

SNEAKPREVIEW



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Sesame

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Reaching the Open University community worldwide

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Exam ratings

LAST year, I took my first ever academic examination for B200, prior to which I had never sat an exam except a few GCSEs over 16 years ago.

Unfortunately, when the results were announced I was quite disappointed with my grade and couldn't comprehend where I had gone wrong.

After exchanging correspondence with the Examination Board, I was finally sent an assessment sheet which showed how the markings of my paper had been rated. This restored some confidence in me and, most importantly, gave me an idea what I had done wrong not to score a higher grade.

Although the problem wasn't so much to do with achieving a higher grade, a year's long effort would have paid off, had I known beforehand how to approach the exam paper and perform better than I had.

As the examination period is fast approaching us, I would like to request the Examination and Assessment Board have a policy set in place ensuring all students are sent these assessment sheets which show the ratings of each section of their paper. For me, this single sheet of paper was a great source of strength which helped me wrap up the situation and move on with my studies.

It is fair to say that we get feedback on our TMAs, which we use to better our performance. Feedback from examination papers would equally help us perform better in the next round.

Koasar Malik
London

Down to earth

RON Ainsworth asked Sesame (issue 221) that 'these philosophers come down to earth' and tell students earlier about the change of presentation dates for AA308 *Thought and experience: themes in the philosophy of mind* and AA311 *Reading political philosophy: Machiavelli to Mill*.

Responsibility for the change lies with the Faculty as much as the philosophers and I'm afraid that it has been made just because we are aiming to be down to earth, and to ensure the long-term security of our curriculum and our finances.

We do try to tell students of our plans as soon as they are firm; if we were tardy this time, I apologise.

In the current financial climate we have to look at all our costs. Presenting only one of the two courses each year keeps down our costs, while keeping both courses in presentation over a number of years gives a wider choice for students.

Alternate year presentation is new in Arts. When we thought about how it would work here, we thought that it would be good to be a bit flexible.

AA308 is a new course; we wanted to give students wanting to take it the choice of 2005 and 2006, and ourselves two years of experience of the course before starting a stricter rotation. I am sorry if this has worked against some students' plans.

Dr Richard Allen
Dean of Arts

Paper still best

SO the e-University (UKeU), see Sesame 221) has foundered. Perhaps the OU should take

note. Is it moving towards computer-based teaching? I find OU course books excellent and enjoyable to read. I can take one to bed or on holiday, read it in the lounge or in the garden or on the train. While studying I can have more than one open on my desk accompanied by glossaries, maps, study guide and notes. I can annotate the text with my own references and comments and place stickers between pages for quick reference. While reading I can jump from page to page using fingers and post-it stickers to temporarily link things together. Moreover, after a while one develops a mental map of where things are in the course material – a big help in revision.

To parallel this learning experience using a computer does not seem to me to be viable. I do use computers and consider the internet great for communication and as an information resource but inadequate for in-depth studies.

Anthony Davis
Altrincham

Tutorials stay

THIS is my third year as an OU student. I am currently studying U210. My tutor has informed me that the OU is considering stopping all tutorials in favour of an 'online' service with tutors/students, which go hand-in-hand with TMAs being sent via email to tutors (as I believe was mentioned in a previous letter) – which gives all tutors the daunting task of printing off every TMA received prior to marking.

If the OU is so against the 'personal' touch – which excludes many students who don't have a computer – why don't they just change their name to the CLOSED University? After all, it does seem intent on shutting its doors on the non-PC-owning student.

Mark Rushton
Manchester

Peter Wilson, from the Learning and Teaching Office, replies:

THE importance of tutorial support is a keystone of the OU supported open learning model. The current debate is about the best way to provide that support. For some courses

providing a wholly face-to-face support model may be appropriate due to factors such as subject area, course level or geographic spread of students. For other courses, providing a wholly online support model may be appropriate because of different positions on the same factors. I am sorry that you have misunderstood the position the OU is adopting. There is no University policy to stop all face-to-face tutorials in favour of online.

The situation with electronic TMAs is slightly different. Ideally this decision should be with the student rather than the course team, but as your letter indicates, for some courses this may cause some difficulties for tutors and may need a different approach to structuring questions or marking schemes. However, there are ways of overcoming these difficulties and in due course the OU aims to give students more choice in submitting eTMAs.

Art for art's sake

IT is very disappointing that it is impossible to get an OU degree totally in art history and why, if you have studied art history at levels 1, 2 and 3, is there no diploma? Why isn't there a full range of OU courses in what is a truly amazing subject? I am studying A354 (13th/14th century) at the moment and the task of taking the huge jump into the 20th century is very daunting. What is wrong with art from the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries?

Please give us some more... anything, but don't just leave us with the two extremes of the spectrum. We want the juicy bits in the middle as well.

Caroline Dowson
Northumberland

Give the ISBN

WOULDN'T it be a good idea to include ISBN numbers of set books in course details? I'm sure I'm not the only Arts student who likes to buy set books in advance of doing the course so as to be able to read them at leisure. As it is important to use the stipulated version of the text why not supply the definitive reference?

Brian Keighley
Huddersfield

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Just a thought

Here's a selection from our big postbag on the Fifth Column (issue 221) on getting TMAs in on time.

WHILE congratulating Eddie Elms (Fifth Column, Sesame 221) on submitting 60+ TMAs, all before cut-off, I nevertheless think he should count himself fortunate that external and unforeseen circumstances have never got in the way of his doing so.

It is part of my duty as a tutor to be sympathetic to the sort of harsh blows which fate can sometimes deliver. While I will always question why an extension is needed, my experience is that few students make such requests casually.

Norman Thomson
Lanarkshire

THIS article and the attitude of the writer really got up my nose. While I agree that some students may be lax in the planning of their TMAs and thus need extensions to compensate for this, the writer obviously has no understanding of those of us with more serious and genuine circumstances that do need this facility.

I note the writer plans to become a customer service officer. If so I suggest he brushes up on his people skills before starting his new career. His draconian approach to life will not make him very popular with his customers.

Elaine Hughes
Cheshire

EDDIE Elms makes a salient point about TMA extensions, but seemingly ignores what may be the cause of at least a significant minority of extension requests: disability.

I have a set of conditions which are variable and/or unpredictable in their effects upon my health and I am sure other students with disabilities are in a similar position.

Perhaps Mr Elms should bear this in mind before fulminating against an OU policy which is markedly more humane in its treatment of students with disabilities than most other universities in the UK.

Andrew Plant
London

Sorry we did not have the space to print all the letters that came in response to our last Fifth Column. A big thank-you to all readers who wrote in.

Star letter

Don't duck exams



I HAVE been reading the exam results page (Sesame 221) with interest. I've also been following the various debates about funding and how the OU only receives the government subsidy if students complete their courses. So I wondered how big a problem this really is as Earth Sciences is being decimated by cuts.

I identified as many 30- and 60-point undergraduate courses as possible and subtracted the number of examined students from the number finally registered. This gave a staggering 43,000 finally registered students who didn't take the exam!

According to the S267 course team chair, the government's subsidy is worth £1,200 per finally registered student who completes a 30-point course (i.e. submits the End-of-Course assessment

(ECA) or attends the exam) and £2,000 for a 60-point course. That means that the OU lost out on approximately £70 million worth of funding last year alone – no wonder we are seeing courses vanish!

I realise that there will always be some level of drop out but surely not to this extent. The 91.5 per cent of the 10,510 students who took DD100 last year should be commended – if they can do it then so can everybody else!

So with exams and ECAs looming on the horizon, please make every effort to see it through as it could be a course that you want to do in the future that gets the chop. Even if you only sign your name and leave the exam hall at the first opportunity then you will have done a lot to help the OU.

Kenneth Laing
Lincolnshire

To plagiarise or not to plagiarise

Students who cut and paste text from the internet into their TMAs may be unaware they are cheating – and could be thrown off their course, writes **Peter Taylor-Whiffen**.

A student at the University of Kent was recently stripped of his degree the day before he was due to graduate because he had copied passages from the web. Michael Gunn, 21, freely admitted he had cut and pasted from the internet throughout his three-year English degree. But he claims he was never told he was breaking the rules and now plans to sue the university for negligence.

The OU's Head of Assessment, Credit and Awards Ben Palmer said plagiarism was regularly detected in TMAs and end-of-course (eca) projects, and the number of cases is increasing. "The total number of cases is not known because not all lead to a penalty and not all are formally recorded," he said. But he did suggest that at least some of the increase was statistically inevitable because of the rise in the number of students doing courses that required an eca project, and the improvements in software to detect plagiarism.

The OU sets out guidelines headed 'What constitutes plagiarism or cheating?' which warn students that they could be flouting the rules even by copying from their own notes of a text, tutorial, video or lecture if the notes contain direct quotations.

Information on plagiarism is available online at www.open.ac.uk/student and is clearly mentioned in each course guide. However, Ben Palmer added: "If students are concerned they should contact their tutor for advice."

But some OU students are keen to prove they are aware of the rules and respect them. One,

psychology honours degree student Fay Higgin, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* after reading a feature in which tutors at other universities had spoken of the difficulty in stamping out plagiarism. "With each piece of work I am required to sign a form stating that this is my own work," she wrote.

But OU ecology student Lisa Wall argued the OU could give clearer warnings to unwitting plagiarists. "When I studied at a 'conventional' university the perils and consequences were drummed into us and we were taught to reference everything," she said.

"As for the OU, there has only ever been the very tedious set of regulations in the course guides and occasional guidelines in the level three booklets, but

nothing that would ever indicate the importance of getting it right and the consequences of getting it wrong. I've studied with the OU for four years and have never heard a tutor even mention plagiarism."

But fellow student Heather Dorricott from north London thinks OU students are given ample warning.

"I think that it is well covered in the more basic courses," said Heather. "I think the fact that the student must sign a declaration with every TMA highlights the seriousness of the offence."

"To the best of my knowledge I have never plagiarised although I think with every single TMA in the last five years I have been tempted to, for the sake of ease and time-saving! However, I do consider it cheating. By being encouraged not to plagiarise, the student has so much more drive to read a subject, read around the subject and completely understand it."

If students are concerned they should contact their tutor for advice

Discounts for OU students

THOUSANDS of OU students are missing out on huge savings on train travel, accommodation and entertainment – because most don't realise they're available.

Anyone who studies more than 15 hours per week for at least 26 weeks per year is eligible for the International Student Identity Card, which offers more than 900 discounts in the UK and 28,000 across the globe.

Owning a card can get you discounted rates on useful items such as car hire, ferry crossings, car breakdown services, currency exchange, books and phone calls. But you can also save money on days out – including free entry to English Heritage properties and discounted admission to Alton Towers. An ISIC card will even get money off at four hotel chains across Europe.

The card, issued by STA Travel, is similar to the NUS (National Union of Students) card issued to full-time students in brick universities. But although most Open University students are not eligible for NUS membership because the OU is not affiliated, many don't realise they can enjoy similar benefits with an ISIC card.

OU learners' eligibility was proved after a German student was initially refused one but successfully appealed against the decision.

Sascha Rehm from Uberlingen had been granted an ISIC card in 2003 because STA mistakenly believed he was taking his degree in Molecular Science at Newcastle University. When they discovered he was an OU student, they turned him down, saying The Open University was not recognised in Germany, and a German students' travel agency also refused to back him because the OU was "exotic".

But ISIC staff confirmed the 31-year-old was eligible for the card because he studied more than 15 hours per week – although it took an appeal to the German Ministry of Culture, which said it ranked the OU on the same level as any German university, before he received it.

The card costs £7 for a 15-month membership from September to the following December. Pick up a form at your local college, call 08701 600599 or visit www.isiccard.com



Chris Aldous (seated) keeps up-to-date with his OU studies while based in Afghanistan

From Abergavenny to Afghanistan

HELPING to rebuild Afghanistan is a dangerous job for a westerner, but Chris Aldous found an unlikely source of help – his OU textbooks.

The 37-year-old spent three months helping the United Nations to establish democracy in the war-ravaged country, and found the best way to break down barriers was to show the Afghans his course materials.

"I wore their local dress, I sat on the floor to eat with them and we struck up a rapport by telling each other about our respective countries," he said. "And my textbook for DD100 includes a map of the British Isles, so that helped to illustrate exactly where I live. It made a huge difference being able to talk about our personal lives, away from all the issues."

But Chris, who is married with a year-old son, was still doing a dangerous job. He used his experience gained in the military and as an officer with Gwent Police to work with an organisation helping the UN to set up a voter registration scheme.

