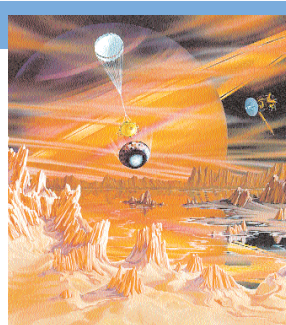


SNEAKPREVIEW



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# Sesame

December 2002

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 212



Putting you in the picture: *Rough Science* visits New Zealand ● page 16

# Letters

Write to: Letters, Sesame, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA  
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 £5 book token for contributions to *just a thought*

## Costs of change to 'ordinary' degree

I appreciate the OU has to keep up, but for those of us who were going to graduate after 2004, it means we are going to have to totally rethink our plans, at short notice.

It's taken me a great deal of time working out which courses I wanted to study in order to complete my 'ordinary' degree, and it means I am in the situation whereby if I take the course I've signed up for next year, I will then have 240 points (120 Level 1, 120 Level 2), so I will have to go straight for a Level 3 course, and have my options severely limited because I do not want to go for

a Level 3 in a subject area that I have not studied at Level 2. With the announcement coming so close to the cut-off for applications for next year I cannot now change my mind.

And will the 2003 degree be of less worth than the following years?

The new rules suit people about to graduate, and those just starting out on their studies but, for those of us exactly halfway through, the goalposts have suddenly been moved. I am very angry at this.

**Dave Tutssel**  
Surrey

I have been with the OU since 1991 and hold a first degree. I was, until reading *Sesame* 211, continuing with a second degree. I will now be withdrawing my registration for M206 next year – as will my partner – as neither of us have any intention of studying a Level 3 course for an ordinary degree.

I also find that with transferred credit and 60 points in my new subject I do not have enough background in my new chosen field to do the required Level 3 courses. I would therefore be required to do more courses before attempting the third levels. A good little money earner for the Open University, but how many students will you lose through it?

**Karen Doyle & Alan Moss** Cricklewood

**Tony Barker, Assistant Registrar, replies**

**The change to the structure of the BA or BSc degree awarded without honours to require some work at Level 3 brings the OU award into line with practice in the rest of the sector and was provisionally approved at a meeting of the Academic Board on 4 July. After that there is a period during which members of Senate can register objections to any of these provisional decisions. That period ended on 9 August and so, in publicising the details in the previous edition of *Sesame*, the university has tried to inform the student body of the approved new policy as early as it could.**

**Implementation at the end of 2004 was approved on the basis that a student who is (a) making continuous academic progress at the rate of just 30 points a year, (b) has 240 or more points towards a BA/BSc degree, (c) is aiming to graduate without honours and (d) has studied no Level 3 courses so far, can meet the requirements of the new structure by taking 30 points at Level 3 in 2003 and 30 points at**

**Level 3 in 2004. Students who are in that position – and indeed anyone else too who has already selected a course for study in 2003 and finds that they need to change that course choice – can do so with no financial penalty up to the course start date (in February).**

**The university has considered the implementation date for the new structure with the study plans of its students very much in mind and in consultation with students' representatives. Students then do need to accept that the university must be able to respond within a reasonable timescale to changes in the external higher education environment to adjust the scope of its curriculum and the structure of its awards to ensure that what it offers remains academically relevant and credible. Having decided that implementation at the end of 2004 represents what it feels to be a reasonable period of notice about the changes to the degree structure, I think it unlikely that the university would want to re-consider that.**

## Set up family support

We are just coming to the end of the fifth year of study - I say 'we' because that's how it has been. During the time my husband George has been studying, we as a family have all been involved in some way. Holidays and weekend activities are all based around OU assignment cut-off dates and exams. There have been many times when I've been verbally encouraging George to continue

but mentally I've been thinking 'if he gives this all up we can get back to a normal life!'

In your Survival Guide – advice for families (*Sesame* 210), point 5 should read, 'Be willing to put your own needs second most of the time' because in all honesty that is exactly what you need to do.

I would love to see some support network for families – it's been a lonely five years.

**Caren Christophorou** Manchester

## Support for Macs

I support Teresa Wilson (*Sesame* 211) regarding CD-Roms compatible with Apple Mac computers. I am not yet a student of the OU (my wife is ) but I was interested in the diploma in German and felt that I would benefit from the CD-Rom '*Begegnung in Leipzig*'. However, I was told that this CD only works on PCs – I use a Mac.

I am sure that I am not the only potential student or student to use an Apple Mac. In this high tech age, I would have thought it possible to produce a disk with suitable codes for both types of computers – Kodak already provides CDs for your photographs suitable for both Windows and Macs

**Fred Stubbs**  
Norwich

**Joel Greenberg, Director of Strategic Development, replies**

**Fred Stubbs is correct in his assumption that it is possible to produce software which will run on a PC and an Apple Macintosh (Mac) computer. In fact, software produced by the university for the Learning Schools Programme ran on a PC, Mac and an Acorn computer, all from the same CD-ROM. However, this comes at a cost and, for most courses, the additional costs of developing and testing the software and providing ongoing technical support, maintenance and updates for upgrades to the operating systems have not been covered by the number of students using it. As much of the cost of the course is derived from the course fee, this would mean an increased fee for students. Technically, it is also the case that developing applications for cross-platform compatibility can restrict the functionality that can be built into the software, and therefore limit its effectiveness for all users.**

**Students studying courses which only require access to the web and/or online systems such as the university's conferencing system, can normally use equipment other than PC compatible systems satisfactorily. However, care needs to be taken in areas where incompatibilities between PCs and other systems such as the Mac may cause difficulties such as tutor/student communications and specialised web applications.**

**While current university policy focuses on the PC platform and related software, Teresa Wilson raises an issue of widening access which needs to be addressed. We intend to review this policy with the new PVC (Learning and Teaching).**

## Sesame

www.open.ac.uk/sesame

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## Threshold is unfair

Having missed out on higher education, I finally decided to take the plunge with the OU.

I carefully and honestly completed the household income form for a financial award, but came in at about £800 above

the threshold. I confidently expected a pro-rata award and was dismayed when I learnt that none was forthcoming.

Why is one eligible up to a given amount but considered able to pay full fees if £1 over?  
**J. Handley** Lincoln

**Mrs E. Lister, Student Financial Support Assistant, replies**

**The Bursary and Study Costs Committee discussed granting a partial or pro rata financial award for course fees but it was deemed too complex and expensive to administer. Anyone who has been declined a financial award can appeal against the decision. Appeals should be sent to local regional centres or the Registration and Fees Centre at Walton Hall, together with any further information which may support the application. There are also other areas of financial support which may be available; the Registration and Fees Centre can advise on this: tel: 01908 653454.**

## Praise for online pilot

After reading *Sesame* 211, I would like to thank Mary Fuller for her letter on the A103 online pilot. I have just completed this and would like to thank the OU for this wonderful, practical way of studying.

As a student who was unable to attend the usual tutorials, I benefited enormously from online tutorials, which ran all

day, every day. I queried things and everybody helped. The tutor was always there giving her time.

We've had trips to art galleries, and more are to be arranged. Please, please keep this scheme going and enlighten many more with the same knowledge and sense of community I have acquired since the pilot scheme started.

**Nina Blinstone**  
Mansfield, Notts

just a  
thought

Course T237/T210 *Environmental control and public health* is also an undergraduate course (*Sesame* 211) and has been so offered since 1975 in various versions. When teamed with T303 *Environmental modelling, monitoring and control*, undergraduates can be awarded our highly regarded Diploma in Pollution Control. They may then, in due course, progress to IEMA Associate Membership or become members of other professional organisations. Congratulations to the IEMA team too!

**Andrew Porteous**

Professor of Environmental Engineering and Chair of T237

In *Sesame* 211 the V-C writes, apropos of gaining an OU degree, 'Those who do obtain the coveted letters after their name...'

I graduated BSc (Open) three years ago and am now completing the third year of a BA (Hons) course. In all that time I have never had a letter from the OU that carried 'the coveted letters'. What an advertisement for the OU to have those letters after graduates' names!

**Donald Fish** Warks

I would like to echo the comments made by Vivien Schoneich regarding the OU's consumption of paper (*Sesame* 211). The greatest waste is surely caused by 1,000s of students sending in hard copies of TMAs for marking. My tutor insists on single-sided, double spaced printouts. The sooner the OU is able to handle them in electronic form for all courses the better for the environment.

**Jerry Diccoc** Swanley

When I first read the new ordinary degree rules, I was delighted, as this will cut two years off the time it will take me to get a degree. However, other commitments mean I can only do 30 point courses. The OU has accepted there is a demand for shorter courses. Why not take this a step further and give students an option to break down 60 point courses into two parts to be studied in consecutive years?

**Judith White** Somerset

I would just like to say a very BIG thank you to the OUSA Reps at Bath University starting August 3, especially Philip Pankhurst who went that extra mile (literally) to help make my stay easier. Nothing was too much trouble. Without OUSA Reps my visit would have been impossible.

**Kathryn Whitehead**  
Rotherham

# ICT for all by 2005

By Yvonne Cook

Anyone wanting to study with the OU will need computer and internet access from 2005, when the university is to start operating on the assumption of universal ICT access.

The new policy, approved by Senate, will allow all courses planned for 2005 or later to be designed with a compulsory online component.

And all administrative transactions, such as course registration, are expected to take place online from 2005, or sooner if 'appropriate access is essentially universal'. The university already has a policy requiring all associate lecturers to be online by 2004.

The university believes the e-strategy, presented to Senate in a paper called *Towards a policy on ICT access and provision*, will prove attractive to students who value an ICT component in their degree. Forecasts suggest that 95 per cent of the student population should have access to a pc and the internet by 2004. Access currently stands at 88 per cent.

A small percentage of students will choose not to, or be unable to, go online, and the university needs to make special provision for these few, the ICT paper adds.

## supported

The move is supported by the Open University Students Association. Rick Holyomes, Vice-President (Education) told *Sesame*: "If we, as students, want not only the enriching experience that higher education can provide, but also a credible award at the end of it, we must accept the idea of ICT being included. This is one of the outcomes of the Dearing Report on higher education published in 1997, so it is not some idea the university has sprung on us.

"OUSA does recognise that some students

may experience access problems and that is why we have been working very closely with the OU to ensure any support mechanisms reach as many of those students as possible.

"What I find ironic, and rather sad, is that a large, and very important part of the OU community still opposes the introduction of ICT, and hence risks the very credibility of the awards they seek to protect."

However some staff have voiced concerns that an 'ICT for all' policy will exclude some students, and discourage others from applying.

"We were set up to reach the people that others do not reach," said S330 tutor Meg Hopkins, chair of the Associate Lecturers Committee.

"I work with an access group and there is no way the people in that would register online.

## unrealistic

"The idea that having a register of ICT provision will allow students without computers to go somewhere locally and get online, is not realistic. If they go to a library, for example, they may find that there is no printer; or that the library does not have OU software, and won't allow them to load OU software."

She also feared that the OU would find it too expensive to make special provision for the minority of students not online.

Peter Wilson, Secretary, Technology Development, said: "ICT is a core skill for all graduates, it can improve the quality of learning in all subject areas, and collaborative modes of study are facilitated by ICT. It is important to provide valuable activities for the vast majority of students who do have access."

## No more waiting for student loans

From next year those OU students who qualify for a student loan will receive it at the start of their course rather than one third of the way through.

Government's decision to make loan payments early follows representations from the university and OUSA and is good news for students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Assistant Registrar Anita Froud told *Sesame*.

"It will be a considerable advantage because obviously people have expenses at the start of their courses, purchasing set books, equipment and stationery, and travelling to tutorials," she said.

From 2003, those who apply and qualify for a loan when they register will be contacted before course start dates and asked to confirm that they still intend to study

the course they applied for, still require the loan, and have had no change to their financial circumstances.

Explained Anita: "Once this is received and the course has started the university will notify the Student Loan Company and the student should receive their payment into their bank account within 15 days."

Said Planning Officer Bernard Coen: "The university and our students association have been pressing the Education Department to pay loans in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at the start of courses. When Margaret Hodge, Minister for Higher Education, visited the university in January she accepted our case, and since then the Department has been working towards making earlier payment a reality."

Further advice on eligibility

for loans for part-time study is available from the Registration and Fees Centre on 01908 653411.

