know?), and from a variety of economic backgrounds. This last point is somewhat different from our residential campuses where fees for foreign students are high and most come from wealthy homes.

I know that students participate enthusiastically in our conferencing network and I hope that they actively think about the marvellous opportunities it represents to make friends all over the world and indeed, friends in their own countries who they might not easily meet in the ordinary course of their lives. They have something in common by virtue of their common membership of an extraordinary university, by their participation in their studies – and, I hope, by their desire to learn from each other, and about each other.

## Special Report reportreportreport

# The even more open university

The OU was founded to be "open as to people". But more than 30 years on, certain social groups are still under-represented within its student body.

The university's Widening Participation Programme has for three years been working to make the OU more easily accessible to would-be students who have traditionally found it more difficult to break into higher education.

As a direct result, the OU has seen significant increases in the number of learners with low previous educational qualifications, from minority ethnic groups, who are disabled or who came from rural isolated areas.

The scheme has seen some spectacular successes. Since its launch in 2001, the number of students

entering with qualifications below GCSE level has risen by 37 per cent and the number of those below A-level standard is up 28 per cent. There are now 41 per cent more students under 25 than there were three years ago, and the number of non-white students is now one in ten – in 2001 it was one in 16.

So how has the OU achieved this? The answer is investment – the university has ploughed £678,000 into Widening Participation, to fund a series of initiatives to get people interested and confident in being able to study successfully.

On these pages, **Sesame** looks at who these students are, and some of the ways the OU is attracting them.



An OU outreach team from Yorkshire Regional Centre builds relationships with local community schools, clubs and women's groups

## Widening young horizons

**M**ore school pupils from socially deprived areas could gain access to higher education thanks to an OU Widening Participation scheme in the East Midlands.

Nine students at the City of Leicester School have recently completed OU short science courses as part of a project to promote university study to youngsters from ethnic minorities – and another 20 are now taking up the challenge in Nottingham in May.

Co-ordinator for the scheme in the East Midlands Roger Martin said the courses showed less confident students that they had what it takes to study for a degree.

"The OU's Young Applicants In School Scheme (YASS) does attract a lot of interest from school pupils, but the majority seem to be from more academic schools who see university as the inevitable next step after their A-levels," he said. "We wanted to introduce the idea to students in more everyday, average

schools, and particularly to those from lower social-economic groups, including youngsters from ethnic minorities."

The Leicester students each studied one course from a choice of S190, S194, S195 and S197, which gave them credits towards an Open University degree. But Roger maintains the implications are far wider than that.

#### OU courses make youngsters stand out

"It's perfectly feasible they may want to go on to do more OU courses, but this is as much about introducing the concept of higher education to people who have not previously considered it.

"It also gives them a huge advantage if they

apply to a conventional university. Because so many students are predicted straight As at A-level, admission boards find it very hard to choose, so it all comes down to a student's personal statement on their application form.

"Youngsters from socially deprived areas don't have as much to put on the form – they can't say they've done Operation Raleigh, or worked in their dad's solicitors' office through the summer. But OU courses make socially-deprived youngsters really stand out, because this study is far more relevant to a university application."

The courses have also introduced the OU to their communities. "There's an assumption that people have heard of The Open University, but in many areas this simply isn't the case," says Roger. "But by encouraging sixth-form pupils to study, and having a presence at school open days and parents' evenings, we're spreading the word throughout communities."



reportreportreportreportreport **Special Report**

# Nurses moving up

NURSES and other health workers are improving their skills as part of the Widening Participation Programme's Bridges To Learning initiative.

The scheme, funded by the Tyne and Wear Learning and Skills Council and the TUC's Learning for All fund, aims to improve qualifications, develop a culture of "lifelong learning" in the workplace and provide what project leaders have described as a "skills escalator" to help staff develop their education and their careers.

The OU is providing courses as part of a north-east England partnership with Careconnect Learning, the Workers' Education Association, UNISON and the government's corporate health service 'university' the NHSU.

But it's the OU's health and social welfare courses that seem to be attracting the most interest. A team from the North East Ambulance Service is studying K100 *Understanding health and social care*, the Northumbria Health Care Trust has block-booked places on the Openings course Y156 *Understanding children* and North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust, working with carers from the Stockton Care Centre, has enrolled its employees in K260 *Death and dying*.

"We're providing a structured framework in which people can learn," says Lindsay Brigham, a staff tutor in the OU's North Region. "The managers are helping to promote it but the word is spreading through the grass roots. This scheme is helping people to get back into learning."

# Scottish scheme

A PROJECT to encourage more people from ethnic minorities to try the OU in Scotland raised the number of non-white students in Scotland but revealed that the university needs to make adjustments to some of its practices.

In 2001/2 just 2.1 of Scottish students on OU Openings courses were non-white, compared to the UK-wide average of 4.9 per cent.

OU staff headed by Deborah Pryde and Margaret MacDonald set out to develop links with community groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh and raise awareness of the OU, giving presentations and running workshops.

Their efforts resulted in a significant increase in the recruitment of non-white stu-

dents, from 2.1 per cent to 3.8 per cent in 2003. However figures for 2004 show the rise is not being sustained, suggesting, says Deborah, improvement only comes through 'intensive and sustained effort'.

The project has uncovered a range of issue to be addressed. Many would-be students from ethnic minorities were put off through a lack of confidence in their English, the project found. Some centres

that ordinarily provided a focus for learning were closed during religious festivals such as Ramadan. "There's the issue of TMAs written by students who do not have English as a first language," says Deborah. "Tutors need guidelines on what is appropriate in terms of OU standards."

**Just 2.1 per cent of Scottish students were non-white**



Maria Eagle, Minister for Disabled People, gives a helping hand to student Jessica Grugeon

# Lure of the robots



THE university's Robotics Outreach Group has entertained thousands of youngsters and their parents with hands-on displays in schools, colleges and even shopping centres – and helped the OU to sign up hundreds more students.

