

Latest on the OU and Mars ● page 3



Computers under attack ● page 9



How not to get that dream job ● page 14



Improve your memory ● page 15



Sesame

January/February 2004

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 219



The new wave: special report on the OU's growing audience of under 25's ● pages 7-8

Letters

lettersletterslettersletterslettersletters

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

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

Both sides now

THE OU's administrative support has been outstanding for this student with 'special needs'. But for TMAs, the OU requires us to write on only one side of A4 paper. I have completed 46 TMAs in six years with an average length of eight sides of A4.

If the OU has 180,000 students and my experience is typical, these students consume over 10 million sheets of A4 a year.

If we were permitted to write on both sides of the paper, we might reduce our consumption by five million sheets saving students up to £100,000 per year and making a small contribution to alleviating the problems of global warming.

John Bishop
Dunstable

2nd class service

I WAS surprised when reading the Nov/Dec Sesame (218) to see that the illustration to 'The Christmas Envelope' showed the item in question with a first class stamp.

My own exam envelope came 2nd class, and only just made it for Christmas Eve.

We can get Beagle to Mars on time, but it would seem on earth the keenly awaited result has to be hand delivered by the slowest means. Surely, a seasonal gesture of goodwill would run to a 1st class stamp? I for one did not know that results had been on the internet for a week!

Joan Smith
Hitchin

A write shame

I FOUND the Star Letter from Dennis Whitcombe (Sesame 218) rather sad. He says he has never had to write much more than his signature over the past three decades.

Has he never written a shopping list, a birthday or

Christmas card, a note of condolence, a letter to a friend? Some of my most treasured possessions are thoughtful, compassionate, hand-written messages from friends, sent in times of joy or sorrow. An email or computer message would not have been the same at all.

Joan Burns
Kent

Legal loophole?

I AM currently studying the OU law course W301 and my gripe is with the OU academic year.

What the OU fails to appreciate is that the next stage of training to become a solicitor or barrister begins in August of each academic year, so final year OU students sitting their exams in October have to wait a full year before doing the next level of training. This merely adds to the perception that OU graduates are 'over the hill'.

The irony is that the OU course was designed in collaboration with the College of Law, so it really ought to have seen this problem coming.

Richard Hand
London

Professor Gary Slapper, Head of the law programme, replies

WE are aware that the gap between graduation and the commencement of professional courses does not suit all students. With the introduction of October start dates for OU courses, the Law Programme is examining the options for changing the start dates of the compulsory LLB courses; however we must consider the views and needs of all students, not only those who wish to join professional courses.

We also note that for many legal employers, adult maturity is just as attractive as youthful enthusiasm. Additionally, many students have found the period between their LLB and professional course a useful opportunity to gain legally-related work experience.

Prison post

Sesame's special report on the expansion of the OU's work in prisons (218) produced a big postbag. Below, a small selection of your responses.

HAVING featured with others in your special report on OU students within prisons I cannot accept the way in which prisoners have been portrayed.

The OU is a springboard towards a constructive future for many inmates, it is used to further and develop skills that could change a person's life.

Whitemoor OU students have been given the position, according to Moira Bristow (Whitemoor Education Manager), of being better off than students on the outside. But we don't just 'stroll along a corridor' for five hours of study. We are dependent upon Whitemoor functioning normally, the Education Department having a teacher available and reasonable study conditions. Inmates do not have access to tutors on the telephone, group tutorials and the networks that develop from them. Nor do we have access to the internet; the Holy Grail of information. Instead, we plod along using diligence and the course materials to do the best we can. It is difficult to see where the advantage is for OU students in prison.

Billy Little
HMP Whitemoor

I AM 36, a registered disabled student and about to start my second year of OU study. This year my request for my fees to be paid has been denied due to being about £50 a year over the limit.

To enable me to pay my fees my husband is going to have to take another job (he already works six days a week).

I am not against prisoners being able to study. This I am sure is beneficial to all involved, and is giving them the opportunity to gain new skills. My point is, perhaps I would be better off giving up my honest lifestyle and going to jail; at least then this government would pay my fees!

Tracy Foster
Totterhoe

I HAVE often been heard to say that I am never going to get my degree unless I get a long prison sentence. Having read the articles I realise that I had not thought this through thoroughly. So thanks for saving me from a life of crime!

Sally Rogerson
Plymouth

Mars attack

I HAVE written to the *Radio Times* expressing my displeasure at Linda Smith's efforts on *The News Quiz* to get a cheap laugh by making personal comments about Prof. Pillinger and his sustained and stirring efforts to land Beagle 2 on Mars.

To suggest he got where he is by studying a few BBC/OU programmes at 3am hopefully has lost Ms Smith many hitherto loyal fans.

Peter Preston
Argyll

Your views

YOUR correspondent (Sesame 218) who would like to feed back his experience on courses would be very welcome to place comments on www.open.ac.uk/courseviews

This OUSA-sponsored site has comments from students who've taken a particular course designed to help students who are thinking of taking that course.

We're very grateful to students who've left comments; we only update annually so don't worry if yours hasn't appeared yet.

Ormond Simpson
Assistant Director Open University in the East of England

Debt free

I REALLY cannot understand why someone would move into inferior student accommodation, live for three years on little to no money and then end up several thousand pounds in debt.

Why not do an OU degree? For £500 a year for five to six years you get a degree which is highly respected by employers, no debt at the end and the chance to work full-time while studying.

David Taylor
Wolverhampton

Just a thought

I HAVE written this letter to encourage new and continuing students.

As a result of my OU studies I have been offered places by three universities to do postgraduate study in earth sciences. Two of these universities are in the so-called Russell Group of elite institutions.

An OU degree is worth the effort because it can open up opportunities to people from all walks of life. Thanks to the OU I have the difficult task of choosing which university to go to.

Stephen Woodcock
Wigan

CONGRATULATIONS to Andrew Guy for his very funny article on what the approach to Christmas means to the families of OU students.

As a fellow-sufferer, my husband agreed entirely with Andrew Guy's version of events. "At least this is your last year", he said to me. I smiled.

Now, when do I mention that I've already booked a place on another course next year?

Patricia Whatmore
Mansfield, Notts.

THE main argument against using a laptop under examination conditions is that course material could be stored on it.

The way to solve the handwriting problems is to answer TMAs during the year using this method (i.e. manually).

John Peach
London

DESPITE being a long-term OU student I was unaware that there were course conferences run by OUSA.

I recently found the Discourse Analysis site (D843) by accident and it appears that I am not the only one as a number of the postings seem to be from people who have 'only just found this site'.

Please, please can you persuade course organisers to issue this information along with each course.

Gillian Semple
Stirling

AS an OU tutor could I ask Sesame to remind readers to make sure that they put the correct postage and correct address and do not sellotape the stamps on to the envelope of their TMA. If they fail to do any of the above they will involve their tutor in a trip to the nearest post office where he/she will be charged £1 handling and in the case of sellotaped stamps an extra 33p postage; and their TMA will inevitably be delayed.

Alan Gibbs

Star letter

Reason to believe



Following my second visit to Harefield Hospital for heart surgery, the surgeon told me "I don't care whether it's God, gardening or golf, you have to have something to believe in." For me it was to be the OU for seven years.