"What with Communism, the Russian invasion, the Taliban and then the Allied invasion, Afghans have endured 30 years of war," he said. "About 99 per cent of them just want to move on. But there are still pockets of Taliban resistance and it can be a very dangerous place. I avoided a few bombs intended for us but I knew three people who were killed."

Chris and his colleagues, who were laying the groundwork for Afghan elections due to be held this October, were working in an area east of Jalalabad, near the Pakistan border. "We got a huge amount of help from senior mullahs,

who would then pass the message on through their regional mullahs," he said. "People are concerned about Islamic fundamentalists but the mullahs told us killing goes against the Koran and a Jihad – Holy War – is justified only against people who take over your country, and they could see we weren't doing that. They were very positive about what we were trying to do."

But it was the team's friendly approach, said Chris, that won them the most friends. "We would talk to people on a personal level and engage them in conversation so we could understand where they were coming from. The trouble with the American military is they always have the idea that they have to pacify people, and the soldiers all come in wearing their sunglasses. You can't expect to build up trust with someone if they can't see your eyes."

"But we were able to talk to the Afghans by doing things their way, following and respecting their local customs and building relationships with them. And we could talk about other things to do with our own lives – so they were interested in my OU books!"

Chris, who lives in Abergavenny and is halfway through DD100, explained that he's always wanted to do a degree but chose the OU because he knew he would be able to study anywhere in the world. "The books were always in my bag and it was good to know I could take them with me if I needed to leave a place quickly," he added. "But I also found I was able to do a lot of studying. In fact, without TV, or playing with my little boy, or any of the other usual distractions, I got more done there than I do at home!"



News newsnewsnewsnewsnewsnewsnewsnews

They're the business!

Exceptional students and graduates from The Open University Business School have scooped awards at the School's annual awards ceremony during a prestigious event at the House of Commons.

The winners – selected from the School's 30,000 students – included learners in the UK and Europe. They received their awards during a dinner for OUBS alumni and guests hosted by Martin O'Neill MP, the Chair of the Trade and Industry Select Committee, who is a former OU tutor. The



winners include Paul Mylrea (pictured right), from Oxford (OUBS MBA Student of the Year), and Sarah Clark, a freelance consultant from Berne (Continental Europe MBA Student of the Year).

Other Student of the Year awards were presented to: Simon Grimes from Langham, Rutland – Professional Diploma in Management; Dr Alison Savory from Mortimer Common, Reading – Derek Pugh Professional Certificate in Management; Ian Michael from West Sussex and Sarah Rumbold from Wareham, Dorset – Certificate in Accounting; Liselott Karlsson from Stockholm – BA in Business Studies.

The OUBS Tutor of the Year award went to Alison Warman of Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan. Dr Thomas Blaser was presented with the OUBS Alumnus of the Year award to mark his contribution to the Swiss OUBS MBA Alumni Association.

The awards were presented by OUBS Dean Prof Roland Kaye (pictured left), who said: "Thousands of OUBS students display exceptional talent and dedication in their studies. As leading examples of this outstanding and inspirational group, our award winners are very worthy recipients, whose efforts and achievements we are delighted to recognise."

Paul Mylrea chose to study for the MBA to help him tackle the problems that he faced in leading a web service for disaster relief agencies. "I had gone from being a foreign correspondent to troubleshooting a start-up project, but it was not just any old start-up. It was in the not-for-profit sector, using untried software, and few people in the company behind it believed it would survive."

"I was sure somebody must have tackled these problems before and hoped an MBA would tell me how they had done it. Of course, in the end, there were no easy solutions, but the MBA helped me think about those problems in a new way and introduced me to a network of people with a huge variety of backgrounds who were always ready to offer advice and support."

Higher grades for top teachers

WIN £1000 per annum until retirement for every 30 points passed.

No, this is not the latest OU gimmick to attract students, but it is the latest initiative to encourage good Scottish teachers to stay in the classroom. The Scottish Executive has established a new teaching grade – the Chartered Teacher – to reward the best teachers and avoid their moving out of teaching into school management to gain a higher salary. When a teacher gains Chartered status, their salary will automatically be enhanced by £6,000 if they remain in the classroom.

One route to attaining the status is by completing a Masters degree which has been accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and every 30 points gained towards such a degree will generate a salary increment of approximately £1,000. A full degree of 180 points therefore leads to six increments.

The Open University's Faculty of Education and Language Studies (FELS) gained such accreditation in June from the GTCS for its MEd (Chartered Teacher), which is aimed at Scottish primary school teachers.

This is the first award developed by the OU specifically for Scotland and 300 places are available for the presentation of the first module (EE851, *Self Evaluation*) in October this year.

Eight further modules will be rolled out in 2005 and 2006. In total the OU programme will have four 15-point modules, and four at 30 points, with the option of two 30-point projects being combined into a 60-point module. Each module will have two starts per year, in October and February. The proposed fees will be £595 for 15 points and £995 for 30 points.

The programme has targeted primary teachers in the first instance, because FELS has a strength in primary education and successfully ran a SEED-funded pilot for primary teachers in the Highlands. Primary teachers are widely distributed across Scotland and therefore form an appropriate audience for the OU's supported open learning approach.

For further details telephone 0131 226 3851 or email charteredteacher@open.ac.uk

Support supportsupportsupportsupportsupport

Tactics are key to high marks

When it comes to winning the exam war, make sure you're aiming at the right target, advises **Ormond Simpson**.

Many years ago I was in the army cadet force. I used to be puzzled by the way the rifle range would empty when it was my turn to fire off one of the WW1 Lee-Enfield.303s. This was until the day there were two of us shooting at our individual targets. My target came back as clean as the day it was printed. My friend's came back with 16 bullet holes in it – and he'd only fired ten. Presumably I'd been banging away at the wrong target... the story of my life.

But one thing that I remember from the lectures on military theory was the importance of the difference between strategy and tactics. 'Strategy' according to the military theorists is about the long-term and large-scale aspects of a military campaign. 'Tactics' are about gaining an advantage, having regard to the immediate situation of combat. Given that studying a course sometimes feels like a war, it's not a bad idea to plan it like a military campaign and bear this difference in mind.

Now if you've got your study strategies wrong over the length of the course it's probably too late to do anything about it at this stage. But if you're coming up to the exams having made it past most of the TMA trenches

you may still need to treat the exam as a battle. You'll need in other words to decide on your study tactics.

You've very limited ammunition (the time you can expend) so you need to aim this at where it will cause the enemy most damage (yes, yes, metaphorically). Many students tend to concentrate their fire on that last TMA in the hope that pushing up their continuous assessment score will help with their overall course grade. But to pass your course or get a particular grade you have to pass continuous assessment and the exam both quite separately at the level you want (40-55 per cent for pass grade 4, 55-70 per cent for pass grade 3, 70-85 per cent for pass grade 2 and 85-100 per cent for a distinction). And while your exam grade

may feed back into your continuous assessment (if there's a substitution rule) it doesn't work the other way round – getting a better continuous assessment grade doesn't help improve your exam score. So in many cases improving your continuous assessment may not be the best tactics.

Take Mr X on the course I tutor (four TMAs, one substitution). He's done very well so far having scored 90, 85, and 88. He's now

working hard on the last TMA. To get the grade 1 pass he wants on the course he needs to score more than 85 per cent on each of the continuous assessment and exam. But if he gets the necessary 85 per cent in the exam, then, because of the substitution rule he actually only needs 14 per cent (yes that's 14 per cent) on that last assignment to get his 85 per cent on continuous assessment.

So my advice to Mr X (I must find out his real name at the next tutorial) is that he should do the final TMA but he shouldn't be spending a lot of time polishing it up. His best tactics may be to largely bypass the TMA strongpoint after a brief bombardment to get his 14 per cent and throw all his forces against the Orcist hordes of the exam by revising furiously.

You can get more information from the unofficial website www.marxonline.org.uk/ which allows you to work out what exactly you have to do to pass. By all means use the OU's own pOCAS (preliminary Overall Continuous Assessment Score) site at



Picture: Getty Images

www.open.ac.uk/assessment/pages/pocas_calculator.htm to calculate your continuous assessment, but remember it doesn't calculate substitution so only gives partial information which I think is rather misleading.

Right student soldiers: target – the exams; direction – 10 o'clock; range – weeks away; OPEN FIRE!

Ormond Simpson is assistant director, Region 06

newsnewsnewsnewsnews News

News in Brief

Are you part of the 'internet informed'?

Website users across the UK are being urged to take part in a project that could improve the relationships between consumers and the professionals they see.

Researchers have identified a new group – the “internet informed” – who log on to look for details about their symptoms before visiting their GP. But they want to know more about what people do with that information, how they search for it and why they look for that information in the first place.

The research team is also looking for volunteers who seek website information in a similar way before appointments with solicitors for civil legal advice and with financial advisors for personal finance products.

How those professionals respond to their patients and clients who have done pre-appointment website searches is also a key theme of the research, which is organised by The Open University Business School and Strathclyde Business School.

Internet-informed consumers are invited to answer an online questionnaire at www.iccresearch.org.uk; there they can also join a debate about internet information in the primary healthcare, civil legal advice and personal investment sectors.

Internet access changes the behaviour of clients

Prof Angus Laing, one of the OUBS project team, said: “It appears that more and more people are going to professionals armed with reams of information they have gathered from the internet. Many of them use that to question the judgement and recommendations of the professionals they are seeing.

“We hope this research will lead to recommendations that prompt professionals to respond better to this changing culture and therefore improve the service they are providing to their clients. We will be looking particularly at how access to internet information changes the behaviour of clients and at the sources and types of information people gather before visiting professionals. The internet as an information resource has the potential to change radically the way consumers interact with service professionals by offering consumers access to a level of specialist technical information that was formerly



Today's consumers are better informed

Picture: Getty Images

the preserve of service professionals.” The project is led by Prof Laing, Beneficial Bank Professor of Marketing for the OUBS, and Prof Gillian Hogg, Professor of Marketing at Strathclyde Business School. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRC) as part of the Cultures of Consumption research programme.

Consumers looking for more information about taking part can visit www.iccresearch.org.uk or can call research fellow Dr Terry Newholm on 01908 655858.

Scottish students' views sought

OU STUDENTS in Scotland are being asked for their comments to shape the future of further and higher education north of the border.

The country's colleges and universities are taking part in a new study to show how further and higher education experiences impact on learners' study and employment over the next five years – and the ‘class of 2004’ will include students from the OU.

Staff at The Open University in Scotland contacted thousands of students asking if they would be prepared to take part in the MORI Scotland survey, which was commissioned by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding

Councils (SFC) in partnership with Critical Thinking.

Now MORI has sent questionnaires to a random 20,000 FE and HE learners across Scotland, including at least 400 from the OU.

The study – *On Track: Class of 2004* – will help universities and colleges to assess and improve their services, help learners and potential learners to make decisions about their learning and career paths and contribute to a better understanding of how the industry as a whole can help learners make the most of their potential.

The results will also discover the types of skills and experience of most

long-term value to learners; whether there are common barriers to career progression and further study; and what motivates people to return to learning at a later stage.

“The Open University is delighted to be involved in this research,” said OU Scottish director Peter Syme. “We hope the information gained will eventually help to improve further and higher education by making it more relevant to future learners and employers, and will also help students make more informed decisions about learning and career paths.”

For more details visit the website www.shcfc.ac.uk

Norman Parkin

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Norman Parkin, President of OUSA 1977-79 and long-time supporter of The Open University. Norman died in late June, aged 78.

Norman was amongst the pioneer students. Registering in 1972 in the second cohort of students he graduated with Honours in 1976. Active first within the OU Students Association in the North Region, he quickly established his credentials and went on to be elected to the OU Council and become the first President of the

‘all in membership’ OUSA launched in 1977.

After his inspirational OUSA presidency, Norman went on to assist the university in many capacities including the establishment of the Association of OU Graduates and being a member of the Delegacy for Continuing Education.

A group of students, alumni and staff are looking for ways of celebrating the contribution Norman made to the OU. If you have any suggestions, please send them to Diana Slevin at d.e.slevin@open.ac.uk



Norman (centre) chairing a meeting as OUSA President in 1978

Here's looking at you

BOYS are just as concerned with their looks and image as girls, according to an Open University survey. Youngsters of both sexes think their physicality, names and clothes are important – but these give way to relationships and their private feelings at the age of 15. So found *Who Am I?*, a web-based study launched in conjunction with the OU/BBC's series *Child Of Our Time*, presented by Lord Robert Winston. More than 50,000 people have responded to the survey, which ties into the mammoth television experiment to follow a group of millennium babies up to the age of 18. To take part in the study, and other related surveys about youngsters' views of themselves and adults, visit www.open2.net/childfourtime/

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”.

