



Time on their hands: military personnel in the UK could soon benefit from a new partnership between the OU, Cranfield University and the Ministry of Defence

Military Coup

by Peter Taylor-Whiffen

THOUSANDS of members of the Armed Forces will be studying Open University MBA courses after the OU signed a 22-year deal to provide courses for the military.

The university will work in partnership with Cranfield University to deliver postgraduate education to military personnel through the Ministry of Defence's Defence College of Management and Technology (DCMT) – and it's expected at least 400 servicemen and women will sign up every year.

"It's very good news indeed," said the OU's Head of Strategic Partnerships, Edmund Dixon. "It's the reward for a lot of hard work tendering and then further impressing the MoD when we made a shortlist."

Cranfield has worked with the DCMT, at Shrivenham, Wiltshire for many years but its previous contract ended last year and other universities were invited to apply. "Cranfield saw e-learning and distance learning as the future and we took the opportunity to work out an agreement with them," said Edmund. "The MoD has renewed its contract with Cranfield and the deal means we are a sub-contractor – but we also have a back-up deal direct with the Ministry in case for any reason it stops working with Cranfield."

The success was ensured by academic input from OUBS, the Faculty of Technology, the Finance Division, Student Services, Region Two (Oxford) and the Corporate Registration team – the Corporate and Employer Services team in Marketing and the OU Library. Student

numbers are expected to increase by a total of 400 learners across all three defence services within five years.

A Ministry of Defence statement said: "Individuals at all levels from the Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force and the Civil Service will benefit from this investment and the higher level education and training it provides for."

And Defence Minister Don Touhig added: "We expect our Armed Forces to operate in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. We can't ask this of our Service personnel, and the civilians who support them, unless we invest in their ongoing training and development."

"This contract provides access to the very best postgraduate education and the flexibility to help equip our people to meet these challenges."

Edmund Dixon said the agreement would bring several benefits to the OU. "We already have thousands of students in the services and they know the benefits of the flexibility of study that we offer," he said. "Not only will this bring even more servicemen and women into the OU, it will enable us to build on the already excellent relationship we have with Cranfield."

And he added: "This success indicates what can be achieved by strategic partnerships. Some of them take time to establish, and require some tough negotiation, but the benefits here are not only a 22-year contract, but also the vital aspect of the OU being seen as the provider of choice."

The Open University is going further and further into space. The Edinburgh Science Festival in April will hear two scientists from the OU's Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute (PSSRI), Professor John Zarnecki and Dr Ashley Green, talking about a new mission to Mars, the first results from the Cassini-Huygens probe which landed on Titan and robotic space missions. *open house* has a sneak preview

Back to Mars

THE Open University is off again on another mission to Mars – on the most ambitious exploration ever planned of the red planet.

ExoMars, which is part of the European Space Agency (ESA) Aurora exploration programme, aims to put a research station and a "high-speed" rover vehicle on the Martian surface in 2013, to spend around five years studying our neighbouring planet.

As well as the longest study of Mars it will be the most in-depth – the rover will be

equipped with a drill capable of digging down two metres, making ExoMars the first mission to probe significantly beneath the planet's surface, where scientists believe evidence of life is most likely to exist.

"ExoMars has three unique selling points: longevity, mobility and depth," says John Zarnecki, Professor of Space Science.

"It is potentially the most important research for us in the next decade"

"The rover will be able to cover one kilometre a day – by comparison, the US rovers currently operating on Mars have done about six or seven miles over the two years they have been there."

Scientists from PSSRI will be working on three of the research instruments for ExoMars. They will be taking the lead in building the ultraviolet (UV)

spectrometer which will measure, for the first time, the amount of deadly UV radiation bathing the surface of Mars. The measurements could tell scientists how far below the surface life would have to go to escape the UV, which damages the DNA in living cells.

PSSRI is co-leader in the meteorological project which will measure air pressure, temperature, wind speed and direction and other aspects of the Martian weather. "We

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French connection

THERE'S a small village near Cambridge whose village sign says "W-----; TWINNED WITH PARIS". Apparently a few years ago the parish council wrote to the then mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac saying that they'd like to twin with Paris and if they didn't hear back they'd assume it was ok. They didn't get a reply – hence the sign.

I was reminded of this Fennish eccentricity recently when it was announced that the OU had received several million pounds from a foundation to support developments in distance education in Africa. I'm sure this money will be well-used, but it did strike me that to be a small distance education college being helped by the OU might be like being a mouse helped by an elephant, and I wondered if maybe there were other ways in which OU people could get involved at less formal levels.

"Why not twin central OU staff, tutors and students with their opposite numbers in Africa?"

I first thought of twinning regional centres with African institutions and I've suggested that idea to regional colleagues. But then why stop there? Why not twin central OU staff, tutors and students with their opposite numbers in Africa? Maybe a distance education student in Africa could receive moral and maybe a little financial support from his or her equivalent in the OU – and perhaps the same for tutors, academics and administrators and other staff. I was reminded of two old friends of mine I taught with in Ghana who have subsequently supported their ex-steward's family through their higher education over nearly 30 years.

I don't know what mechanisms could set up such a scheme – maybe the Open University Students Association (OUSA) or the Alumni could take part with advice from OU Worldwide. But I do know that without interest from OU people nothing will happen. Is there someone out there who thinks this idea is worth taking forward?

And who knows? – perhaps the moral support will be two-way...

Ormond Simpson is a Senior Lecturer in Institutional Research in the Institute of Educational Technology

Do you have a gripe or would you like to share an interesting fact with other staff members? If so, send us an article of no more than 300 words to The Editor, open house, or email your contribution to open-house@open.ac.uk Please include contact details.

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Next issue

The next issue of *open house* will be published in April. If you would like to contribute an article please contact the Editor, Debbie Dixon, at open-house@open.ac.uk Deadline for submissions is 8 March.

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Back to Mars

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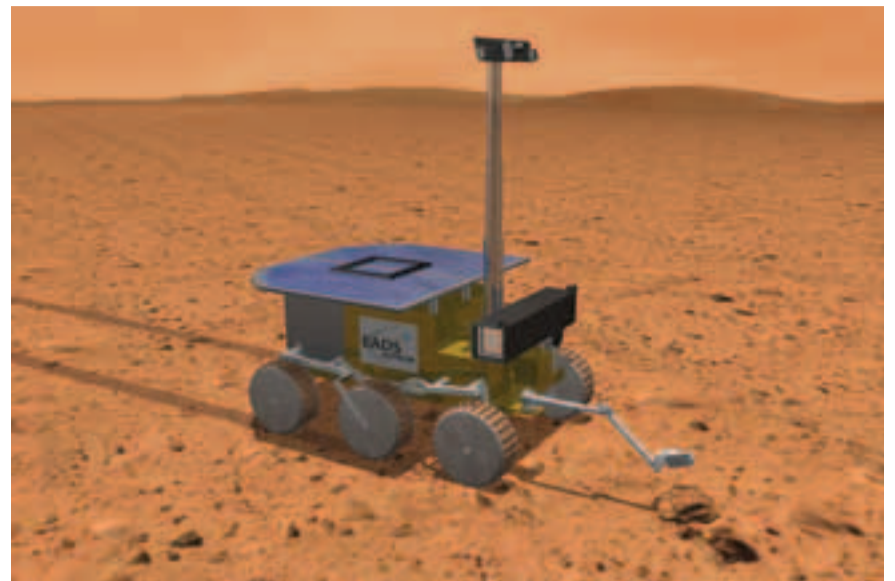
hope to be able to do this over several seasonal cycles," said Professor Zarnecki. "Mars has definite seasons and we want to see how it varies. A Martian year is about two Earth years, so six Earth years will give us three Martian seasons."

The third project PSSRI will work on is the drill which will throw light on the evolution of Mars by revealing whether there is heat coming from its centre. A hot core would show that Mars is like Earth, still in a state of flux.

Funding

"We are hoping ExoMars will bring significant funding into the OU, perhaps several million over the next five or 10 years," said John Zarnecki. "It is potentially the most important research for us in the next decade."

The Aurora programme, of which ExoMars is only one stage, is even



Artist's impression of the ExoMars Rover which will probe beneath the Martian surface
© 2004 University of Wales, Aberystwyth and EADS Astrium Ltd.

more ambitious. Its ultimate goal is to put European astronauts on Mars, although this will be some decades in the future.

I, Robot

IF WE ever find traces of life outside Earth, it will probably be a robot that makes the discovery – according to Dr Ashley Green of the Robotics Outreach Group.