What have I gained apart from a BA (Hons) History? As someone who left school at 15 to join the Royal Navy, it has given me the knowledge and self-confidence that was so long lacking in my life.

What else have I gained? An interest in Philosophy, Art History, Literature and Music as well as a renewed interest in History.

As all OU students know it cannot be done without the full support of wives, partners, family and friends, OU administrators, tutors and fellow students to give you a prod when you are flagging.

At my graduation ceremony in Torquay on April 3, 2004 I shall raise a glass to all that I have come in contact with in the OU. And the second glass will be raised to all OU students everywhere. Good Luck. Believe me, it's the greatest feeling in the world.

Brian Clayton
Portishead, Somerset

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

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

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

Sesame

The Open University Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

Tel (01908) 652585 (Sesame only)
 email (editorial only): Sesame@open.ac.uk
 Advertising - Tel: 020 7878 2316, email: sesame@mcmslondon.co.uk

OU teams' exploration of Mars goes on

Scientists are still working to establish the fate of the Mars lander vehicle Beagle 2, which has failed to make contact since its scheduled touch down on Mars on Christmas Day, writes **Yvonne Cook**.

As *Sesame* went to press a last ditch attempt to reboot the craft's computer was scheduled for early February, following which scientists are likely to begin examining what went wrong.

But while the search continues for the baby Mars lander, its mothership Mars Express is now beaming back images which will give us a better picture of the surface of Mars than we have of Earth.

So says Dr John Murray of the Open University's Volcano Dynamics group, who is one of two British members of the international team of scientists involved in the European project to map the entire Martian surface, using cameras which take three-dimensional pictures.

The stunning images could provide clues about climate change and volcanic activity on the Red Planet which will help us understand these processes better on Earth, says Dr Murray, a planetary scientist who specialises in the study of volcanoes.

"Knowing the topography is critical," says Dr Murray, who has been involved in planning for the European Mars mission for more than 10 years. "With its help we will hopefully be able to build up a geological picture of how Mars has evolved.

"Mars has the largest volcanoes in our solar system. They are massive things approaching 25 kilometres in height – three times higher than the highest on Earth. Hopefully by studying them we will learn more about the processes by which volcanoes are built."

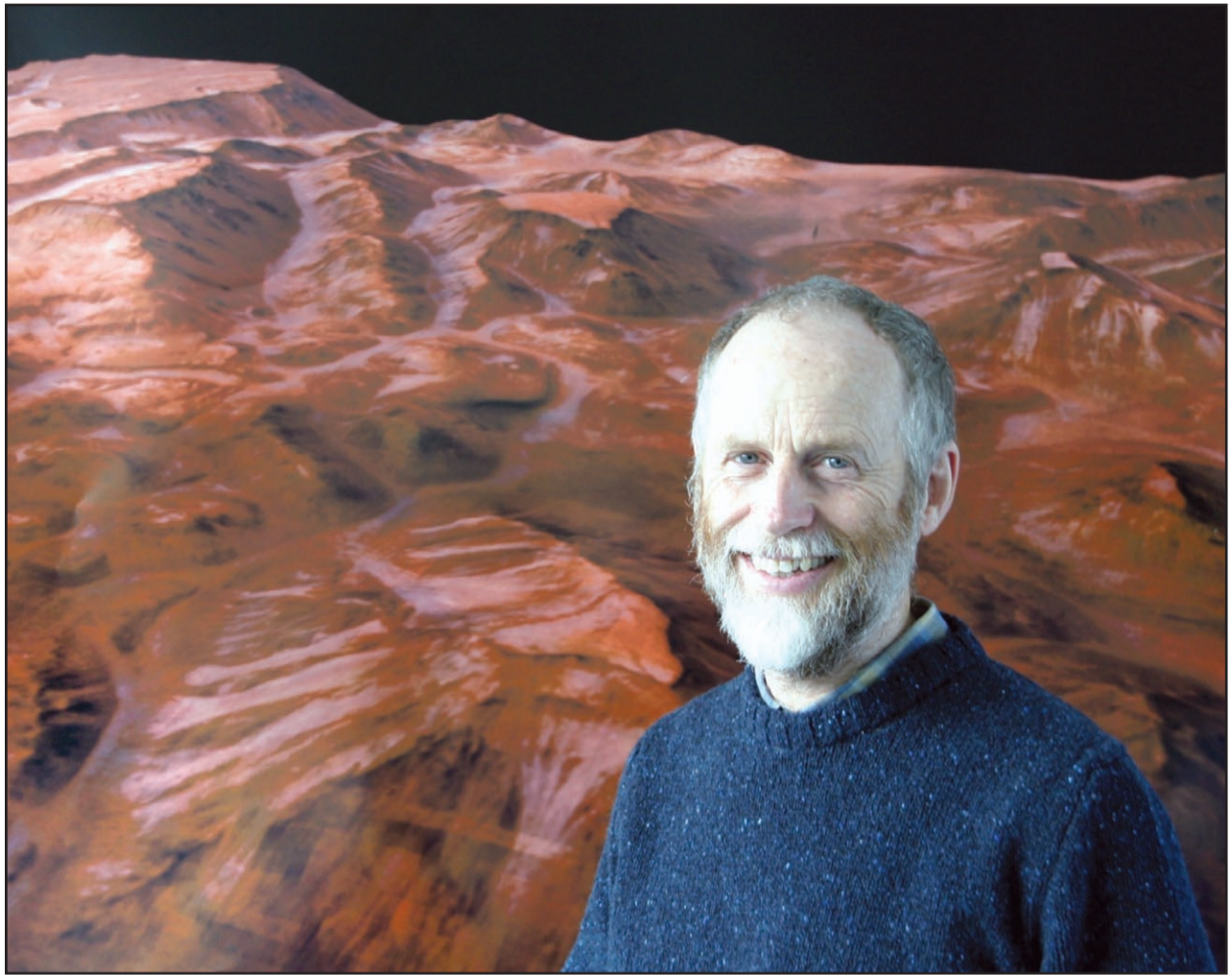
Another focus of interest are the polar 'ice caps', which were once thought to be made of frozen carbon dioxide. Images from Mars Express definitely show the presence of water ice, increasing the probability that the environment was once suitable for life.

But the ice may also hold the answer to another mystery.

Says Dr Murray: "Evidence from previous missions already suggests these ice caps are melting. If we find the ice is continuing to retreat, this may be evidence of global warming on Mars.

"This would have huge implications. The consensus is that global warming on Earth is caused by human activity, but if it were happening on Mars as well, we may have to re-think."

Mars Express will photograph the entire planet's surface during



John Murray standing in front of one of the stunning images captured by Mars Express' camera

its two-year mission, half of it at a resolution of 10 to 20 metres. If the Open University had a campus on Mars, this would be close enough to pick out the large buildings.

And for areas of special interest the cameras can 'zoom in' to a resolution of 2.5 metres. One thing they will be looking for is suitable landing sites for future Mars missions, says Dr Murray.

The camera may also help throw light on the fate of Beagle 2. There are plans to take high resolution images of the area in which the Mars lander is presumed to have touched down, which will give the best clue yet as to whether the surface is as smooth as was assumed. There is even a possibility that the camera could spot the craft's parachute canopy, although a scientist working on the project has said this would be so

small it would be 'like looking for a needle in a haystack'.