The change does not apply in Scotland where students already receive their loans early and apply directly to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. For more information on financial support in Scotland contact the Open University in Scotland on 0131 226 3851 or [www.open.ac.uk/scotland](http://www.open.ac.uk/scotland).

● With this copy of *Sesame* you should receive a leaflet explaining all the financial options for students on certain benefits, or with low incomes, including information on student loans. If you have any queries on the leaflet, or your eligibility for financial assistance, contact Registration and Fees on 01908 653411.



President Alison Ryan reprising her performance at OUSA's dinner

## Alison calls the tune

One essential requirement for a students' association president is the ability to make a noise. And current OUSA leader Alison Ryan proved she was up to the challenge when she surprised colleagues and university guests at OUSA's annual dinner by piping them to their tables. In keeping with the Scottish theme, Alison chose a menu of haggis, neaps and tatties, for the celebration.

The OUSA president, who lives near Dundee, has been playing the bagpipes for 34 years, and used to practice for up to two hours a day. Though the demands of home, career and the OU mean Alison no longer plays competitively, she still gets asked to pipe the haggis and perform at weddings. And she's lost none of her voice. She joked: "Playing the bagpipes is much more about technique than puff. But I do have a lot of lung power!"

## Global alliance plans post-MBA programme

A new international post-MBA programme is to be piloted by a consortium of four universities across four continents. The World Alliance in Distance Education (WADE) was formally launched at the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Durban in July and unites the OU with the Hong Kong Open, Canada's Athabasca and Australia's Deakin universities.

The focus of its post-MBA pilot will be worldwide business issues, including corporate governance in a global environment, international supply chain management, global trade and markets in changing economic and political environments and emerging issues in international business.

"The idea is for MBA graduates from all four

universities to continue to top up their skills and business understanding, while also learning from each other's business cultures," said programme director Richard Wheatcroft.

The intensive programme, which is due for launch in June 2003, will last one year.

In the long term WADE may expand to partner more distance learning institutions from around the world. Its offerings are likely to include more business courses, but also courses in other subject areas. But it will not just be courses, says Ann Floyd, who is OU representative on the WADE steering committee:

"We hope to share expertise, learn from each other and find ways in which we can collaborate for our mutual benefit.

More details at: [www.wade-universities.org](http://www.wade-universities.org)

# Huge expansion in schools programme



(l-r) Tahira Shabir, Shaista Bibi and Marrium Noreen studied MU120 *Open mathematics* alongside their A levels at Oulder Hill School, Rochdale

Up to 200 schools could soon be introducing OU courses into their sixth forms as a way of providing a stepping stone between school and university.

The idea of introducing sixth-formers to OU study alongside their A-levels began at Monkseaton Community High School in the north-east of England seven years ago – but now the idea is catching on nationally.

“Our courses are a bridge and they complement students’ knowledge,” says OU project co-ordinator Liz Manning.

Monkseaton, in Whitley Bay, is providing back-up to other participating schools through a national support scheme. “We had two national launches and representatives from around 160 schools attended,” says Liz. “But altogether we’ve had interest from 200 schools in such diverse areas as Birmingham, Cornwall,

Sheffield, Dorset, Manchester and Suffolk.”

Science, maths and computing courses tend to be the most popular. “A lot of students opt for T170 and T171,” says Liz. “MU120 gives a good breadth of knowledge and we know of at least one student who was struggling with A-level work until he studied S103 and it all clicked into place.”

## quality

Before they begin, pupils learn OU study will be different from schoolwork. “Their relationship with their tutors will not be the same as the one they have with teachers,” adds Liz. “No-one chivvies them up to do the work. And, of course, we tell them they must work during the summer.”

Monkseaton headteacher Paul Kelley’s OU pupils are now studying languages, maths, science, technology and social sciences. “It’s not about league tables, it’s about quality of learning,” he says. “Our students are learning good study skills and these courses are inspiring exceptional commitment in our pupils.

“And now UCAS (the universities’ application service) is changing its forms to give a space for higher education study. I’m sure universities will be more attracted to students who have already succeeded at higher education level.”

Of those pupils who have progressed to traditional universities, not one has dropped out, say Liz and Paul. But there are other beneficiaries – as teachers study alongside their pupils. “Some of them are now doing the same courses as their students,” says Liz. “Sometimes the children do better than they do!”

## E-books to be a first

Lugging around kilos of heavy study materials could become a thing of the past with OU plans to become the first UK university to introduce e-books as standard.

From 2003, material on all new courses will be available electronically – at no additional cost – alongside the traditional printed materials.

“There are many advantages,” explains Dean Taylor, the OU’s assistant secretary (Technology Development). “For instance, if you’ve read a paper book and want to refer back to a particular passage, you have to flick through and rely on an index. With e-books you just enter the key word and you find it instantly. Not only that, but you can also bookmark, highlight and annotate text for later revision.”

The new service will also increase accessibility to materials for students with disabilities and be used to give potential students a taste of courses before they commit to them.

“The books can be used with a number of electronic platforms – PCs, Macs and personal digital assistants (PDAs) such as laptops,” says Dean.

The fact that courses are now planned and created electronically from the start makes it cheap to turn them into e-book format, which students will probably download from password-protected websites.

And there are reassuring words for technophobes who fear an end to paper materials. “People will always need text-based materials and some people will always be happier reading paper books,” says Dean. “This is not going to replace them. But the OU has always tried to use technology appropriately. This will be a huge advantage to many of our students.”

## Sidney Perry Studentships 2003

The Sidney Perry Foundation is offering a number of Studentships in Engineering to assist OU students intending to make a career in engineering. Preference will be given to those following degree course profiles which meet with the approval of the relevant engineering institutions and the requirements of the Engineering Council guidelines, including the MEng programme. The studentships, which will provide up to £1,200 for fees at level 3 or 4 and some expenses, are intended to enable students to complete the final 120 credit points of such a degree profile.

Applications are welcomed from OU undergraduates who have completed, or are about to complete, their first 360 credit points, including any transferred credit (or advanced standing). Copies of the Application Form, which should be returned no later than January 13, 2003, may be obtained from The Secretary, The Sidney Perry Foundation, P.O. Box 1689, Hindon, SP3 6TP. For further informal advice students may contact: Professor A.G. Parkinson, Department of Environmental and Mechanical Engineering, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

## News in brief

### Fast track accounting

The Open University Business School’s new fast-track route into accounting, the Certificate in Accounting, has won approval from the Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Ireland. The Irish kitemark follows approval from the ACCA, CIMA and CIPFA. [www.open.ac.uk/oubs](http://www.open.ac.uk/oubs)

### Physics lectures

Time travel, solar sails and the creation of life are the subjects for discussion in the latest series of Institute of Physics lectures, hosted by the Open University. The series begins on October 15 when the OU’s Professor Nigel Mason talks about *The physics of the creation of life*. On Tuesday November 12 Professor Colin McInnes from Glasgow University looks at *Setting sail for orbit: the physics, technology and mission applications of solar sails*. Finally, on December 17 Dr Bob Lambourne from the OU tackles *Time travelling*. All events begin at 7.30pm and take place in the Open University Church. Telephone 01908 653229 or email [t.j.moore@open.ac.uk](mailto:t.j.moore@open.ac.uk) to reserve a place.

### Lesbian love stories

Former arts tutor Sarah Waters saw her lesbian historical romance turned into a three-part TV drama in October. *Tipping the Velvet*, which Sarah wrote while teaching on S210 *Approaching literature*, has been billed as ‘one of the highlights of BBC2’s autumn schedule’. As *Sesame* went to press another of Sarah’s novels, *Fingersmith*, was on the Booker Prize shortlist.

### Mountaineering mobiles

The latest generation mobile phone may soon become the mountaineer’s ‘must have’ following a pioneering webcast from the summit of the Matterhorn. Climbers Lorenzo Gariano and Scott Woolums exchanged text messages and filed audio reports via a website created by the Knowledge Media Institute, the OU’s new technology research unit. Their phone was also equipped with a digital camera to allow them to transmit photos of their ascent.

### Lord Young honoured

Social innovator Lord Young of Dartington has been commemorated at the official open of the Open University Business School’s new headquarters – to be known as the Michael Young building. The official opening was performed by Lord Young’s daughter Sophie in September. Among a lifetime of achievements, Lord Young, who died earlier this year, founded the Consumers Association, National Extension College and Open College of the Arts.

### Get ready to screen save

Anyone waiting to hear when they can take part in a global scheme to use screensavers to help predict climate should keep an eye on the website <http://www.climateprediction.com>.

Due to be launched this autumn, the scheme aims to tap the potential of vast numbers of computers to help run a climate prediction program – as reported in *Sesame* 208 (April/May).

### Award winning prof.

Professor of Music Trevor Herbert has been named winner of the 2002 Christopher Monk Award, an annual prize presented by the Historic Brass Society to honour those who have made significant contributions to the early brass field.

### Green website developed

OU researchers have developed a website showcasing UK sustainable energy projects that demonstrate how greener technologies may offer hope to the two billion people worldwide without access to electricity.

Launched to coincide with the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the site’s critical approach is key to influencing opinion, according to Professor Dave Elliott, director of the Energy and Environment Research Unit. “As an independent university-based research group, we feel that we are in a good position to produce educational outreach material that is informative, but does not avoid the problems and shortcomings that have emerged.” [www.energyprojects.co.uk](http://www.energyprojects.co.uk)

### On board with Beagle

World-famous balloonist Per Lindstrand has brought his high-flying team on board with Beagle 2. His internationally acclaimed Lindstrand Balloons Ltd has been named by lead industrial contractor Astrium, Stevenage, as a key member of the industrial team which will work together on the Mars craft’s landing system.

# Spotlight on OU Societies

## Rocking all over the world

**G**EOLGY rocks – at least if the size of the OU's society is any guide.

In its 30th anniversary year, the Open University Geology Society now boasts 2,503 enthusiasts – making it by far the largest of the university's extra-curricular groups. Like many of the others, it offers an extra dimension to course-work – another layer, geologists would doubtless call it – but it's not difficult to see why else it is so popular.

For a start, the society runs 200 events a year. Its members enjoy field trips throughout the UK, Europe, America and, in the next couple of years, New Zealand and Africa. There are also conferences, study sessions, lectures and newsletters.

"It's a fantastic opportunity for people to learn more about the subject," says chairman David Maddocks. "But more than anything, it's fun."

The society has 18 branches across Britain and Europe and, while many members are students, others have either finished their degrees or have never been OU students. Not bad for a society which began life with a couple of people sitting on a wall in a car park.

"It was at a summer school at Shap Wells Hotel in Cumbria and the then head of earth sciences Ian Gass and a few others were eating their lunch," says David. "Someone suggested it would be a good idea to have a society to give students an opportunity to enjoy more field trips than the OU was able to offer them at the time."

### celebrations

It took a year and a half from that meeting to form a society, a timespan recalled in the 18 months' worth of celebrations OUGS members are undertaking to mark the anniversary.

The society's first conference, *Understanding The Earth*, was held at Reading in 1973 and speakers included authors of course books. "It was excellent," recalls Jane Randall, one of the founder members. "The OU was still very new and this was a wonderful way to bring people together."

Another new experience was the opportunity to travel across continents on field trips. Adds Jane: "Last year a group went to America and the society is planning a trip to Norway. They are fantastic opportunities to study landscapes in different parts of the world, but you can have as interesting a time and learn as much from a local branch trip to study quarries five miles up the road."

Each of the branches – 16 in Britain, one in Ireland and the other covering mainland Europe – have their own newsletter and programme of events. But while the groups are separate, they all welcome each other's members to join their expeditions.

"I think the society is popular because it gives people so many opportunities," adds Information Officer Martin Elsworth. "And geology is such a fascinating subject. Every single piece of scenery you look at, whether it's on the other side of the world or in your own town, has a fascinating geological history."

For more information on the Geological Society, which costs £15 per year to join, log on to [www.ougs.org.uk](http://www.ougs.org.uk)



The OU Geology stand at OUSA Conference attracts interest

If you would like your society to be featured in a future Spotlight please send details to [Sesame@open.ac.uk](mailto:Sesame@open.ac.uk) Tel: 01908 652451.

## Update

# Register now to avoid disappointment

Have you ever been allocated to a tutor group far from home when there is one nearby? Do your materials sometimes arrive late?