Sounds of Life

NOISES never heard by mankind are the focus of the OU's first-ever series for BBC Radio 4. *Sounds Of Life*, which airs on Mondays at 9pm until September 13, is attempting to recreate the noises of early Earth to discover which species was the first to communicate intentionally. Host Aubrey Manning also finds out how animals make themselves heard and how they listen to their environment, by discovering how bats pick up ultrasonic echoes and how spiders sense vibration in their webs.

Explosive research

VESUVIUS' next eruption may be forecast with more accuracy than ever following work by an OU PhD graduate. Dan Morgan and a team of colleagues from universities across the UK analysed crystals from the Italian volcano's 1944 eruption to determine their patterns of iron and magnesium content and to work out how long they were in their magma chamber before being thrown out. The scientists plan to analyse the magma from other Vesuvius eruptions and Mt Stromboli to enable them to predict the next major eruption. Volcanoes feature in a number of OU courses, from the level one S103 *Discovering science* to the third-level S339 *Understanding the continents*. For details visit www.open.ac.uk/courses

Are you a shopaholic?

ANSWER questions on shopping and you will be helping an OU tutor towards her PhD. Joanna Robson is researching how new technology (such as the internet) impacts on an everyday activity (shopping) and the implications for self-identity – and is looking for volunteers to help provide the answers. The lecturer, who teaches DD100 and D318, is inviting readers to visit her website to complete a questionnaire and contribute to discussion boards, as well as post some links to relevant sites or articles about consumption or technology. “Of course, I would like people to complete the questionnaire,” she said. “But I'm also looking for volunteers to take part in phase two of the research through online focus groups.” If you are interested in helping, visit www.shoppingforum.org

Book your place

THE Open University is organising a three-day international seminar to take place in London in November 2005 to discuss the role books and publishing played during the colonial and post-colonial period. Key speakers will include Professor Harish Trivedi from Delhi and Professor John Sutherland from University College London. The seminar will mark the end of a two-year research project into the history of book production from the mid-18th century to present day, which is currently being carried out by The Open University's Literature department, following the award of a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRC). If you would like to attend the seminar entitled *Reaching the margins: the colonial and postcolonial lives of the book, 1765-2005* please telephone the Literature department on 01908 652092.



Patrice Foti: loves every minute of teaching

Checkout to chalkface

From running a supermarket to facing a classroom of children – Patrice Foti has made the most of a new initiative to bring more people into teaching.

The OU modern languages student signed up for the Student Associates Scheme, which gives its participants ten solid days' experience in a school – and he's loving every minute of it.

He so much enjoyed his ten days' teaching visually impaired pupils at Hampshire's Toynbee School that he has signed up for a further 20 days this September – a second phase that will earn him a credit towards the Government's Standards for Qualified Teacher Status.

Patrice, who was forced by injury to give up his previous job, taught modern languages and says he received huge encouragement from school staff.

"Chris Thomas, the joint head of modern foreign languages, did everything to make sure I got a wide perspective of the school," said Patrice, who is studying English and French for a degree he is due to complete next year. "He opened doors."

Patrice is among thousands of students – including almost 100 from the OU – who have signed up for the scheme, which aims to ease

the UK's teacher shortage by enabling people to try out the job while getting paid £40 tax free for every day they try it.

The money comes from the Teacher Training Agency, which wants to recruit teachers in the fields of science, geography, maths, design and technology, music and modern languages.

The scheme invites students to try teaching without obligation to take it any further. The first phase, which Patrice has completed, consists of ten days in a school near to the student's home, following a "schedule of observation and small scale activities".

The second, 20-day phase, may even exempt a student from some study or training if he or she goes on to an officially recognised teaching qualification, such as the OU's PGCE.

Head of The Open University Careers Advisory Service Clare Riding said: "Regional Career Advisors have told us that students see a value in this new scheme," she added. "It enables them to explore whether a teaching career is right for them."

Visit the website <http://sa-scheme.open.ac.uk> for more information. Alternatively telephone 01908 858685 or email FELS-student-associates-scheme@open.ac.uk

Students see a value in this new scheme

SEAs spark wave of interest

COULD you inspire young people to get into technology? The OU is helping in a nationwide search for Science and Engineering Ambassadors (SEAs) – and one of them could be you.

A new scheme is aiming to encourage more young people to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (so-called STEM subjects) by teaming them up with volunteers who can show them the exciting career opportunities available.

SEAs are drawn from a range of backgrounds including professionals, graduates, full-time parents and retired people, and pass on their enthusiasm and experience in a variety of ways. Volunteering could mean helping at an after-school science club, talking to a group of pupils about your career or helping with practical work in the classroom. How much time you commit is entirely up to you.

The SEAs Programme was launched by SETNET – the National Network for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – after research showed fewer young people were entering the professions, and co-ordinates its volunteers through a variety of networks (SETPOINTS).

OU graduate Carolyn O'Donnell was so impressed by the scheme that two years ago she became a

SETPOINT manager. "Every time a class of pupils is exposed to an experience like this, whether it be building a giant tetrahedron or making air-powered dragsters, a little bit of extra learning takes place," she said. "It only takes one spark to fire up a young person's enthusiasm."

"It really is awe-inspiring sometimes when you find yourself in a classroom alongside a rocket scientist, or a robotics expert and find yourself as eager to learn as the pupils are. I really love the experience and I know the teachers really value it too."

"As an OU student for many years I was always grateful for the chance I was given to extend my horizons. Ambassadors can do the same thing for young people. They offer a glimpse of what is possible."

If you are interested in becoming an SEA, contact Karen Sheard on 020 7636 7705 or at seas@setnet.org.uk or visit www.setnet.org.uk

The SEA Programme is just one avenue promoted by the OU's Active Community Programme, which offers a range of volunteering opportunities for staff and students. To find out about other forms of volunteering or to discuss ideas, contact the ACP manager at Active-Community@open.ac.uk or visit www.open.ac.uk/acp

Mark reveals the world's worst disaster

RESEARCH into the world's worst mass extinction, which led to the loss of 90 per cent of living species 250 million years ago, has found that the historical tragedy also involved some disturbing genetic mutations.

The Open University's Dr Mark Sephton, who was part of an international team of scientists from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom who uncovered the remarkable new information, said: "The mother of all mass extinction just got worse."

The findings appeared in the latest *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) magazine, published in July.

"In our work we have found that at the time of the end-Permian extinction increased amounts of ultraviolet light filtered through the Earth's surface and caused damage to the DNA in plant spores. The results were abnormalities that prevented plant life from reproducing and a consequent collapse of terrestrial ecosystems," said Dr Sephton.

"The cause of the increased intensity of ultraviolet light was a disruption in the Earth's ozone shield. Massive volcanic activity that was taking place in Siberia at this time forced chlorine- and bromine-containing gases into

the stratosphere where they catalytically destroyed ultraviolet-absorbing ozone gases. It was only when volcanic activity subsided, that life on earth could begin to recover from its biggest ever catastrophe," he concluded.

Dr Sephton believes the results heed an important warning for today's society: "We are bringing

the effect of human activity on ozone depletion under control but the end-Permian example shows us that natural volcanic activity can cancel out all our good efforts.

For a copy of the article visit your local university library. Alternatively you can visit www.pnas.org



courses

Courses

Holidays

holidays

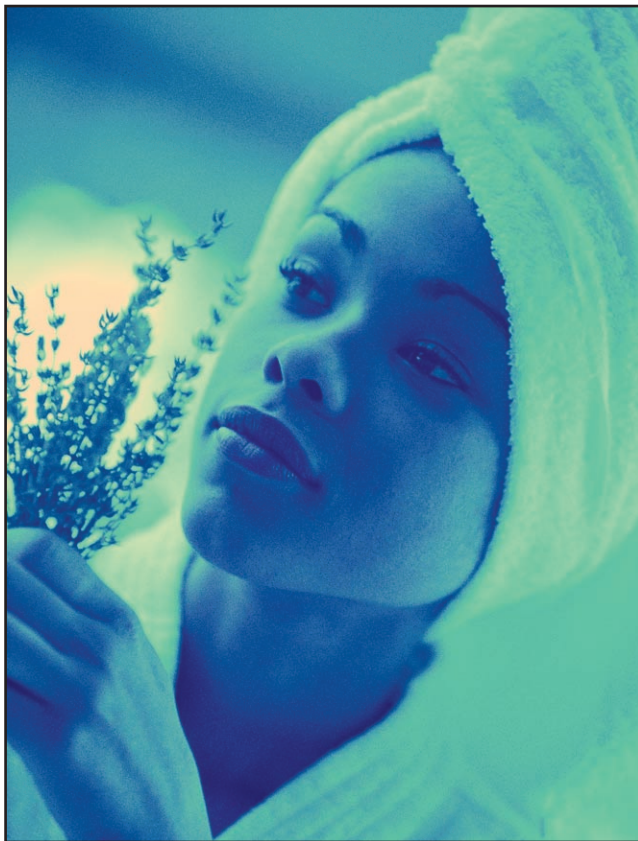
An alternative view of health

Complementary and alternative medicines and their role in health care provision are the main themes of a course available from next year.

One in five of us is said to have used this form of medicine and the 30-point study, which will explore how it has developed and been accepted throughout history, will enable students to evaluate its potential and make informed contributions to the debate on what has always been a controversial subject.

K221 will not teach its students how to practise complementary and alternative medicine but will examine the cultural, ethical and social history of such approaches and how they have been absorbed into mainstream services, as well as assessing evidence as to whether or not they work.

The theme is also explored in a new OU/BBC Radio 4 series presented by Anna Ford, starting September 21 at 9pm. During six shows the newsreader, and former OU tutor, explores our fascination with alternative medicine and meets practitioners including homeopaths, aromatherapists, reflexologists and acupuncturists. *The Other Medicine*, beginning in September, also explores whether alternative therapies work, whether they can be



Alternative therapies are hugely popular

Picture: Getty Images

effective even as placebos, whether they may be harmful and how more and more doctors are adding them to their scientific skills.

K221 *Complementary and alternative approaches to health: issues and debates* runs from February. It is a specified course in the BA (Hons) or BSc (Hons) Health Studies or Health and Social

Care, the Diploma in Health and Social Care but can also count towards several OU degrees. It does not require its students to have done any previous study in this field but as it is a level two course, it is suggested that *Understanding health and social care* (K100) would be ideal preparation. For details visit www.open.ac.uk/courses

Clash of faiths

WHY are religions that preach peace so often associated with conflict? How is it possible for people with polarised beliefs to live alongside each other? Why do some people switch their spiritual allegiance?

These and countless other intriguing questions are explored in a fascinating new OU course available from next February. AA307 *Religion in history: conflict, conversion and co-existence* will lead its students from the Roman Empire right through to the events of September 11, 2001, taking in along the way the Crusades, the

Reformation and the Holocaust. The study captures perspectives from Britain, Europe, India, Africa, the Middle East and the United States, as it explores controversial subjects such as the impact of Europe and the US on the non-western world.

AA307 is designed to appeal both to those interested in religion in the contemporary world and history students who want to examine how religion has shaped our world over the centuries.

For further information on this course visit www.open.ac.uk/courses

Study to be an HR Master

HUMAN resources managers can improve their skills and their career potential with the OU's new Master's degree in the subject.

The three-stage programme offers a grounding in all areas of management before focusing on HR strategy, interpersonal, investigative and consultancy skills. Students will also have

the option to study psychometrics, creativity and innovation or knowledge management.

The MSc is one of five new courses offered by the OU's Business School from November. Master's degrees will also be available in International Finance and Management, Management and Business Research Methods, Business

Administration (Life Sciences) and Public Administration.

Programme director Keith Dixon said the flexible study methods allowed students "to gain skills and knowledge that they can apply immediately in the workplace".

For course details call 01908 653231 or visit www3.open.ac.uk/oubs

Pure Cornwall

September to December 2004 - from £89

Four nights for the price of three on selected dates

UNDER the warming influence of the Gulf Stream, Cornwall is truly a land for all seasons with a mild year-round climate. An ideal haven for walkers, golfers and garden-lovers or those simply seeking refuge far from the madding crowd. Travelsmith is offering *Sesame* readers three different types of accommodation which cater for all interests and budgets.