Lead scientist on Beagle 2, the OU's Professor Colin Pillinger said: "We are dedicated to trying to re-fly Beagle 2 in some shape or form, therefore we need to know how far it got because we need know which parts of this mission we don't have to study in further detail."

For more about the European Space Agency's Mars Express mission see www.sci.esa.int/home/marsexpress/. More about the search for Beagle 2 at www.beagle2.com

We are dedicated to trying to re-fly Beagle 2 in some shape or form

While exploration of Mars dominates the headlines, the OU continues to build its reputation as a centre of excellence in space and planetary research with a major role in many other current missions:

- NASA's Stardust probe successfully flew through the tail of Comet Wild 2 at the start of January collecting interstellar dust which could give clues to the origins of the Solar System. OU scientists helped develop instrumentation on board and were in California to help analyse the first data from it.

- A team from the OU's Planetary and Space Science Research Institute (PSSRI) are involved with the European Space Agency's Rosetta Mission, due to start its 10-year voyage on February 26. It is the first mission to attempt to orbit and land on a comet.

- Cassini/Huygens is a joint ESA/NASA mission, due to go into orbit around Saturn on 1 July, and to launch a probe onto Titan, Saturn's moon. PSSRI is involved in three experiments on board.

Coming to a screen near you...

...the very latest news on OU study, courses, support and other happenings, updated daily when you install the new *Sesame* screensaver.

The service turns your computer's screensaver into a bulletin board keeping you in touch with your university between issues of *Sesame*.

"With so much on offer we needed a speedier way of keeping the OU community up to date," explained project manager Claudia Sargent. "But the screensaver is also a great example of the exciting way in which the OU uses technology to offer students more. This really is unique."

Operating rather like a slide carousel, the screensaver launches a lively mix of images containing

news, study tips, details of new courses, information about university services, events and television programmes, and useful reminders. It also carries a small number of adverts, which finance the service.

"Once students and associate lecturers have installed the screensaver from our website – which involves a few simple steps – they need do nothing more," explained Claudia. "Every time they are connected to the internet the screensaver will update itself behind the scenes. It's safe and will not interfere with other programmes."

To download the screensaver, created in partnership with Oxigen, visit www.open.ac.uk/sesamescreensaver.

 www.open.ac.uk/sesame

- Are we born or made?
- The irrepressible Robert Winston is back on TV screens from January 6 with a three part OU/BBC co-production *A Child of Our Time*.
- The programmes go out at 9pm.



Sesame

 www.open.ac.uk/sesame

- The OU Library will be closed on 31 January and 5-7 February during the move to its new building.
- Electronic resources will continue to be available throughout the move.
- For any queries about the availability of services during the migration period, email: library-circulation@open.ac.uk



Sesame

Stay in touch by installing the new **Sesame Screensaver** – a lively mix of news, study tips, course information, TV and events

Honour for Mandela

THE Open University has joined the list of those recognising "a hero and inspiration for all time".

At a private ceremony in Cape Town on February 4 Nelson Mandela became a Doctor of Laws of the OU, receiving his honorary degree from Chancellor Baroness Betty Boothroyd and Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley.

His award recognises Nelson Mandela's contribution to peace and reconciliation in South Africa and the emphasis he put on education as a transformative tool. He once said that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".

Describing how in prison on Robben Island Mandela and his comrades created "what could be truly called 'a learning community'... a remarkable 'university' under the harshest of circumstances", Professor Gourley drew a parallel with the OU's founding principles of social justice.

She said: "Throughout his long and difficult life he has been a towering beacon of moral authority – and in the process he has become more admired than any other contemporary political leader in the world.

"He has been the guiding spirit in the process of reconciliation in South Africa as well as being tireless in helping other societies reach peaceful resolution to their problems. He is indeed a living legend, a teacher, an example to us all."

Part-timers ignored



By **Malini Sen**

It may not have been an ideal choice of date as the Associate Lecturers National Conference 2003 clashed with England's rugby world cup final against Australia. But the agenda provided plenty of important topics for tutors to run with, in order to help the university get results for its students.

The agenda included discussions on the Disability Discrimination Act, personal development planning, supporting students online, student recruitment and retention, the curriculum and awards strategy and tutor feedback on assignments.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley took part in a question and answer session, sharing with ALs her

concerns about the government's White Paper on the future of higher education. "The White Paper seems to be located more in the 20th than the 21st century," she said. "There is just a slight reference and nod towards part-time students and lifelong learning. How do we get through to the government agencies about part-time students? How do we make their voices heard?"

ALs responded by suggesting the OU "makes politicians more aware of part-time courses. MPs would greatly benefit from OU courses". Others said the OU should harness alumni power.

Later, the V-C reiterated the university's commitment to ALs and said she was "improving the levels of communications to make them feel more a part of the OU community."

How do we get through to the government agencies about part-time learning?

See PDP as package

THE new personal development planning service (see *Sesame* 218) is a useful online resource for students but it will not work as a stand-alone. That was the overall feeling of associate lecturers who suggested that PDP needs to be integrated with support and guidance to make it more valuable.

"PDP is a useful tracking tool. Students can draw out their achievements and record their skills. It helps them to reflect on, and list experiences which they did not think would be valued when looking for a job," said Jim Monaghan from Ireland.

However, many students will ask 'why do I have to do it?' pointed out

Meg Hopkins from Scotland. "It can be looked upon as an added chore to their studies. Students need to have a practical reason and be encouraged to use the online tool," she said. Also, when it comes to assessing their own achievements, people are often reticent and require guidance to evaluate their experiences.

ALs agreed that mentoring was needed but said it may not be feasible for them to do it because of their existing workloads. Project director Patrick Kelly welcomed the feedback from the ALs, saying "the PDP is the beginning of a process, still evolving and any feedback is important."

Feed back on feedback

THE highest number of complaints from students concern feedback on TMAs, a member of the Complaints Office staff told ALs at the conference. Two common complaints were that the feedback was not balanced – the comments were positive but marks low – and that tutor's handwriting was illegible.

Among the areas ALs pinpointed for improving the impact of their feedback were clearer expectations on marking and faster feedback from those monitoring them. They also suggested:

- ALs could share experiences with each other on FirstClass
- The Complaints Office could share its experience with ALs
- ALs should get students to specify what feedback they wish to receive
- They should work at motivating students as well as correcting them
- ALs should balance length of feedback against speed of return

* For next issue's VoxPop *Sesame* would like to know whether you find your tutor's feedback on assignments useful – or could they do better? Visit the *Sesame* Conference in the OUSA common room on FirstClass.

VC's View vc'sviewvc'sviewvc'sviewvc'sview

Live long and prosper with OU



OU Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley

I was interested to read in the September/October edition of *Sesame*, an article entitled 'Fight the age bias'. I am glad that this debate, so important and immediate in wider society, continues to find its champions in the Open University community also.