Then there's a chance your problems could be linked to late registration. With an increasing number of OU students leaving it later to make a decision about next year's study, **Howard Horner**, Regional Director in Region 2, explains why registering late can be bad news for both students, and the university.

**S**tudent numbers on courses and in particular locations now vary from year to year more than ever before. My job is to balance the need to live within my budget by appointing the right number of tutors to each course with my responsibility to meet students' preferences for tutors based in their nearest tutorial venue.

The later student numbers on courses are confirmed, the harder it is to achieve the right balance. And that can lead to students who register late being excluded from their local tutor group because it is already full.

It is hard for tutors too. Though our main presentations start in February, to meet our legal obligations as employers I have to advise tutors in September if there is a possibility we may not have a tutor group in the location to which their continuity of employment is tied. At this point we have less than half the final number of students committed, so we have to guess based on previous years' data. We are quite good at guessing numbers but we cannot know where

students will be located, so the tutors may not be in the right place.

Late registration makes it hard for planning other things like printing and distribution of course materials, support mailings and planning introductory meetings too. The warehouses now keep extra supplies of popular courses – which has an impact on our costs – but occasionally we have to disappoint students or wait for reprints to meet the need.

And later registrations mean we have a mountain of paper to process in a very short time and queues and delays build up on the phone and in the centres.

There are probably many reasons why students don't register earlier, but when I talk to students I find that some are based on misunderstandings. Students tell me they are not absolutely sure about their course choice and worry it will cause problems if they need to change it. We'd much prefer to know their current thinking now and deal with a few changes later.

Others say they don't want to commit to payment yet – when payment doesn't have to start until the course does.



Howard Horner

The message is really a very simple one. Please reserve a place on your intended next course NOW, even if you are not absolutely sure of it. Please convert your reservations into registrations.

We can then plan on the basis of much harder information. You will have more chance of getting the group you want. Fewer tutors will go through a possible redundancy process unnecessarily. Tutors will get optimum group sizes for effective teaching rather than bigger than ideal because of latecomers. You are more likely to get your materials in good time. Our workload can be spread out.

And I will keep my remaining hair for a few more years!

# Live and learn on Orkney



Standing Stones of Stenness, Orkney

Picture: Charles Tait Photographic

Students of sustainable development are invited to learn the subject from the world around them - by living on Orkney.

The OU validated the island college's BSc in Sustainable Development and Environmental Management three years ago – and staff are hoping the first graduation, which took place in September, will encourage other students to head north.

"It's an opportunity to live your learning," says course leader and former OU student Dr Jim Chalmers. "In the Scottish Highlands and Islands, and Orkney in particular, the tensions between the economic needs of fragile communities and the risks to an extremely rich but vulnerable environment are widely evident.

"The course is built on recognition of the need to sustain the people – their settlements, communities and societies – by prudently using natural resources to meet such objectives equally for both present and future generations."

Many of the modules can be undertaken via distance learning but Jim says the best way to absorb knowledge in this subject is to spend time within the local environment. "Orkney has a small but very active, very sociable community," he says. "Students will soon find themselves rubbing shoulders with stakeholders from all sides of a multi-dimensional fence. The location could not be more appropriate.

"Without the OU we wouldn't have a degree to offer," adds Jim. "Ultimately the aim is to be able to create a whole Highlands and Islands university and, although that's a very long way off, OU validation is vital in promoting this area as an educational resource."

The course covers topics such as micro-economics and regional business management, ecology, tourism development and management, conservation biology, earth science, mathematics and statistics and a study block titled simply "Highlands and Islands Communities".

For further details visit: [www.orkney.uhi.ac.uk/sdem](http://www.orkney.uhi.ac.uk/sdem)

# Navy fliers get lift from OU

The first seven naval officers to get a flying start with their careers have just passed out of Britannia Royal Naval College.

A partnership between the university and Royal Navy means the 12-months they spent undergoing rigorous officer training at Dartmouth in Devon have earned them 120 points towards an OU degree.

The next generation of Top Guns will now continue their degree studies to fit around military duties and the needs of their developing careers – a boon for the Navy which hopes the scheme will encourage more young people to sign up straight from school.

Its own publicity for the scheme asks potential recruits: "Which would you prefer, studying inside a library or earning a degree at the controls of a Merlin helicopter?"

## impetus

The impetus behind the OU-RN partnership is the relatively short career span of aircrew who need the lightening reflexes and split-second decision-making ability more usually associated with youth. Yet, as Learning Qualifications Manager Bill Searle explained: "Twenty years ago only 5-20 per cent trainee officers signed up as graduates in their 20s as opposed to from school. Now it is 85 per cent. "What we would like to do is get younger

people in so we can keep them in the air for the Navy longer. Most individuals want to gain a degree – this is a way for everyone to get what they want."

Among the first off the ground with a scheme the Navy has called 'A Flying Start' is George Thompson from Tunbridge Wells, who said: "I always wanted to fly and wasn't especially interested in spending three years at university. The money issue was also a big one. I worked out that in the three years I'd be at university I'd have been getting into about £10,000 debt, instead of which I will have earned four times that and still get a degree."

## worthwhile

Dave Walker from Sunderland is training to be a flight observer. ("If you've seen *Top Gun* I'm the one who's not Tom Cruise: the best way to explain it is that the pilot flies the aircraft and the observer fights it.") He agrees the scheme is good news. "I didn't really get the grades to do anything worthwhile at university and doing my degree this way means I can fly longer because I'm younger."

Meanwhile even before August's passing out ceremony Matthews Fooks-Bale from Great Yarmouth was looking ahead to beginning OU studies in biology and natural sciences in February. He said: "Although the qualifications I gain through flying will be sufficient for the future, the degree will give me extra security and show initiative to future employers."

Colleague Tom Cunningham from Liphook did a year at university before transferring to the Britannia Royal Naval College. He explained: "It was a hard decision because everyone gets a degree these days. If the scheme had been around



(l-r) Dave Walker, George Thompson and Matthew Fooks-Bale

when I was deciding between university and the Navy it would have been easier.

"An OU degree will definitely help me in my quest to get promotion and eventually a command."

Together with Mark Barber, Jamie Dale and Chris Wilcox, the high flyers met Armed Forces Minister the Rt Hon Adam Ingram, at Dartmouth to review the next generation of naval officers lined up on the parade ground against a stunning backdrop of colourful pennants and the Dart valley winding out to sea.

Admitting to having "dipped in and out" of OU study himself, the Minister said: "I think

the scheme is a first class idea which shows the armed forces keeping pace with modern life. It is this kind of investment, in people, which is even more important than our investment in equipment."

Gill Cox from the OU's Development Office said such schemes were now 'part and parcel of being seen as a good employer'.

Having set up a modern learning centre within the historic college buildings, Bill Searle told *Sesame* both partners were sufficiently encouraged by uptake of the scheme to now be exploring further collaborations, including foundation degrees.



'Passing out' in front of families, friends and TV cameras

# Stay in touch through Alumni Association

If you're hoping to graduate this year – or taking time out from study – the Open University Alumni Association will keep you in touch.

Launched in 1998 the association's 240,000 active members make it among the largest of its kind in the world.

How involved you want to be is up to you: there are a wide range of services to choose from, including a monthly electronic newsletter, free full-colour magazine *Open Eye Magazine* mailed to your home twice a year, and a lively alumni website featuring latest news, discussion areas, opinion polls, plus details of alumni events and services. A monthly edition of *Open Eye* appears in *The Independent* newspaper on the first Tuesday of each month.

As well as lectures, social gatherings and reunions, this year's events programme included a special weekend arranged around the university's ever-popular Open Day. There are also opportunities to get involved as a volunteer.

Services available to alumni range from career support and lifetime personal planning to up-to-date

listings of BBC/OU TV programmes you may want to view to keep up the learning habit.

Through a range of partners, the association is also able to offer special deals for its members on everything from travel and wine to insurance and financial services.

Said Sue Ball, Director of Alumni Relations: "Whether in retirement, voluntary work, employment, bringing up families, studying or looking for work, our alumni are a part of The Open University Community. We value their continued involvement with us."

Details of many of these services feature in the autumn issue of *Open Eye Magazine* which the association is happy to send to any student or graduate. To receive your copy email: [alumn@open.ac.uk](mailto:alumn@open.ac.uk), or call: +44 (0) 1908 653815.

And for a close look at what the association can do for you register on its website at [www.openlink.org](http://www.openlink.org)

Finally, don't forget that whether you are studying, 'resting' or graduating, you can view each edition of *Sesame* online as it is published: [www.open.ac.uk/sesame](http://www.open.ac.uk/sesame)



A visit to Bletchley Park – home of the WW2 codebreakers – for OU alumni

## Support

# Moving on from a 'fail' mark



A poor result is a common hazard of student life

Picture: Getty Images

Failing your exam might not be the Christmas present you were hoping for – but it needn't be the end of the world, or your OU studies either. While you wait for your results, *Sesame* invited **Ormond Simpson**, Director of the OU's Centre for Educational Guidance and Student Support, to offer some reassuring words on what you can do if the news is disappointing.

**E**very year some students either fail their exam or end of course assessment or don't do as well as they expected. I hope it's not going to be you but keep this just in case!

In fact nearly a third of successful OU students have withdrawn or failed a course at some point in their careers so it's a common hazard of student life – a bit like having a cold.

The chances are you fall into one of two groups:

*You thought you'd done OK and weren't expecting disappointing results. Could it be:*

- you're not good at assessing your own work? Unfortunately only a few courses offer even generalised feedback on exams but you can contact the Staff Tutor for your course at your Regional Centre. They might be able to organise someone to go over the paper with you to see where you might have gone wrong, or give you other advice;
- there were special circumstances affecting you that you didn't tell the university about at the time? You have to do that within seven days of the exam so unfortunately it's now too late unless there were very exceptional reasons like hospitalisation that made it impossible to do so;
- a mistake has been made. Errors are very rare in exam procedures but can occur. If you want to appeal then see the procedures in the *Student Handbook*. You should have clear reasons for appealing – a gut feeling that it was wrong probably won't be enough! Remember that it's not the average of your continuous assessment and exam scores that govern your grade; the most important influence is the lowest of the scores – usually the exam grade.

*You knew you'd not done very well? If so then maybe:*

- Your exam skills may need improving – using time effectively, understanding questions, being relevant and so on. See the Toolkit on 'Revision and Exams': [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/learning-skills/revision/](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/learning-skills/revision/) or ask your Regional Centre for a paper copy;

- your revision skills may need improving – revising the right material, practising exam questions, etc. You need the Toolkit again (details above);
- you had a bad attack of exam nerves – see the Toolkit or go to the 'Getting Through' area in the Advice section of FirstClass.

In every case contact your Regional Centre who may have other help available – revision workshops, exam stress packs and so on.

*What are your choices now?*

You can

- resit the exam. If you've been offered a resit do think seriously about taking it up. Resits are not an outside chance – most students pass them. Contact your Region for extra help;
- retake the course. If you failed outright or even if you've been offered a resit you can retake the course. You'll obviously have to do all the assignments again but it should be easier second time around. But note that if you passed the course with a lower grade than you wanted then you can't take it again;
- forget it. You can simply put a failed course down to experience and move on. Failed or withdrawn courses don't appear on your final OU record anyway;
- take a year off. If you didn't do well because of some long-term problem then you can drop out for a year or two and come back when things are easier for you. There are more than 100 OU students who started in 1971 who are still plugging away – although I'm not recommending a 30 year break...
- drop out of the OU altogether. Please don't! If there were problems then do contact us. Didn't like your course? – we've lots of others; didn't get the help you needed? – tell us and we'll do better; not enough time? – talk to an adviser at your Region and so on. Remember the OU never holds withdrawal or failure against you – you'll always be welcome to restart your studies with us.

Whatever you decide to do please contact your Region to discuss how we can help you. And good luck for next time!

## TMA? – Takes Me Ages

Overcoming the "I'll do it tomorrow" syndrome by **Rod Whiteman**

Old habits die hard. For over 40 years in a frequently silly place called 'business' I began each morning with my 'Things To Do Today' list. A disciplined approach to time management was the ethic, creating a daily reflection on achievement and progress. Now that I have exchanged this confinement for the fabulous freedom of a mature student, I still feel a need to map out my study programme and apply the magical ticks. Until I come to the day I add a delusory scribble – TMA due.