They feature robots doing everything from playing football and dancing to simulated exploration of distant planets. "Our displays have entertained people who previously thought the OU was just something on TV," said RoboFesta research fellow Dr Ashley Green.

Robofesta has been a key attraction at numerous adult education events. It played a large part in last year's Government-led Campaign For Learning Family Learning Week, and at this year's event, in October, the OU scientists plan to run 200 workshops around the country.

These will be directly linked to an OU course, T184 *Robotics and the meaning of life*, which guides students through creating and programming a machine.

"We can provide the parts, including a motor, for people attending our displays to make their own robot on the day for about £5 – a robot they can take away with them," said Dr Green. "We're working on showing people how to build re-creations of the American Mars rover craft."

For more details visit <http://robofesta.open.ac.uk>

# Mobile showcase boosts outreach

Ten thousand people with disabilities already study with the OU but there are many more potential disabled students, the Get On Board project has revealed.

It involved a bus packed with OU information, course materials and equipment touring the OU's South region, accompanying OU staff who gave presentations to disability groups. "The idea was to increase the numbers of disabled students in the OU by showing them our courses, as well as facilities and equipment that could help them study more easily," said project leader Jill Buckeldee. She adds:

"The bus was a huge benefit, not only as a very visible demonstration of the OU, but also as a mobile office which showed people

exactly the types of adaptations we could help them access which would enable them to study."

"We made a huge impact on a lot of people, making them realise what was possible," says Jill. "This was particularly noticeable in people with mental health problems on recovery programmes – for many people just the idea that they can do this goes a long way to increasing self-esteem."

"Our research showed everyone had heard of the OU but most did not make the personal connection that it was something they could be part of," she adds. "We found there are groups of people who are very keen to study but just need that personal contact to help them make that step."

# Foundation degrees with work and study

FOUNDATION degrees are set to bring even more people into higher education over the next few years.

Work-based and shorter than the conventional degree, they were launched in 2000 by a Labour government keen to signal the importance of connecting higher education to employability.

It's a little-known fact that the OU is now the leading provider of foundation degrees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with around 1,800 students on E123 Working with children in the early years.

This first course in the university's Early Years foundation degree proved so popular when first launched that a second

presentation had to be offered in May 2003.

A further 200 or so students are studying at various FE and HE colleges on a range of foundation degrees validated by the OU through its Validation Services operation.

And the OU has just launched two new part-time foundation degrees to be piloted this autumn in partnership with Microsoft.

The OU's Technology faculty will work with Microsoft on a part-time foundation degree in Information and Communication Technologies; while the faculty of Maths and Computing will be partnering the software giant in a foundation degree in Computing and its practice. Both

degrees will include a mix of OU courses, with courses and work-based learning which lead to Microsoft qualifications.

Potential students include IT trainees in the workplace and in outreach schemes in areas of regeneration, who will be offered the opportunity to use their IT training as a 'gateway' into the higher education system via the OU foundation degree.

Linda Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Awards), said the OU's foundation degrees are innovative in focusing on the distance, part-time learner. "The government has been preoccupied with the full-time, under 30 year olds," she said. "These are taking foundation degrees into the whole area of lifelong learning."



**OU Life** ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life

# Dad would have been proud



Dr Wilson is also celebrating another achievement – it's just been announced that he has been made new Gresham Professor of Geometry, a prestigious post which is the oldest maths professorship in the country. From September he will be giving a series of free public lectures at Gresham College on the history of mathematics.

Picture: Maxine France

**O**U history comes full circle in June when Dr Robin Wilson receives a degree he has earned from the university founded by his father.

Dr Wilson, son of former Prime Minister Harold Wilson, will collect his BA Honours in Humanities with Music 17 years after beginning his studies. And the ceremony at Ely Cathedral will be a real family occasion, as his wife, daughter and mother, Lady Mary Wilson, will be in attendance.

It's a fitting reward for a man who has helped thousands of students earn their own degrees – Dr Wilson joined the OU's Maths faculty in 1972, became Dean in 1996 and is now Head of Pure Maths.

"One reason it's taken me 17 years to achieve my degree is that my OU teaching career forced me to take a break from my own studies for seven years," he says. "And when I came to 'cash in' my points I found I'd done my first course too long ago for it to count, so I had to do another year at the end. But I'm delighted to have achieved it."

But Dr Wilson didn't begin his studies with the intention of gaining a degree. "Since I was a child I have been fascinated by music," he says.

"I have performed as an enthusiastic amateur – mainly as a singer – in a wide range of productions and I wanted to learn more about harmony, so I thought 'If anyone can teach me, the OU can'."

Dr Wilson says the most rewarding part of his studies was "always the summer schools" and in his professional capacity has attended considerably more than most students. "I attended one a couple of years ago and one of my fellow students asked me if this was my first summer school. 'Oh no,' I replied, 'it's my 65th!'."

He says his degree taught him music theory and helped him to appreciate a wider variety of music – both of which were helpful in a parallel career as a music critic on his local paper the *Oxford Mail* – but it also helped him as a tutor to appreciate the difficulties students face.

"I used to be exasperated by students who would ignore instructions to read a whole topic before doing their assignment, and instead would read the assignment first and then try to find only the passages that enabled them to answer the questions," he says. "But of course when I studied, what

did I do? Exactly the same.

"I've done 60 TMAs and sat 20 exams so I know what it is like to be a student – meeting deadlines that are far too tight. It's helped me to appreciate their problems."

And he believes his famous father would be proud of what he – and the OU – has achieved. "By the end of the 1970s he was amazed at how much and how quickly the university had expanded," said Dr Wilson.

"I remember the beginnings of the OU in my father's mind, as far back as 1963. We were on holiday in the Scilly Isles, and on Easter Day, just after church, I recall him writing out the details of this crazy idea."