I have been reading Peter Schwartz' new book called *Inevitable Surprises* and it certainly provides food for thought. He draws attention to the trends that are already in train in the world around us that will 'inevitably' change our lives – trends that most of us seem either to ignore (because it is too difficult to contemplate what they mean) or be ignorant about. They will affect our lives, our businesses, our institutions and our politics in ways we cannot know for sure – and it would certainly help if we thought about them more than we seem to do at present.

One of these inevitabilities is the increasing age of the population in the Western world. Not only are people living longer but they are healthier than before. An article by Donald Hirsch in *The Guardian* tells us that 'Today, seven million people over 50, a quarter of Britain's workforce, are in work – 1.9 million more than 10 years ago'.

It no longer makes sense to retire people at 60 or 65. We cannot afford it, for a start. When pensions were invented (so to speak) we expected people to live maybe five years after retirement. Now we can expect them to live a further 20, 30, even 40 years. Who can guarantee a larger and larger portion of the population a permanent holiday for that long? Who wants a holiday that long if you are still in good health and possibly reaping the effects of years of experience? Have you noticed the average age of Nobel Prize winners?

We must be careful, however, about assumptions made on behalf of others. The last time I wrote on this issue I received a letter from a member of the public calling an extended retirement age a 'middle-class conspiracy'. I am not sure how accurate this description is, but it must awaken us to the fact

that while it is a relatively appealing thought for some (or perhaps many) members of senior management or university professors to continue after retirement in some capacity, there are other members of the population for whom retirement is an eagerly anticipated release from the bind of less fulfilling work; and for whom the thought of continuing after traditional retirement age is anathema.

Improving the lot of older workers who do not find themselves in a position they find satisfactory (but may yet be required to continue working) must be a key focus of the Open University's social justice mission over the coming years. Our past is scattered with wonderful examples of how we have helped just such people, and I would urge everyone to continue efforts to ensure that our future sees us addressing the issues of those in need of continuing and transformative education.

The age discrimination laws that will take effect in 2006 will make it illegal for companies to force individuals to retire on the grounds of age. This will open up opportunities which the Open University is particularly well placed to grasp.

The future predominant challenge for the older workforce will no longer be how to get another job after being made redundant, but rather where they can find the teachers of the skills that they require in order to keep them up-to-date with the latest technological developments and working practices in their field. An institution such as our own that can provide such education will not only improve the lot of many older workers, but will also be going a long way to destroying the myth of the older worker as being out of touch.

Emphasis on getting 18-30 year olds to university has perhaps led some to ignore (at our peril) providing every opportunity for those beyond 30 (even far beyond 30) to retrain, re-skill, refocus and generally stay mentally and economically active as long as possible. The 'inevitable' changing demographic of the country is proving that it is not only young people who need universities; we all need them.

It is not only young people who need universities

Boost for fight against Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's sufferers may soon be able to delay the onset of the disease thanks to a life-changing discovery by the OU's Brain and Behaviour Research Group.

Their findings might enable those with the illness to continue to live normal, independent lives for longer by boosting their short-term memory and alleviating many of its early symptoms.

The team discovered a small molecule in the brain that actually restores memory and protects against the poisonous effects of the disease – a find seen as so significant that it recently beat 650 other submissions to win the prestigious Medical Futures award for the Best Innovation in Mental Health.

Now it is hoped the honour will help fast-track a partnership between the OU, which has patented the discovery, and a pharmaceutical company that can turn the findings into drug form.

"We are thoroughly delighted," said Professor Steven Rose, who headed the research team with Radmila Mileusnic and Chris Lancaster. "But more significant than the award itself is the opportunity it has given us to work with drug companies to turn this into a treatment."

Professor Rose and his colleagues were experimenting to discover the properties of a "sticky" substance which links brain



Professor Steven Rose and Radmila Mileusnic with the award

cells together to improve memory. "If they lose that substance, animals forget," he said. "We broke down the substance to see if we could discover the exact property that does this. When we found it, and

realised that by restoring it artificially, it rescued memory that had been lost, that was certainly a 'Eureka!' moment."

More information: www.open.ac.uk/science/biosci/research/index.htm

Blackout triggers upgrade

THE university is upgrading its internet links following the system breakdown in September which led to a 48-hour blackout for all its internet-based services.

The present BT connection is to be replaced with a new link which will be three times faster than the existing one. Another national telecommunications company is currently surveying the route for this.

And a second, completely independent link is being created running from a site close to Walton Hall. This will be a BT provided service.

The breakdown was caused by a failure in the university's 'protected' link to JANET, the academic network that provides internet services to all the UK's universities.

Rory Kearns of AACS Technical Services said this means there will be an alternative route for most systems should the main JANET network fail again.

Said Rory: "In the meantime, the most important objective is to be able to inform students what is happening. We cannot again leave them in the dark for two days."



New date for Open Day

THE university's next Open Day has been postponed until 2005 to enable a full review of its future shape. Normally staged every other year, the event attracts thousands of students to the OU's Milton Keynes campus to enjoy a mix of entertainment and displays. The next Open Day will now take place on Saturday 18 June, 2005.

University Secretary Fraser Woodburn said the review will look at the aims of the event and "seek to ensure that the activities and displays on Open Day enable those who attend to see the very best the university has to offer". He added that it will continue to take place in alternate years from 2005.

Fees rise for new residents

NEW students who have not been resident in the European Economic Area (EEA) for at least three years will pay higher course fees in future.

The change brings the OU into line with other universities who are already charging a higher fee for students living in the UK who don't meet the government's new residency requirement. The government no longer funds study for those who have lived in the EEA for less than three years.

All new students will be asked to declare their residency status on their registration agreement. Queries on the new policy should be sent to the Registration and Fees Centre – email: reg-fees@open.ac.uk

Milestone for Arab OU

FOUR regions of the Arab Open University have won the right to issue UK qualifications to their students. In future, successful students of OU programmes in Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan will emerge with the same qualification as their UK equivalents. "Reaching this point is a major milestone for the AOU and for the OU and strongly cements the relationship," said Cath Sakkour of Open University Worldwide.

Revolutionary prize

SOCIAL Sciences Associate Lecturer Neil Davidson has been awarded the 2003 Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize for his book *Discovering the Scottish Revolution*. Also an OU graduate, Neil's book argues that the period between the 1690s and 1740s is Scotland's equivalent of 'the bourgeois revolution'. "I think this is the first attempt to apply Marxist analysis to early modern Scottish history," said Neil, who is the first Scot to win the award. More books p17.

Edinburgh lectures

HOW might Scotland invent a new and distinct profile for itself in an enlarged EU, and what can it learn from Poland? Once again the OU in Scotland is presenting one of the Edinburgh Lectures, with award-winning journalist Neil Ascherson tackling the highly topical subject of *Voices in a Crowd: Scottish and Polish survival strategies in an enlarged EU*. The talk takes place on February 23 in the Royal Museum Lecture Theatre at 6pm. Entry is free at the door on the night, or £3 for an advance reservation. Further details: www.edinburghlectures.org

Electronic pals

ELECTRONIC pen pals could be part of the future of language learning, according to Drs Ursula Stickler and Tim Lewis of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies. Presenting their research to an international conference on independent language learning, they described pairing English speakers learning French or German with those in France and Germany learning English. "It helps them to better express themselves in authentic speech or writing," said Dr Stickler. "Each partner has extensive knowledge of their own country, profession and culture which is exchanged, resulting in a more valuable learning experience."