Juliot's Well, Camelford. Set in 31 acres of beautiful woodland and meadows, adjacent to Bowood Park golf course, just four miles from the nearest beach and 24 miles from the Eden Project near St Austell, offers four grades of mobile homes and deluxe two-bedroom stone built cottages. Many amenities on site. From £55 for three and four nights, seven nights from £89.

Lanteglos, Camelford. This peaceful retreat is set in 15 acres of lovely gardens and woodland in a valley just a short drive from the magnificent North Cornish coast and adjacent to Bowood Park golf course. The villas are compact terraced family units with one double bedroom and one with bunk beds. A wide range of amenities are on offer on the site. From £65 for three and four nights, seven nights from £99.

Tregurrian and Beachcombers Apartments, Watergate Bay. Watergate Bay is a tiny hamlet between Newquay and Padstow, just 17 miles from the famous Eden Project. The four-star Tregurrian apartments are a select development of three deluxe two-storey units, just 100 yards from Watergate Bay beach. The new Beachcombers apartments are just 100 yards further along the road and are furnished and equipped to a similar four-star standard. All guests are welcome to use the Tregurrian Hotel's amenities when open.

From £89 for three and four nights, seven nights from £149.

All prices are per unit and include bedding, electric and heating. Ref: C165/OU



Cornwall - fishing village

Corfu

September & October 2004

From £299 for one week

REACHED through peaceful hillside villages and olive groves, Arrillas is the perfect setting for an ideal romantic getaway or peaceful family holiday. A gentle curve of sand offers a safe bathing beach and your holiday includes an escorted half-day walk and a full-day boat excursion to one of the offshore islands.

Accommodation is in privately-owned apartments or studios with 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.



Arrillas beach, Corfu

Jersey fly/drive

September/October 2004

Save up to 30% off brochure prices

Free car hire and half price dinners

Seven nights B&B from £225. H/B, 50% off for *Sesame* readers £38 (usually £77)

EXPLORE Jersey at your own pace with a free hire car. Visit the castles, historic sites and many other attractions that make the Island so memorable.

L'Emeraude is an elegant three-sun graded country hotel situated in a quiet location around one-and-a-half miles from the beach and St Helier's town centre.

Prices per person based on two adults sharing include return flights from Bournemouth (other airports at a supplement). Ref: C166/OU

For a brochure and further details of any of these holidays readers should call Travelsmith Ltd (ABTA V1290/ATOL 1917) on 01621 784666 quoting the holiday reference number.

PVC's VIEW



Linda Jones
(Curriculum
& Awards)

Open to change

Don't you sometimes wish that everything would stop – just for a month or two – so that you could catch up properly and get ahead in your studies? So that your head would stop spinning and you could balance work, study and relationships without feeling guilty about any of them? Stop the world, I want to get off!

I feel rather the same at the moment because there is so much work going on in the University related to new initiatives. And many of them are interlinked. For example, trying to create more flexibility for students through the Autumn starts project, which I've been sponsoring, links to work in Student Services such as reviewing re-sit patterns and thinking about models of student support.

What are all these initiatives designed to do? Do we need them all? One of the major initiatives – the course models project – illustrates the importance of reviewing practices even where the OU has a strong reputation already. 'Course models' is the shorthand term for major work we are undertaking on course development, production and presentation. We are systematically learning the lessons from courses that work well for students and applying them more generally so that students get a more integrated and consistent experience as they move through different courses and along their chosen pathway.

We know that features such as student workload and the pacing and type of assessment influence study outcomes, so removing overload and reviewing assessment can help in retention and student success. By generalising 'best practice' we aim to enhance the study experience for students: important work, but also very challenging work for course teams.

At the moment I am wrestling with the reconfiguration review. The major question here is whether our current academic groupings are best suited to meet our changing 'markets' – the existing and potential students of the University and sponsoring employers. The faculties and departments/centres which are the backbone of academic organisation have not changed substantially over the years. We have added on academic units – for example the Business School – but otherwise it has mainly been minor adjustment. Do our current groupings map well enough onto the new types of markets we wish to serve and can they meet the demand for new curriculum offerings? Are we paying enough attention to one of the distinctive features of the OU: inter-disciplinary courses?

Your OUSA representatives made some very useful comments on the Stage 1 report of reconfiguration, which was discussed by Academic Board recently. If you have views then please write to me at PVC-CA@open.ac.uk or to PVC Curriculum and Awards, the Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

In the meantime, stop the world for a few days at least this summer!

Books booksbooksbooksbooks

Hail the king of the road

Next time you're stuck in a bank holiday traffic jam, you might want to quietly curse the name of H.V. Morton.

For it is to this journalist-turned-author that Britain largely owes the dubious tradition of the Sunday afternoon drive. Morton's was the Morris, nosing its way down narrow country lanes, which opened the throttle on a new age of discovery for those who followed its driver's musings in his best-known book *In Search of England*.

The England he discovered was one where the smell of wood smoke settles on a village street at dusk and church bells chime in harmony with the harness' jangle as a shire horse heads home. And it was one his compatriots desperately needed to believe in, as his biographer, Michael Bartholomew points out: "The generation that had survived the Great War was avid for news that the England that they'd been fighting for, or for which their sons or husbands had died, was still out there."

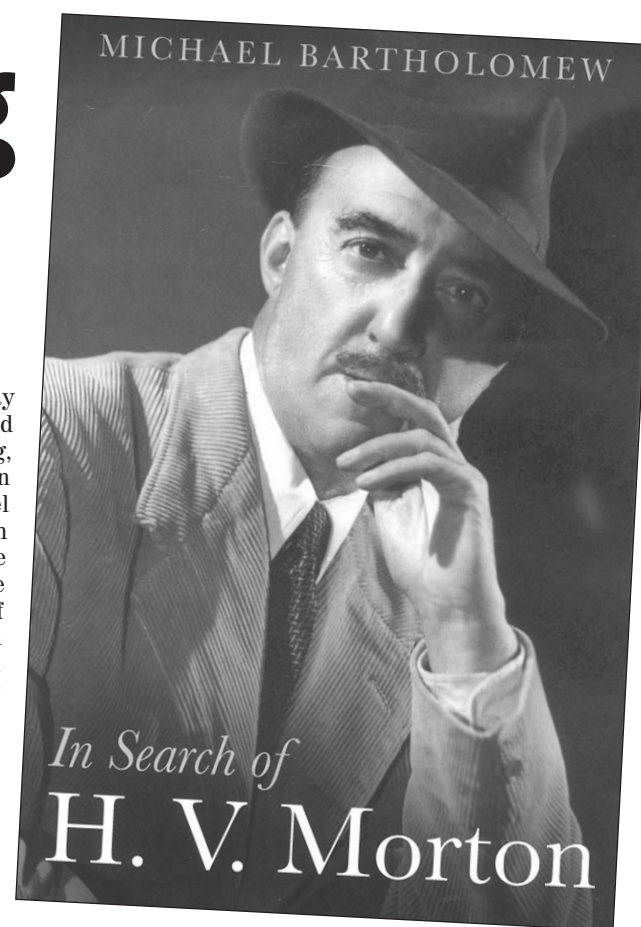
The man behind the wheel was the creation of an unlikeable character

But Bartholomew, who lectures for the OU, does not have far to go in his own search through Morton's life before it is clear there is a gulf between H.V. Morton the traveller and Harry Morton the writer as wide

as that between motorway services and Michelin-starred restaurants. The charming, witty and self-effacing man behind the steering wheel was the clever creation of a distinctly unlikeable character: an incorrigible philanderer who kept a list of all the women he slept with (more than 100), flirted with fascism, and, far from being rooted in the England he described, decamped to South Africa for the last 30 years of his life in search of sunshine, low taxes and obedient servants.

With or without a reading of H.V. Morton's extensive collection *In Search of H.V. Morton* is a fascinating exploration of the

popularisation of travel writing, as well as a record of a changing world and the way people wanted to relate to it. It is impossible not to relish the quality of Morton's prose in the extracts Bartholomew selects from journeys both within Britain and through Italy the Middle East and Spain. Morton wins his biographer's praise for lack of chauvinism in writing about Scotland, Wales and Ireland; and, four years before Orwell wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for a passionate pamphlet *What I saw in the slums*. But what also



absorbs Bartholomew is Morton's myths. In an era in which devolution and the immigration debates have fuelled even greater interest in the question of British national identity, this excellent biography releases us from the thrall of thatched cottages and ploughshares – revealing them to be as much artistic creations as any film set.

In Search of H.V. Morton by Michael Bartholomew is published by Methuen priced at £18.99 (hardback).

Jane Matthews

Author Michael goes to Waugh

WRITING a novel is, as anyone who's ever tried knows, hard work. Writing a sequel to one of the most popular classics of the 20th century is a challenge in a different league.

But OU English Literature student Michael Johnston has done just that – and his follow-up to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* has attracted considerable attention.

Brideshead Regained continues Captain Charles Ryder's memoir through the Second World War and suggests to fans of the classic novel what became of Waugh's characters including Ryder, Julia and Cordelia Flyte, Bridey, Rex Mottram, 'Boy' Mulcaster and Ryder's troubled college friend Sebastian.

The work was a labour of love for its author, who "never realised OU study of literature would become a vocational course".

"I loved *Brideshead Revisited* and was keen to see what happened next," said Michael, who develops Ryder's character as a successful war artist who meets Churchill, De Gaulle and Eisenhower, and witnesses the horrors of Belsen.

But while his sequel has since been acclaimed by such literary luminaries as critic Sheridan Morley, it has been far from popular with the family of Evelyn Waugh.

"I wrote it as a tribute, but his estate has not given its approval," he admitted. "But I was still able to write it because I did my legal homework and discovered that while a book itself is copyrighted, the author cannot necessarily copyright the characters or even the plot."

Brideshead Regained is the 67-year-old's first novel but it follows a varied career which included a spell researching and writing radio shows for the BBC and writing video presentations. Although *Brideshead Regained*

was quickly taken up by a literary agency, he was unable to sell the idea of such a sequel to publishers. So Michael set up his own publishing company, Akanos, and brought it out himself – but the problems didn't end there.

"It was all going really well – I even had a book-signing lined up in Sloane Square – but then the Waugh estate saw the book and said it should be pulped. So that was nice and encouraging!"

The estate claimed Michael's story drew so heavily on the original that it did, after all, contravene copyright, so his agent set up a face-to-face meeting that ensured the book would still be published – but there was a price

to pay. "The Waugh estate has now given permission for publication but not distribution in bookshops. But I can sell it on the internet, which I am doing successfully. And it's also available at 100 libraries across the UK."

Brideshead Regained by Michael Johnston is priced £14.95 on www.amazon.co.uk but OU students can buy a signed copy from Michael's website www.akanos.co.uk for a discounted price of £12.95. To order a discounted copy, go to the website or send a cheque for £12.95 payable to Akanos, and a covering letter mentioning you are an OU student, to Akanos at 2 Woodfall Avenue, Barnet, EN5 2EZ. Postage to the UK is free – students ordering from outside the UK should check the website.

Book shelf

● ANY work that earns a foreword from Ronnie Barker has to be worth a read, and David Jandrell's *Welsh Valleys Humour* certainly raises a smile.

As the title suggests, this first book by the OU tutor highlights the idiosyncracies of the spoken word in the Valleys – and very entertaining it is too. Whether he's ribbing his countrymen about the fact they do do things – "I do go to the pub and do have a game of darts" – or their individual perception of time – "we'll have this done now, by lunchtime" – he is never malicious, always affectionate and the result is a fondly prepared tribute to his native land.

There's also a fund of humorous stories, all of which I suspect contain elements of behaviour that will raise smiles of recognition throughout the valleys. But that is the one minor problem with this book. For all its supposed Welshness, several of its tales, figures of speech and malapropisms could be and are heard anywhere. This book will sell well in the Valleys, but it may struggle elsewhere. For many of these reported idiosyncracies of speech are as rife in England, Scotland and Ireland. It's a good read, but it's surely not quite as peculiar to Wales as it thinks it is.

Welsh Valleys Humour by David Jandrell is published by Y Lolfa priced £3.95. For more details visit www.yloffa.com or call 01970 832304.

researchresearchresearchresearch **Research**

Pictures in the mind

Michelangelo Buonarroti was once asked to explain how he had crafted one of his most famous sculptures. His well-documented reply was honest, simple and accurate: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

The Renaissance Italian genius was first and foremost a labourer, a skilled artisan who had learned the craft of sculpture from the received wisdom of his elders. But that fails to explain how he managed to "see" a non-existent celestial figure in a lump of marble with such clarity that he could create its image in three dimensions.