While human beings have only ever set foot on one extra-terrestrial body – the moon – robotic probes, orbiters, landers and rovers have visited and studied every planet in our solar system, except Pluto, to which a NASA mission has just been launched.

But for closer planets like Mars, the future is for humans and robots to work together, said Dr Green. "The surface of Mars is very dangerous to humans because of the cosmic radiation. The atmosphere is much thinner than ours and affords no protection from it. Humans landing on Mars would need some kind of underground shelter quite quickly.

"Even if we do send humans there, robots would have been there first to build their habitats and process carbon dioxide to produce oxygen." Martian explorers would use robot vehicles when travelling the Martian surface, to minimise their exposure to the deadly radiation. Robots will help them cope with the toxic Martian soil and sub-zero temperatures.

Robots may be tougher than us but the idea they could replace humans completely is 'still in the realms of science fiction,' said Dr Green. "It takes a minimum of four minutes for radio signals to go from Earth to Mars, so operating robots remotely is not feasible. They have to be able to operate on their own." And although the NASA rovers Spirit and Opportunity, currently working on Mars, can navigate, avoid obstacles and search for data, they can't match up to a human

explorer equipped with eyes and hands and brain. "What the Mars robots take several weeks to do, a trained geologist could do in a couple of hours," said Dr Green.

But with humans unlikely to be on Mars before the 2030s, even according to the most optimistic projections, it is robots which are spearheading the search for life. The Cassini-Huygens mission, which carried the Titan probe, was the most complex robotic mission ever. But plans are already been made for an even more ambitious probe to another of Saturn's moons, Europa, which probably has subterranean oceans which may be capable of harbouring life. "We will need a robot which can generate heat to burrow into the icy surface of Europa and then deploy a submersible vehicle to swim around in the water," said Dr Green.

While robots are searching for life in space, here on Earth they are helping to recruit the next generation of space scientists and engineers. Part of Dr Green's role at The Open University is to run events around the country where young people can take part in simulations of robotic space exploration. "It is a good way to get youngsters excited about science because it involves three things that interest them: robots, space and the search for life."

Edinburgh Science Festival runs from 5 to 16 April. Professor Zarnecki and Dr Green will be speaking on 8 April as part of the Festival's Milky Way strand. For details and a programme see: www.sciencefestival.co.uk

For more on robots in space see <http://robots-open.ac.uk/space>

"The surface of Mars is very dangerous to humans because of the cosmic radiation"



Student support under review

THE OU's Review of Student Support is currently in the second of five phases which will determine the future nature of learning support and define what is required to deliver appropriate support accordingly. The review was launched in October by Will Swann, Director, Students and Professor Brigid Heywood, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Staff) with the aim of ensuring the OU is up to date with students' support needs in a changing university environment and is in a position to meet them.

"Students in all sectors can be expected to make increasing demands of HE providers for high-quality teaching and service," said a briefing paper recently presented to the OU's Central Consultative Committee. "If the university is to prosper in such an environment, it must engage in continuous improvement in its student support.

"The university needs to ensure its student support model is fit for a rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, in which responsiveness will be at a premium."

The review is building on work previously done to gauge students' perceptions of the support they receive, but the comprehensive work involved in researching the views of groups including students and staff, means its final conclusions and recommendations for implementation will not be announced before 2008.

At the centre of the study is a Project Team, including: Assistant Regional Director Pat Atkins (Region 02, Oxford); Director, Teaching and Learning Nikki Bolleurs; Head of Accounting Services Karen Doncaster; Head of Teaching and Learner Support Dr Christina Lloyd; Regional Director Dr David Knight (Region 09, Newcastle-upon-Tyne); Head of the Office of the Director, Students Hugh Walmsley, Associate Dean, Social Sciences, Troy Cooper; Dean, Maths and Computing, Lindsey Court; a member of another Central Academic Unit will also be joining the team. The project manager is Assistant Director (Associate Lecturer and Teaching Services) Mary Kirby and the project leader is Dean of the Faculty of Arts Dr Richard Allen.

The Project Team will also liaise with a Stakeholder Reference Group, to include three each of students nominated by OUSA, Associate Lecturers, Regional Student Services Learner Support staff, staff tutors and central academic members of staff.

By the summer of this year the team is expected to publish outcomes of its research review, reports of visits to other institutions and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis.

For further details visit <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/student-support-review/>

International Fellowship Programme

AFRICA comes to Walton Hall in February as the OU begins in earnest its new International Fellowship Programme. Delegates from Higher Education institutions across the continent have been invited to a senior management workshop in which they will use the OU as a case study to help them further develop Higher Education systems and principles in their own countries. The two-week workshop will include plenary presentations and smaller group sessions and delegates will also visit various departments within The Open University. The Programme itself is targeted at academics and administrators who will be invited to spend up to six months working on a project directly related to open and distance learning. Their expenses will be covered by the OU Foundation and their projects will contribute to the work of the OU, as well as benefiting their own organisations. For further information visit www.open.ac.uk/international-fellowships

Bonanza for KMi

THE European Commission has awarded large research grants to academics from the OU's Knowledge Media Institute. Professor Enrico Motta will receive 2.3m for his work on NeOn: Lifecycle Support for Networked Ontologies, 843,000 for XMEDIA: Knowledge Sharing and Reuse across Media and 584,000 for *Openknowledge: Open, co-ordinated knowledge sharing architecture*. KMi's Deputy Director Dr John Domingue has also been awarded 1m for *SUPER: Semantics Utilised for Process management within and between Enterprises*, 722,000 for *LUISA: Learning Content Management System Using Innovative Semantic Web Services Architecture* and 332,000 for *LHDL: Living Human Digital Library*. The awards come from the EC's Framework 6 Information Society Technologies programme and, said Dr Domingue, "affirm KMi as an international centre of excellent in the fields of ontology engineering and semantic web services".

Jamie pedals for cancer relief

LAST year *open house* reported that Jamie Slee of AACS was to take part in a 600km cycle challenge across South Africa to raise funds for Macmillan Cancer Relief. Jamie successfully completed the challenge and raised over £3,000 for the charity. For more details visit <http://fatmanonabicycle.blogspot.com>

OPEN SUDOKU

Win a £20 book token



ROBIN WILSON
PROFESSOR OF
PURE MATHEMATICS

THANK you to all of those who sent in their entries for the Open Sudoku competition in the Nov/Dec issue of *open house* (issue 403). The three lucky winners are: Jane Mitchell, Bob Burn and Donald Burrows.

Book tokens and copies of Robin Wilson's *Hidden Words Sudoku* are on their way to you.

Below are the sudoku puzzles for this issue – each with a mathematical theme.

Can you complete each grid so that each of the nine letters appears just once in each row, once in each column, and once in each 3 x 3 box? If you do so correctly, you will find a hidden mathematical word appearing in one of the rows or columns: the hidden word may appear either forwards or backwards, down or up.

The first puzzle is a practice one – the solution is given on page 5.

The second is more difficult, and is set as a competition. When you have solved it, send the completed grid, with the hidden word, to Debbie Dixon, Editor, *open house*, Communications Group, The Open University,

Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. Closing date is 3 March.

A copy of Robin Wilson's latest book *Hidden Words Sudoku* and a £20 book token will be awarded to three lucky winners.

Below is the solution to the *open house* issue 403 competition.

A	B	T	R	E	N	I	O	S
R	I	O	B	A	S	E	N	T
S	E	N	O	T	I	R	A	B
I	N	S	T	B	O	A	E	R
O	T	E	A	S	R	N	B	I
B	R	A	I	N	E	S	T	O
T	O	I	N	R	A	B	S	E
E	A	B	S	I	T	O	R	N
N	S	R	E	O	B	T	I	A

Hidden Word: *BARITONES* (row 3 backwards)

R	I	M					E		
				P	E		R		
		T			A	M			
		Z					T	R	
M	U						Z		
		I	R				U		
	A		E	Z					
	T						P	M	Z

Practise puzzle, Hidden Word: ?

P			Y					
D			E	A		L		
			O		L			Y
		D				R		
		E				P		
		L				O		
A			D	O				
		R		E	A			H
					R			E

Competition puzzle, Hidden Word: ?

United Nations

MARTIN Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies has returned to the OU after completing a spell as Special Advisor to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Associate Lecturers Conference

A FULL report of the 2005 Associate Lecturers Conference is available online at www.open.ac.uk/ALC/HomePage.html

2006 Inaugural lectures online

DETAILS of this year's inaugural lectures at Walton Hall can be found online at www.open.ac.uk/inaugural-lectures OU professors set to speak include Kathy Hall, Professor of Education and Mike Saward, Professor of Politics. Events are free and open to all members of staff and students.