Unique OU

OPEN University academics were congratulated in a Parliamentary motion proposed in December by Labour MP for North East Milton Keynes, Mr Brian White. The early day motion, which was supported by a further 74 MPs, referred to the university's accomplishments in both research and teaching. It recognised the important benefits that research brings to students, and called on the government to "ensure that the special nature of the Open University and the unique access to excellence it provides, should be recognised".

Intelligent TV

The OU is "currently producing some of the finest and most intelligent programmes on television" according to *Evening Standard* columnist Victor Lewis-Smith. For latest details of OU/BBC programmes visit the partnership's dedicated website www.open2.net

From page to stage

ROYAL Shakespeare Company actor James Hayes, who is studying for an OU degree, took time out from performing as Escalus in *Measure for Measure* at Newcastle's Theatre Royal to help fellow students explore how the Bard is best staged. "I'm sure working with students and their tutors will help me as much as them," said James, whose other acting credits include TV series *A Touch of Frost* and *The Bill*.

Farewell to Zimbabwe

AN award ceremony has been held in Harare to mark the end of the OU's partnership with Zimbabwe Open University. Charlene Hewat, Lovemore Magwere, Jephias Mundondo and Johnson Mpanhadzi were among a group of students in Zimbabwe to achieve the OU's MSc in Development Management. The masters programme was taught by tutors within Zimbabwe and the UK. "It was a rich experience for all concerned and our friends in Zimbabwe will be sorely missed," said Jacqueline Eisenstadt of the OU's Technology faculty.

Centuries-old trade in sex slaves

This year has been designated the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition. But, as one OU academic's research proves, the struggle against sex slavery is far from over. **Peter Taylor-Whiffen** investigates.

When Luan Plakici was found guilty of kidnapping women from across Eastern Europe and forcing them to work as sex slaves in Britain, the case hit headlines for many reasons.

The Albanian's sentence – 10 years – was the longest ever handed out in this country for human trafficking for prostitution and, for many, a fitting conclusion to the largest case of its kind ever seen in the UK. Plakici's operation brought at least 50 young women to Britain and earned the 26-year-old and his gang more than £1 million.

For many Britons the most distressing aspect of the case was learning that this trade exists at all. But it always has, and always will, as long as men are prepared to pay for sex, says the Open University's Dr Susan Mumm, who has spent two years researching the history of human trafficking for prostitution.

"Many of the issues have been the same since Victorian times," says Dr Mumm, a senior lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies. "Thousands of 19th century, working class British girls suffered similar fates because they were lured by lies of a new life

abroad. Then, an invitation to work in a bar in a foreign country would sound like the best life chance you'd ever get – far more exciting than scrubbing floors. It sounded so glamorous – like the idea of being a model today."

Dr Mumm says the dream of a better life is the obvious reason so many girls were taken in – and why, even in the 21st century, Plakici was so easily able to lure what his trial judge called the "poor, naïve and gullible" from Eastern Europe.

"It's easy for people to wonder how, in this day and age, so many women could be duped so easily," she says. "Yet they all believed a convincing promise." And Plakici, who was convicted just before Christmas of offences including kidnap and incitement to rape, was very convincing – even marrying one teenager, before telling her she would spend her wedding night working as a prostitute.

He was eventually caught because seven of his victims relived their horrific ordeal in court. Their testimonies were courageous but at least they had the support of a system that acknowledged and abhorred the sex trafficking trade. Their 19th century counterparts were not so fortunate. British girls, targeted because England was the only European country not to outlaw prostitution under 21, were spirited away to France and Belgium to a life of imprisonment, beatings and enforced sex with dozens of strangers a day.

And once sullied, they were largely considered by prudish Victorian society to have got what they deserved.

Dr Mumm adds: "Because the Victorians

viewed sexually experienced women as uniquely debased, and 'fallen' to an extent that simply was not possible for a man, women would internalise the view that they were hopelessly cast out from decent society.

"Even if a woman was lied to, taken to a location where she did not wish to work, confined against her will, enmeshed in debt bondage, and beaten, the fact she had consented to sex outside marriage removed her from all hope of sympathy."

This prevented many women from plucking up the courage to escape their captors, who threatened to tell the women's families what they had become. And if they did flee, their unavoidably scanty dress, or the debts they owed for lodgings, would automatically land them in trouble with the law. Any woman inclined to run to the police was arrested – and returned to their brothel.

"Human trafficking as we know it was then called the 'white slave trade', a term which, although many of the women were not white, distinguished it from the slave trade," says Dr Mumm. "But although abolitionists had fought to free black men from slavery 100 years earlier, society was not interested in emancipating

women of any colour."

Change, when it finally arrived, came largely through a remarkable woman called Josephine Butler, whose research in the late 1800s proved to her the existence of an evil trade of women for sex. She later recalled how her friends actively discouraged her from publishing her findings, "declaring that all sensible persons would say that the writer of them was mad."

One of Butler's main obstacles seemed to be, as now, that people could not, or would not, believe such a cynical trade was being so callously plied. But the reality was that thousands of young women were lured into sex slavery with 'techniques' that are still used by the likes of Plakici. "One of the most effective ways to isolate anyone is to put them in a country where they can't speak the language," says Dr Mumm. "Virtually none of the working-class, 19th century English women who ended up across the Channel would have been able to speak French. Some of today's victims come from Africa, and although they can speak one, even two European languages, these are usually English and French. So they end up as sex slaves in Italy, where they cannot converse on equal terms and are more vulnerable."

But Butler did publicise the issue, and was assisted by leading Quaker Alfred Dyer. He and his associates investigated her 1879 claims about Belgian brothels and within a year 12 of the racketeers were behind bars. Arguably Butler's greatest single success in her campaign was highlighting the case of 16-year-old Adeline Tanner, who was drugged and



As many as one million women are thought to be sold for sex each year

Picture: Getty Images

abducted to a Brussels bordello but found to have a physical abnormality that made intercourse impossible. It led to a sea-change in the opinion of the ultra-moral British middle classes, who had always previously claimed that only women with no virtue could end up in a foreign brothel.

It was a turning point. In 1880 Prime Minister William Gladstone approved an annual grant of £100 to repatriate women who had been trafficked abroad – as long as they really were proved to be 'innocents'. Warnings urged women not to respond to advertisements for 'amateur actresses' promising theatrical work abroad. And support organisations sprang up, such as the Traveller's Aid Society which helped women by establishing the respectability of offers of work. Others included the National Vigilance Association, which absorbed the Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Minor's Protection Society, the Belgian Traffic Committee and the Central Vigilance Society.

The NVA's work included creating international anti-trafficking agreements and eventually led to the 1949 United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, which agreed to punish anyone who 'procures, entices, or leads away, for purposes of prostitution, another person,

even with the consent of that person'.

For the first time, all women who were forced to endure work as sex slaves were seen as victims.

It didn't stop the trade, of course. It's widely believed that now, as in the 1880s, only one tenth of cases of trafficking women for sex ever come to light. The difference is that the estimated numbers of victims has increased more than ten-fold, with as many as one million women now thought to be sold for sex worldwide every year.