The concept of imagination remains one of the greatest uncharted territories of psychology. Certainly within the relatively short history of the science, when compared with research into other workings of the mind, the topic as a whole appears to have attracted less attention than it might have done. Granted, we can't all paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but almost all of us have some ability to come up with imaginative ideas or images. So it's time scientists paid more attention to the power of imagination, says Open University senior psychology lecturer Dr Ilona Roth.

"The problem is that historically psychologists have either studied individual aspects of imagination piecemeal – imagery, creativity, for instance – or have simply avoided the topic altogether, she said.

There's a risk that modern technology – TV, video and computer games – stifle the imagination

Certainly some early psychologists who were interested in the scientific basis of behaviour thought the imagination wasn't susceptible to scientific study. Behaviour theorists such as John B. Watson, who believed that human behaviour consisted of learned responses to their environment, refused to research the concept because they could not observe it.

"Some contemporary psychologists see imagination as imagery: visual-type experiences in your head without any sensory input," said Dr Roth. "Others focus on pretence, fantasy, or creativity. Others look at 'social' imagination or theory of mind, which involves empathy and putting yourself in someone else's position. Still others link it to counter-factual reasoning – thinking in terms of 'what if?'. Imagination means different things to different people, so maybe psychologists are right not to put it all together."

Imagination, it seems, has been around for a long time, though researchers disagree about the nature of its history. It's a common, though not uncontested belief that between 20,000 and 50,000 years ago mankind experienced a so-called "symbolic explosion", resulting in the first decorative art. "Certainly by this time, and probably earlier, people were creating things for more than purely functional purposes," said Dr Roth. "They deliberately made them attractive as well, or even created artifacts with a primarily decorative purpose."

This explosion heralded such imaginative creations as the famous French cave paintings in Lascaux and Vallon Pont D'Arc and bequeathed an artistic, inventive legacy that has influenced every aspect of our lives. But while there are clear indications



Ilona Roth: scientists need to pay more attention to the power of imagination

Picture: Daniel Hambury

that we have developed our imaginations since, it doesn't follow that with 50 millennia of imagination behind us, this 21st century will herald a golden age of creativity.

"We have greater stimulus than we have ever had," said Dr Roth. "But some would say that certain aspects of our culture suppress the imagination because all the information is already there. There's a risk that modern technology – TV, video and computer games – stifles imagination by supplying the ideas and images a child would otherwise work to create in its mind. That said, IT can also be a wonderful inspiration. Computers are bringing more imagination than ever before into, say, maths teaching. The key is about getting children actively engaged."

But if we're not inspired or encouraged to be overtly creative at an early age, is imagination a trait we can develop? "It's a possibility," said Dr Roth. "It's also a case of people having hidden talents that emerge when they get the chance to demonstrate them. Creative writing courses show that people of all ages can learn to write fiction, and quite a few novelists seem to find their voice in later life. And we know creativity doesn't necessarily stop in middle age. Look at Picasso."

Not everyone can be a Picasso, or a Shakespeare, or a Da Vinci, but it seems we do all have a talent for mental pictures. One of Dr Roth's research interests is autistic children, who are usually thought to lack creativity. "It's true such children will play unimaginatively – while others are using building blocks to make things, the autistic children will lay them in a row on the floor," she said. "And they tend to grow into adults who are exclusively focused on bizarrely narrow fields of interest, such as train timetables."

Then, of course, there is the one in 200 autistic children who has so-called savant skills. At the age of 12, Stephen Wiltshire astonished a nationwide television audience by drawing a detailed, accurately-scaled architectural sketch of St Pancras station entirely from memory. The BBC show, entitled *The Foolish Wise Ones*, prompted a wealth of commissions and

enabled Mr Wiltshire, now 29, to make a living from his talent.

There are others, too. An English girl known only as Nadia could draw exceptional, proportionally accurate sketches of horses from the age of three. Richard Wawro, who exhibited his autism in childhood by walking in circles and striking a single piano key for hours at a time, did not talk until the age of 11 – but his artistry is so admired that, now 52, he has sold 1,000 paintings, almost all of them recreations of images he has seen only once.

As the case of autism suggests, atypical brain function can certainly affect imagination. Some psychologists, including Dr Daniel Nettle from the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, claim to have found a disproportionate link between creativity and mental illness. Dr Roth is quick to stress a propensity for one does not automatically lead to the other but accepts there may be a connection. "The genealogies of Byron and Tennyson show mental

disorder in their families, and they themselves suffered from bouts of depression," she says. "Virginia Woolf was a manic depressive. So was Spike Milligan. It is even reported that people with early stage Alzheimer's can occasionally show increased creativity. This is consistent with an enhancement of some neural mechanisms or processes

at the expense of others."

However imagination manifests itself, it's not just a matter of ideas run wild. Inventors need discipline to hone their creations into objects of usefulness. Shakespeare broke many boundaries but was a master of the tightly-structured plot.

"Mental fluidity needs constraint," says Dr Roth "Without it, you have free association, which leads to chaos. Your imagination literally runs away with you."

To test your creativity and imagination, visit the Imaginative Minds website at www.britac.ac.uk/events/imaginative/ and click on "additional resources". For details of OU psychology courses, visit www.open.ac.uk/courses

The genealogies of Byron and Tennyson show mental disorder in their families

You ask

IN the last issue of *Sesame* we reported on the speech by Will Swann, the new Director, Students, and invited readers to send him in their questions. Student **Gill Sinclair** had two:

"If the Director aims to provide 'appropriate courses [and] good customer service', how does he intend to consult with students about their future study plans before the OU takes the decision to discontinue courses? The OU should take into consideration latent as well as current demand"

"How will the Director find out what new courses students would like to see, and assess the demand for those courses? At present, there is a lot of discussion on the conferences about courses people would like to see, but who captures this?"

The Director, Students, replied: "It is very important that faculties and schools think carefully about the implications for students before they discontinue a course. Sometimes it may be necessary to do so. There may be a change in the regulatory

environment and the course has been withdrawn because it no longer meets national standards. They do need to make sure students are informed about any change.

"The decisions about which curriculum we are going to develop rest with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Awards). She has very comprehensive plans in hand to ensure that when new courses are made they are based on extensive market research.

researchresearchresearchresearch Research

Let's hear it for our children

A new research centre is finding out about youngsters by getting them to set the questions. **Jane Matthews** listens in.

You're not listening" may be the soundtrack to everyday life in many family homes. But "not listening" has taken on a new meaning since my 11-year-old son Paul was invited by his school to participate in a bold initiative to teach children how to be researchers.

The Children's Research Centre was launched at The Open University this year after a successful pilot. Since January, 16 Year Seven students, including Paul, have completed a 10-week course in research skills. They are now midway through the second 10 weeks of the programme, working on individual research projects. Underpinning the creation of the Centre is the conviction that children are the experts on being children. And that so long as society limits itself to adults researching children's lives we will only ever have an incomplete picture.

Proof of this came right at the start of the programme when the trainee researchers discussed what they might want to research. "Medieval kings" said one, "planets", another: their frame of reference being the kinds of projects which teachers suggest in the classroom every week. Fast forward a term and the children's focus has switched dramatically. Without any prompting from staff at CRC (who, at the children's suggestion, are now styled 'research assistants') the topics they have chosen include whether classroom seating arrangements affect children's learning, what makes lessons interesting for children, the effects of parent pressure on children having music lessons, and Paul's topic – children's experience of bereavement.

Paul has circulated a questionnaire to 145 nine- to 11-year-olds at his school and reports that all but one have been through the death of a relative or pet; five out of six of those questioned have had multiple bereavements. In July Paul set

out for Great Linford Combined School in Milton Keynes with a dictaphone to do follow-up interviews with some of those who had agreed to be quizzed. How did they feel about their loss and about death in general? Who did they go to for support and what kinds of support helped them? "I just wanted to find out if having a death causes you to change, in your behaviour, or your personality," Paul explained when I asked where he had got the idea to tackle such a difficult subject. "To be honest I don't think parents and teachers do listen to children enough. We have a lot of ideas adults don't know about."

"I have always been impressed by what children of this age are capable of," said CRC's founder Dr Mary Kellett, who has been both parent and teacher before joining the OU. "The whole ethos of the Centre is about valuing what they can contribute, empowering them to get their voices heard. It's not just what children say; they think about things in a different way. We miss so much because everything we do is through adult filters. They are used in research as participants but the research is always adult-led, always from an adult perspective.

"The barrier for them is not their age but their lack of research skills, so why not teach them?"

There is certainly a chasm between society's and CRC expectations of what children of this age are capable of. As this first CRC programme year draws to a close Paul can now not only programme the video better than me but can use a camcorder and a voice recorder, design a questionnaire, listen, observe, consolidate vast amounts of information, write a report and discuss the ethics of research.

In one session I watched the children spend 45 minutes in total concentration learning how to use Powerpoint to present their research findings. It was hard not to draw a comparison

with the National Curriculum requirement for the same age group to spend half a term making biscuits. Or school projects, which, according to these young researchers, consist almost entirely of doing a swift Google search on the internet, then paraphrasing the results.

But apart from the fact that allowing children to set the research agenda will tell us a great deal about their priorities and how they see the world, it may also be true that children-as-researchers elicit different responses from their peers. Paul's classmate Daisy Wooller, who is looking at whether there is a relationship between enjoying or loathing a subject and being good or bad at it, said: "Sometimes children do tell adults what they want to hear. And I think children listen to you more because you are one of them. You're not a stranger."

Child researcher Eleanor Denny says she certainly found her peers opening up to her about their feelings of being pressured by parental expectation when they are studying music, wanting to quit but feeling unable to tell their parents in case they felt let down. Paul points out to me that children may also choose to make things up to tell adults, so they can have a joke about it afterwards with their friends.

But back to not listening. These middle school years are a period which has been overlooked, Dr Kellett believes. For every text on toddler taming or surviving teenagers, there is gap on the shelf between. "Very few sections of society are good at listening to this age group. They will listen to teenagers but very few take 11- and 12-year-olds seriously," she said.

This may no longer be quite true for she and her CRC colleagues have been inundated with requests from teachers, policymakers and other researchers for more information and to provide speakers at education events. Eleanor recently presented her initial findings to both the Cabinet Office and to an audience of 200 teachers at a conference. Two students from the CRC's pilot group, Ben Davies and Selena Ryan-Vig, are talking to the FA and FIFA about their findings that their peers not only prefer mixed-gender football and would like a mixed premier league, but believe it would improve spectators' behaviour.

To be honest I don't think parents and teachers do listen to children enough. We have a lot of ideas adults don't know about

Very few take 11- and 12-year-olds seriously

And in due course I would expect the British Board of Film Classification to be knocking on 12-year-old Alex Gifford's door to hear what young people really think about film certificates. I imagine the censors have already worked out that all those under-12s who were prohibited from watching *Spider-man* saw it six months later on Sky Movies or on a DVD rented out by their accommodating parents.

What they may not know, until they read Alex's final report, is how universal is the ploy – aided by the arrival of multiplex cinemas – of children buying tickets for films they are permitted to see, then sliding into a screen nearby where the film they really want to see is showing to 15 or 18 pluses. "I want the Board to change it so that I can go and see films with my family or friends if my parents agree," says Alex. "I do think that sometimes children know more about their own lives than adults do."

Mary and the other 'research assistants' would certainly agree. The Centre is closely linked to the OU's Childhood Studies Programme which has itself broken the mould by drawing extensively for its course materials on children speaking directly about their experiences of being children. "The longer I have worked with children, the more I learn how much society can learn from them," Dr Kellett said.

I come at it as a parent, conscious that even when I'm listening hard I can't climb into Paul's head and understand precisely how it feels to be growing up now. I never will, but it strikes me that in homes like ours up and down the country CRC may also play a significant role. Through facilitating children talking to their peers about their experience, and learning from the results, we might just close the gap of understanding a little – before teenage arrives and the bedroom door slams firmly in our faces.

Reports by children involved in CRC's pilot stages can be read on its website <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>

The Open University runs a course on *Research with children and young people* (course code EK310), which can be studied alone or form part of a Childhood and Youth Studies degree.



Daisy and Paul setting their own research agenda

Picture: Charlie Wooding

Special Report **reportreportreportreportreport**



Walk back in time

Mention time travel and most people conjure up images of a mad professor showing off Heath Robinson gadgetry in a 1950s B-movie. But the truth is we can all step back hundreds, thousands, even millions of years whenever we want to – just by venturing outside the front door, writes **Peter Taylor-Whiffen**.