OU Teaching Awards 2006

THIS year's Teaching Awards will take place at Walton Hall on 26 April. The awards will be presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley.

Smart computing

ARE you having trouble with your computer? Are you worried about spam, viruses and spyware? Do you want to know your firewalls from your VPN? To help answer your queries, AACCS has published a new computing guide entitled *Smart Computing* which is being distributed to staff at Walton Hall and the regional centres.

New Marketing Director appointed

DAVID Andrew of KPMG Consulting has been appointed as the new Director of Marketing & Sales. He will take up his new role on Monday 27 February 2006. David comes to the OU with strong marketing experience from nPower, Hilton Hotels and the National Provincial and Leeds Permanent Building Societies. At nPower between 1999 and 2003 he won the *Financial Times* Global Award for the best sector marketing activities in the sector worldwide.

Festival fever

BUILDING on the success of last year's festival partnerships, the OU will once again be lending its support this year to a number of local festivals around the UK. As well as general event sponsorship there will be series of OU speakers, book launches and workshops.

The series begins in February with the month-long Shrewsbury Darwin Festival www.darwinshrewsbury.org for which the OU is the lead sponsor. This is closely followed in March by Spit-Lit www.alternativearts.co.uk, London's celebration of women's contemporary writing. Also in March is the Newcastle Science Festival www.newcastlesciencefestival.co.uk where, by popular demand, the OU will be hosting Robofesta, the festival's very own answer to Robot Wars. The science theme continues in April with Edinburgh International Science Festival www.sciencefestival.co.uk April also plays host to the Cathedral Quarter Festival in Belfast www.cqaf.com Now in its fifth year this diverse festival has received great reviews for its quirky, quality programme.

May 2006 marks the 40th anniversary of the Brighton

Festival www.brighton-festival.org.uk and the OU will once again be lending its support to England's biggest mixed arts and community festival. Swindon Festival of Literature www.swindonfestivalofliterature.co.uk runs for 13 crazy days from 1 - 13 May and the month concludes with the ever popular Hay Festival www.hayfestival.com Last year's hugely successful breakfast talks with OU academics at Hay made national headlines!

The Shrewsbury Summer Season, a unique collaboration between the Borough Council and the town's dynamic artistic community, www.shrewsburysummer.co.uk launches on 1 June and the series concludes with the Buxton Festival www.buxtonfestival.co.uk, another literary feast, which begins on 7 July.

For further information about any of the festivals mentioned please visit the festival websites.

Alternatively, more detailed information will appear in future Open University publications including details of special offers and discounts for OU staff, students and alumni.



Brighton Festival: The OU is supporting a number of local festivals across the UK in 2006

VC'S VIEW



**PROFESSOR
BRENDA
GOURLEY**

EACH year members of my Executive meet to review how they have fared against the objectives they agreed to the previous year and to set themselves group objectives for the year ahead. This exercise is in addition to the setting of members' objectives in their own areas of responsibility.

I write again this year to share these group objectives with you so that you may deepen your understanding of the tasks that engage our time and effort – and make the connections with your roles wherever they may be in the organisation.

1. This year we will again be engaged in ensuring that The Open University occupies its market position and rightful place in the new 'top-up fee' economy. Our government lobbying last year was reasonably successful and not only has the 'widening participation' premium been increased, but other measures have been introduced to

improve the position of part-time students and the institutions that cater for them. It remains to be seen whether the new arrangements and provisions made are adequate.

2. As student expectations change, as technology changes, as our expectations of central academic staff and associate lecturers change, we realise we need to re-evaluate the whole student experience. The Student Support Review has therefore been established to review how we can continue to deliver the best learning experience for our times. (See story on page 3.)

3. Last year we spent considerable time and effort in streamlining our governing committee structures. This year we will be examining our processes with a view to reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and devolving as much decision-making as possible to appropriate levels.

4. We will spend time this year in consultation and examination of a small range of strategic options with respect to the size and reach of the university. You can find more information about the options and process on the Scenarios website: <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/scenarios/p4.shtml>

5. We will align our scenario planning, strategic priorities (and option choice), unit planning, staff management and refinement of performance indicators and information systems. These need to all hang together in a cohesive manner – and managers in the university, at whatever level, need to ensure that they do; staff at all levels need to have an opportunity to engage in the debate and understand their role in the implementation of the plans.

We all know that we operate in a very competitive environment, both at national and international level. We also know that we have a

grand mission and enormous support from a whole host of stakeholders, not the least of which are our alumni. We have a 'brand' and reputation which are recognised all over the world. We have these things because we have built them over time and we have an enormous amount of expertise in the institution – disciplinary expertise, research expertise, educational expertise, organisational expertise. These combine to give us a quite distinctive competence: the ability to deliver a very high quality product (and service), at scale, over a very considerable geographic reach. Maintaining that competency is not something we take for granted and requires ongoing focus to ensure we stay in a leading position. I would argue that indeed it will be not only focus but the timely execution of our strategic objectives that will make the difference.

The new Eden?

SCIENTISTS in Cassini-Huygens mission control were amazed by the 'Earth-like' images beamed from Saturn's moon Titan, more than a billion miles away from Earth. "It is remarkably Earth-like in some respects, with similar geological processes," Professor Zarnecki said "There are lots of complex molecules on the surface. We do not yet know how complex – how far along the road to being the building blocks of life."

The Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute-built Surface Science Package aboard the Huygens probe showed it landed in an undulating landscape of icy gravel, which was probably the shore of a dried-up methane lake.

Scientists did not expect to find life on present-day Titan because it is so far from the Sun, and endures temperatures hovering around minus 170 degrees Centigrade. But four billion years from now, as our Sun ages and expands, it could be 'the new Eden' as Professor Zarnecki puts it.

"When the Sun becomes a red giant the oceans on earth will boil away. Titan will warm up and could be the best place to live. The conditions for life are there, waiting to be triggered."

Before the Huygens probe was launched from the European Space Agency (ESA) Cassini spacecraft, no-one had ever seen the surface of Titan. But scientists planning the mission knew it had unusual qualities including an atmosphere thicker than Earth's, containing nitrogen as its main constituent, just as on Earth.

The Huygens lander collected data for only two and a half hours, while descending through Titan's atmosphere on 14 January 2005, and for a further 72 minutes sitting on the surface.



Professor John Zarnecki

New international partnership offers OU degrees to students in Asia and Africa

OPEN University Worldwide has signed a major contract with NIIT, Asia's largest IT education trainer, to deliver the University's BSc (Honours) Computing and its Practice to students in six countries across Asia and Africa. The partnership will give students in Bangladesh, Botswana, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria and Vietnam the opportunity to study for an OU undergraduate computing degree. It will start registering students from 2007. The initial student intake is expected to be around 950 growing to 3,500 over a period of six years.

Children's Christmas Party

STAFF from the OU Club and a number of volunteers took 90 children to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* at the Milton Keynes Theatre last December. After the show the children returned to Walton Hall for tea and a special visit from Father Christmas. One mother said: "I just want to say a huge thank you to everyone involved in the Children's Christmas Party. My little girl and her friend had such a good time and talked about it all evening. It was well organised and everyone had obviously given up their time and put a huge effort into making it a really special day for the kids." A spokesperson from Estates said: "The day was organised and implemented with military precision to ensure the safety and well-being of the children."

OPEN SUDOKU

PRACTISE puzzle, page 3 solution.

R	I	M	Z	U	T	A	E	P
A	Z	U	M	P	E	T	R	I
P	E	T	I	R	A	M	Z	U
I	P	Z	A	M	U	E	T	R
T	R	A	P	E	Z	I	U	M
M	U	E	T	I	R	Z	P	A
Z	M	I	R	T	P	U	A	E
U	A	P	E	Z	M	R	I	T
E	T	R	U	A	I	P	M	Z

Hidden Word: TRAPEZIUM (row 5)

Minority report

LESBIAN, gay, bisexual and transgender OU staff can now link up with each other through a dedicated Open University email network.

The launch of the network is just one of a series of developments planned by the OU to mark national Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History Month, which will be celebrated across the UK in February.

The University's Equality and Diversity Management Group has also invited high-profile gay and lesbian organisation Stonewall to a meeting to discuss the OU joining its Diversity Champions Programme, which enables organisations to work with each other to promote diversity in the workplace.

And the OU Library will be hosting a month-long exhibition of LGBT history put together by lesbian and gay staff

with Milton Keynes community organisation Q:Space.