And, Dr Mumm repeats, it will never stop. "Traffickers still find it very easy to lure girls

from areas with struggling economies, such as Africa, Eastern Europe or some parts of the Far East," she says. "And because these areas are poor, their governments have more pressing concerns.

"Even when cases do come to court, the sentences for the traffickers

are usually inadequate. Plakici made the headlines because he got 10 years – but as long as trafficking drugs carries sentences five times as long as those for trafficking people, you wonder what priorities our society really does have."

● A207 *From enlightenment to romanticism* includes a block on slavery and abolition. For details of Religious Studies courses see www.open.ac.uk/courses

Even if a woman was lied to, confined against her will and beaten, the fact that she had consented to sex outside marriage removed her from all hope of sympathy

It's widely believed that now, as in the 1880s, only one tenth of cases of trafficking women for sex ever comes to light

The best value there is

by Ormond Simpson

A COUPLE of years ago two OU researchers did a survey of OU graduates' earnings. They found that typical OU graduates' earnings increased from 15 per cent above average earnings before graduation to 22 per cent above average earnings after.

An increase of 7 per cent doesn't sound very much but look at it this way: if you are earning £25,000 at age 30 you have a choice. If you invested £2,400 in a building society then at the end of 30 years you'd have around £5,900 – a return on investment of 250 per cent. If you invested that £2,400 in getting an OU degree then on average you'd get an increase in earnings of 7 per cent of £25,000 for 30 years from around age 35 when you graduated. That's a total of £52,500 – a return on investment of 2,200 per cent.

Of course there's that small amount of time and energy on study that needs to be invested as well – the returns of satisfaction on that are harder to assess but more important.

What would happen if you decided to go to university full-time? My colleagues in the OU's Finance Division who know a lot more about this warn me that the data is very complex and difficult to interpret. But what the heck... Researchers at the University of Warwick estimate that graduates who study full-time will make around £220,000 more than non-graduates over an earnings lifetime. But you would have to invest rather more than an OU student. Tuition fees will set you back up to £3,000 a year; maintenance will cost you perhaps £3,000 a year. And as the University of Warwick researchers point out the main cost is the loss of earnings against 18 year-olds going straight into work, which could amount to around £16,000 a year. The total cost of a conventional degree will then be around £60,000 so the return on investment will be 350 per cent – better than a building society but not as good as the OU.

So study with the OU – it's the best value!



Young at heart OU

From enhancing the university's reputation to increasing flexibility, the effects of increasing numbers of younger students should benefit all, as **Jane Matthews** discovers.

It sounds like the holy grail of those seeking eternal youth: another birthday comes and you get a little younger. But so it is for the OU which, as it approaches its 35th anniversary, can boast that the average age of its students is falling all the time.

Over the past seven years the number of under 25s enrolling has tripled, bringing the total to one in ten of all OU students. By 2006 the university expects that figure to be closer to one in five.

It's a phenomenon that brings challenges, but alongside them the potential to benefit all those studying with the OU, whatever their age.

"One of the many things resulting from the trend is the fact that our younger students are helping break down some of the stereotyped images that some people still have – that we are the university of the second chance for an older population," believes Allan Cochrane, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students).

Alison Ryan, President of the OU Students Association agrees: "If we keep attracting younger students then it is likely that an OU degree will be even more accepted by employers than it is now."

Last summer Professor Cochrane set up a working group to look at what is causing the influx of younger people, to examine why they have traditionally done less well – pass rates for under 25s are 11 per cent lower than for the student body as a whole – and recommend ways of supporting them better.

The most obvious answer is no further than the nearest newspaper headline. "Top-up fees and increasing student debt are encouraging students to seek alternatives," says Judy Rumbelow who is chairing the Younger Students Group.

"The increase was an inevitable consequence of government policy," says Alison Ryan. "Many school leavers are choosing to stay at their local university and live at home even if other universities are better placed to provide their degree option. In addition most have to work part-time to supplement their studies. This makes the OU a much more attractive

option as they can work full-time and study."

However, all those involved in looking at the trend sound notes of caution. Firstly, the university does not know whether those who choose the OU over traditional university do so positively or 'grudgingly, having been financially forced out of their chosen institution'. Nor does it believe the under 25s can be treated as a homogenous group, indeed those who come to the OU with credit from other institutions tend to do well.

Both issues have implications for the way the university supports them in their studies – though here too the Younger Students Group believes the gains will be across the board. "Around 80 per cent of the recommendations the Group is making would be of help to all students," says Assistant Secretary Steve Clayton.

Our younger students are helping break down some of the stereotyped images

Among the areas he and colleagues are looking at are better information about what OU study entails, greater pre-entry support with topics such as time management, and more emphasis on peer support, the kind of supportive and social contact with other students that is woven into the fabric of campus-based universities, with their freshers' weeks and groaning noticeboards.

Another is to enhance the university's Careers Service so it can meet the needs of a generation who may have spent little or no time in work.

But the ripple effects of a younger OU reach into many other areas. For instance, the momentum for a more flexible study year – at a time when the OU

is already committed to offering two start-dates a year – is likely to increase. Says Allan Cochrane: "In the longer term I hope that it will be taken for granted that we will offer two start dates.

"What we need to continue to do for this age group – and for other age groups – is to offer a greater degree of flexibility in our methods, courses and curriculum."

"I think the curriculum will need to continue the current moves towards more work-oriented subjects, which may be to the detriment of the less work-oriented subjects," says Alison Ryan.

Content too may need to change. "Some of our courses make assumptions that students are able to bring to their study an element of life experience – of running a household or a business, for example," Allan Cochrane points out.

What younger students will bring, however, thanks to the national curriculum, is an enviable ease with ICT, enabling them to fully exploit the growing range of services available online.

At the sharp end, those who will teach them are wholly positive about the extra dimension a truly broad age spectrum will bring to the university. Mike Lowndes, Chair of the AL Committee says: "Diversity is one of the major strengths of the OU and a factor that makes teaching with the university interesting, rewarding and challenging. ALs learned long ago to consider every student as an individual, each with their own aspirations, abilities and problems. I have never found the age of a student to be a reliable factor in predicting their performance on courses and I suspect it is the same for most other ALs."

Meanwhile the Younger Students Group is keen to get feedback from the under 25s. Says Judy: "We would be really delighted to get their views and comments on their experience of being younger students in the OU." Write to: *Sesame*, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA; email sesame@open.ac.uk

FRONT PAGE STORY

On the crest of a wave of young students

At the London Boat Show in January **Ruth Elliott (below and right)** became ladies' winner at the UK's first ever indoor windsurfing championship. But when she is not riding the waves Ruth is immersed in study – one of the tide of under 25's now choosing the OU over traditional university. Below she explains how it feels to be one of the OU's 'young 'uns'.

I survived one year at university. I passed everything with distinction, worked to make enough money, drank well under my weekly allowance of alcohol and got £4,000 of debt for my efforts. The potential for accumulating £12,000 of debt by the time I finished and the hours I needed to work to afford to live made the decision for me to quit. I still wanted to learn but it needed to be on my terms to fit in with my choice of lifestyle and lack of money – and that's where the OU comes in.