It's then the excuses start. "I'll probably feel more creative tomorrow." "Just a quick look at the radio guide." Apparently, Sigmund Freud had an aversion to writing letters. When he analysed his procrastination, he found that he had an unconscious 'counter-will', that suggested writing letters was a form of grovelling obedience to authority figures.

People often accuse me of being over-analytical, but I've made a close and careful

study of this statement and I know it's not true. However, I have analysed the reason for my own delaying tactics. It's probably due to an inner fear of making mistakes. Will my tutor run out of red pens? Will I finally be uncovered as slightly stupid? Like so many others, I have a morbid dread of criticism or ridicule. Totally irrational of course, but the thought carries more psychological credibility than the character weakness of laziness.

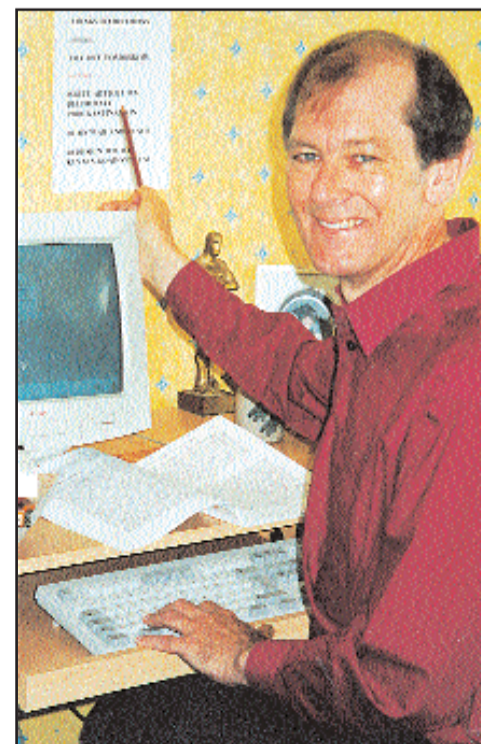
I now employ three methods to gather sufficient momentum: reducing the task, stressing the imperative and removing temptation.

Reducing the task – almost any task can be broken down into smaller component parts. While a totally co-ordinated discourse may be the ideal, the two elements in any TMA appear to be planning and execution. If it's possible to separate these two sessions, by doing the former a day before attempting the latter, completion seems to become a function of natural fulfilment.

Stressing the imperative – the stressed imperative approach is achieved by announcing to all concerned, and even a few that show no interest whatsoever, that I am going to do it by a certain time and include the key theories of X, Y and Z. Declaring the intent acts as a spur to follow through and, in response to the audacity of attempting to share my dilemma, everyone else is keen to ensure that I keep the promise.

Removing temptation – as for temptations in their many forms and guises, they are so numerous that attempting to remove them may seem futile. But to focus on what I want to say and how I want to say it I retain a rule of one sheet (or screen) at a time. My tip is to keep reference material at hand, but out of immediate vision. There's usually a justifiable enticement to quickly look up another fact or check another argument. Concentrating on the words on the page restricts the peripheral vision, the edges of which are where distractions (and biscuits) frequently lurk.

We all develop our own coping strategies. I'm sure there are many better ways to beat procrastination but the fact that, to date, all of my TMAs have gone in on time shows some small degree of resourceful application.



Still making lists: Rod Whiteman

# Take time to make time

There's nothing new in the idea of time management for OU students: they do it all the time. But with exams out of the way for many, now is a good time to revisit some important principles, and remind yourself why you're managing your time in the first place, says **Jane Matthews**.

**F**ast food, fast living, quick fixes, rapid response: as we hurtle towards yet another year end even our language reflects the increased pace of life. Where once the word 'coach' implied someone paid to help athletes win a race or footballer score goals, now we have life coaches to help us win the race against time and achieve a different kind of goal.

Alternatively, we could sign up for a course on time management, or read any number of fat volumes on the subject. The catch here is that while we may know our problem is procrastination, recognise how poor we are at delegation, confess to allowing every conceivable interruption to fragment our days, and accept that we don't do enough prioritising, we're far too busy being busy to do anything about it.

After all, if we had the time to read 400 pages on better time management then we wouldn't need to be doing it in the first place.

## Develop a sense of your time

As all those who have written six or more TMAs in the last six months know, time spent planning what you are going to do always saves you time in the end.

The same principle applies to managing time, which is why the first step in getting control of your own time is to really understand how you spend it. Don't assume you know more or less how your 16-or-so waking hours break down each day. Keep a log for a week or two; divide each day into 15-minute intervals and at the end of each hour scrupulously record how you spent each chunk.



Picture: Getty Images

While you're monitoring your use of time, see if you can also identify your 'best time' – the hours when you are mentally at your most alert, active and creative.

## Reflect and review

There's a fair chance your time audit will reveal some surprises. Time spent pointlessly tends to be forgettable. But even if what you see is what you suspected, now is the moment to review your time log against a number of crucial measures:

- Does the way you spend your time reflect your priorities, not just for work or study, but for your life in general. This may be a good opportunity to revisit your life goals and values to see how they match against daily life. It is the (often limited) time that we spend moving ourselves another inch towards those which feels the most rewarding, and does the most for our overall sense of well-being and satisfaction.

## Identify

- What are the items in your log which are taking up significant chunks of your days but which contribute very little – or nothing? An obvious example is the TV: advertisers spend billions trying to engage your interest, but can you afford to deliver up so much time to them? Once you've identified these, consider what would happen if they weren't done at all...

- Or, are there any items in your log – at home, work, or outside, which others could do?

- How much time every day is under your own control to be 'spent' at your own discretion? Perhaps it's not enough, or it's lots of little bits of time throughout the day and night. Is it possible to consolidate these into a single longer period which would be more useful to you – whether you then choose to spend it writing your memoirs, updating your CV, or listening to music with a drink in your hand.

- And how are you spending your 'best time'? Does it coincide with the activities which are most important to you or is it being under-used on 'low-value' activities.

## Practicalities

Having got to grips with the bigger picture, there are plenty of techniques – and plenty of people willing to share their own – for winning small incremental victories against the relentless march of the clock.

- Planning the day is not simply a question of making a 'to do' list every morning, satisfying though it is to move down the list and scratch each item out. Instead, try giving your planning some serious structure: check your diary and the family calendar to see what you have on and think about what, if anything, you want to achieve from each of those commitments. Prioritise tasks so that you're clear about what should, could and might be done over the next 24 hours. Are there any gaps and how do you intend to use them? Try setting time limits for some of the tasks. And are there items which you keep carrying forward? If so, are you trying to cram too much into the day, or is there some procrastination going on – in which case, you'll feel one hundred per cent better if you just crack on and get that task (a TMA?) out of the way.

- Learn to say no. You can sign up for an assertiveness class if you think it will help, but you could also try the simple tactic of insisting that you sleep on any proposal or suggestion before giving an answer. And before you say no to other people you may first need to learn to say no to yourself; we are all capable of being our own worst enemies in taking on more than we know we ought.

## Invest

- Invest time to save time, for instance by signing up for a course in effective reading, doing some more computer courses, or using any of the excellent study skills or toolkits available through the OU's learners guide: [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide).

- Deal with the tyranny of the telephone and other interruptions. Working at home, creating a private office space, even taking your books or papers to the local library, are all ways of escaping from interruptions, including those we allow ourselves such as nipping out to make another cup of coffee. Switch off the phone if you dare, or the irritating function on your computer that alerts you every time another email thuds into your inbox. But don't forget the phone can also be your friend. How many times have you exchanged endless emails with someone when a quick phone call would have sorted it out immediately? And rather than constantly breaking your stream of thought to make a call, save them all up to do in one go.

- Organise your work or study area so that you don't waste time looking for things, lose important bits of paper, or are unable to start on anything until you've cleared the debris away.

- Learn from other people who seem better able to juggle the huge number of demands and commitments that come with all the roles we play in our lives. What are the systems they use to get the most out of every day – or does it have more to do with their attitude?

- Look after number one. No matter how obvious it sounds it always bears repeating that like everything else on the planet if we don't look after ourselves we won't function at our best. That means making an effort to get enough sleep, taking regular breaks through the day, and time out during the year. Diet, exercise, and an awareness of our own body and how it reacts to stress, all play a part in ensuring we're not giving ourselves half measures.

## Time is on your side

All of us operate to some extent within the constraints of employment, family and social structures. But it's also true that we sometimes have more power to change things than we imagine. Time management is about making change, not so that we can simply do more but so that we can do more of what means the most to us.

So however many articles you read or courses you go on, remember why it is you want to manage your time better: your own goals, desires, values and priorities.

Keeping that in mind will also help you stay flexible. So that when something comes along you can assess whether it is an annoying interruption or an opportunity to spend your time more richly. The older we get, the more we understand that there will always be another deadline, another DIY job to be done, another useful article to be read. We shouldn't postpone enjoyment until 'afterwards' because afterwards never comes.

# Open line

## Dear Sesame

**The biggest problem I have is the quantity of course material I have to get through. People say to me they never read it all, only the key bits. But how do I know which is which? I often feel I can't see the wood for the trees.**

FIRST, I think you should be clear about why you're reading. Is it to understand key concepts, gather evidence for a TMA, revise for an exam? Checking course guides, contents pages, introductions and summaries before you start can help put things in context.

Many students like to 'skim read' course material before reading it in depth. You scan each page quickly to get the gist – an average page should take a minute or less. This also helps you put it in context and decide what's important and what's just 'background'.

Try making notes in pencil after each chapter or section. You can rub out the less important ones later, leaving you with a useful summary of the essential points.

Further thought: When was the last time anyone tested your reading skills? For most people it's about age seven or eight. You can make yourself a more effective reader; one place to start is the free Student Toolkit *Taking notes and reading to learn* at: [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide) or in printed form from your regional centre.

**Richard Peoples**

Student Services Manager (Retention), Student Services

IT'S important to focus on how we learn, not just what we learn. If you are someone who hasn't studied with the OU before my first suggestion would be to look carefully at how you have learnt things in the past: everyday things like learning to drive, or how you tackle reading a newspaper or learning a recipe.

Ask yourself some simple questions about how you study now: what works and what doesn't and why that is. Look closely at how you read the course materials. There are lots of reading strategies that help with reading actively and analytically. You are already using at least some of these successfully.

**Denise Bates**

Student Services Manager, Region 1 (London)

I WAS very impressed at the start of my course (B630) to discover that the material is condensed into tailor-made books, with no need for additional materials. So I've taken the view that every word of the material is required reading: why else would the course team have gone to so much trouble editing it all?

This doesn't resolve the fact that some courses involve a high workload. But in theory there is no irrelevant coursework and there is no safe way of predicting what may crop up at exam time.

**David Porter**

by email

THE best thing to do is to ask your tutor for advice, especially if you are having problems with a section.

I struggled with one particular section of the old A102 course and fearing I was going to fall behind discussed it with my tutor. She said that I could safely leave it out as there was no TMA attached and I could choose not to answer that particular question on the exam. I did this and still managed to pass the course with a distinction. I have also applied this again, leaving out a similar section on another course, again without affecting my result.

**Helen Douglas**, Whitley Bay

AFTER having to stop studying for two years due to personal problems, I began again this year only to find that my personal problems hadn't ended.

I realised that I would have to be more pragmatic about my studying and have had excellent advice from my very understanding tutor, Sue Griffiths (A210 East Midlands Region).

Sue advised me that all the 'key bits' are pointed out in the TMA notes, which will tell you which sections are most relevant

to that particular question. She also urged me to make good use of the index in each unit.

Now I am revising for the exam, I am using the sample exam paper to guide me towards the parts of the study material that I missed first time round, in the hopes that I will then have a good range of material to work on in the exam, just in case the parts I did study do not appear on the paper.

**Tracy Hartshorn**

Chesterfield

I PERSONALLY would not recommend skimming on a whole course as it is easy to skim over important concepts.

I would recommend three things:

- use FirstClass or contact your regional office to enquire as to the actual workload so that you can prepare suitable time for that particular course;

- study the course not in too much detail during the year but enough to grasp all the main concepts that crop up whilst consolidating certain topics with TMAs and any self assessment questions; and

- at exam time, I would recommend going through ALL the coursework using TMAs, tutorials and previous exam papers as a guide only of what is most likely to crop up in the exam.