Recent government figures suggest about six per cent of people are gay or lesbian, a proportion likely to be replicated among OU staff. But, said the OU's Policy Officer for Equality and Diversity Tony O'Shea, these developments will have a much wider appeal.

"Participation in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history month is not just about recognising the contributions made by gay and lesbian staff to the achievements of the OU," he said. "It also encourages us to consider how well the university is positively promoting an environment that is open to all forms of diversity and whether we can do more to meet our employment equality duties."

Head of Equal Opportunities Derek Child agreed action was overdue to ensure the voices of lesbian and gay staff are heard.

"Within the university, this is a somewhat invisible minority," he said. "We currently have neither monitoring data to measure participation and career progression nor established networks to provide peer support. LGBT history month in February provides an opportunity to address this invisibility."

To join the new LGBT network, click on 'lgbt-network-list' at <http://mail-lists.open.ac.uk> The names of list members are only visible to the owner (coordinator) of the list.

For more information about Stonewall's Diversity Champions Programme, visit www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace

THE VOICE OF REGION

Bleak (Open) House here I come!



STUART THOROGOOD
STUDENT SERVICES ASSISTANT, REGION 1

AS faithful readers know, our last degree ceremony left me hoping that one day I too might swell the membership of the Open University Students Association. Well, that day has dawned. Not satisfied with being a mere member of staff, I have now become a mere student. I sent in my fee waiver and am now signed up on A215 *Creative writing*. Well how hard can that be for a fully-fledged fourth columnist like me?

"Stuart, darling!"

I'd know that purr anywhere – it was Lorraine in Advice and Support. "Sweetie!" I trilled. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, it's more a case of what I can do for you. I'm calling in my

professional capacity. I've just had a hot transfer and see you've registered for the level 2 creative writing course. Now don't take this the wrong way, my love, but I read your last column." There was a distinct pause, a clearing of the throat. "Don't you think you'd be more comfortable with an Openings course?"

Thrive on pressure

"Oh that's very sweet of you Lolly, but I thrive on pressure." (I'd heard this line from students many times and it usually seemed to work.)

"Well that's fine, but remember we're here when you need us lambkins. And you will. Just leave a

message and we'll get back to you within 10 days." I put the phone down, stood up, peered over the Japanese screen that divided our work stations and said, "Thanks Lulu."

Desk buddies

"Don't mention it, pet, we're practically desk buddies – apart from the huge gulf in salaries, status and competence of course."

I've already got myself sorted out with a study-buddy. Team Leader Trixie to the rescue. She's an old hand at this sort of thing; she's got three OU degrees already (Fayette, Sheila and Helen she calls them). I nearly died when she showed me how she'd covered her course book

in Post-its – "Cream is for Chapters, Red for Readings, Teal for TMAs, Green is for Envy, Beige is for people who are scared of commitment, and White is for pretentious minimalists who just shouldn't be allowed."

Must dash and get my fingers sticky – I'll keep you posted!





The big read

A UNIQUE project throwing light on the history of reading has won a grant of £292,108 – one of the largest Humanities grants in the history of the OU – from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The Reading Experience Database (RED), which is managed by Professor Bob Owens and Dr Mary Hammond in the OU's Literature department, jointly with Professor Simon Eliot of the University of London, looks at what, where, and how Britons were reading between 1450 and 1945.

Anyone can contribute to the RED which is the only one of its kind in the world. It features references to reading in printed records, letters, journals, diaries, commonplace books, and notes written in the margins of texts.

Silent reading

"There has been a lot of theorising about reading as an activity," said Bob, "but without reference to any kind of empirical data." One theory is that people used to read out loud, even when reading only to themselves, and the switch to the modern practice of silent reading came in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. But to support this and other ideas more evidence is needed, and the RED team hopes to find it.

The database currently holds around 6,000 records but with the grant, which will fund two research fellows, the RED team hopes to boost it to 25,000 entries at least. They will also make its resources available to researchers everywhere.

And it was the OU's readiness to fund a promising project in its early stages that has paved the way for the huge AHRC grant, added Bob. RED was developed from a 'seedcorn' grant awarded by the OU's Research Funding and Development Committee in 1997, topped up later by a grant from the Arts Faculty Research Committee.

Do you have any evidence of reading (not just of books, but of magazines, posters, anything written) before 1945? Do you have access to diaries, family papers or anything else containing evidence of reading? You can contribute to the RED at www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED

Disability equality scheme – volunteers needed

HUMAN Resources is looking for volunteers to help develop the university's disability equality scheme and action plan. The main purpose of the scheme is to ensure that working at The Open University is a positive experience for disabled staff.

The aim is to identify potential areas for improvements and to promote disability equality.

HR Adviser Dawn Steel said: "Our code of good practice on the employment of disabled people has been in existence since the early 1990s. The code has been subject to regular reviews since then, with input from the Disability Advisory Team and individual members of staff who have taken the trouble to feed back to us on their

observations and experiences.

"Over the years much work has been carried out to improve the physical environment and access for disabled staff.

"There have also been a number of initiatives to raise the awareness of staff and managers about fair treatment of disabled staff, and the issues and difficulties that can be faced by disabled people in employment.

"We need to be sure that our scheme and action plan are appropriate and meaningful for disabled people. In order to achieve this, we would like as much input as possible from disabled staff about their experiences of employment with the university and suggestions for actions that would lead to an improved experience, both for employees and for people

who apply for jobs here. We would also like to hear from any disabled friends or colleagues of staff who have applied for a job here or who have worked for the OU in the past and have now moved on.

"We are interested in hearing from people who have any type of disability: e.g. sight, hearing, speech, dexterity, or mobility impairment; disfigurement; learning disability; diagnosis of HIV or cancer etc., or those who have had a disability and have now recovered."

If you would like to be involved please contact Dawn on 01908 652849 or email her at D.Steel@open.ac.uk; or contact Satvinder Reyatt on 01908 653345 or email her at S.K.Reyatt@open.ac.uk

WOODLEY WISE Gee but it's great to be alive!



ALAN WOODLEY
SENIOR RESEARCH
FELLOW, INSTITUTE
OF EDUCATIONAL
TECHNOLOGY

THE day begins with the usual good-humoured cut-and-thrust session of rally cross through the Milton Keynes grid system. Eventually, I arrive on campus and a mere twenty minutes later I am tucking my car into a lovely parking space in a well-manicured flowerbed that is almost within sight of the main buildings. I then set off on the invigorating half a mile walk to my office. As I walk I chant the OU's Mission Statement under my breath as a soothing mantra and I count my blessings.

Arriving at my award-winning office block, I swipe my ID card vigorously and repeatedly as part of my early morning callisthenics.

Reaching my office, I wave vaguely in the direction of any

colleagues that I can make out in the distant heat haze. Then, at last, I can hunker down in my hessian-covered podule, at my very own personal workstation. I tear off today's page from my Sudoku Calendar, water my cactus and boot up my faithful old PC, eager to see what joys the day holds in store.

The Intranet tells me that we have received yet another International Award! We have been elected as "The biggest open and distance learning university in the United Kingdom that has done something in Africa". I don't know about you, but it gives me a real deep-down glow of satisfaction and inspires me to crack on and meet my day's objectives.

I take my coffee break at my

desk. (At 75p – or 15 shillings in old money – I find this remarkably good value. And you get a free wooden stick thing that you can use as a cactus label.) And, if you keep really, really still, the OU screensaver kicks in and so you can learn as you relax.

Then it's off to a meeting over on the East Campus about gender issues in online photocopying. (Or something like that. I have lost my notes.)

Lunch takes the form of a jacket potato with your selected filling (corned beef gumbo for me as part of Eaton's Creole Cuisine Day) nestling on a bed of polystyrene. I wolf it down.

Back at my desk I choose to "defragment" my hard disk. This

gives me ample time to complete the Sudoku.

Finally I attend a short course on "Paper Cut Avoidance and Recent EU Legislation", where you get a complimentary beverage of your choice and biscuits with little chocolate bits in.

All too soon it is time to tidy my desk and join the happy milling throng that is queuing to leave the campus. But never mind – in the immortal words of Scarlett O'Hara, "Tomorrow is another day!"

On the buses, what buses?

Following on from last issue's story on Green Travel, *open house* has been looking at how long-distance travellers make the journey to Walton Hall campus

MILTON Keynes has good rail connections, but travelling the four or so miles between the station and Walton Hall campus is not so easy, *open house* has discovered. Staff and visitors have to choose between an expensive taxi, or bus services which they say are unreliable, infrequent and slow

One solution currently being investigated by Estates is a shuttle bus service running between the station and campus, which would also be used by regional staff, Associate Lecturers and others visiting campus.