Dr Wilson studied at Oxford while "my father and Jennie Lee were putting the plan together" and after gaining a PhD, joined the OU staff a year after the university was launched.

"I admit I always used to be a bit sensitive about my father's link with the OU, especially when I was trying to build my own career," he adds. "When I applied for the job I was worried people might suspect nepotism, and I know the university took up twice as many of my references as they did for the other applicants. It helped, though, that I'd stepped in at the last minute to give a summer school lecture and one of the people appointing the post had heard it."

And so Dr Wilson became part of the history of the OU, where he has been happy to remain ever since. "I had no intention of following my father into politics," he says. "Our family background is teaching, and I wanted to be a university tutor from the age of about 11 – even though I probably didn't even know what a university was. I take an interest in politics, but no more or less closely than anyone else."

Dr Wilson is due to retire in five years' time and says he will have no time for further study until then. "But when that time comes I might consider the MA in Music. As my research field is the history of mathematics, I might go back to learning Latin or Greek," he says. "I would do that with the OU – it would be another subject to learn."

"As far as family connections go, I've studied music, my brother has an OU Maths degree and my cousin graduated in Geology. That, I think, shows the range of what this university does."

**I always used to be a bit sensitive about my father's link with the OU**

## Life-changing swap

CLAIRE Gethin's OU studies will prove invaluable when she takes up a whole new way of life next year – teaching children in Sri Lanka.

The 30-year-old is swapping her job on an IT helpdesk for experience in a classroom in one of the Asian country's poorest regions – if she can raise enough money to go.

"I was travelling in Sri Lanka with a friend who had done some teaching in Mexico and said it was fantastic, so once I got home I couldn't wait to find out how to do something similar," says Claire.

But although the move seems like a complete change of career, Claire, who works for a publishing company, says she does already teach people through the helpdesk – and she'll also be aided by her academic study.

"This is my second OU year," she says. "I'm currently studying ED209 *Child development*, which will help me a great deal. I'm not quite sure at the moment

where I want my degree to go, but at the moment I'm interested in social sciences."

Claire, who was in the Army for three years and also does work for the YMCA, will do three months' teaching in Sri Lanka through Travellers Worldwide, which matches volunteers with teaching and conservation projects in 15 countries across the globe.

But she would appreciate help to fund her trip. "Selling things from my flat is a process which has already started," she says. "I just need to raise as much money as I possibly can, and I'm hoping maybe a company might be able to help me with sponsorship."

She would also be interested to hear from anyone who could donate educational materials – books, tapes, reading cards – suitable for primary-school-age children.

If you are able to help Claire, call her on 07765 255298 or email her at [clairegethin@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:clairegethin@yahoo.co.uk)

## In memory of Elspeth Reid

STILL fresh in the memories of friends, colleagues and students is the enthusiasm and commitment of the late Dr Elspeth Reid to her work in the OU. Dr Reid (pictured right), an OU graduate, tutored OU Geology courses (most recently S260 and S369) from 1986 until she died in a car accident last year.

Friends are establishing a fund in her memory with the aim of ensuring that field excursions continue to be part of OU geology students' experience. All monies raised will go to provide more field excursions, primarily in the north of Scotland where Dr Reid was based.

If you would like to make a donation to the fund, please send a cheque, payable to The Open University Foundation (Elspeth Reid Fund), to The Open University Foundation, The Open University, FREEPOST ANG5074, Milton Keynes, MK7 6YR. If you are a taxpayer, you can increase the value of your gift by nearly a third at no cost to you, simply by collecting a Gift Aid Declaration form (available from the Alumni Association website at [www.openlink.org/pdf/taxform.pdf](http://www.openlink.org/pdf/taxform.pdf) or by calling 01908 659141).



ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life ou life **OU Life**

# Sascha's OU crusade

**A** determined German student launched a single-handed battle for recognition of The Open University in his home country, after being refused an international student identity card (ISIC).

Sascha Rehm, 31, from Überlingen, who is studying for an OU degree in Molecular Science, took his case right up to the German Culture Minister after being told that he could not have the card because The Open University was not recognised in Germany.

The situation was particularly confused because Sascha had been granted the ISIC card in the past – apparently, it now transpires, due to a mistaken belief that he was a Newcastle University student. But when he applied again in 2004

through the same company, STA Travel in Frankfurt, he was turned down. "They said 'your university is not recognised by us'," Sascha told *Sesame*.

An appeal to the RDS [students' travel agency in Germany] did not help. "They said The Open University was 'exotic'. I was outraged," said Sascha, who needs the card to be able to claim student discounts on travel and entry to a range of facilities.

Refusing to give in, Sascha contacted ISIC offices in London who told him he was entitled to the card as he studied more than 15 hours a week. He also contacted the German Society of Chemists for support. And he contacted the offices of the German Minister of Culture.

It was when the Culture Minister's office

came back with a website, anabin.de, which lists the foreign universities recognised in Germany, that STA changed their position and granted Sascha the ISIC card.

"It is surprising that all these educational bodies I contacted did not know about the anabin website," said Sascha. "The Open University is there, and it is rated H+, which means it is on the same level as any other German university. Any university which has this sign must be recognised by all German institutions."