Because right here, in your city, town or village – wherever that is – you’re constantly looking at millions of years of history. See that field? That used to be all forest. That hill up to the supermarket? Formed by a glacier. Thousands of fossils beneath your feet prove you’re walking where dinosaurs once trod. And what about that medieval church, or that canal?

The history of Britain is all around us, all the time, and it’s fascinating to learn how our islands evolved to our present-day homes. And now a new TV series, produced in association with The Open University and hosted by Alan Titchmarsh, will show you how to do just that.

The Natural History Of Britain not only highlights our nation’s extraordinary past, it also suggests a walk you can do, where you live, to see examples of this history on your doorstep.

The series, which starts in September, will show how Britain has evolved through geological, climatic and human change. Have you complained about the weather recently? This is nothing – at one time or another Britain has been boiled in lava, buried under tropical swamps and swept by desert sands. It has been crushed by enormous glaciers, released by warm winds and forested from head to toe. Ten thousand years ago there’d have been no trips to the seaside because we simply didn’t have one.

Ten thousand years ago there’d have been no trips to the seaside because we simply didn’t have one

The programmes should make for great viewing, as we see Alan abseiling down an underground waterfall twice the height of Niagara Falls, meeting fishermen who have successfully trawled the sea for the bones of woolly mammoths, and coming face-to-face with the rare swallowtail butterfly.

But what makes this BBC/Open University series different is the direct way in which you can get involved. At the end of six of the eight programmes you’ll see examples of history that you can explore in your area – and each BBC local website will outline walks you can do, enabling you to travel in time yourself.

Each walk shows just how close that history is. In Yorkshire, for example, a simple stroll through the park surrounding Keighley’s Cliffe Castle clearly demonstrates how the area has developed through the centuries.

“The whole park is the result of an ice-deepened valley,” said Christine Verguson from the BBC’s website in West Yorkshire, whose Keighley route was mapped out by staff at Bradford Museum. “A Roman road cuts through the middle of the park, and there’s also a 17th century wood with butterflies, jays and blackwings, while above fly more dramatic species such as golden eagles and buzzards. There’s a lot going on, but most of us seem to take this fascinating history for granted. Hopefully these programmes will show people history is all around them.”

This is far from the only walk Christina is co-ordinating in West Yorkshire. Viewers in that region could also, for instance, go to Walton Hall, Wakefield, where 19th-century Squire Charles Waterton created the world’s first nature reserve, or the picturesque Hardecastle Crags in Calderdale to see steep-sided valleys, fossils, millstones, evidence of a packhorse trail and badger setts.

More than 200 such walks will be listed across all the local BBC websites – many proving you don’t have to live in the countryside to enjoy natural history.

In Cardiff, for example, a trek through the city centre from the National Museum to the bay features fossils from the paleozoic period, the geology of the South Wales Valleys, the evolution of the River Taff and the impact of an ever-changing sea-level.

And as you’d expect in this part of Britain, the walk also takes in the industrial and ecological effect of mining and even the extraordinary history of how the coalfields were formed – from, believe it or not, tropical rainforests.

“When people think of natural history, they naturally think of rural areas,” said BBC Wales co-ordinator Sarah Goodey. “Obviously many of the Welsh walks cover beautiful countryside, but we also wanted to show how much natural history can be found in urban areas.”

From volcanoes in Borrowdale to industrial Glasgow, from Plymouth’s limestone pavements to the formation of Peterborough city centre, the clues to our nation’s past are all around us.

The walks, almost all wheelchair/pushchair accessible and of varying lengths up to four miles, take in cities, hamlets, natural phenomena, man-made marvels, mountains, caves, farms and quarries.

You can walk the routes on your own, or join in a special “walking weekend” on October 16 and 17, when local BBC radio stations will be encouraging listeners to join organised treks. Whatever your age or ability, and wherever you live, there is no barrier – time-travelling really can be for anyone.

• The walk routes will be available for download in time for the first episode of *The Natural History Of Britain*, which airs on September 26. For more information log on to www.bbc.co.uk/wherelive or tune into your local BBC radio station.

Crystal clear

THE University, in the final analysis, should facilitate maximum comprehension with respect to the totality of its communications.

Or, to put it in Plain English, the University wants people to understand everything it says.

So a crusade to stamp out jargon, gobbledegook and waffle in Open University publications has been launched by the Communications Group and Student Services, with the support of the national pressure group, the Plain English Campaign.

The goal is to persuade all the University’s writers and editors to write to Plain English Campaign guidelines and to make sure that all its communications are clear, concise and say what they mean.

“Our aim is to ensure students are confident they can read any of our documents, from a prospectus to a leaflet about financial support, and understand them the first

time round,” said communications officer Claudia Sargent, one of those responsible for co-ordinating the Plain English drive.

Two OU documents, *Terms and Conditions of Registration* (now renamed *Conditions of Registration*) and *Becoming a Student*, have already gained the coveted Crystal Mark for Plain English, as have the financial support leaflet and some internal staff communications. Two further documents, the *Meeting Your Needs* booklet and an Intellectual Property policy document are soon to undergo the PEC treatment.

In its rewrites, the University is trying to tread a fine line between using simple language, and talking down to readers, said Claudia.

What do readers think of OU’s use of English in its communications with students? Write or email *Sesame* with your views.

A Plain English makeover: Terms and Conditions of Registration before and after

Before

- Sanctions the University may take
- Without prejudice to normal legal remedies, the University reserves the right
- Disclosure will be the minimum needed to comply with authorisation

After

- *What we may do*
- *We have the right*
- *They must only reveal data that is absolutely necessary*

What the Plain English Campaign’s Guide says:

Don’t use

- an absence of
- consequently
- costs the sum of
- empower
- in the absence of
- in the event of

Try

- *no*
- *so*
- *costs*
- *let*
- *without*
- *if*

reportreportreportreportreport Special Report

FRONT PAGE STORY

OU at the forefront of social research

What does it mean to be a British Muslim in the context of the recent war in Iraq and 9/11? Why is the underachieving young black man the epitome of cool, while his academically more successful female counterpart is not?

These are the sort of questions that the Identities and Social Action Programme being directed by Open University professor Margie Wetherell is hoping to answer.

Extensive research will be carried out at a number of universities across the United Kingdom over the next six years.

The programme, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, seeks to deepen the understanding of the processes involved in the making of selves, groups and communities in Britain today.

We have a long history of research into identity issues

"Much public debate is based on untested claims about the changing nature of identity in modern and post-modern societies.

"There is an urgent need to ensure that such claims are based on empirical investigation in order that we see our society move forward in the right direction and maintain a high quality of life," said Professor Wetherell.

The outcomes of the programme will be of interest not only to social psychologists, but to the media, the participants of the research and to UK policy makers.

For example, the Government Social Exclusion Unit, The Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disabilities



Notting Hill Carnival in London. What does it mean to live in a multicultural community? Universities across the UK including the OU are carrying out a six-year project to find out just that
Picture: Halden Photography

Rights Commission are interested in using and understanding the links between identity and discrimination to develop their policies.

Such work is also of relevance to the Home Office in terms of the development policies on immigration and the dispersal of Asylum Seekers.

As well as looking at ethnicity, the programme will consider the links between identity and political engagement and the relevance of social class. It will also examine how the cultural majority construes themselves in today's society, gender issues, how disabled people see themselves and

community conflict unrelated to ethnicity. The Open University, which is well-known for its high quality social science research, is delighted to be at the centre of the £4 million research project.

"It is extremely important for The Open University to be involved in this project. We have a long history of research into identity issues going back to one of The Open University's famous scholars, Professor Stuart Hall.

"So to be at the forefront of the latest identity research is only fitting," said Professor Wetherell.

Gabi Nobis

Breaking out of the Learning Zone



Zeron Gibson, co-presenter on *Lab Rats*

A WELL-KNOWN TV writer recently called The Open University for some information about a new OU/BBC programme when it suddenly dawned on her: "Say... when did the OU break out of the *Learning Zone*?"

For 30 years it has been a BBC institution: BBC TWO in the pre-dawn hours was wallpapered with Open University *Learning Zone* programmes, mainly materials for courses run by the distance learning pioneer. For the students it was their contact with mainstream higher education, for here were the classrooms and the academics lecturing them with show-and-tell visuals. It was the student's duty to tape the programmes or, if their constitution permitted it, watch them 'live' in order to complete their courses. Or, the programmes could be fodder for insomniacs, because you didn't have to be an OU student to watch.

It may seem that the old programmes of the 70s and 80s are still with us, but sideburns, kipper ties, long hair, Jarvis Cocker glasses, and production techniques that screamed We Love the 70s died a respectable death long ago. *Learning Zone* territory then was knowledge central, where the effort to illustrate and teach grew with creative

touches as the broadcast industry technology advanced.

A *Learning Zone* compilation looks like a history of the evolution of the modern television industry production techniques. Today the *Learning Zone* is broadcast television that is mostly used to inspire learning. Course programmes still appear, but delivery of materials for Open University courses has mainly gone multimedia - with students using e-books, CDs, DVDs and the internet.

As the *Learning Zone* evolved away from delivering course material, The Open University has been gradually morphing into a prime-time player over the past five years. Now, with about 20 series a year in prime-time television, it's starting to get attention.

Look for yourself - there's the familiar shield and circle, blue and yellow OU logo on such popular programmes as *What the Industrial Revolution Did For Us*, *Landscape Mysteries*, *Rough Science*, *Hollywood Science* and *Lab Rats*. And the selection is no longer locked to BBC TWO.

The OU has become a co-producer of major BBC ONE series such as *Human Mind* and *Leonardo* and is starting to make an impact on the schedules of BBC THREE and FOUR, backed up with links to the popular new OU short courses.

Take the science programme *Lab Rats* for example. On BBC THREE, it generated lots of global press coverage after featuring the first-ever televised sperm race, won by co-presenter comic Zeron "Always Bet on Black" Gibson.

In August, the OU/BBC programme *Being Positive* on BBC THREE dealt with the rise in HIV cases in the UK.

This autumn on BBC ONE, The Open University is co-producing a six-part series after following child social workers for a year in Bristol.

The OU/BBC commissioning unit is serving up arts, history and science in the popular, populated, prime-time vein. There is talk of capturing audience share, involving more independent production companies and programme placement. This is more than just a new television company formed of convenience; it's a whole new approach to the old Open University TV formula of a professor with a prop.

The OU website detailing all OU programmes, www.open2.net, gets more than 700,000 hits a month, proving a powerful medium for viewers to explore further aspects of a programme.

Louis De La Forêt

People peoplepeoplepeoplepeoplepeople



Simon's a star in rock's hall of fame

OU lecturer Simon Green has just learned that somewhere floating in deepest space is an asteroid with his name on it, writes **Peter Taylor-Whiffen**.

Dr Green (pictured left) has been accorded the rare honour of having a rock called after him to recognise his 20 years' research into space debris.

"I'm delighted," said Dr Green, whose name was chosen by Swedish astronomer Claes-Ingvar Lagerkvist who, as the man who discovered the asteroid, is allowed to choose what it will be called. "I found out when I called him about an asteroid mission research project and he said 'oh, by the way...'"

There are known to be about 100,000 asteroids – chunks of rock orbiting Mars and Jupiter which were left over from the formation of the planets – but the rocks can be named only after scientists have studied them long enough to establish their exact orbit. Dr Green's asteroid, which was previously known as 9831 but will now be mapped as Simongreen, was actually discovered in 1979.

"About 65,000 have been tracked sufficiently to be given a number," he said. "But only a relative handful have been given a name, so it's a great honour."

The process of naming an asteroid after an OU scientist had to be ratified by the International Astronomical Union, which has learned from experience to keep a tight rein on the type of names suggested for asteroids by their discoverers. A quick

check of the existing list of known asteroids, many named before the IAU brought in such ratification, reveals that floating somewhere between Mars and Jupiter are rocks named for Tweedledee and Tweedledum, American comedian Robin Williams, Pinocchio, Pink Floyd, Pavarotti, Lennon and McCartney and all the individual members of the Monty Python team.

One is even called Mr Spock, a move which prompted the Union to change the rule so it could have more control over the naming process. Members might have been happier if the discoverer had chosen the name because of a space-inspired reference to *Star Trek* but were less than impressed to learn the scientist had actually named the asteroid after his cat.