**Anita Whitehouse**

Peterborough

DON'T forget to read the summary of each chapter of your text book first! Sounds a bit back to front, but that way you get the idea of which bits are important in each chapter. They are also very useful for exam revision!

**Tina Milledge**

Chatham, Kent

READ the relevant TMA question first, then read/skim through the course material with the TMA question firmly in mind and pick out the

relevant parts.

Also check with your tutor and ex-students which parts of the course are vital.

**Ulrike Reichwald**

Germany

## Next issue...

**As a new student I feel rather isolated. I have done some preparatory reading but would like to make contact with other students and the university. How do I go about this? And will this change as the course progresses?**

# Bringing home the value of OU study

By **Peter Stammers**

My first contact with the OU was 32 years ago as an "A00..." student in 1970 doing the science foundation course S100 in its first year. I was a lecturer in a college, training teachers, and like 1000s of other people in all sorts of jobs, I needed a degree.

I completed my degree, got promotion, did further degrees, got a senior post at Kingston University and obtained early retirement a couple of years ago, thus enabling me to return to the OU part-time as a Business Development Co-ordinator.

It's difficult to encapsulate

in a short article just how much the OU, and especially its innovative teaching methods, affected my own professional teaching career, but last week one domestic incident brought it home to me (literally) in a way I hadn't expected.

I had moved away from science teaching into "management" in a way people seem to have to these days, but I'd always been enthusiastic about science, as a hobby, since "doing the OU" as we used to say. My daughter, Kiri, just starting her 6th form science course, came home with her first homework: "What do you know about mass spec-

trometers, dad?"

"I remember doing that!" I said, and I went to my S100 units, ageing with yellowed pages, and straight to the correct unit – almost the correct page. Back it all came, what a mass spectrometer is and how it works; then it was on to the Balmer and Lyman series, atomic sub shells, etc. It was wonderful; I was 30 years younger and my daughter was lapping it up. Combined with the stuff she'd got from school the OU material was giving her insights she didn't think she could realise.

The point I'm trying to make is that what happened (and continues to happen) in my home is a far more valid and real evaluation of OU courses than anything that inspectors or 'quality assurance teams' can do. And it has taken place 32 years after the course was studied. So, from my experience we should assume that some animated ex-OU student will be enthusing to their offspring over their course material in the year 2034!

My daughter should have the last word; discussing her post-A level future last night, she asked, "How do you enrol in the OU, dad?"



Kiri and Peter Stammers

Picture: Lee Rousell

# Avoid delay of TMA

Save yourself and your tutor time and worry by putting the correct postage on your TMA.

That's the message from Una Lawson, Manager (Assignments) in student services.

"Incorrect postage could cost students delay and worry about delivery of their TMA before the cut-off date," said Una. "For the tutor there is the time and inconvenience of picking up the TMA from the delivery office. And for the OU, extra expenditure and administration costs to reimburse tutors."

TMAs that do not have the correct postage to cover their weight are held at the local delivery office by the Royal Mail and a notification card sent to the tutor. The tutor has 21 days to either return the notification card, attaching the correct postage and a

surcharge, so the item can be delivered, or travel to the office to pick up the TMA personally. After seven days the Royal Mail will return the envelope to the sender.

"This is a growing problem," said Una. "A standard first class stamp will only cover items up to 60g. When posting TMAs we advise students to obtain a certificate of posting from the Post Office counter and this would be the ideal time to double check that postage is correct also."

She added: "When posting assignments we also advise students to use first class postage and allow three days for delivery. They should also keep a copy of each assignment. We strongly advise students not to use the recorded or registered services available from Royal Mail."

# Your chance to have a say in race policy

Would you like to comment on the OU's race equality policy and plans for development?

Do you know of good work being done by other organisations to promote race equality?

Following wide consultation with students and staff, the university has now published its Policy and Strategy for Race Equality and is developing a plan to put the policy into action – and is keen to get more feedback.

The policy brings together in one place, for the first time, plans and objectives on race

equality from across the university, all of which impact on students and staff.

It is also a requirement of the new Race Relations Amended Act that all higher education institutions have a statutory duty to work to eliminate unlawful racial discriminations and to promote equal opportunities and good race relations between people of different racial groups.

Now the Policy has been published the university is talking to the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equality Challenge Unit, Universities UK and other institutions about its development

and implementation.

Explained Liz Dawtrey: "The policy and action plan are not fixed in stone and will be regularly reviewed and changed. Students can contribute to the ongoing development of the policy and we would be really pleased to hear or read their comments."

To receive a copy of the policy email Liz at: [E.Dawtrey@open.ac.uk](mailto:E.Dawtrey@open.ac.uk) or Angela Edwards at [A.J.Edwards@open.ac.uk](mailto:A.J.Edwards@open.ac.uk), or telephone 01908 652566, or write to The Equal Opportunities Office, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA.

# Boldly going where no course has gone before

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

**A** new OU space course is inviting students to unravel one of the universe's greatest mysteries... is there life on other planets?

In the year Beagle 2 begins its long-awaited mission to Mars, S283 *Planetary science and the search for life* looks even further... by encouraging participants to think about the possibility of life-forms elsewhere in the universe.

"It's an intriguing premise," says course chair Iain Gilmour. "This is about science fact, not fiction, but we will be asking students to use what they've learned as a basis for theorising as to whether we might not be alone."

Beagle 2, the British-led effort to land on Mars as part of the European Space Agency's Mars Express Mission, is a project headed by OU professor Colin Pillinger and will take off in May. But Iain is keen to point out that you don't have to be a leading researcher to be fascinated by the question – and the course should prove fascinating for anyone who's ever wondered about extra-terrestrials.

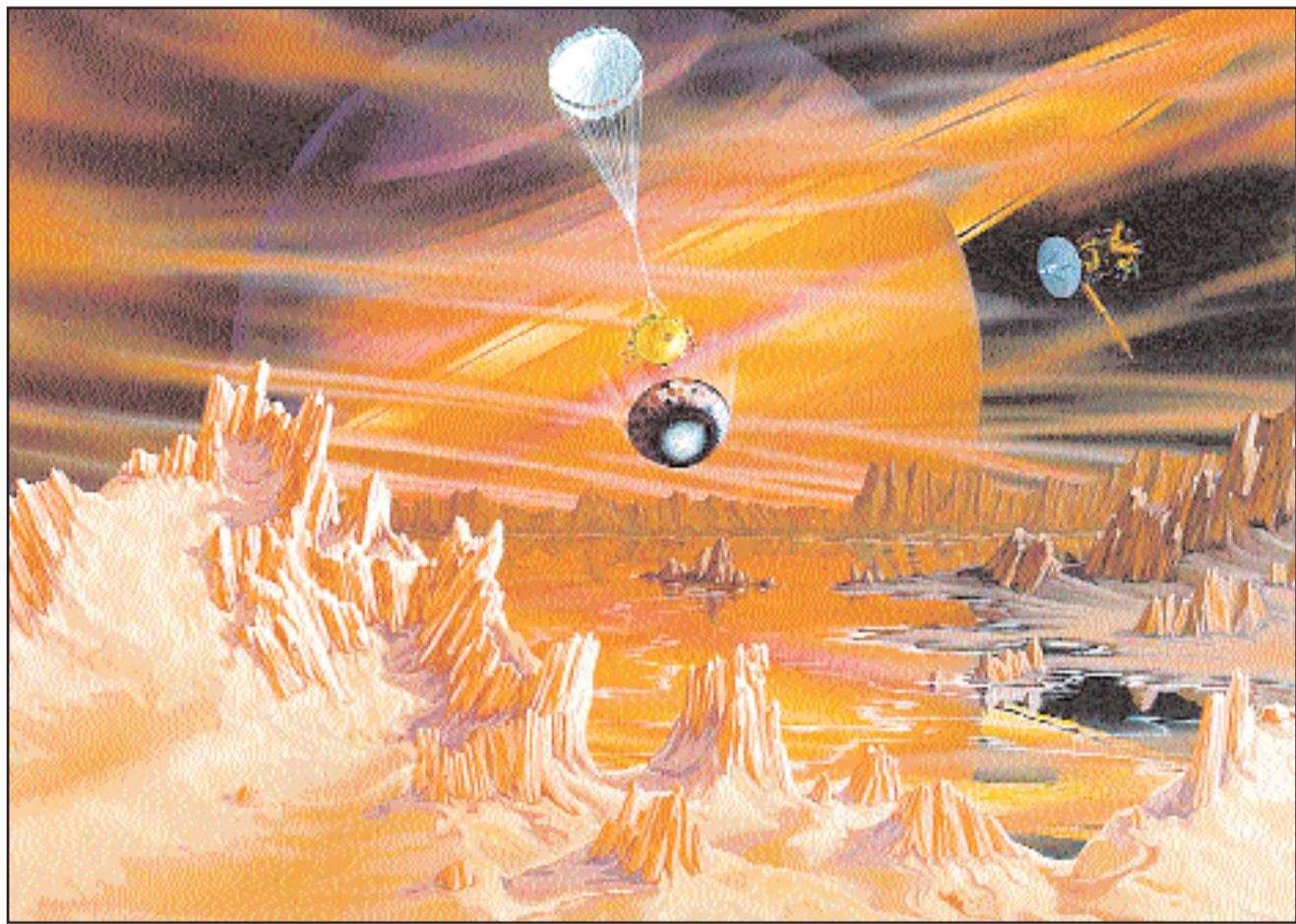
## expertise

"It's a multi-disciplinary course," he says. "It combines astronomy, earth sciences, geology, physics, chemistry – there's something to interest everyone."

The course was developed out of a previous one linking planetary science and astronomy (the latter now available as a single entity, S282) and, says Iain, the new courses have evolved because of the enormous expertise of OU academics.

"The fact that we have so much more to offer reflects the involvement of our academics in missions to almost every planet in the solar system," he says. "Space exploration has developed enormously over the past decade and planetary science academics are at the forefront of the science."

Students of S283 will explore the origin of our own solar system – how it has formed and evolved and why Earth appears to be the only planet capable of sustaining life. They will also look at how spacecraft have explored the solar system and "planetary processes" such as volcanism and impacts, and the structure of other planets and their atmospheres, as well as asteroids, comets and meteorites.



Artist's conception showing the arrival of the ESA/NASA probe Huygens at the surface of Saturn's moon Titan, carrying experiments developed in the OU's Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute  
Picture: NASA

It is this knowledge that students will use to explore the even bigger picture – but Iain is already confident life exists elsewhere.

"The number of planets out there means some must fall into what we would call habitable zones," he says. "I think it's only a matter of time before we discover something that has similar conditions to those on earth, which means it's entirely

possible life exists elsewhere.

"Towards the end of the course we might even be challenging the students to work out how they might try to communicate with beings on another planet. That's not to say, though, we are necessarily ready or willing to hear anything they've got to say in reply!"

## A rich tapestry of voices

Students enrolling on A430 *Post-colonial literatures in English* can expect to engage in exciting debates about identity, race and gender through the writings of highly acclaimed Black British, Asian, Irish and African authors, writes **Eulina Clairmont**.

**T**he new course includes dynamic and enlightening writing on the experience of being Black British or an immigrant in Britain, as in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*; the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, writing in India, and W.B. Yeats in Ireland; plus South African authors such as Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard.

Professor of Literature Dennis Walder explained the literature team's long commitment to bringing writings from authors from former colonised countries to new audiences.

He said: "In the department we are determined to try and bring to students texts that have been written by people who come from former colonies – or

whose background is not European.

"There is a strand running through the foundation course onwards. On the foundation course Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is studied. A210 *Approaches to literature* includes Alice Walker as well as Shakespeare. And in A319 *Literature in the modern world* we had a selection of new writings in English by authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe."

Added Dennis: "This course was the key to our decision to produce a replacement for A421. New writing was the most popular part of A319 which has had an extension because it was so popular. We had correspondence from students telling us how enriched they felt by the course texts."

*Post-colonial literatures in English* is a major contribution to the OU's drive for developing a culturally diverse curriculum – one that reflects the interests of a multi-cultural society while incorporating a knowledge base beyond the dominant Euro-centric perspective, Dennis believes.

It also challenges assumptions within some areas of higher education that post-colonial material isn't as 'good' as European writings.