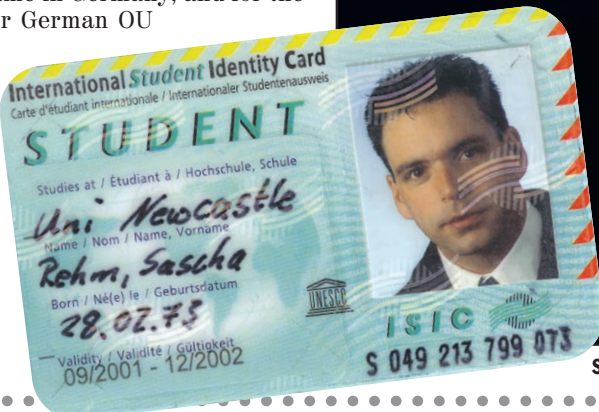
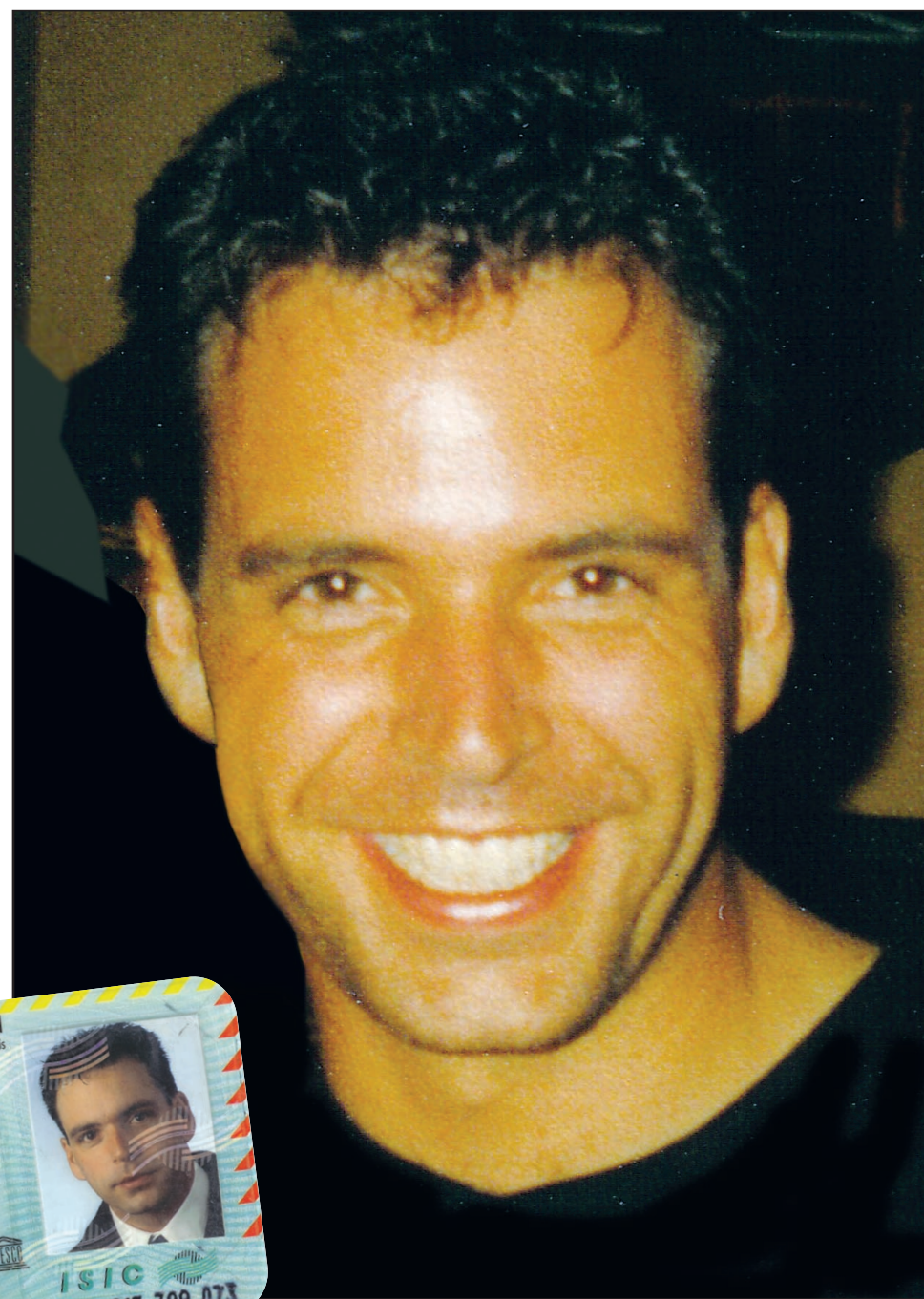
Sascha, who took up OU study because it was the only way to fulfil his longstanding ambition to study chemistry, had been prepared to go to law to argue his case, he said. "I could have got the card through

the ISIC in London, but it was a matter of principle. I was fighting for The Open University's name in Germany, and for the benefit of other German OU

students and OU students who come to work in Germany

"I am proud to study with The Open University. I wanted Germany to recognise it and now they do."

**They said The Open University was exotic**



Sascha: 'proud to be with the OU'



A full-funding scholarship takes Mike and Lynne Down Under

Picture: Sheila Forman

# Degree leads to Oz adventure

A COMBINATION of IT and academic skills have earned new graduate Mike Bester the opportunity of a lifetime – 18 months' study in Australia.

Mike, who is employed by The Open University as a computer conference administrator, working with course teams to set up and run students' online conferences, has just achieved a First Class Honours OU degree in Technology and Computing. His results have won him a scholarship for a Masters Down Under.

The 29-year-old and his wife Lynne, who also works at the OU in its Rights department, head for Oz in June, a month before Mike's first semester begins at Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology.

"Only three of these awards for Australia were handed out in the UK in the past year, so it's a real honour," says Mike. "And it's a full-funding scholarship, which pays for my flights and my course and even gives me a living allowance."

Mike applied for the award from the international Commonwealth and

Scholarship plan last January, and after passing an interview in June was selected for the honour at the end of last year. But his trip was dependent on getting at least a 2:1 in his degree.

"I was fairly confident because I needed only a pass in my last exam," he says. "But it was nice finally to have the piece of paper. And because the results were late [owing to the lecturers' industrial action] everything's happened very quickly. I got my results in April, graduated at Birmingham on May 1 and am off to Australia in June – which meant I had only two months to sort out visas and all my other travel arrangements."