Before I started an OU course I thought I needed some stability in my life to manage time to study. But since I joined I've had seven jobs, five homes and lived abroad twice. I've studied in the back of a van, on planes and by candlelight. I am currently a postwoman and I compete on the national windsurf circuit, travelling to competitions and training abroad for a portion of the year.

I started windsurfing five years ago, whilst teaching at a dinghy sailing centre and borrowing their equipment. Three years later I'd saved enough to buy my first board (she was beautiful) and I've never looked back. I love the adrenaline rush from surviving four

metre waves, 40 mile an hour winds, and travelling to the most amazing beaches you can imagine. Training involves sailing whenever it's windy: if you picture those horrible days when you don't want to leave the house – well they're perfect for me. Fitness is key to winning and although the three hour postround walk helps each day, there's always more you can do.

Spring 2003 was my first competition season and while half of me relishes the experience, the other half has a panic attack at the start

of each heat. I know I've done really well for my first year but I know I could do so much better with more training time. Competitors are a mix of professionals and those scraping together enough money to train and travel to windy locations. I couldn't do it without sponsors who I'm currently 'borrowing' about £1,000 of kit from (thankyou Funsport, Starboard, Tushingham, Sola).

Choosing the OU means I can study without getting into debt, can live anywhere, and can study the courses I

want to study. My dad has encouraged me all the way and pays for my OU courses, maybe out of guilt for not having the money to support me through university. My mum asks me "what use is it going to be?" and my friends can't believe how long it's going to take to get a degree – but usually with some grudging admiration. The main advantage so far is employers don't

see me as a surf bum; they see someone with commitment, time management skills and determination. I

feel it opens doors for me now and will do so in the future when I decide I want a 'proper' job.

The OU wonders why us younger folk don't appear to have the staying power to complete our courses. I read that your 20s can be the most stressful time of your life, because there are so many changes and decisions. In my six years of study I may be heartbroken at least twice (one down already), move house six times and change jobs. Just because I'm only 25 doesn't make these matters trivial

I still wanted to learn but it needed to be on my terms



or easy to cope with.

What can the OU do to help us? If I think I can complete a course, advisors should look at positive solutions to problems I might have. For example, I was going abroad for a few months to work, but with email and internet this shouldn't have been an obstacle. Options of evening tutorials for those of us who work weekends would help. And I dream of studying over the winter term.

Don't get me wrong, I think the OU is fantastic, I love the courses and being able to get qualifications and do what I want. All that's needed is just a bit of flexibility and understanding that while we young 'uns may not fit the expected student profile, we can still succeed with a little help.



Vox Pop

This issue we sent reporter Nicki Wilson to talk to secondary school students and find out whether they would consider studying for a degree with the OU.

Sophie Barrett, 18

"I don't know much about the OU apart from that it offers you courses that you can study from home rather than going away to university. It's something that would interest me later in life, not now. When I finish school I want to go off to another town rather than studying from home."

Rachel Bennett, 18

"I'm planning to study geography. I don't know a lot about the OU. It was never put forward as an option by our careers tutors. It's not something that would interest me but I think some of my friends, had they known, would have been interested in the idea of studying through the OU."

Dan Collier, 17

"I guess from a financial point of view it is something that would make sense. But it was never really suggested as an option at school. I'd like to study away from home."

Anita Soni, 18

"I am hoping to study engineering. I couldn't study with the OU because the exact course I wanted wasn't on offer but I would have considered it had they offered the course. I would have been quite happy to study from home."

Collette Anderson, 17

"I'd definitely consider studying with the OU. I am currently deciding whether to go to university or not. The chance to live at home and study without moving would be a big attraction for me."

Steven, 16

"I find it much harder doing work at home than when I am attending daily classes. When you're in class you've got guidance so you do it. I'd miss other students being around. If I had to work from home I'd find any excuse not to do the work so I couldn't see myself being able to do a course with the OU."

VOX Pop is a chance for you to contribute. It lives on the FirstClass conference system. Look for *Sesame* in the Common Room area of the Open University campus.

Safe computing at home

From chat room stalkers to the devastating effects of the Blaster worm – as our love affair with the internet has grown, so too has our awareness of the dangers involved. But what do you need to do at home to protect yourself, your family – and the computer and software you've invested in? **Marilyn Moffat**, Software Manager in the OU's Academic and Administrative Computing Services, has this advice.

The crucial thing is not to ignore the threats and to ensure that everyone who uses your machine understands how to 'think smart' by following the suggested guidelines below. The good news is that all of these problems can be dealt with by some preparation and a good quality defence system.

Your computer's operating system

Many threats work because they exploit weaknesses in your computer's operating system. So your first line of defence is to keep your system up to date. For Microsoft Windows 2000 and later, use the automatic update feature provided. New computers are rarely supplied with up-to-date security patches: ask the supplier to help you acquire these before you take it home. And give every user their own logon so that you can use tools like web filters more effectively.

Software Solutions

Many of the threats to your computer can be detected by special programs. Some are essential, others desirable. The following is a list of those which can now often be bought in a single 'internet security package' for a reasonable cost:

- Antivirus software is essential on all computers. Once installed ensure that it is set to update automatically on a daily basis at least. Once a week you should manually check that the updates have been successfully downloaded. Kaspersky Antivirus Software is issued on the Applications CD for students and Sophos Antivirus is available to all members of OU staff.
- Firewall software is now essential on any computer connecting to the internet at broadband speeds, and is recommended for all others. It scans the traffic going to and from your computer, and is trained to recognise network connections or

software that may cause a threat.

- Web Filters/Parental controls are essential for any parent wishing to protect their children from inappropriate content.
- Anti-spam software is able to identify unsolicited email with a good degree of success and move it to a place where you can screen and delete it.
- Pop-Up and Ad Stoppers are extremely useful in improving your user experience!

Whilst some of these packages can be acquired free from some online organisations, most users will benefit from choosing one of the commercially available internet security packages with all of the above features included, along with good automatic updating and user support systems.

Your Behaviour

Many of the things we regard as threats rely on exploiting human behaviour. From the expediency of the double click on icons in emails, to the secretive nature of some children which makes them vulnerable to online stalkers, we are often the cause of our own downfall. The advice is 'think smart':

- Don't ever (ever!) double click on an icon in a mail message. Remember that viruses can replicate via email in such a way that they can appear to come from your friends. Save the attachment first and let your anti-virus software scan it before going any further.
- Don't be too cavalier with personal information. Simple examples include sharing your email address with a commercial company. Do you know what they intend to do with it once you have given it to them? Examine the small print on the form you are completing. Often there are boxes you need to check (or uncheck) to ensure you do not give the site owner the right to use your details to send you junk mail and to share it with other organisations. One option is to use a special email address like junk@my-isp.co.uk so that incoming mail can be identified and filtered by your software.
- When publishing web pages, avoid including your email address, as programs called 'web trawlers' will be able to collect it and sell it on for use by 'spammers'. You should also be



Use parental controls to protect your children from unsuitable content **Picture: Getty Images**

careful about other ways of publishing personal details. Friends Reunited for example encourages you to share details of your life with the world at large. Are these the same details that allow people to work out what your passwords are?