"People sometimes think these texts must be obscure and the writers are marginal writers. This is wrong," Dennis argued. "Firstly, what you have to do is

to invite people to look at what is available, to look at an alternative worldview. Secondly, you only have to show people the literature is as good as any other – the work of V.S. Naipaul stands out, he is one of our best writers. He can be unpleasant but he deals with issues of migration, identity and race in a very interesting and subtle way."

Students on A430's forerunner, A421, enthusiastically welcomed this fresh approach to learning literature, reading Urdu stories in translation alongside better-known Indian novels. This could account for the consistently high pass rate: 20 per cent of students received a first class pass last year. Though students have come from varied backgrounds tutors noticed it attracted proportionately more Black and Asian students than other literature courses.

Like A421, the new course is also based on three case studies, plus the opportunity to carry out a piece of independent research for the final project.

"In the past students have provided astonishingly good – indeed publishable – work," said Dennis. "They can research any writer that comes under the post-colonial rubric. The television adaptation of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is a prime example of a 'text' that somebody doing a project on this new course can take up and write about."

## ATHOL FUGARD

**port elizabeth plays**

Introduction by Dennis Walder  
Preface by Athol Fugard

Athol Fugard's plays are a fascinating part of the case study on South African literature – one of three case studies that, together with a project, make up A430 *Post-Colonial literatures in English*

Picture: Oxford University Press

# Research

## GM food row on menu at OU



(l-r) David Wield, Joseph Murphy, Sue Oreszczyn, Susan Carr, Les Levidow and research secretary Pauline O'Dwyer

**A**s the US threatens action to get a ban on importing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into Europe lifted, OU researchers are hoping to contribute to the debate.

The Faculty of Technology's Biotechnology Policy Group is heading for Brussels for meetings with both sides, as part of its research into the conflict between the two continents. Leader of the OU's project team, Dr Joseph Murphy, said the Group is particularly interested in the US threat to make a formal complaint to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on the grounds that the European moratorium is illegal under trade law.

### backlash

He explained: "In 1998 there was a public backlash against GMOs in Europe. As a result the European Union's Council of Ministers imposed a moratorium. This has resulted in American agricultural exports to Europe being blocked.

"Because there is no clear scientific proof that GMOs are harmful to health or the environment, the US says the moratorium is illegal under trade law and should be lifted. It has threatened to make a formal complaint to the WTO."

But, said Dr Murphy, one of the most significant aspects of the disagreement is the US government's apparent reluctance to act its threat.

There are a number of possible explanations. "It's possible that the threats have a role to play in influencing current proposals

for new legislation on GMOs in Europe. A definitive legal judgement would remove the ability to make threats," he suggested. "At the same time the WTO is reluctant to deal with the issue. Given that the moratorium reflects public opinion a ruling by the WTO that declared it illegal could have serious implications for the organisation. It is suffering from a lack of legitimacy as it is. Added to that, the case isn't as clear cut as the Americans suggest. They might not win."

The case also highlights some major problems with trade law. Added Dr Murphy: "Trade law makes it difficult to restrict trade on any grounds other than a scientifically proven risk to human health or the environment. But in this case cultural differences with respect to food and agriculture may be just as important.

"This is particularly clear in France. If these differences are not accepted as a legitimate basis on which to make policy then there are serious problems for democracy."

### conflict

Dr Murphy's team – David Wield, Susan Carr, Sue Oreszczyn and Les Levidow – are carrying out their research into the conflict with financial backing from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. They expect to have their results at the beginning of 2004.

"I believe that we will make a significant contribution to an important debate. We're particularly keen to engage with a wider audience and to use biotechnology as a way of thinking about trade issues more generally," said Dr Murphy.

## September 11: media under attack

By **Malini Sen**

**M**ulti-ethnic audiences in the UK have a deep mistrust of news reporting by British television following September 11, according to new research by the British Film Institute (bfi) and the Open University.

Marie Gillespie, senior lecturer in sociology at the OU, who directed the audience research, said: "The research came about in response to vociferous criticism of news media coverage, especially but not only among British Muslims, of representations of Islam. We were also keen to see how the availability of a diversity of news sources might shape interpretation of events."

The audience research was carried out in multi-lingual households and families in the UK and elsewhere, including Arabic, Bengali, English, Farsi, Hindi, Kurdish, Pashto, Turkish and Urdu speaking viewers. It was a unique collaboration of the ESRC's Transnational Communities Programme, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Independent Television Commission, the British Film Institute and the Open University Pavis Centre's Everyday Cultures Programme.

### selective

More than 70 per cent of those interviewed felt that British as well as American TV news bulletins were selective in what they broadcast, in particular the coverage of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

A majority also felt that television images and narrative presenting Islam as a primary cause of the conflict fed directly into the exacerbation of Islamophobia post-September 11. But multi-lingual viewers had many advantages over those with access to news sources in only one language.

"The diversity of news sources available on satellite TV gives multi-lingual viewers an advantage, especially at times of crisis. We found that they regularly compare and contrast news from plural political perspectives. This makes for 'sceptical zappers' who don't accept information uncritically and seek out alternative news sources, on the internet especially," said Marie.

### competition

The project also involved analysis of over 50 news bulletins from 18 TV stations including BBC, ITN, Sky News, CNN, Al Jazeera and Asian station Zee News over four separate days in the period between September 11 and December 13, 2001.

Said Marie: "It is time for news broadcasters to wake up to the fact that they face serious competition in how they communicate news. If broadcasters do not address the issue of how they accommodate the views of the Muslim community, they risk losing this audience altogether to services such as the Arabic satellite news channel Al Jazeera.

"They also need to find ways of addressing the information deficit among viewers of low educational backgrounds, as it is



September 11 recalled in the OU/BBC production *Attack on the Wires*

among these viewers that we found the most dogmatic forms of thinking," she added.

The findings of the research were discussed at an international symposium in London in early September. Building on the ideas and knowledge exchanged at the symposium, the European Network, Online/More Colour in the Media, will launch a two-year 'media watch' project, empowering refugee and migrant organisations in their efforts to press for media practices that do justice to the multi-cultural diversity of present-day society.

For more information see: [www.afterseptember11.tv](http://www.afterseptember11.tv)

# Research Of mice and men



## PVC's VIEW

Geoff Peters  
Strategy, Planning  
and Partnership

## Look out for more OU on TV

**N**ow that the evenings are getting darker and many of you will have put this year's examinations behind you, perhaps you will have an opportunity to sit and watch the television occasionally.

This year The Open University will be much more visible than it has been for many years. The BBC has been a partner of the OU since the very beginning, and this November the Vice-Chancellor and the BBC Director-General will sign a new agreement that will mean the university will be much more involved in mainstream broadcasting. Whereas in the past OU TV programmes on BBC2 were increasingly available when very few people were awake, in the future we will contribute to programmes on all four UK TV channels and radio too.

### home-grown

Sometimes the academic content of the programmes will have been designed by OU staff and the programmes will have been commissioned entirely on our behalf. *Rough Science*, which will start its third series on BBC2 in October, and is being broadcast in the US too now, is entirely home-grown. Earlier in September the BBC1 programme *A Land Worth Loving*, was co-produced by the BBC and OU, although it drew on the OU's expertise in its investigation of the impact of rubbish on the environment. In all cases there will be much more than a television programme on offer. There will usually be a set of accompanying web pages on our dedicated site: [www.open2.net](http://www.open2.net); there may be events, digital and printed materials, and sometimes a short course. For *A Land Worth Loving* there was a free poster and [open2.net](http://open2.net) delved deeper into the waste debate and provided an insight into ways of "going green".

### Art Deco

Also in September the OU BBC2 series, *The Trouble with Love*, was linked to a symposium at Tate Britain that brought together presenter Amanda Vickery with authors, philosophers and journalists Richard Coles, Susie Orbach, Sue Macgregor, Rowan Williams, Polly Toynbee, Tim Nott and others to examine the history of love over the last 1,000 years and explore the realities and fantasies surrounding the representation of romantic love in the 21st century.

Spring 2003 will bring new programmes exploring Art Deco and geological mysteries in the UK landscape, and the launch of the recently approved digital channel BBC3 which will include a range of adventurous educational programmes. The OU also makes its first appearance on BBC4 in November, when it presents programmes linked to the re-release of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *Saturday night and Sunday morning*, with cast and crew from the films revisiting their production.

There is much more to this new partnership than these programmes, as we will explain in later editions of *Sesame*. Meanwhile look out for the OU logo in some unexpected places on television this autumn.



Picture: Getty Images

**O**U student Simon Gregory's research is not just helping him earn a PhD – it's helping to discover the secret of life itself.

Simon is also leader of a group of scientists at Cambridge's world famous Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute who have just mapped 98 per cent of a mouse's DNA – a valuable resource in the hunt for human genes.

"The genome of the mouse is widely regarded as one of the keys to understanding the human genome sequence," said Simon, who is in the final year of his doctorate. "Comparison of the two sequences can highlight regions that act to control genes and enable us to understand their role in health and disease."

Simon came to Britain from his native Australia in 1990 and was head-hunted to the Institute, where he is now Human Chromosome Group 1 leader and Mouse Mapping Co-ordinator.

### conditions

"One of the conditions of getting the job was that I studied for a PhD," he said. "I soon realised that becoming an overseas student at Cambridge University would be very expensive and I could do an OU course for considerably less cost but achieve the same outcome. And the fact that I could study part-time has given me time to do more research at the Sanger – which has then fed back into my PhD."

Simon's work is helping to bring closer the day scientists can map the entire human genome. "Science moves so fast," he said. "When I began at the Sanger in 1993 a sixth of the genome had been discovered and the target of completion was 2010. But in those few short years, funding for research and scientific advances have brought that target to 2003. It's very exciting."

## Looking at literature - parrot fashion

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

**M**onty Python did not get there first – Latin poet Ovid penned *On the Death of a Parrot* around 2,000 years ago. Since then the popularity of the parrot in literature has been enduring, according to two OU researchers who are trying to find out why Polly keeps on popping up in fiction.

"The parrot seems to have been a major device for writers ever since Ovid," says Paula James, a lecturer in humanities. "Many have used it as a voice for something, or to give another level of narration. This bird seems to have been specifically chosen by writers for centuries."

Perhaps the most famous is Captain Flint which, with its raucous cry of "Pieces of eight!" sailed with his pirate master John Silver to Treasure Island. The bird was named after a notoriously evil buccaneer, who, while long dead, remained, in the form of the parrot, literally looking over Silver's shoulder.

In Ovid's *In Mortem Psittaci* the bird is seen as a symbol for lost love. Gustave Flaubert's

*Un Coeur Simple* has maid-servant Felicite confusing a parrot with the Holy Spirit, even after it dies and is stuffed. Julian Barnes' novel *Flaubert's Parrot* uses a journey to France to find out more about the bird as a symbol of a doctor coming to terms with his wife's suicide. And in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys' Caribbean take on *Jane Eyre*, a parrot is doomed to death in a fire because of its clipped wings, mirroring the fate of Bertha Rochester. There are countless more examples.

"Most parrots in literature seem to be there for a specific reason," says Paula, who is undertaking the project with colleague Julia Courtney. "In most cases they appear to be included for their ability to talk, or to mimic. It's a very deliberate ploy on the part of the writers."

She is also trying to learn as much as she can about parrots. "I've known people with parrots and their birds are wonderful, very sophisticated creatures which have learned to speak and appear to have developed cognitive powers. Dr Caroline Pond, who teaches

biological sciences at the OU, has an African Grey called Madge who remembers whether or not she likes certain people five years after she met them, and she imitates the phone if she's not getting attention."

Paula is happy for anyone to contact her with more parrot

references at [P.James@open.ac.uk](mailto:P.James@open.ac.uk) – but while her main source will be literature, she's aware there's at least one modern reference she can't leave out.

"We couldn't do something about parrots and not cover Monty Python's Parrot Sketch," she says. "It's a classic."