Mike will complete his three semesters in Melbourne before deciding whether to continue studying for a doctorate. "That would mean finding more funding, so we'll wait and see," he says. "It's a shame to leave the OU – this is certainly the best job I've ever had – but who knows what will happen in Australia? It's the sort of experience that could change your life forever."

**My trip was dependent on getting a 2:1**

# Careers careerscareerscareerscareerscareers

## On course for that job

More than half of all OU students are studying to further their careers. We look at how the OU can support their ambitions.

OU courses are opening up a new world of job opportunities for thousands of students. More and more people on the career ladder are discovering that the application they demonstrate in doing a distance learning course can impress employers as much as the qualification itself.

Even students who begin a course for personal reasons soon realise how much it sharpens their professional skills, as well as increasing their confidence. A recent OU survey showed 87 per cent of students said they had developed the ability to apply new knowledge; 86 per cent had developed independent learning skills; three-quarters said it had improved their self-discipline; and 64 per cent said it had taught them to prioritise.

All this can impress a potential employer, as will the skills every OU student picks up along the way. Anyone who successfully studies at a distance can demonstrate determination, commitment, and organisational and problem-solving skills. Surveys also suggest most employers want people who are self-reliant, willing to learn, flexible and committed – something true of every OU graduate.

Take student Lorna Clark – the OU helped her to change career. “I have looked beyond what I thought I was capable of prior to my studying,” she says. “I really didn’t think I was degree material when I started.”

She’s not alone. Sandra Danton said “It taught me to be organised and plan ahead” while fellow student John Paterson said the OU taught him “to research every statement/opinion very thoroughly and to look at things from different perspectives”.

About 60 per cent of OU students start courses with the specific intention of furthering their career. If you have work-related objectives, your choice of courses may be important, especially if you’re in a profession (such as law or psychology) which requires particular qualifications.

If you want to study to help you begin a specific career, look at the OU Recognition leaflets. There are 24 of these, with titles including Professional Engineering Institutions, British Psychological Society, Administration and Management Institution and also Teaching. Some are available from your Regional Centre and all can be accessed at [www.open.ac.uk/essential/rils](http://www.open.ac.uk/essential/rils)

Or, to see a range of career areas and the OU courses to which they link, visit the Career Planning website at [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers) and click on *OU Study and Your Career*. For a full list of all OU courses, visit [www.open.ac.uk/courses](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses)

You can also explore the sort of careers for which your chosen subjects might be useful. At [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/signposts](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/signposts) you can discover what you can do with qualifications in subjects including geography, literature and business studies, as well as more general or combined studies degrees.

Even if the OU doesn’t offer a course relating directly to your chosen career, your study could help you enter a specialised course at another institution and can certainly give you relevant essential broad-based knowledge. For instance, physiotherapists and speech therapists need biology and the OU’s science Level 1 course will help would-be pharmacists. For a guide to UK courses at all levels explore the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) website at [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk). You may need evidence of your ability to study at university level – and your OU studies will prove this.

However, your OU course doesn’t have to be career-linked to show an employer what you can do – many are impressed by your self-discipline and the skills you’ve acquired. The ability to present a logical argument that you learned when working on your history assignment is just as impressive in a business meeting.

OU study has certainly made a difference to careers. “Doors

suddenly opened,” says Amanda Dale. “They [my employers] were impressed at someone studying in their time away from work and keeping a job as well.”

Janet Maclean was told by employers that her OU study “showed motivation and commitment”. And when Paul McCormick told interviewers he worked until the job was done “they said this was self-evident as I had obtained my degree through the OU.”

**Choose a course that really interests you**

More than 25,000 have sponsored their workers to take OU courses.

When beginning your study the most important thing is to choose a course that really interests you. You don’t have to commit yourself to a particular subject but it’s useful to consider where you would like your studies to take you – for instance, if you fancy teaching you will need courses

that relate to the National Curriculum.

There are many ways you can get advice on course choice. Careers advisers will be at a series of events this summer – find out more at [www.open.ac.uk/near-you/](http://www.open.ac.uk/near-you/). Or you can contact your regional centre or visit [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers) or [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/course-choice](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/course-choice)

### What do employers think of OU graduates?

‘One employer in particular was keen to utilise my report writing skills and research skills.’

*Vanessa Clare*

‘Headteachers said that OU degrees showed great commitment on the part of the graduate. They were held in high esteem.’

*Paul Harling*

‘The Probation Service was impressed that I balanced full time voluntary work and my OU studies.’

*John Pierre Madigan*

‘At the interview I made a point of the fact that I wasn’t afraid of hard work and was used to working until the job was done. The interviewers commented that this point was self-evident since I had obtained my degree through the OU.’

*Paul McCormick*

‘Most employers (if not all) said that having an OU degree showed that I was prepared to work hard to achieve my personal goals. The OU widened my appeal to prospective employers.’

*John Paterson*



On the way up? Make the most of the help available from your university

Picture: Getty Images

## More recruits for Career Links

STUDENTS looking to enter a particular career can learn the reality from people with experience of the profession, thanks to the University’s Career Links project. Featured in the last issue of *Sesame* the scheme, run by the OU Careers Advisory Service, teams those

wanting advice with volunteers prepared to offer a personal perspective on their career area.

Since the pilot was launched three months ago the scheme now has 80 ‘Career Helpers’ but would still welcome others,

particularly with experience of environmental work, astronomy, secondary school librarian work, proofreading/editing, pharmacy and antique dealing.

More than 160 ‘Career Seekers’ have signed up for guidance. Advice is currently

available on economic development, advertising, ambulance paramedics, audit commission, secondary maths teaching and childminding.