But there are no such problems for Dr Green, a senior lecturer at the OU's Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute. "There are guidelines but my name seems to have passed the test," he said.

He said the asteroid was "100 million times fainter than anything we can see with the naked eye" but added that, at 'only' 200 million miles away, "in space terms it's in our back yard."

"I'll get an image of it next time I'm looking at that area of space," he said.

"I don't know if I get a certificate or anything like that, but it doesn't really matter. I know where it is. I'll find it."

The asteroid was 100 million times fainter than anything we can see with the naked eye

Business-like Abi changes her tune

Many people discover an OU education helps them build on their chosen career and increase their pay packet into the bargain. But **Abi Magnus** (pictured right) has found her studies have taken her in a completely different direction – and she's enjoying every minute of it, she tells *Sesame*.

WE often hear stories about the OU changing people's lives. But five years ago when I signed up for DD100 *An introduction to the social sciences*, as a way of easing myself back into study before embarking on an MBA, I had no idea what was in store.

I'd been in the music industry for about five years, working my way up to international marketing manager. Then, suddenly, one dark evening in February 2000 I found myself attending an OU tutorial at Goldsmiths College, London with 15 other bemused-looking people. (Although only two were as bemused as I was, as we three left-handers tried to work out how to take notes using the desk attached to the right-hand arm of their chairs.)

It changed my life forever. Whatever my expectations – and I admit to being relieved that there wasn't a beard or elbow patch in sight – I never counted on trading in my MBA and career plans.

But I did. After DD100 sparked an interest in social issues and international development, I studied U208 (the old *Third World development* course) followed by L210 *Mises Au Point* and last year U216 *Environment*. I'm now in my fifth consecutive year with the OU.

And this year was the biggest change

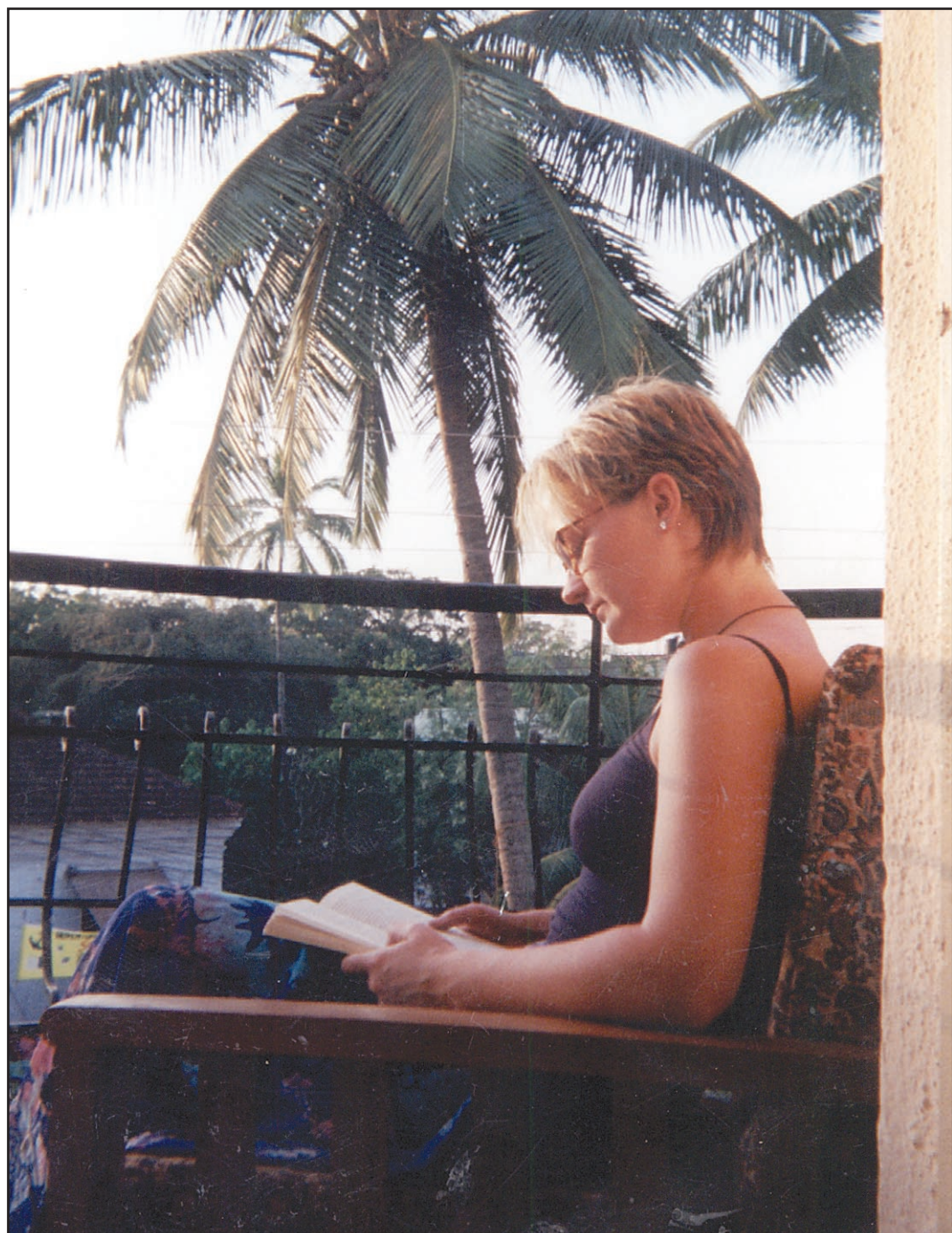
of all, as I left the music industry to work pro bono as a marketing consultant with Learning For Life, a voluntary NGO which supports innovative, sustainable education programmes for children in marginalised communities in South Asia.

I've travelled a long way – literally and figuratively. In just the past six months I've stayed in a Bedouin tent and learned to study the ancient Tibetan art of Kum Nye! After this year's exam, I'm hoping to spend a couple of months on a community development project in Rajasthan, India.

I've found in my new work that education is probably the single most important factor in creating sustainable development. Being able to put my OU education and commercial experience to such positive use is incredibly rewarding – even if I do occasionally miss the comforts of a record company salary.

So, where does the journey end? I guess it doesn't. Life has changed and life is perfect. Well, it would be if I could find a comfortable way to take notes in those stupid right-handed chairs...

Visit the Learning For Life website at www.learningforlifeuk.org



peoplepeoplepeoplepeoplepeoplepeople **People**

Sue takes caravans forward

When Sue Fagg took over managing her parents' caravan park, aged just 21, she never dreamed that she would end up helping to redefine training in the industry.

Many years of experience later, her initiative has helped to launch a certificate in caravan park management, and she is influencing the way that industry training is developing – thanks to her MBA from the OU.

Sue's research investigated people management and business planning in the industry, and asked whether owners of micro-businesses – firms with 10 or fewer employees – operated "strategically". She sent questionnaires to 550 parks, of which an astonishingly high 46 per cent responded, and the results are being fed into the current review of qualifications for the industry being led by Skillsactive, the Sector Skills Council for sport and active leisure.

These are achievements Sue certainly couldn't have foreseen when her father died, leaving her in charge of the Dog and Duck pub and adjoining caravan park, at Plucks Gutter, near Canterbury in Kent.

"When you are a vulnerable small business, as we were then, you are either bought out by the competitors, or they give you a helping hand," said Sue. "Happily, the parks industry is a very friendly one, and other owners suggested that I would learn about the business by joining a trade association. They even offered to take me to a local meeting."

Sue became so involved with her trade association, The British Holiday and Home Parks Association, that she subsequently became chairman. She also began to work with the Industry Training Organisation, a forerunner to Skillsactive, towards developing training and qualifications relevant to the caravan industry. And it was as she looked for a way in which caravan park owners and managers could learn, and develop whilst carrying out their job, that Sue began her OU career.

"We felt that we wanted to establish training that encompassed distance learning but had distinct targets to aim for," she said. "While researching this I came across the OU's Certificate in Management. I tried that, found that I could do it, passed, and thought I might as well try the Diploma. And there I was... hooked!"

"The OU reflected many aspects of how I wanted to learn as a working park owner/manager. And how I felt that others may want to learn too. It's learning in your own time, but with a structure, and with regular targets that make you plan your time. Then there is the opportunity to share problems and knowledge with others on the net via FirstClass, which stops you feeling so alone. And the summer schools were excellent – I've learned so much just from other people doing the same course, even though the business in which they operated was miles away from mine."



Sue is raising training standards in her industry

Picture: Barry Duffield

Sue is now a Trustee of Skillsactive, and the work that she did for her MBA course B826 *The management research project* – which earned her a distinction – highlighted the disparate styles of park management currently employed, and has prompted early quantitative research to identify training needs and skills gaps in the caravan parks industry.

"It seems a widely held belief that management theories only work well for big business," said Sue. "But training and

business planning can work right across the board. As 95 per cent of British firms are held to be SMEs (small to medium-sized businesses) this could be a very important lesson."

"I've learned so much from the OU," she added. "And I don't think I've finished yet. If I see a particular business school module that I think is relevant, I'll certainly study it. You can't afford to stand still. I don't think that you ever stop learning."



Toby turns hi-tech to beat cowshed blues

FORMER herdsman Toby Mottram swore his OU degree would take him as far away from cows as possible – but it's actually turned him into one of Britain's leading dairy research engineers.

For Toby (left) has combined his practical herd experience with his academic background to build robotic milking machines and develop sensors that track cows' health and milk quality – and could save the worldwide industry millions of pounds.

"In the late 1970s I was working 60/70/80 hours a week with cows and I wanted to escape it, so I started to study with the OU," says Toby, who is now a project manager at Bedford-based Silsoe Research Institute, the world's foremost agricultural engineering centre.

"My courses took in a lot of engineering and fluid mechanics and I graduated in 1985. I vowed I'd never milk another cow again, and I never have – but by 1989 I'd helped to design a robot milking machine."

Toby has since taken his research even further, and is now heading a team developing biosensors to measure progesterone levels in cows, which will have a huge commercial impact on the industry.

"At the moment, 40 per cent of cows don't get to a second milking season because there isn't the time to keep monitoring them regularly. Technology means one person can milk 350 cows and robotic

machines will mean we don't even need that one person. But it also means there isn't the time to check each cow. However, our biosensors can take a sample from each animal and our testing can show which cow it's from, their health and the quality of their milk, as well as identifying potential problems such as mastitis and even lameness. This development has huge commercial potential for the industry."

And it won't stop there. "We're also developing sensors to work on analysing cows' breath, and I think the opportunity is there to use similar techniques to assess the health of other animals – including humans."

Toby's career has now come full circle – his work to develop the sensors has just featured in a video to be included in course material for T224 *Computers and processors*.

"I've become a sort of translator between the needs of the industry and the engineers who try to meet those needs," he says. "I talk to people all over the world who milk cows and my time as a herdsman means I know exactly what they go through, their problems and their resentments. My engineering expertise, which all began when I started my OU degree, means I can help them solve those problems."

Careers careerscareerscareerscareerscareers

Ringling the changes at BT

It's a long way from part-time assistant in an electrical store to launching a new mobile phone network – but Daniel Ralph's career moved on after he decided he could not afford to go to a conventional university.

Since his Open University BSc (Hons) landed him a job with BT Laboratories, the married father-of-two has spent a year working in the USA, delivered presentations at international conferences, written books on mobile technology and now heads a team of 25 engineers.

He's also organised 0800 phone lines – such as the vote lines for *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* – and also helped launch 3G Mobile in Europe. And Daniel's in no doubt as to the reason he's been able, literally, to ring the changes.

"The OU is the single biggest factor in what I've achieved," said Daniel (pictured), now a mobile team leader with BTexact Technologies in Ipswich. "When I left school in 1992 I could already see that university was going to land me in a lot of debt, so I decided to try another way.

"My employers were very supportive, especially as that was in the days when far fewer young students came through the OU. They gave me time off for exams and even paid some of the cost of my courses.

"I was able to study while I was earning money and gaining professional experience, and then when I graduated I was taken on by BT." But it didn't stop him learning.

Since joining the company in 1996, he's achieved BT's own MSc in Telecommunications Engineering – and has one eye on returning to the OU to study for a PhD. But having become a father for the second time in May, he admits to having other priorities.

"It's a little difficult to contemplate at the moment when I would do some more courses with the OU," he said. "But I do intend to come back.

"I would recommend it to anyone. I could study while I was working and I found all my courses really interesting – that's an enormous help. I have a lot for which to be grateful to the University. I wouldn't be where I am without the OU."