Among those who would welcome it is Professor of Geography Doreen Massey, who says the OU should do more to support those who help the environment by using public transport.

"The OU spends a fortune on car parking and protecting cars through security, while those who come to the OU by public transport are expected to take taxis at a cost of £8 to £10.

"Getting a taxi late at night from campus to the station costs me more than a senior citizen ticket from Milton Keynes to London.

"When we had an environmental conference at Walton Hall, people were really shocked by the difficulty of getting to campus by public transport."

Stephen Potter, Professor of Transport Strategy, agrees: "My view is that the public bus service has now degenerated to the point that the frequency and reliability means that we have little option but to provide our own alternative.

"However, I think it is important that the university-provided alternative does address the needs of staff, research students and visitors. The service could also produce savings for the university if a station shuttle were used as an alternative to taxis for our visitors.

"The main point to consider here is frequency. It would need to run at least every half hour to represent an improvement on the bus service (ideally a 20-minute frequency). An alternative might be to contract a shared taxi service using the larger people movers that some MK taxi operators have. I have done some work on such systems which can work very well. Chiltern Railways run a shared taxi service to Bicester Station which might be an example to look at."

Minibus service

Dr Nigel Clark, Lecturer in Human Geography said he would happily use a minibus, but echoed Doreen Massey's view that the OU is subsidising car-users when he added: "Alternatively, some sort of subsidy for taxi rides would be much appreciated.

"The OU doesn't officially subsidise travel to and from work, but many of us who don't drive for environmental or other reasons view the endless expansion of car parks (not to mention the bus service from some of the car parks to East Campus) as a kind of unofficial subsidy to car-users – which is not sending out the sort of messages about energy use that some of us would like."

Health and Social Care Research student Katherine Owen said she would also support a minibus service: "Living in London I am shocked and appalled by the Milton Keynes bus service to the OU. If it was halfway decent then people would not be forced to travel by car. I am a full-time PhD student and cannot afford the £9 one way for a taxi fare."

Dr Les Levidow, Senior Research Fellow in Technology, another of those who branded the station to campus bus service unreliable, said he was one of a number of staff who take the 9.22am train from Euston, arriving in Milton Keynes around 10am, and then share taxis. "The minibus would be a welcome substitute if it coincided with the train arrival."

Another potential minibus user, Professor of Accounting Judy Day, pointed out: "As some staff (or visitors) travelling by public transport will be claiming expenses, a minibus might save money for the university.

"It seems a pity that the OU doesn't make it easier for staff who travel by public transport, in the interests of both staff,

and of the environment."

And finally, Geography Lecturer Dr Steve Hinchliffe had another solution for those who are fit: "I tend to cycle between the station and campus, using a fold-up bike on the train.

"I did enquire some time ago as to whether the university would enter into the treasury's scheme to assist people buying bikes but didn't get anywhere."

A station shuttle service is one of the options considered in a transport survey currently being carried out by Estates.

Green Travel Coordinator Beverley Harker told *open house*. "I am conducting a transport survey and the results will help me decide what areas need to be developed."

"I believe one area could be a shuttle bus between the station and campus. But this will depend on demand."

DIARY OF A FRUSTRATED COMMUTER

The OU's Assistant Secretary, Central Secretariat, Roger Walters, has been waging a one-man campaign to improve the bus services between campus and the railway station.

A non-driver who depends on public transport, Roger has made around 20 complaints to Milton Keynes bus companies during the last 12 months, complaining of buses late running, early running or non-running.

Roger, who has been commuting to Walton Hall from Northampton via rail and bus since 1973, said the bus service between the station and campus is 'the worst it has ever been'.

"The frequency – only hourly after 8.30 am – and reliability of services to the campus is disgraceful – as is the fact that two bus companies each run a service at the same time instead of spreading them out.

"The OU aspires to be a green employer and tries to discourage car usage, yet is it any wonder there is more car usage when the bus service is so abysmal?"

"I am sick of waiting at the OU bus stop or at Milton Keynes because of long spaces between buses and of having

my already long day extended yet further. I would like to see very much firmer action by the university to address this problem."

A spokesperson from Estates said: "The Open University follows up issues raised, but action is restricted in an effectively monopolised industry."

Commuter's diary: extracts from Roger's correspondence with the bus companies

15 December: "The service 20 timed to leave the OU at 19.12 arrived at about 19.25. The driver offered no word of explanation or apology and calmly announced that as he was running late he would be stopping short at the city centre. He deposited us at about 19.45, again without any apology whatsoever. When I asked when and where I could get a bus to the station he vaguely waved in the direction of one bus stop, which had no timetable. The next bus arrived at about 20.00 and I got to the station at 20.06; fortuitously the next train was five minutes late or I would have had to wait until 20.30 for a train – having caught a bus due to get to the station at 19.33.

Bus company MK Metro's excuse: "The driver involved left me a note regarding the evening in question whereby, he needed to come off the road due to him not being well and needed to go. His bus radio was not working and thus he needed to get off the road but could not contact control."

21 and 24 November: D1 bus fails to arrive at the station, Roger pays for taxi.

Bus company MK Metro's excuse: "At the moment we are experiencing running time problems with the D1 service. During the morning peak there is not enough time and we are in discussion with the council to rectify this matter. On both occasions the journey was cut by the inspector to put the service back on time."

Complete the transport survey online at <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/estates/surveys/surveyOUTravel.cfm>



OU staff travelling up from London

New TV campaign

FOUR OU graduates are helping to promote the university by featuring in two new television adverts that went on air in February. The graduates talk about their studies and how the OU has helped them to change their lives and careers. "Market research has shown that all our advertising needs to be benefit focussed and by using testimonials in a TV ad we can demonstrate how the OU has made positive impacts on people's lives," says Jessica Magill the OU's Channel Strategy Manager Advertising. The forty-second ads will be shown on digital channels including Sky News, Sky Travel, Discovery and UK channels and on terrestrial channels C4 and C5 in Scotland. The television campaign will be backed up by press advertising in major national dailies and online and direct mail campaigns that will reach in excess of 40 million people in the UK. All campaigns build on learnings from the Powering People campaign launched last summer which lifted awareness of the OU by four per cent during its first brand stage in June 2005.

Brand guidelines

THE Open University brand guidelines are now available for all staff. Providing detailed information on the look, feel, imagery and tone of the university's corporate identity, the new guidelines can be viewed online at <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/brand>. The website also has details on branded merchandise for use in promotions and events, design templates for posters and leaflets and letter templates for Associate Lecturers. Staff can also access a new photo library of images for design work from the brand website. The OU Business School is to receive separate brand guidelines which will be launched later this year.

NASA Stardust mission

LAST month television, newspaper, online reports featured OU researchers involved in the NASA Stardust mission. The OU's Planetary and Space Science Research Institute's Dr Simon Green and Professor Monica Grady were on BBC News 24, Dr Ian Franchi on Channel 4 News. NASA's Stardust mission returned safely to Earth in January after a three billion-mile trip collection interstellar comet dust from Comet Wild 2.

RoboCupJunior tournament

THIS year's RoboCupJunior tournament will take place at Bletchley Park on Saturday 25 February. The UK finals will be held at Cranfield University in Milton Keynes on 29 March. The best teams will qualify to represent the UK at RoboCup 2006, which will be held in Bremen, Germany in June. For further details contact Dr Ashley Green on 01743 358013 or email Ashley at a.a.green@open.ac.uk. Alternatively, visit www.robofesta-uk.org

Virtual Learning Environment

THE OU will become the largest user of the Open Source software package Moodle, when the new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for students goes live in 2007. Moodle stands for Modular Objected Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, but it's also a verb that describes an enjoyable tinkering process which can lead to creativity and insight. Moodle is open source – which means it is free of charge and anyone who gets Moodle has access to the source code and can alter the software as they wish. Users can amend it to their own requirements or make improvements which they can then feed back into the Moodle community. It is a web-based software application which is designed to work with other commonly used systems and which has toolboxes allowing teachers/tutors to create online environments for learning, and allowing the creation of 'communities of learners'. For more information visit <http://moodle.org/> or <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/ouvle/>

Working across boundaries for curriculum innovation

'Energising', 'illuminating' and 'exciting' were some of the words used to describe the OU's first Curriculum Conference, held at Walton Hall last month. Over 500 staff and guests took part in the two-day feast of plenary and parallel sessions and another 250 joined through web-casting. **Report by Graeme Ginsberg**

by Linda Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Awards)

THE conference title, *Working across boundaries for curriculum innovation*, set the focus firmly on how the curriculum is changing in response to external and internal opportunities.