For details visit [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers)

**supportsupportsupportsupportsupport Support**

# Support for your family

This year's OU graduates may have succeeded in dozens of different subjects but one secret of their success is common to almost all of them – the support of their friends and family.

For although the thousands of students receiving their degrees have shown extraordinary determination, hard work and resolve to achieve their aim, many claim they simply could not have done so without regular encouragement from their nearest and dearest.

Now the role of friends and family in OU life has been recognised with a new website, which shows those who have to live around a student how they can provide practical help and support.

The Friends and Family site tells people close to OU students what to expect when their loved one has to tackle assignments, write exams, attend tutorials and go to summer school.

There's also a link bearing the somewhat ominous heading 'How things might change', which covers how OU study will affect what the site refers to as 'your student'. "It may be difficult," it says, "to avoid a clash with significant personal and social events."

It also points out that "sometimes your student seems to be speaking a new language", adding a cross-reference to help baffled families interpret such terms as points, AL, TMA, course levels and PI.

This practical site, which went online after a huge response to a similarly-themed leaflet published by OU staff in the Eastern Region, also warns when tensions might arise in the household, such as during residential schools. "Students are expected to work hard and often return home feeling exhausted," it advises.

"Those left at home may feel a bit 'left out' and over-burdened with things like child care and running the household. Careful planning is often needed to cope with an extra workload at home."

Above all, it highlights the benefits of encouraging the student, suggesting how to gee them up when they are low, and, just as much of a boost, to share their delight in their success.

"Study is no picnic and there may even come a point when your student considers whether or not to continue," it says. "This is the sort of time when you can be of most help, being around and talking things through."

Find the site at [www.open.ac.uk/family](http://www.open.ac.uk/family)

**The new website tells students' nearest and dearest what to expect**



Family and friends don't have to feel left out

# Students impressed with quality but not workload

The annual end-of-course survey provides useful feedback for those in charge of delivering courses and services and helps them make improvements.

NINETY-FOUR per cent of students who responded to the November 2003 annual courses survey were satisfied with the quality of their course, according to results just published by the university's Institute of Educational Technology (IET). Eighty-eight per cent of students would recommend their course to a friend.

Just over half of the new undergraduates (54 per cent) responding to the survey said they are studying with the OU to help them progress in their employment and/or to start a new/change career.

Satisfaction with the accuracy of information and advice before the course started is slightly higher for all items compared to 2002, with over 90 per cent of respondents satisfied with the course description. Access to a computer for OU study purposes continues to increase although at a lower rate; 94 per cent of respondents had access to a computer in 2003 compared to 92 per cent in 2002 and 88 per cent in 2001.

Printed teaching materials continue to be the highest rated course component, with 97 per cent of students rating them helpful.

Course-related resources, applications data, etc provided on CD ROMs/ DVDs/disks are rated less highly, 83 per cent overall increasing to 87 per cent for courses where the computing element is compulsory.

Tutor support is rated highly with more than 80 per cent of students satisfied with the quality of tuition they received, the quality of their tutor's support in developing their study skills and the availability of their tutor for help and support. Tutors' academic and/or professional knowledge, the amount of time taken by tutors to return TMAs and tutor feedback on TMAs are even more highly rated with over 90 per cent of respondents satisfied. Face-to-face tutorials continue to be preferred, with 76 per cent of respondents finding face-to-face tutorials helpful and 80 per cent finding day schools

helpful, compared to 64 per cent for tutorials via e-mail, telephone or conferencing. Just over a quarter of respondents (26 per cent) attended no tutorials, most commonly due to inconvenient times or distance to travel.

Students rated highly the overall quality of information, advice and support provided by OU staff other than their tutor and the administrative information on the OU website. More than 90 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the quality of information, advice and support provided.

Workload for students remains an important issue; more than half of students (52 per cent) surveyed reported spending more time than they expected on their OU studies. This figure varies across courses and there is evidence of improved retention rates where course teams have made adjustments to workload.

Around 28 per cent had considered giving up their course at some stage. When asked what kept them going 'personal motivation' was the most commonly cited reason (86 per cent), followed by

extended deadlines/ special arrangements (32 per cent), and help from their tutor (29 per cent).

Retention remains at the top of the university's agenda, says the IET Students Statistics team, and student feedback provides valuable input to its work to improve retention rates.

In November 2003 the team sent out questions to 32,586 students on 153 courses who sat the examination/ completed the end-of-course assessment. They achieved a response rate of 56 per cent.

The IET Student Statistics Team would like to thank all those students who responded to the end-of-course survey. The information you provide is a key element in our internal review of courses and services and helps us identify areas where we are successful and areas where we need to improve.

**Printed materials continue to be the highest-rated course component**

# Financial support changes

THE Government is making radical changes to its package of financial support for students from September 2004, as reported in this issue of *Sesame* (page 3).

The main features of the new scheme are:

- A grant for fees which students will not have to pay back. The maximum grant available is currently set at £575. If eligible and depending on the outcome of an income assessment students could receive £575 towards course fees.
- A grant of £250 which students do not have to pay back, to help towards study costs, depending on the outcome of the income assessment. This grant replaces the £500 part-time loan.

In order that as many people as possible can have financial support to help them study with The Open University, the university adds to the money from Government. This means we can offer schemes of support for courses that are under 30 credit points, and help many continuing students achieve their qualification even if a course within that qualification has a course fee of more than £575.

More details about the different schemes of financial support can be found in the leaflet 'Financial Support' which is included with this copy of *Sesame* (only for students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Alternatively for more information students can contact the Financial Support Team (phone 01908 653411, email [reg-fees@open.ac.uk](mailto:reg-fees@open.ac.uk))

Research researchresearchresearchresearch

# Are we born to gamble?

Astrologers have always believed that the time of our birth has a profound effect on our destiny. New research into human biology suggests there may be some truth in this. By **Patricia Reichardt**.