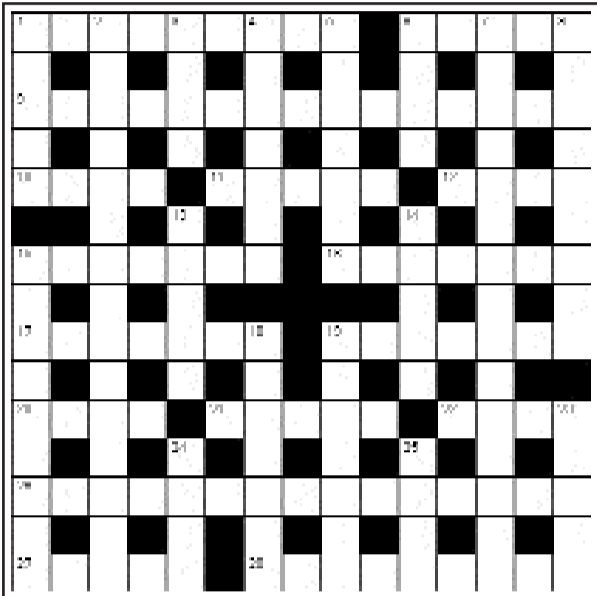


Paula James (left) and Julia Courtney

# Competitions

# Win

## £100 cash plus a Chambers 21st Century Dictionary



Compiled by Bob Gregory

### Sesame Crossword Entry form

Send your entry with the completed coupon to:  
Cullen Crosswords, 19 Cyncoed Place, Cardiff, CF23 6SG  
Closing Date January 17, 2003. Only one entry per person.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel. No: \_\_\_\_\_

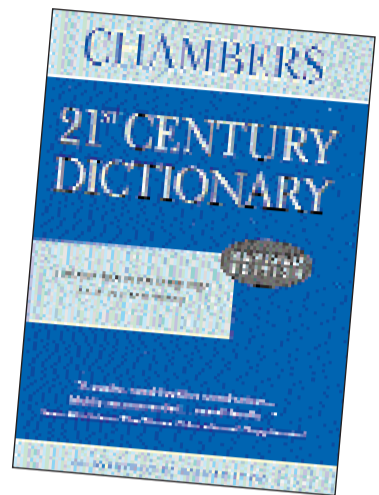
**M**ore people took up the *Sesame* Christmas crossword challenge last year than ever before, proving to us that you all enjoy the light relief it brings after a hard year's slog. This year Chambers have generously donated copies of their thumb index *21st Century Dictionary*, worth £25 each.

The senders of the first four correct solutions drawn out of the hat on January 17, 2003 will receive a copy of the Dictionary. In addition the first one drawn out of the hat

will receive **£100** cash courtesy of *Sesame*.

*The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* is the most authoritative guide to modern English available. With clear definitions in straightforward English, this essential guide gets you to the right information instantly.

Someone has to win and maybe this year it could be you. So, don't save this for later, do it now and be in with a chance to put **£100** towards next year's course fees.



### Clues Across

1. Refund cut by professional rogue (9)
6. How Polonius was covered in embarrassment (5)
9. German builder at redeveloped disaster area (7,8)
10. Shakespearian originator of intrigue in the past (4)
11. Fur-producer shows modest upturn (5)
12. Roman bones buried beneath Mt Pelion (4)
15. Nymphs reported near unnamed South American mountains? (7)
16. Plant about a pound? That's lashing out! (7)
17. Don't change container port in the Baltic (7)
19. Sandown starts with rotten turnout – get a loudspeaker, say? (7)
20. Dye for a duck (4)
21. Meat dish as the cook prepared it (5)
22. Strumpet's opinion (4)
26. Grasp the opportunity to maximise production (4,3,4,2,2)
27. Physicist without a German beer-mug (5)
28. Rows in the gallery? Goodness! (9)

### Clues Down

1. Talk left unfinished by teacher (5)
2. Novel character of the bird preserve (9,6)
3. Ring at dawn to be given the responsibility (4)
4. Quite confused about how not to do business? (2,1,4)
5. Strong currents here where pure uranium is processed (7)
6. Acting academy returning from a month in Israel (4)
7. Official price for a record? (12,3)
8. Woman had a rip in her dress and sobbed (4,1,4)
13. Maybe he'd pack it in for this girl (5)
14. Look back to study of ancient times (5)
15. Complaint of the way the annual general meeting goes in New York, America (9)
18. Gets information about raising money for the future (4-3)
19. Standing parliaments entertaining alternative drug (7)
23. Gates at Murrayfield, certainly without one who shuns Scotch! (5)
24. One sort of model put in "Page 3" newspaper to shock (4)
25. Openings of each transcript used in the case (4)

## Caption Competition

**T**hink up a suitable caption for this photograph, taken by Sheila Forman, of OU geologists on a field trip at Durham residential school and you could win **£75** cash prize. There are also three runner-up prizes of a **£10** book token.

Just write your caption, in no more than 15 words, on the back of a sealed envelope or postcard and send it to:

*Sesame* Caption Competition, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA.

The winning caption will be printed in a future issue of *Sesame*.

Don't forget to include your name and address on your entry.

This competition is open to all OU staff and students. Only one entry per person.

Closing date, January 17, 2003.



## Win £100 in Sesame's Christmas quiz

**S**esame is offering one reader the chance to win **£100** cash in our Christmas quiz. There are also five runner-up prizes of a **£10** book token.

All you need to do is correctly answer the five questions listed below.

Entries on a postcard to 'Sesame Christmas Quiz', The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA. Please remember to include your name, postal address and telephone number. Only one entry per person.

Closing date is January 17, 2003.

1. Which London Theatre opened in 1818 as the Royal Coburg producing mainly popular melodramas?
2. Which South American river rises on the western slopes of the Sierra Parima and enters the Atlantic Ocean near the island of Trinidad?
3. What is the common name for the spontaneous passage or diffusion of water or other solvents through a semipermeable membrane?
4. Which planet was discovered in 1781 by the English astronomer William Herschel?
5. What is the surname of the US scientist awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1934 for his discovery of the heavy form of hydrogen known as deuterium?

## Rhine Cruise to Christmas Markets

**Four days full board departing 14 December**

**from £169**

(three sharing one cabin)

What better way to experience the famous German Christmas markets than by a cruise ship on the legendary river Rhine?

The staff of MPS Lady Anne will offer you a fantastic welcome the moment you walk aboard. The vessel encapsulates a style that will allow you to rest, relax and feel at ease whilst aboard.

An exciting on-board programme of activities is organised for the evenings whilst your days will be spent cruising the Rhine and stopping off at several different Christmas market towns

where the streets and shops are magically illuminated by a myriad of sparkling Christmas lights. A free Cologne orientation tour is included in the price and an optional excursion to Rudesheim is also on offer.

Coach pick up points available from tour operator.

Full details of this magical post-exam break are available from: **Diamond Holidays, Overstone House, Kettering Road, Market Harborough, Leicester, LE16 8AW. Tel 01858 431 900, quote tour no 1153.**



## Monet's Gardens and Paris

**Four days from £149 departing May 16**



Claude Monet's Garden, Giverny, France

Picture: James Davis Travel Photography

We have combined this city break with a visit to Monet's Garden at Giverny, a garden ablaze with flowers and colours which would become Monet's favourite model for painting. Enjoy this magnificently restored garden before viewing some of his paintings at the Musee Marmottan, Paris. This delightful Museum also contains other impressionist works and fine Empire Furniture.

Included in the price of this holiday are three nights accommodation and continental breakfast in a central hotel; return ferry crossings; luxury coach travel throughout; Paris by night coach tour; excursion and entrance to Monet's Garden at Giverny; entrance to the Musee Marmottan, Paris; and a sightseeing coach tour of Paris. Services of a Diamond Holidays representative throughout the trip.

Pick up points for coach: Milton Keynes, Luton, London or meet at port (Dover).

Full details and brochure from **Diamond Holidays, Overstone House, Kettering Road, Market Harborough, Leics. LE16 8AW. Tel: 01858 467200 or fax 01858 434030. Please quote holiday reference code 4648.**

## People

# Reflections of a Jubilee probationer

By **Dr Maurice Milne**

It isn't only Her Majesty the Queen who has reason to celebrate 2002 as a jubilee year. For me, it marks the 25th year since I started as an OU tutor: so I'm heading for silver, not gold.

I am also relieved to learn that I have successfully completed my probationary period. Four years ago, I temporarily gave up my role as an associate lecturer. This had the effect of putting me back to square one when I resumed service with the South Region – hence the probation.

Meanwhile, the Walton Hall computer still retained my original number, first allocated in 1978. OU tutors never forget their number, in the same way that ex-servicemen can instantly recall their army number.

Having announced that I will emerge from the underground workings of TMAs and PT3s at the end of 2003, and step blinking into the sunlight of restful pastures, it seems a good moment to look back on my time with the OU.

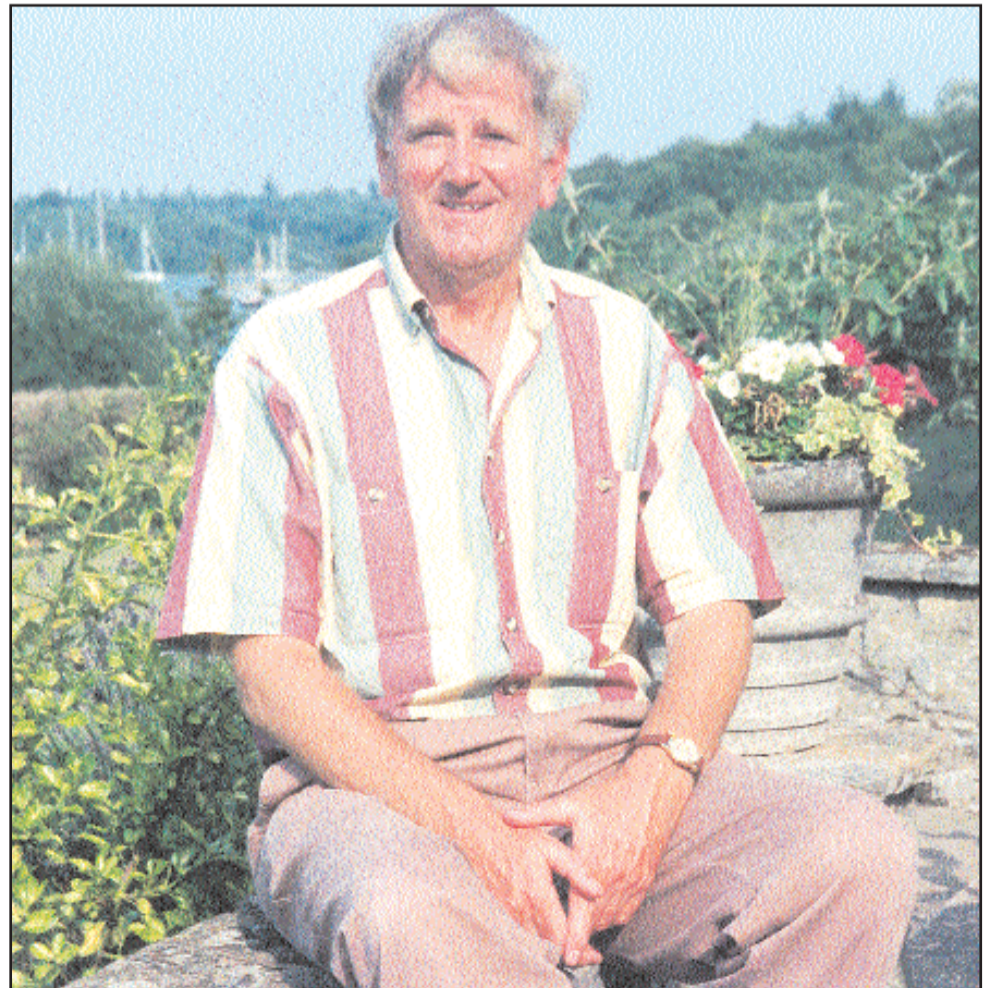
As a historian, I turn instinctively to the twin concepts of continuity and change. What is now different? What has remained the same? As

countless TMA guidelines have told me, start with the weaker and end with the stronger.

For me, the change aspect is the weaker. Yes, the TV programmes have become more polished. They are more colourful, with better graphics, and enlivened by location filming. Bearded men with sandals and meaningful stares are less in evidence. Guidance for new tutors (myself in probationer mode) has to take account of changed social mores: what shall we do with a drunken student? What if someone uses politically incorrect language?

And now there's the new contract. Instead of being paid per TMA marked, that will simply be part of the job. No longer will the anticipated ringing of the cash register drive me through the dark night of the soul, as I wade through another batch of TMAs. Time to go.