OU academics had responded enthusiastically to the call for papers and a record 120 presentations, posters and workshops were offered across the two days.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley set the tone on day one with an inspiring speech reminding us of the continuing vital importance of the OU mission in an age of globalisation and rapid change.

Professor Sir David Watson, Institute of Higher Education, challenged us to think beyond human and social capital to the fostering of 'creative capital' in our students.

In a dazzling keynote on day two Professor Mike Campbell, Learning and Skills Authority, explored the implications of shifts in the global and UK labour force for higher education provision. Statistics had never been this much fun!

Sessions led by the Deans stimulated debate on partnership working and curriculum innovation. At the curriculum dinner, guest speaker Professor Geoff Peters updated us on the competition and bassoonists from the university orchestra soothed our excited spirits.

Sixty papers were presented in five lots of parallel sessions, focusing on cross boundary working, blue skies

curriculum thinking, aligning pedagogy and curriculum choices and harnessing ideas from Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and research centres.

An array of curriculum ideas were presented and discussed, including propositions for programmes on heritage, citizenship, sport, family studies, public health and business English. Those 'Aha' moments resonated, as colleagues from

"Those 'Aha' moments resonated, as colleagues from different parts of the university realised they were working on parallel tracks, saw how much they could learn from each other or heard about a ready-made solution that they could adopt"

different parts of the university realised they were working on parallel tracks, saw how much they could learn from each other or heard about a ready-made solution that they could adopt.

Papers conveyed the excitement as well as the challenge in working with

partners, on how to build common aims, manage expectations and avoid inertia. Poster sessions ensured further stimulation over lunchtime.

So what did we gain from the conference? First, information and ideas, a chance to take stock and to compare notes. We were celebrating our success in invigorating the curriculum but were also preparing for future challenges. Second, something less easy to define: a renewal of mission and sense of common purpose. As the VC herself said, there is nowhere better to be than at the OU!

If you missed the conference click on <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/curriculum-conference-2006/> to see the highlights.

Exciting opportunities

THE Open University has always been keen to act not only as a provider of educational opportunities for individuals, but also as a promoter of social justice and a greater public good.

We consider it important to continue to do so, but this is an increasingly complex world and we need to be mindful of the broader contexts in which we work. The vast disparities in levels of income, health, education and freedoms mean that cooperation and collaboration between cultures, governments and organisations are key. Only if we embrace diversity and adopt holistic approaches to our global, national and local environments can we continue to develop initiatives that truly maximise the extraordinary technological advances we are seeing every day.

Most immediately relevant are the challenges we face in the UK. The demographic profile is changing and the proportion of the population in the 30-44 age group – the group where most of the OU's students currently come from – is set to decline eight per cent in the next ten years. The increasing number of people over the age of 60 will need to meet workforce shortfalls and educational institutions will need to shift their emphasis from 'earlier' to 'life-long' learning.

Course delivery

The OU has always challenged traditional models of course delivery and we are very well placed to continue setting benchmarks, for example, in the increasingly popular Open Content category. But we cannot afford to get complacent. We need to reach out to

new groups of potential learners with programmes that are as flexible and accessible as possible. We need to ensure that our curriculum content is ever relevant and offers clearly visible development opportunities. And we need to continue to cultivate unique partnerships, both at home and overseas.

The OU's first annual curriculum conference, Curriculum Innovation Across Boundaries, has provided us with exciting opportunities to challenge our perceptions and discuss issues in a multidisciplinary context. We would like to thank all the participants for their very valuable contributions and for helping the university to continue to pursue its objectives as an educational innovator.

**Vice-Chancellor
Professor Brenda Gourley**

The ageing workforce

THE OU was delighted to have keynote addresses from Professor Mike Campbell, Director of Strategy and Research at the Sector Skills Development Agency, and David Watson, Professor of Higher Education Management at the Institute of Education.

Professor Watson outlined various contemporary theories about how individuals' skills, social networks and creative work environments underpin personal fulfilment, organisational development and economic growth. He pointed out that these crucial interactions between human capital, social capital and creative capital cannot be cultivated without investment in education and the OU needs to consider how it can best meet the needs of businesses and their employees.

The university needs to examine its internal systems and networks, nurturing staff and student interests to create as diverse and multidisciplinary an environment as possible. At the same time, it must continue to cultivate long-term strategic partnerships with those organisations and associations that are similarly driven by innovation.

Technological advances

The UK may be the fourth largest economy in the world but Professor



With an ageing population, older age groups will have to make up workforce shortfalls in the UK

Campbell pointed out that its productivity per capita is only the eighteenth largest. Employers have had to adapt to rapid technological advances, continued globalisation and shifting consumer tastes, but they have found it difficult to do so since the working population lacks the high-level skills needed.

Improvements in education and employer training programmes have yielded disappointing returns for the economy, and there remain

considerable deficiencies even in basic skills such as numeracy and literacy.

Meanwhile, the UK has an ageing population and the older age groups will have to make up workforce shortfalls. Yet, historically, this has been the age group least likely to be targeted for education.

Professor Campbell suggested that this will need to change if skill gaps are to be closed and the economy is to experience appropriate levels of growth.

The OU of the future

AS THE university seeks to attract and retain new, more diverse student cohorts, Student Services and Level 1 Course Teams have been exploring ways in which they can collaborate to provide the most effective and efficient studentship resources.

Juliet Bishop, Sharon Ding and Christina Lloyd provided up to date information about what resources are currently available and under development, showing faculties that by maximising the quality and relevance of materials, the OU is able to provide truly integrated learner support.

Scientific research has often informed teaching and vice versa. In his paper *Synergy Between Research And Teaching*, Bob Spicer explained that course materials have often drawn on research initiated as a result of course team discussions. He illustrated the point with inspiring examples of research and teaching synergies in Astronomy.

James Fleck outlined developments being undertaken at the University of Edinburgh towards a groundbreaking Global Innovation MBA. Designed by a network of leading international researchers, the programme's subject content is focused within a global knowledge economy context and delivered through ultralight notebooks, fully loaded with course materials so that students can work both online and off. The community-based environment and strong student focus associated with this exciting elearning programme mean that many components can very easily be incorporated into the OU curriculum.

Assessment

'Formative' assessment is a form of evaluation that aims to go beyond the mere ascription of grades associated with the more traditional, 'summative' forms, promoting feedback dialogues between the assessors and students. This learning-based focus is increasingly viewed as an essential component of good course design since, if properly implemented, it can point to ways in which the course can be adapted and developed to enhance student learning. Peter Knight summarised online formative assessment techniques

explored at international conferences in 2005 and suggested implications for the OU's curriculum practices.

Traditionally, higher education has focused on preparing people for their working lives. But, as Charles Edwards highlighted, with an economy that has become increasingly reliant on the professionalisation of its ageing population, higher education needs to offer individuals continued educational support and development opportunities. To maintain its position as an higher education innovator, the OU will need to reflect on its current curriculum and modes of delivery, exploring ways in which it can strengthen core capabilities, including the ability to design strong course content and create supportive learning environments.

Best practices

The Practice Based Professional Learning Centre (PBPL) seeks to explore opportunities and define best practices for practice based learning (PBL). Mark Fenton-O'Creevy and Pam Shakespeare reported that the centre, which is a collaboration between four faculties (IET, OUBS, FELS and FHSC), is set to extend activities to other academic units. They pointed to the results of a recent survey, which suggested that, in addition to those studying in the four focus faculties, other students (including Arts, Science and Social Sciences) also greatly value these employment-enhancing techniques.

Sport is an exciting area, offering opportunities to engage students and enhance the understanding of many subjects by providing alternative, down-to-earth contexts. Richard Skellington, Bram Gieben and Kath Woodward reported on last autumn's forum on the role of sport in our curriculum. Recent and planned developments include the current preparation of a business case for a Foundation Degree in Sport hosted by the FELS, the planned introduction of sport as a 'hot topic' to the Social Sciences' core foundation replacement course, and the possible introduction of a sports management course by the OU Business School.

Plenary sessions round up

WITH group learning an important component of the OU's courses, Andy Northedge discussed the structuring of processes online. He explored some of the challenges tutors face, including how to get students to participate and feel confident about the medium, how to maintain focus on relevant topics, how to control the processes and how to assess students effectively.