**N**ick Leeson will forever be known as the man who gambled away an entire bank. The rogue trader, whose doomed fraudulent attempt to cover his \$850 million losses on the Singapore markets brought down Barings and earned him six years in jail, maintained he was simply trying to recover his employers' losses without being found out.

Some commentators suggested such a large-scale fraud was the inevitable result of desperate traders operating under such high pressure.

But new research suggests there's a simpler explanation for Leeson's irresistible urge to gamble. He was born in February.

A paper by Dr Carol Joinson and Dr Daniel Nettle at the Open University suggests a link between the season in which a person is born and the likelihood they will take risks. Their study reveals individuals born between October and March to

have a significantly higher level of "sensation seeking" than people whose birthdays are in the spring or summer.

A quick trawl of well-known risk-takers seems at first glance to back this up. Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher was born on January 3 and the man heralded as the world's greatest ever racing driver, the late Ayrton Senna, on March 21. Tragic water speed record-holder Donald Campbell was also a winter baby, as was Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, first man in space Yuri Gagarin and gangland boss Al Capone.

This is certainly not the first study to link particular traits with seasons of birth. Previous research has suggested the month in which a person is born can make him or her more prone to autism, depression, dyslexia and schizophrenia. It can even increase the chances of being left-handed.

But why should this be? "There could be several factors," said Dr Joinson of the Open University's department of Biological Sciences, whose research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. "Characteristics could be shaped by, say, social surroundings, or temperature, or nutrition, or whether a mother is prone to infection, but certainly one credible cause is the turnover of dopamine in the brain."

The chemical, which produces sensations of pleasure and carries messages between the

brain cells, is already known to be associated with certain conditions – an excess may result in schizophrenia and a paucity can contribute to Parkinson's disease. And interestingly, dopamine levels have been shown to be higher in individuals born in winter.

"This has been suggested to be due to the length of photoperiod (the amount of light in a 24-hour period) during gestation or early neonatal development," says Dr Joinson. "The link may even go back to the moment of conception."

Almost 450 Open University students responded to an invitation to fill in a questionnaire, which asked participants to examine 40 pairs of statements and state which of each pair best described them. The questionnaire, developed ten years ago by American Professor Marvin Zuckerman, covered a variety of subjects including drug-taking, sexual inhibition, mountain-climbing and parachute-jumping, as well as more oblique questions about looking at other people's holiday snaps, making friends with gay people and attitudes to modern art.

"Risk-taking can take many forms, depending on many social and economic factors," says Dr Joinson. "It could be skiing down a mountain, or it could be going to the pub and getting drunk. But it's all risk-taking and Zuckerman's questionnaire is widely accepted as one of the most appropriate methods to measure it."

The survey showed that participants between the ages of 20 and 45 years who were born during October to March were more likely to engage in sensation-seeking behaviours than people of the same age born during April to September. "Sensation seeking" is defined in earlier research by Zuckerman as "the seeking of varied, novel and intense sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experiences".

But just as fascinating is the researchers' finding that winter babies aged between 46 – 69 years were considerably less likely to take risks than their summer counterparts.

"Of course we would expect younger people to take more risks," says Dr Joinson. "For most people youth is all about trying new experiences – leaving home, going out into the world, getting their first job, etc. And most people,

Those born between October and March have higher levels of sensation seeking



Risk-taking comes in many forms

Picture: Getty Images

through life experience, do tend to take fewer risks as they get older. What is significant about these results is that later on in life the level of risk-taking among people born in winter declines to a level below that of people born in summer."

The lack of humans' willingness to gamble in later life is born out by numerous studies which show the brain's level of dopamine starts to decrease from the age of

40. But this decline still doesn't clearly explain why the level of risk-taking among those born in the winter should fall so steeply.

"It's been suggested that there is a link with

the length of photoperiod when people are born and what this means in terms of dopamine turnover across the entire lifespan," says Dr Joinson, who is keen to undertake more research in the southern hemisphere and on the equator to see if results there correlate with her recent findings.

"It does seem to be the case that the season in which you're born can have far-reaching effects for the rest of your life."

And not, of course, just your life. If you're born to be a stock-market trader, it may have a pretty significant effect on other people's, too.

Dopamine levels are higher in those born in winter

## Field work points to mass extinction

OU RESEARCH student Carly Stevens stepped into a blaze of publicity when her research into grasslands pollution was accepted for publication in the internationally renowned magazine *Science*, the Holy Grail for world scientists.

Just last year Carly was braving the weather in 68 grassland plots across the country documenting disappearing plants. Her findings suggested that the impact of nitrogen pollution on grasslands is so great that it could wipe out four out of 10 UK plant species

This March Carly, just 25, found herself sitting next to Dr Jeremy Thomas, a world expert in his field, facing more than 30 journalists at a press conference on mass

extinction. Dr Thomas was publishing a paper on how UK pollution has harmed birds and butterflies, and *Science* presented his and Carly's findings together as evidence that the world is experiencing an alarming loss of species.

The head of Earth Sciences department in the faculty of Science, Dr Phil Potts says: "It's not often in any institution that a paper is published in *Science*. It's not often in any institution that a research student is principal author on a paper published in *Science*. It is a major accomplishment for Carly and her supervisors to be published in a journal that has a major impact on the

world's scientific community."

Less well known is the fact that Carly is the third generation of her family to study with the Open University. Grandmother Gladys Sambrook has an OU BA (Hons) Arts; mother Gayna Stevens, is now studying for an OU Health and Social Care degree; while daughter/granddaughter Carly is soon to achieve a PhD in Biogeochemistry from the Open University.

Carly, who also teaches OU summer schools in environmental science and ecology, remembers as a youngster watching her grandmother Gladys studying her Open University courses. Gladys started her degree in 1984 at the age of 64.