Ellen Cocking from the OU's Careers Advisory Service said: "It's great that he places the OU as the 'single biggest factor' in his career achievements, but I would see Daniel himself as the crucial factor



Mobile phones proved a great career move

Picture: Getty Images

in his own success. Our students tell us that the OU can do many things: educate, inspire, guide, motivate and increase confidence, but it is you – the students – who are the real success stories.

"More employers are seeing the value of OU study and sponsoring their staff (about 65 per cent of MBA students, for example, are backed by their employers) and it was reassuring to see that Daniel's employer was able to offer him substantial support.

"The relationship between the study you

undertake and the experiences you are gathering on a daily basis in the rest of your life should not be underestimated. Many of our students tell us that when they started OU study they had no intention of using what they had learned to progress their careers, but that as confidence in their own abilities grows, the sky is often the limit."

If you would like to tell us how OU study has shaped or influenced your career path, contact us at sesame@open.ac.uk

How to get on the career ladder

If you want your OU studies to help land you that great new job, don't wait to read the situations vacant column – go out and find the position yourself.

Estimates are that up to 70 per cent of all vacancies are filled without being advertised, and many of these positions go to speculative candidates.

All OU students have an immediate advantage when it comes to landing a job, of course, because every one of them can demonstrate initiative, dedication and self-motivation. But if it's not advertised, how do you find that job in the first place?

Networking

Networking enables you to acquire contacts in your favoured area of work. By word of mouth, you may get the opportunity to shadow, gain work experience and, crucially, find out about that vacancy.

The first step is to look at your existing contacts. Does anyone you know – a friend, relative, fellow student, tutor or work colleague – know someone who works in your desired area of interest?

If not, you could become a student member of the relevant professional association to gain local or regional contacts, and attend events, conferences and workshops.

You can also identify companies in general trade directories Kompass (www.kompass.co.uk) or Kelly's Business Directory (www.kellysearch.com); both available at most public libraries, or contact relevant trade associations – e.g. the Institute of Public Relations, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

At www.prospects.ac.uk/links/CoProfiles there is a list of graduate employers and www.prospects.ac.uk has company profiles or there's local chambers of commerce, regional development agencies and, for local companies, Yellow Pages and other directories.

Information interviewing

You can identify a contact by 'cold calling' relevant organisations, and asking to talk to an appropriate individual about the work they do. This is called information interviewing and could see you talking to, say, a department store manager, your child's teacher or a nurse at a health centre.

Once you've identified someone you think might help, ask if you can meet. Talk to them about their work – how they got into it, their background, a typical day, the best and worst aspects, their plans for the future, how the company recruits new staff and what it expects of applicants. Also ask about the possibility of work-shadowing or work experience, then about

other organisations in the same field.

After the interview, write to thank them and then let them know of future developments – it will ensure they keep you in mind for future opportunities.

Speculative applications

When it comes to making speculative job applications, there's an art to going for a job you're not even sure exists, and there are things you can do to make sure your letter gets to the top of the pile.

The key is to make your application individual to the organisation and type of work you can offer them. Tailoring an application to a specific audience will get attention – sending out something that is obviously a standard application that you've photocopied dozens of times will probably not.

It's crucial to obtain the name of the most appropriate person to target with your application. Write enclosing your CV and wait seven to ten days for a response before following up with a telephone call.

For more information about using these tactics in your job hunting, contact your Regional Centre and ask for some help from the Careers Advisory Service or visit our website at www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers
Good luck!

researchresearchresearch Research

The right to choose

The French government has banned the wearing of hijab in state schools. OU researcher Emma Tarlo has been following the responses to the ban as part of her study, reports **Malini Sen**.

The French government's ban on wearing the hijab (headscarf) in state schools has raised issues of religious freedom, gender equality and human rights.

Emma Tarlo, research fellow with the OU's Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, has been following British Muslim responses to the ban as part of her research into issues of 'Clothing and Identity in the South Asian diasporas'.

The French legislation outlawing religious clothing and symbols in state schools is expected to be implemented from September. The French government has argued that the law is needed to protect France's secular traditions in state schools.

Emma's research aims to move the study of Muslim dress beyond the dichotomies of Islam versus West; tradition versus modernity; oppression versus freedom; towards a focus on the debates about dress taking place within Muslim communities both in Britain and globally.

Using the personal biographies of individuals as a starting point, she examines how British Muslim clothing choices are informed by a variety of factors including experiences of migration, ethnic and family background, fashion, religious conviction, global politics and encounters with racism.

Emma's ongoing research combines interviews with British Muslims from a variety of social, ethnic and political backgrounds with an analysis of media representations of Muslims and debates about dress taking place on Islamic websites. The research also addresses the important issue of cultural diversity in British public institutions such as schools, hospitals and the police force.

One of the causes the French ban is seen as advancing is women's equality. However, since the



Muslim women marching towards the French Embassy in London in protest against the French proposal to ban the wearing of hijab in French state schools
Picture: Emma Tarlo

announcement, Muslim women across the globe have been protesting against the decision, chanting slogans such as: "Not our fathers, nor our husbands, we choose the headscarf."

"While the media often paint Muslim women in hijab as oppressed, hijab-activists have reversed the argument. Using the language of feminism, they speak of 'fashion fetishism' and of many women in the west being reduced to 'mere sex objects' under a 'relentless male gaze'." said Emma. "This view is not shared by all hijab-wearing women, some of whom are highly fashion conscious. Neither is it shared by Muslim women who choose not to wear the hijab, some of whom are not religiously inclined, and others of whom argue it is up to men to restrain their gazes rather than women to cover. Most agree

that self-restraint and modesty in dress are recommended for both men and women in Islam."

What most Muslims in the west appear to want is the freedom to dress as they please without their choices being subject to controls (whether by family members, religious institutions or the state). This was the central theme of an international conference held on July 12 at the City Hall in London, titled *Hijab: A Woman's Right to Choose*.

The conference was organised by the Assembly for the Protection of Hijab, a body set up in response to the French ban with the aim of reversing it. The conference brought together on one platform an unusual mix of Muslim women activists from all over Europe, legal experts, Sikh and Christian representatives, academics and human rights activists alongside London's Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and the religious cleric Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi. It remains to be seen whether these new alliances will be successful in overturning the French ban.

Not our fathers, nor our husbands, we choose the headscarf

The write way

A YEAR ago the hassle of holding heavy study texts prompted former student Gary Lancelot to invent a gadget to make reading easier - now his latest creation is taking the strain out of writing.

The former management student found that while the OU experience improved the mind, it could take its toll on the body. But his designs don't only make learning more comfortable. They prompted him to form his own company to sell them, business is booming - and *Sesame* readers can buy them half-price!

"I used to get aches and pains because of my posture when reading or writing," he said. "So I came up with these ideas which mean people can study in the correct position. It's a lot healthier."

The latest of Gary's simple yet effective study aids is the WriteSTAND, which is, as its name suggests, a special angled mini table-top desk on which to compose that TMA or simply scribble notes.

The effectiveness of the WriteSTAND lies in the ergonomics. "To write in true comfort, you need to do so at an angle," added Gary. "It seems obvious but so many people write on a level surface that they don't realise there's a better way. I'm entirely confident it encourages a much healthier way to write."

The new invention - which comes in a choice of an A4 and a double-A4 size, both of which can take a laptop, putting the screen directly in the user's field of vision - has also impressed the OU's occupational health adviser.

"It's excellent," said Val Powley. "It will really benefit students as it brings the writing surface up closer to them. It's also very well made and very well priced."

It's not the first time Gary's designs have caught the eye - a year ago he issued his "Bookchair", a book-rest shaped like a deckchair. That, like the WriteSTAND, was produced and marketed with vital skills Gary says he picked up from his OU studies.

"I had no experience of business," he recalled. "My studies gave me a lot of confidence and put me on the right track."

The result is his company, also called Bookchair, which operates from east London. But Gary's product is made by India-based Fair Trade manufacturer, Teddy Exports, whose profits help to fund community



Gary demonstrates the WriteSTAND

initiatives in the Tamil Nadu District, including a children's day care centre, training for local farmers and an HIV/AIDS awareness project.

The WriteSTANDs are available now priced £49 (for the A4 stand) and £59 (double A4 stand) - but you can order them for half price - £24.50 and £29.50 respectively (plus £5.95 p&p). Simply email sales@bookchair.com, call 020 8523 5023 or write to Bookchair House, 119-121 Gloucester Road, Walthamstow, London E17 6AF and quote the reference: SES 2004. The offer ends on October 31, 2004. For more information visit www.bookchair.com

The last word **thelastwordthelastword**

Gotcha – IT buffs update childhood game

It's news to delight or horrify those who think the computer has given us a generation of sedentary, socially inept youngsters. That most basic of childhood games, tag, can now be played on a PC.

Research students have developed a virtual version of the playground favourite in which participants use hand-held machines to tag competitors in their vicinity. It doesn't necessarily involve running about, reckless chases and grazed knees, but it will expose its players to the great outdoors.

In truth, Citi-tag has been designed primarily for adults to play in city centres. And the game itself is the mere by-product of a PhD research project – although it seems highly likely it could quickly become a national craze.

Citi-tag is somewhat wordily described by creators Yanna Vogiazou and Bas Raijmakers as a “wireless, location-based, multi-player game, designed to enhance spontaneous social interaction and novel experiences in city environments by integrating virtual presence with physical”. In basic terms this means a game of tag, but one comprising two teams whose players each use a hand-held WiFi-enabled (wire-free) PC equipped with GPS (satellite navigation). When the PC senses the presence of a rival, the player presses a button on the screen to tag them, rendering the opponent powerless until “untagged” by a member of his or her own side.

Yanna, a full-time research student with The Open University, and Bas, who attends the Royal College of Art, developed the initiative to create, they say, “an enjoyable social experience, stimulated by real world interaction among players”. Developing the technology with the OU's ground-breaking Knowledge Media Institute (KMi) and its Centre for New Media (CNM), the



Virtual tag could become a national craze

pair aimed to “identify the design implications for future technology-mediated social experiences”.

Yanna said: “It all started while we were discussing mobile games during a workshop. We wanted to look at virtual spontaneous interaction, like a sort of Mexican wave online.”

“We began to have this crazy idea for a game and got lots of help from KMi and were eventually able to trial it.”

The first run of the game involved nine people at the OU's Milton Keynes headquarters, but within a month 16 people were playing virtual tag in Bristol city centre – with the data

contributing to the researchers' PhDs, due for completion next year.

“It would be interesting to see where this type of research leads,” said Yanna. “We'd like to think about maybe seeing if the technology can transfer to mobile phones but we'd need funding to do more research. But Citi-tag is great fun and the sort of thing that could take off as a craze.”

The key to this would appear to be to identify an audience old enough to recall the simple pleasure of the game, yet young enough to embrace modern technology. And, to coin a phrase, you're it.

FIFTH COLUMN

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.

Stamp out this waste

demands
Deborah
Bennison



It's just happened again. This must be the third time in as many months. There it is, an uninvited behemoth lying among my more diminutive post. A huge, heavy duty brown envelope – foolscap size, no less, not even A4 – overprinted with the OU's address and with no less than four overprinted sticky labels stuck all over it.

And what's inside this impressive package? Oh – just one, flimsy sheet of unfolded A4 paper inviting me to a careers day or some such.

Am I the only one who objects to this profligate waste? A waste of time (who's having to stick on all those totally unnecessary sticky labels?); a waste of money (the labels, the heavy-duty envelope, the extra postage); and last but not least, a waste of the earth's resources.

I haven't got a composting toilet or curtains made from recycled newspaper – but I do have some scruples when it comes to all things green and environmental.

Can the OU honestly lay claim to any green credentials at all when it is blithely wasting the earth's resources in such a cavalier fashion?

And another thing – it costs me a lot of money to study law with the OU. We're talking nearly £1,500 for one course, plus interest when you pay in instalments as I have to. I really object that some of my hard-earned cash is being used to pay for this unnecessary extravagance.

All I ask is this. If you want to send us messages on thin sheets of A4 paper, please use a small, lightweight envelope – no overprinting, and no collection of sticky labels adorning it. Even better, where possible, email us.

And the OU can use all the money it saves on stationery and postage to plant some trees at Walton Hall.

Deborah Bennison began studying with the OU in 2001, and is in her final year of a law degree. She is currently studying W301, having already completed W200, W201, and W300.

Sesame Screensaver

Stay in touch

www.open.ac.uk/sesamescreensaver