WITH nearly \$4 million of funding and core partners in nine countries, The Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) is a multidimensional research and development programme aiming to provide high-quality educational resources and systems that significantly enhance teacher training in various disadvantaged African countries. Bob Moon, Jane Devereux and Jenny Leach outlined the programme's background, its links with prior information and communications technology (ICT) research conducted by the Digital Education Enhancement Project (DEEP), and the implications of the TESSA model for future OU projects.

WITH science and technology advancing at an astounding rate, attention to ethical issues is key. Derek Matravers, Carolyn Price, Jonathan Leach, Viv Brown and Rob Paton outlined the OU's plans to raise the profile of ethics within the curriculum, including the introduction of an MA in the Ethics and Law of Healthcare, a 60 point course in values and a short course in Professional Ethics. This work has provided a solid foundation for promoting interfaculty collaboration and cultivating strong external partnerships for the longer-term development of the curriculum.

IN THE recent *Times Higher Education Supplement* Student Satisfaction Survey, the OU Law Programme was ranked among the top five in the UK. The OU's law courses are delivered through the Centre for Law, a unit within the OUBS, and the College of Law (CoL), the country's largest provider of postgraduate legal training. Gary Slapper and Ben Fitzpatrick (the Centre for Law) and Jane Chapman (CoL) considered how best to integrate vocational expertise into academic law courses and explored differences in culture and understandings of 'law' between the two partner institutions.

ANNE Hall warned that the OU is at a critical point in its history and cannot afford to stop innovating. The University may be the dominant provider of part-time and distance education in the UK, but, with increasing numbers of institutions entering these markets, we need to rethink not only our content, but also our delivery, models. Recent estimates suggest that 15 per cent of the world's population now use the internet and that there are 100 million broadband connections. Elearning is becoming increasingly important and the OU needs to continue to develop online capabilities that offer genuine competitive advantages.

Perry Awards Scheme

IN MEMORY of the OU's founding Vice-Chancellor, the late Lord Perry, the university is set to launch the first ever awards programme for staff later this year. Full details of the Perry Awards will be available in the March/April issue of *open house*. The Staff Survey results published last December have shown that staff often feel that their achievements are not recognised as much as they should be, and it is intended that the Perry Awards will help address this. All OU staff will have the opportunity to nominate an individual or group who they believe to have done outstanding work towards the progression on the university's Strategic Priorities.

tOUr de Britain

"WHEN I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race."

So wrote HG Wells, obviously impressed by a means of transport that was cheap, environmentally friendly and encouraged the traveller to exercise.

But things have changed since Well's time, and no more so than in the past 20 years. Since 1985, the number of bicycle journeys made in Britain has fallen 37 per cent. Only one per cent of adults now cycle to work and it's the same story for children biking to school. A desire for safety, comfort and – let's be honest – sloth has cocooned us in trains, buses and most of all our cars, and the way things are going it seems we may never get out again.

Or won't we? The Open University is currently formulating its environment policy and has recently appointed Beverley Harker as Green Travel Coordinator, with a brief to make OU staff more aware of environmentally efficient ways of moving equipment and people. Inevitably, the issue of cycling, both on campus and to and from work, will be examined as part of the university's overall approach to the environment.

"It's very important that we listen to as many people's views as possible," said Beverley. "And we'll take all views into account."

Inflammatory issue

Cycling has long been an inflammatory issue at the OU's Milton Keynes campus. Two-wheelers have had to overcome the fact that at Walton Hall, some pedestrians and motorists simply don't like them. One of the main causes of complaint, according to a recent lively *open house* forum, is the number of cyclists that ride on the footpaths, because, said one contributor, "they think they have a right to break the rules".

Many called for a ban on cyclists using the paths, which incensed the two-wheelers who retorted that they were forced off the road by illegally parked cars – yet no-one was calling to ban the errant motorists.

Yvonne Raw, who chairs OUBUG, said at the time that part of the reason for what she called Walton Hall motorists' "ignorant and selfish attitude" was down to the layout of Milton Keynes itself.

"When I drive elsewhere in the country, a

good driver will be able to cope with all the potential hazards encountered on a normal street," she says. "In Milton Keynes drivers are mollycoddled in a motorists' play-pen."

That's not to say MK does not encourage cycling. Far from it. The city may appear, built on a grid system of dual carriageways and roundabouts, to have been designed mainly with the motorist in mind, but its Redway route takes in a staggering 150 miles of cycle paths. In addition, the borough council has a cycling officer, there's a bicycles-only route taking in MK's main attractions and the provision for two-wheelers makes up part of the National Cycle Network.

So perhaps more people who work at the campus could be encouraged to get on their bikes. And if more did, perhaps the OU would see the need for better facilities than the ones Walton Hall currently provides. Doug Blane, who cycles to his job in the OU's Office for Students with Disabilities, recently emailed *open house* with his thoughts on Walton Hall's latest facility for cyclists.

"Henshaw building has a newly built transparent 'poly-tunnel' bike shed that can house at least 80 bikes," he wrote. "Henshaw building has only one shower and only four lockers for all staff to share. There is no seating in the shower area, so you either have to sit on the floor or use the seating in the lobby to get fully dressed."

He also says the shed is insecure – partly because it "has an open top as a 'design feature' that allows the bikes to get wet when it rains."

Regions

In the regions, staff who cycle seem underwhelmed by the OU's current attitude to two-wheelers. OU social sciences lecturer Dr Hugh Mackay was so irritated by what he described as "the centralisation of the OU and its transport policies" that last year he protested by cycling to a meeting at Walton Hall – from his home in Cardiff, 149 miles away.

"The OU has a car-biased transport policy," said Hugh, who made the 13-hour journey to highlight what he saw as a lack of transport provision for regional staff who are asked to come to Milton Keynes. The only alternative he had to cycling, he said, was to make a train journey that had previously taken him a tortuous five hours.

And he added: "More and more car parks are being built at Walton Hall – most of them for staff who live locally, and they're laying on minibuses to help them get from one campus to another which is just a stone's throw away."

Some areas of the country naturally have more cyclists – and therefore more schemes both to support them and to encourage non-cyclists to get on a bike. In Cambridge (home to the OU's east regional office), the huge student population and its effects mean one in four people cycle to work or study – that's 25 times the national average.

And it follows that places without a historic cycling culture have less provision – and understandably fewer people willing to take the two-wheel route to work. A recent survey of OU staff in Edinburgh, where even the tourist guides concede new cycle paths "still mean cycling in heavy traffic", found only two of about 40 had ever cycled to work. Almost as few drove – most taking public transport or walking – with many citing the city's traffic as a good reason not to get on their bikes.

"I do cycle for pleasure but am terrified of the traffic and there isn't a complete cycle path to the OU," said Elaine Walker. Sheena Grant admitted she would "never be brave enough" to bike through Edinburgh, Michelle Hynd thought it "a stressful way of getting around" and Sue Dumbleton said "I don't have a death wish which I'm sure cycling in Edinburgh would entail". Alison Simpson said simply: "I know too many drivers who hate cyclists."

But cycling in a big city is not so bad, said Laurie Holmes, who rides three miles to work in the London regional office in Camden. "The first time I did it I thought I was taking my life in my hands," she said. "But I absolutely love it. It keeps me fit."

But Laurie said she had to learn to be a confident road-user. "When I first started out I was timid, but I found that put me more at risk."

Laurie happily bikes to work in almost every kind of weather – "I'm quite hardcore, but I don't go out

"I cycle for pleasure but am terrified of the traffic and there isn't a complete cycle path to the OU"

when the roads are icy" – and is particularly grateful on hot days for the showers at the OU office. "It's a very good facility and should encourage more people to bike in," she said. But, as at Milton Keynes, not all the facilities for cyclists are ideal. "The bike rack seems to have been designed for children's bikes," she said. "It's so small that nobody uses it. It was obviously aesthetically pleasing but wasn't very well thought through. I chain my bike to a pillar."

But it's issues such as this that highlight the need for the comprehensive cycling survey, says Yvonne Raw. "It's another example of assumptions being made as to what the cyclist needs without talking to people who would actually use the facilities," she said.

"But I make assumptions too about other cyclists, and their needs and concerns, and they may be completely different from what they actually think. That's why it's vital that as many people as possible respond to this survey and contribute to the debate, whether they are keen cyclists or think we're just a nuisance – so we can get the complete picture and plans can take into account the views of everyone."

Beverley Harker agrees that before addressing issues of cycling on campus and around cycling to work her first job is to hear what people have to say. "I am very keen to hear suggestions for improvements," she said.

To take part in the survey visit <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/estates/surveys/surveyOUTravel.cfm>



What about ALs views?