My abiding impressions, however, are of continuity. The paper mill at Walton Hall continues on its exuberant way. TMA deadlines continue to reveal the three basic personality types: the early bird, the on-timer, and the habitual procrastinator. Electronic technology continues to be lauded, while students battle through February sleet, April showers, midsummer sunshine and autumn leaves, simply for the human contact at the study centre



Maurice Milne – preparing for retirement

Above all, their optimism continues: the shining faith that, come hell or high water, another course will be surmounted on the path to graduation. Bereavement, flu, an OFSTED inspection, helping Simon and Samantha with their GCSE coursework, an unexpected

holiday in the Seychelles, a runaway partner, a returning partner: we tutors have heard them all, and believe them all, for they are integral to the human condition, OU-style.

Tutors come and go: the students are eternal. I shall miss them.

# Changing places through the OU

For many OU students, the motivation for signing up is to change direction. Below, *Sesame* features the stories of just two of those enjoying new careers through the OU – with advice on what help is available from the university's careers service.

## Merci, OU

**S**ix years ago the OU awarded me a degree, which significantly changed my life and led to a fresh career abroad teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), writes **Thomas Denne**.

I left school in the mid 1950s with a smattering of GCEs and did a number of unremarkable jobs. In 1967 I opened a mechanical repair garage and spent my time fixing defective cars until my French wife and I decided to go and live in her country.

But there were two problems. Firstly, French motor mechanics are not very well paid and secondly, with the advent of reliable electronic systems, tuning engines, which was my forte, was becoming a virtually redundant skill. What to do?

The answer was obviously to get some new qualifications and a new job but when you are over 50 this is rather more easily imagined than done. Some people said (or seemed to be thinking) 'only in your dreams'. So it was with a certain sense of trepidation I approached the OU – only to be most pleasantly surprised. Right away I had the feeling that here was a place where my dreams might indeed come true.

By the time I applied in the autumn of 1990 the only foundation course with places available was science, but this actually turned out to be a blessing as it imposed a discipline that served me well in the five years that followed. I also acquired as tutor-counsellor a scientist who remained with me until I graduated, who was a constant source of strength when my enthusiasm flagged, and who became and remains a good friend.

Because I enjoyed the earth sciences and biology sections of S102 I went on to U206 *Environment* and from there migrated to a series of 'D' courses, amongst which I

particularly enjoyed D214 *The United States in the twentieth century* and D315 *Crime, order and social control*. My only regret is that U210 *The English language* was not part of the curriculum in those days, although I was later able to buy the material of this course through an advertisement in *Sesame*. In 1996 I achieved a 2.2 Honours BA.

Curiously, the next step – getting a TEFL qualification – was very difficult because of intense competition for such courses. But having an OU degree helped enormously. One of the TEFL tutors later told me that OU students are particularly well regarded by other academic institutions because they are self-starters who show persistence. This is a sentiment that I later found to be widely shared, even here on the other side of the channel.

One of the things the OU certainly teaches you to do, with all those TMAs, is to write and this enabled me to make the first financial return on my studies. In 1997 I started a series of monthly technical articles for a professional motor trade magazine, which continued until I retired from that business in the spring of 2000.

We arrived in France at the end of the millennium year and after settling into our apartment in the close suburbs of Paris I wrote to six language schools. Three schools offered me part-time jobs and I chose the one where I still work now.

TEFL teaching in language schools is not magnificently rewarded and owing to the immutable laws of supply and demand, so cogently expounded in D210 *An introduction to economics*, Paris pays less than the provinces. This is because heaps of young graduates want to find a job in the capital. However, such 'Teflers' are mainly a nomadic



Our man in Paris: Thomas Denne at la Défense

bunch and after a year most of them move on or return to the UK. If you stick it out you may find that better paid opportunities arise and you will probably hear about them on the grapevine because they never seem to be advertised.

This year I have done a number of extra jobs and worked 90 hours teaching in two universities. The absolute minimum qualification needed for this is a 2.2 Hons. Phew!

At the end of June 2002 I helped to invigilate a final year English exam. Since all of the 100 undergraduates were immaculately behaved I could allow my mind to wander and even now I can recall exactly what I was thinking.

Firstly, it seemed like money for old rope; here I was, earning at nearly three times my normal hourly rate. Secondly, I really felt for the poor souls diligently trying to define the usage of the Irregular Present Perfect and Present Continuous, two verb forms that have no exact equivalents in French. (You have been there yourself, you are thinking.)

Finally I reflected: 'isn't this a real turn up for the books; who would have believed...' except, of course, The Open University. The OU always seems to believe that you can do it and perhaps its greatest triumph is that, in the end, you actually begin to believe it too.

Thank you, OU.



A new direction: Margaret Alexander

## From civil to social service

**M**argaret Alexander is throwing caution to the wind to fulfil a lifelong ambition. The social care student has quit her job and is off to Thailand to participate in a Discipleship Training School.

"I am sure my family and friends are a bit anxious about my decision but I want to take myself out of my comfort zone. The school will involve three months of studying based on Christian teaching followed by three months of outreach work. Possibly working with children or refugees or hilltribes," said Margaret.

Margaret had worked as a civil servant for 10 years when she decided on a career change. She first did a couple of evening classes at Newcastle College. Then in 1997, at the same time as starting a new job in Surrey working with young people with epilepsy and other special needs, she joined the OU.

After studying K100 *Understanding health and social care* she went on to do K201 *Working with young people*, K204 *Working with children and families*, EU208 *Exploring educational issues* and this year tackled K302 *Critical practice in health and social care*.

Said Margaret: "I don't think any course can totally prepare you for what you face while working with young people but they have certainly helped to broaden my knowledge in health and social care."

Her trip to Thailand is her second to the east. "I have always had the urge to travel," she added. "I spent a summer in China working in two orphanages, which was quite humbling and, at times, a very emotional experience. Cycling, on the other hand, was a hair-raising experience!"

As *Sesame* went to press, Margaret was preparing to take her OU exam in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She plans to complete her final year of the degree on her return from her travels.

## Careers service

If you want to know how your OU studies could help you change direction like Thomas and Margaret, The Open University's career service offers a range of support.

First stop could be the interactive careers service website – [www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers) – which aims to clarify thinking about the next move through exercises on attitudes to work, experience, skills and personal qualities, and 'needs, responsibilities and constraints'.

The service offers advice on how particular course choices can help you develop or change your current career.

And there's help with the practicalities of application forms, preparing CVs, interview technique, assessment tests, and even projecting and reading body language.

A wide range of useful publications and web links to other organisations also feature.

# The last word



Roughing it for the sake of science – the team including Mike Bullivant (far right) is reunited for a third time

## FIFTH COLUMN

Here's your chance to write 350 to-the-point words on an OU subject that gets right up your nose – and we'll pay you £50 for the privilege.

### Changes to tutors' contracts are bad for students

argues  
Liz  
Hartnett



**T**he OU has changed tutors' contracts. Under the old system, for 20 students and four TMAs I'd earn around £1,300. Under the new, I'll earn £1,433. But the new system changes my motivation because I'll be paid whether or not a student sends in a TMA. I'll be paid monthly even if I take months to mark. So I won't rush, I won't ring or email marginal students to submit another TMA.

Secondly, I'll have a limit on how many students are in my tutor group, and if the OU gives me 29 per cent more than that, then I earn 100 per cent more. So late or relocating students will get allocated to an emptier tutor group even if it's at the far end of the region.

I am not just a tutor; I'm a proud OU graduate and I have been proud to be an OU tutor for one of the finest universities in the country. The new tutor contract is not good for students so it's not good for the OU. You have to be tenacious and resilient to achieve the OU degree you deserve, and good tutors can encourage that in students. But who and what encourages tutors to be tenacious and resilient too?

Change is necessary. Good change is essential, but I am sorry to see the OU changing this way. It won't happen immediately the new tutor contract comes in, but over the next two or three years, the OU will change to match the bog standard of the lesser establishments.

Liz Hartnett graduated with an OU degree in maths and computing in 1984 and, not having had enough of a good thing, became a tutor on 1988. She currently tutors on B800 the *MBA foundation course*, M206 *Computing: an object oriented approach* and MT262 *Working with computers*. She lives in Aylesbury.

## Third TV series goes for gold

**F**inding and smelting gold, building a metal detector, measuring earthquakes with a home-made seismograph, making mercury and devising accurate scales to weigh their haul of gold are just a handful of the challenges facing the ingenious scientists in the third series of *Rough Science*.

The popular Open University/BBC science series returns to our screens in October, with the five scientists swapping the warm Caribbean of the second series for the rugged, and much less hospitable landscape, of New Zealand's south island. In this six-week series they take on the role of gold prospectors, following in the footsteps of those who first plundered the area in the 1860s in their search for gold.

The team is faced with winter weather, traversing glaciers and exploring gold mines in the course of the challenges, as well as coping with the main, geological phenomenon – earthquakes!

Each week, presenter Kate Humble sets a series of seemingly impossible challenges, allowing the scientists three days and minimal basic tools and equipment to complete the tasks involved. Apart from this, all they have to rely on are the local

natural resources, their own ingenuity and scientific knowledge, and a good sense of teamwork.

Series producer Steve Evanson says the geology and geography of the island presented the scientists with some real challenges, and the team learnt to appreciate the scientific expertise of the early gold rush miners.

### FRONT PAGE STORY

"What was fascinating was that we were asking a group of highly-trained university scientists to reinvent the technology developed and applied by prospectors 150 years ago. Even when gold was plentiful, it was still a 'needle in a haystack' search for tiny particles of the precious metal. The original prospectors probably had little formal education, but they were using an incredibly broad range of sciences in very inventive ways," he said.

The aim of the series is to make science fun but in it we also get to see more of how the scientists live – and get on – while filming the series.

Says the OU's representative, chemist Mike Bullivant: "This series of *Rough Science* will

definitely have a different feel from that of the previous two. We're certainly making more use of the natural resources of our beautiful south island location, and many of the challenges are stretching us to the limit. Our sense of enjoyment still shines through though."

*Rough Science* is scheduled to begin on BBC2 from Friday October 25 at 7.30pm, but always check press for the latest programme details.

The *Rough Science* website can be found at: [www.open2.net](http://www.open2.net) and will feature background information about the challenges, the scientists' diaries, interviews with the scientists and photographs of them in action. There will also be information about the science behind the challenges and details of studying science with the Open University, including the OU's range of special science short courses for those keen to return to study without committing themselves to a full undergraduate course.

As well as Mike Bullivant the team includes physicist Jonathan Hare from Sussex University; Oxford-based virologist Mike Leahy; physicist Kathy Sykes from Bristol and botanist Ellen McCallie from the Missouri Botanical Garden in the USA.

## Thoughts on that free time!

SO you made it through this year's study! Congratulations! Now – for a few months at least – there's nothing to do but wait for your results. What on earth will you do with all that free time? Peter Taylor-Whiffen has some suggestions:

- Take the video cassette you use to record OU programmes and tape *EastEnders* over them. This time, do it on purpose.
- Tell your husband/wife/partner you'll be eating with them tonight. You don't have to book a restaurant or anything – a meal at home is fine. However, we do suggest warning them as it may shock them to see you at the dinner table after all these months.
- Apologise to your family for being a grumpy old whatnot these last few weeks. If you're continuing your studies next year, take care not to say rash things like "I promise it won't happen again". It will.
- Offer to take your kids to a theme park/to the pictures/on a picnic for the day. If they refuse, don't be down-

hearted – it just means they're heeding your advice not to go off with strangers.

- Go to a party. Do not show off by using knowledge gained in your OU history of art degree to criticise the host's paintings. They bought them because they like them. (NB: if you've been studying psychology, a party is also not the place to start analysing people's behaviour. You'll almost certainly get punched.)
- Invite people for dinner. If your husband/wife/partner tells your friends how proud s/he is of your efforts, smile modestly and change the subject. Do not get all your course work out to show them, unless they're people you don't want round again.
- Take a holiday. You deserve this

break away from your books. Enjoy every moment – even standing in the check-in queue, knowing that for once your baggage will comply with the weight limit.

- Get a dog and take it for walks. This will give you something to do at two o'clock in the morning, when you'll be so used to studying that you won't be able to sleep.
- At work, casually tell your boss you've completed this year's study. Say how much it's helped you in your job. Don't forget to mention how much commitment and hard work it takes to do an OU course – and use the word 'rewarding' as often and obviously as you can.
- Enjoy the Christmas season. Enjoy your rest. You've earned it.