The last word thelastwordthelastword

FIFTH COLUMN

# Spanish studies aid human rights work

Some people study Spanish so they can converse with the locals on a Mediterranean holiday. Others learn the language to help them in business. Mark Chamberlain used what the OU had taught him as he travelled through one of the most dangerous and violent parts of Colombia.

Mark, who had studied L314 *Buen puerto*, accompanied members of the Organizacion Feminina Popular (OFP) whose outspoken promotion of women's rights makes them a high-profile target for paramilitaries in the Magdalena Medio district of Barranca.

The Leeds-based student, who had already toured much of Latin America, was invited to the area having previously co-ordinated a tour of Britain for OFP members. And his journey was full of tension in a region with a murder rate equating to 260 per 100,000 people – more than six times as many as America's most violent cities and 100 times higher than the rate in the UK.

**Murder rate is 100 times higher than in the UK**

"It was extremely tense," said Mark. "The area is ruled by paramilitaries who are often working in collusion with the Colombian Army. The OFP actively encourages women to become more assertive and denounces violations of human rights. It names names of those who carry out such violations, and because it has such a public profile, by running houses for women across the city, its members are regularly under threat."

This danger was graphically brought home to Mark during his visit. "Eight people, including the husband of an OFP member, were 'disappeared' – unfortunately an all-too-frequent occurrence in Barranca. And one woman learned while I was with her that an attempt had been made on her husband's life. We were relieved to learn it failed."

OFP members, whose work is recognised by the United Nations, are regularly accompanied by volunteers from Peace Brigades International, an organisation whose global influence is vital in helping the OFP carry out its work. Indeed, UN Special Representative for Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilana said the PBI's presence was "the only reason why [paramilitaries] have not assassinated more of them".



Mark: Colombian travels were an ideal way to improve his Spanish

Picture: Alan Firth

Mark said he'd left Barranca with an "enormous respect" for the OFP – and his OU language studies had helped make the experience a little easier. "It was an ideal way of improving my Spanish while immersing myself in the culture of a Spanish-speaking country," added Mark, whose travels have also taken him to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

Mark said the welcome he received from OFP members "was as warm as the temperatures",

which often hit 40 degrees Celsius. And his ability to speak the language wasn't the only ice-breaker. "I took my violin with me, which was a great way of reducing stress!" he says. "Mind you, the case made them ask a few questions at customs..."

● Although Mark was travelling independently, PBI welcomes applications from people over 25, who are proficient in Spanish and have had previous experience of working within a human rights organisation or in social work. For details visit [www.peacebrigades.org/britain.html](http://www.peacebrigades.org/britain.html)

Here's your chance to write 300 to-the-point words on an OU subject that gets right up your nose – and we'll pay you £50 for the privilege.

## Get TMAs in on time

demands Eddie Elms



After receiving my sixty-sixth copy of *Sesame* I have finally decided to write about an issue which I feel devalues the professional credibility of The Open University's qualifications that so many of us are working our socks off to gain.

I constantly read, with little sympathy, about students who have missed their TMA cut-off date and expect an extension. To further exasperate the problem The Open University seems to have institutionalised, even encouraged, this unprofessional tardiness by empowering tutors to accept late TMAs. Why? We have substitution rules on many courses to help compensate for the pressures of distance learning.

The university's great strength is the independence of its learners. We must be able to work effectively under pressure and stick to deadlines when problem-solving. Many of us manage to tackle demanding courses while still holding down, and advancing in, professional and busy jobs. What message is the university sending about the calibre of its graduates when it tolerates this undisciplined behaviour in its students? In industry people miss deadlines at their peril!

Over the last 11 years, I have submitted more than 60 TMAs to my tutors, all completed to the best of my abilities and arriving well before the cut-off date – I find it extremely demotivating to learn that other students have submitted their work, and had it accepted, months after the cut-off date. This also raises the unpalatable question of plagiarism, as fellow students within the cohort may have received feedback on their work and may openly discuss it during tutorials before others have even bothered to submit theirs.

We constantly sing the praises of the OU and the professional recognition its qualifications attract. So let's start behaving like proficient students and insist that all TMAs are submitted on time.

Eddie Elms has been studying with the OU for 11 years and aspires to become a customer services officer with Easyjet.

## Wanted: foodlovers to dine undercover

FANCY becoming a restaurant critic? A former OU student is looking for 'mystery diners' to try local venues and report back their impressions of the food and service.

Vianne Dennehy recently became operations manager at Mystery Dining, which helps restaurants to maintain high standards by agreeing to send out 'undercover' volunteers to try their fare.

The company is looking for

people with service experience in the hospitality or travel industry, who fancy a free dinner! "They will book a table and eat a meal – just like any other customer – but after they've left the restaurant they fill in a questionnaire about the food and the service," says Vianne.

The volunteer is not paid a fee but will be reimbursed all their expenses (to a certain limit). For further details log on to [www.mysterydining.co.uk](http://www.mysterydining.co.uk)

## Anyone for golf?

DUST off your clubs – it's time for the Annual Open University Staff and Students Golf Challenge.

For the fourth year running, students and alumni are invited to join staff for a day of golf at the OU's home course, The Millbrook, Bedfordshire, on Thursday June 24.

The format will be unchanged – a fun 9-hole scramble in the morning, of teams put together on the day. Then the main event in the afternoon – individual, full handicap Stableford over 18 holes for the OU Challenge Trophy. There will also be nearest-the-pin and longest drive prizes.

The event is supported by the OU Club and The Millbrook Golf Club, so the day's golf plus coffee and lunch costs only £20.

Students and alumni, with current handicaps, can enter by contacting Andy Harding, faculty of Technology, OU, Walton Hall MK7 6AA, email [a.v.harding@open.ac.uk](mailto:a.v.harding@open.ac.uk) or phone 01908 653328.

This event is extremely popular and places will be allocated only to golfers with current handicaps, strictly on a first come, first served basis.