I'M sure that you can imagine how Associate Lecturers feel when the university insists on using the term 'staff' to mean that small minority of those employed by the OU who have a full-time contract. It is quite offensive for us to read about something that affects the staff and then to read on and realise that the seven and a half thousand employees need read no further – they are excluded! (The best of times, the worst of times *open house*, issue 403.)

The Vice-Chancellor has repeatedly said that terms such as 'the academic staff and ALs' should not be used but still we see OU reports and statements that carelessly write about the OU community of 'academic staff, students and ALs'. It appears to us that the university is pleased to include the work of ALs when it accepts the praise of students placing it at the top of the national league. The contact that students have, and the face to face teaching that they praise, is not with some office or committee at Milton Keynes but with their ALs in distance learning and tutorials.

We would like our staff colleagues to spend just a little time and thought in attempting to avoid the continuation of this slipshod terminology in their thinking and writing.

Alan Cadogan, Vice-Chair

Associate Lecturers Committee, Region 03 (South West)

Response

WE do recognise that Associate Lecturers are a vital group of university staff. As we said in the article, the survey process is being reviewed and one aim will be to ensure that the views of all staff are taken into account in any future surveys.

Human Resources

Staff survey

IT was good to see the staff survey getting top billing in the latest *open house* (issue 403) but the content of the article was pretty disappointing. The author had totally failed to grasp the meaning of the figures in my report when s/he wrote: "Research staff were around half as likely to rate terms and conditions as fair than were ancillary staff, but ancillary staff were only one-third as likely as academic staff to rate themselves as sharing the OU's aims and ideals."

Taking the second point first, staff were not asked to say

how far they shared the OU's aims and ideals. They were asked a) How important it was to them in a job to be "Working for an organisation whose aims and ideals I share" and b) How well their current job at the OU measured up.

In fact ancillary staff, who include print, craft, manual, industrial production staff and gardeners, were about four fifths (73 per cent vs 87 per cent) as likely as academics to feel that sharing an organisation's aims and ideals was important. The bigger discrepancy was whether their job actually measured up. Ancillary staff were only three fifths (40 per cent vs 69 per cent) as likely to say that their current job measured up "very or extremely well".

On the first point it is easier to turn to a separate question where people were asked directly to say whether they agreed that the OU was a fair employer. Here there was virtually no difference – 60 per cent of researchers and 61 per cent of ancillary staff agreed or agreed strongly.

Alan Woodley, Senior Research Fellow
Institute of Educational Technology

Response

THE bowdlerisation of the question on aims and ideals is a direct quote from the report text on pages 13 and 18 including the heading to table 2.8 of the report. The figures were taken from the tables of results. On fair terms and conditions table 2.4 shows a satisfaction quotient for Research staff of around 50 for Ancillary staff (not academic staff as this reply erroneously asserts) of about 83. Exaggeration of the ratio between these numbers is aided by the scale which runs only to 90 not 100. The figures for "working for an organisation whose aims and ideals I share" (sic chart 2.8) show as around 63 for academics and exactly 20 for ancillary staff. That is pretty much exactly the one third that the article claims. In fact, the conclusions drawn in the article (although not the ratios between figures) are exactly those drawn in the report.

Derek Prior

Director of Communications

Please email your letters to open-house@open.ac.uk or post to Debbie Dixon, Editor, Open House, Communications Group, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA. We reserve the right to edit letters.

IN THE HOT SEAT

Will I like the future?

THE OU model of supported open learning has, by and large, served its students well – the recent survey of student satisfaction, published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* last year, testifies to this.

But this model is more than thirty years old now, and the university is, quite rightly, I think, asking what model would be 'fit for purpose', now and in the future. I am quite excited that we, the Associate Lecturers, have an opportunity to engage in a debate on a support model relevant to the 21st century – but in a way, fearful also, that the role of the tutor will become more onerous, effectively for less pay!

Associate Lecturers are to be represented on both the project team and on the stakeholder reference group. I hope to be able to inform the debate for the benefit of all.

The university, with its increasing global competition, needs to keep at the forefront of distance education provision, and I hope that during my time with the OU, I can help facilitate this. I enjoy new challenges. I want

to be involved in the university's new initiatives – but, who will bear the cost?

Already, a majority of ALs (who live in supported geographic areas) have had to migrate to broadband – I have to say, I would have done so anyway. Once the university's Virtual Learning Environment is firmly in place, I would suggest that connection other than broadband will just not be an option.

I have so far only met e-TMAs as a student on MA Online Distant Education courses, and found it a great experience – but, what will I find as a tutor? Will I, as some suggest, need two flat screens – at a cost to whom? – well, me of course! Will the face-to-face model survive? Will e-conferencing be the replacement norm? In my experience, it's great at the postgraduate level, but would it be generally applicable at undergraduate level? Will I spend increasing amounts of time supporting younger students, with my ear 'glued' to my mobile telephone, or having to indulge in the



KEN HUDSON
CHAIR OF THE AL
COMMITTEE

intricacies of 'text speak'?

The imponderables go on – but will, undoubtedly, become the debating points for the new model, whatever this turns out to look like. What we can be sure, is that both OU students and OU tutors, in the future, will look different – but will we like them?

Ken Hudson

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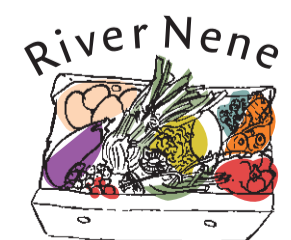
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THE INTERVIEW

Ian Oldham

Associate Lecturer, Region 10 (Wales)



You've got mail

Despite a love/hate relationship with his computer, Ian welcomes the OU's move towards becoming an e-university. When he's not laying down the law he enjoys walking in the Welsh countryside

How long have you worked at the OU and why?

I have worked for The Open University since 1999. I started as an Associate Lecturer on T171 and TU170.

In your opinion what does the OU do well?

It's only when you work for other educational establishments that you realise that the OU is comparable to any other university. However, the course material published by the OU is the best in the world.

How do you think the OU could attract and retain more students?

There used to be a joke, "go to prison and get an OU degree", but over the years this has changed, the standing of the OU is equal to all the major universities. Word of mouth is the best way to encourage new students, there are no better ambassadors than past and existing students.

What's been the biggest change since you started working here?

The incredible speed that online learning has been introduced and the willingness of students and tutors to embrace the new technologies. But we must make sure that everyone is given the opportunity to acquire these skills so they are not left behind. In my days as an OU student, all the course materials arrived in the post, which was very exciting in itself, but having the chance to interact with the tutor and other students at any time of the day or night has to be the best way to offer support and encouragement.

What do you like best about your job?

Working with my students. There is no better feeling in

the world than to have a student complete a course that you have helped and encouraged all the way, or to have received a letter which says I could not have passed this course without your help.

And what do you like least?

The very occasional students who, despite all that the tutors do for them, are never satisfied.

Complete the following sentence: The OU would be better if...?

It promoted itself more.

What single thing would most improve your working day?

Apart from a secretary, computers that worked more like other electrical appliances. You wouldn't expect your microwave to freeze or jam every other time you used it, so why do we accept this from computer software? I have a love/hate relationship with my computer. Things are improving but there is still a long way to go.

Describe yourself in three words

Patient, understanding but demanding.

What are your hobbies?

Photography, entomology and walking in Wales when I have time, carrying out my duties as a magistrate and not forgetting working for the OU. I wish I had more time for my hobbies.

What's your favourite film and why?

Obviously it would have to be *You've Got Mail* starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks.

What do you miss most from your childhood?

Probably having no responsibility, but you don't realise that when you're young. I didn't like school and definitely don't miss it. I started studying late and my first degree was with the OU (not studied for in prison!). They were good then and they are better now.

If you were prime minister for the day what would you change and why?

I believe everyone is capable of obtaining an OU degree providing they have the motivation. But by the same token we have seriously neglected our craft skills. Not everyone needs to go to university, there's so much more choice out there. A degree isn't everything and it isn't for everyone. It certainly doesn't guarantee a job these days.

What are your top three holiday destinations and why?

North Wales, Mid Wales and South Wales – after that it would be Tangier in Morocco, sailing in to the harbour and seeing all the white houses on the hill, it's a fantastic sight and such a cultural shock.

Pertisau in Austria – going on the cable car to the top of the mountain and seeing how insignificant the people and cars look. The scenery is wonderful and always changing from snow, cloud and mists drifting, no two days are the same.

New Zealand – it seems such a beautiful place and as soon as I have the time I would love to visit for a couple of months. I can always dream.

If you would like to be featured in The Interview please email your contact details to the Editor at open-house@open.ac.uk