- Be very careful when downloading free software tools which claim to be useful utilities. Some of these 'helpful' packages (such as Hotbar) include spyware and other unwelcome utilities as a hidden payload. If in doubt, use the internet to research the software first: you might be surprised what you discover.
- Read the *End User License Agreement*. Some of these commit you to paying for services which you do not want.
- Don't forward hoaxes. All you are doing, in effect, is falling for a confidence trick that causes you to 'spam' all your friends!

Your Family

- Use web filters (parental controls) to manage the content different members of your family can access.
- Teach your children to use their common sense in dealing with content. Teach them to be sceptical and to double check information with reputable sites and other sources.
- Follow the SMART rules for parents and children which are set out on the KidSmart website: www.kidsmart.org.uk/ and www.parentsonline.gov.uk/parents/index.html
- Get your children to use filtered search engines such as www.ajkids.com/ and www.yahooligans.com/

Sources for Further Reading:

- www.bbc.co.uk/chatguide
- www.kidsmart.org.uk/
- <http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk/schools/>
- www.parentsonline.gov.uk/parents/index.html

Under attack

A BRIEF guide to understanding the major threats you may come across at home:

- **'Malware'**: a general term for a collection of programs called variously viruses, worms and trojans by the people that discuss them. They are usually distributed as short programs, often hidden in seemingly innocent 'hosts' like email messages and removable disks, or by copying themselves to your computer while you are connected to the internet. The impact on your computer will include slower processing (because the program is stealing your resource) and your computer may be 'high-jacked' in order to spread the malicious program further. Worst case scenarios involve destructive programs, designed to damage your computer by removing some – or all – of the files on it.
- **Unsolicited email**: it is now reported that as much as 50 per cent of all internet mail can be classified in this category. It can range from annoying repeated adverts for products like pharmaceuticals to more explicit attempts to introduce users to sinister or even illegal online services.
- **Spyware programs** are installed on your computer both by stealth or as a hidden part of another program downloaded by the user. Their purpose is to gather and report personal and other information to collection agents elsewhere on the internet. The type of information collected can vary – for example some report on your internet searches in order to help develop a personal marketing profile so you can be targeted with appropriate adverts. Others could be explicitly fraudulent, collecting personal information such as credit card and other personal details for criminal activity.
- **Pop-Ups and Adware** are pop-up windows which appear unasked for on your computer screen, frequently promoting activities like gambling.
- **Web Content** can be a problem to the end user as, unlike a book which goes through a rigorous editing and publishing cycle, a website can be the product of one person, made available widely with no further checks on veracity or legality. Unacceptable content can range from something which is simply wrong to more extreme examples of 'hate sites'.
- **Chat rooms and interactive use** are the areas of the internet most widely discussed in recent months. There is now a good deal of excellent advice available at the sites listed in further reading (left).

End fear of the dark side

COMPUTING is wonderful, but, as the article shows, it has a dark side. Most non-technical computer users feel powerless in the face of these threats, and some are terrified when a virus strikes.

A new short course from the OU starts from the premise that fear is generally fear of the unknown, aiming to demystify malicious software by explaining the threats posed by it, giving an insight into how such software works, and teaching you how to protect yourself in cyberspace and practice safe computing. T187 *Vandalism in cyberspace: understanding and combating malicious software* is worth 10 points with its first presentations in May and October 2004.

Further information at: <http://tscp.open.ac.uk> plus details of an antivirus conference being held at the OU on March 4.



WOULD-BE writers were invited to develop their skills at a creative-writing workshop organised by the Open University in the North.

The event at Newcastle Playhouse was linked to the BBC's Get Writing initiative. Other workshops were held at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, and in Darlington.

The series also offered a taster for the OU's start writing courses (see right), according to tutor David Stephenson, who has produced tips and tasks for those starting out as writers. Visit www.bbc.co.uk/getwriting. Picture shows David Stephenson with attendees.

The media today: a study of power

ALISTAIR Campbell recently promised his retirement from the Prime Minister's Office gave him a chance at last to air his true opinions about the "poisonous influence on public life" of the *Daily Mail*. But how much power does the media in all its guises really have?

A new course DA204 *Understanding media* aims to help students move beyond exaggeration and simplification towards a more subtle, realistic and complex appreciation of media power and influence – and to an understanding of the fundamental question, why are the media important?

Launched in February 2005, the course's opening block on media and celebrity is not only a good introduction to debates about media power and influence but also introduces other key themes of the course; for instance the important but hotly contested nature of the media's role in people's private and public lives and the dynamics of media economics and production, including the crucial importance of celebrities to those economies.

The Level 2, 60-point course also addresses

how the way the media are produced shapes them, how we 'read' the media, including how the media tell their stories and represent various groups, and, back to Alistair Campbell, how the media relates to citizenship and political identity. What role might governments and other institutions play in media markets?

The course is likely to appeal to anyone with an interest in film, television, popular music, print media, advertising and the internet. And at a time when understanding how communication works is a vital skill for the job market it is relevant to students from a wide range of areas including social sciences, arts, technology, education and law.



Top names line up to help writers

If most of your New Year resolutions are already in tatters – you missed your first gym session on January 5th and were back on chocolate by the 12th – don't panic. This is still the year you really can write that novel – because the OU can help you do it.

The range of new creative writing courses don't just restrict you to prose. The 10-point studies can also teach you to compose poetry and plays. But whatever your writing ambitions, you'll be hard-pressed to find better teachers – the new course materials include contributions from some of Britain's greatest and most popular scribes, including Alan Ayckbourn, Willy *Educating Rita* Russell and Louis de Berniere, author of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*.

"Great writers are made, not born," says the OU's Reader in Creative Writing Linda Anderson, and the courses' advice about the structure of plot, character development and other essentials that simply wouldn't occur to most fledgling writers suggests she's right. You may need a muse, but you must also have what the course authors describe as "the clear-headed thinking of a mathematician" to bring all the components together and make the most of your talent.

Students will learn many techniques to sharpen their writing – and hear them from the experts. On the CD-Rom for A176 *Start writing plays*, for instance, Ayckbourn demonstrates how he can quicken and slow the pace of a play without any stage direction

but simply through the words he uses. Tanika Gupta, best known for her play *Sanctuary*, advises on how to write better dialogue by listening to people ("I hung around bus stops listening to teenagers and being shocked how much they swore, and hearing words [slang] I'd never heard before"). And Russell teaches about the importance of visualising the setting ("If I'm setting a play in a house, I am in that house").

All six writing courses are 12 weeks long, run three times a year and offer an excellent springboard into specific types of writing. A171 *Start writing for the internet* includes interactive exercises and computer conferencing to demonstrate effective online communication. A172 *Start writing essays* includes a CD-

Rom with contributions from Richard Dawkins and Brian Walden and A173 *Start writing family history* helps students focus on the use of historical sources.

New from February 2004 are A174 *Start writing fiction*, which shows how writers get ideas and structure their thoughts, and A175 *Start writing poetry*, which explores a range of forms and techniques. A176 *Start writing plays* is available from November.

Their creators are hoping students will heed Willy Russell's advice in one of the courses to 'follow your passion and learn from everything that is around you. Immerse yourself in those who've done it and done it, in your opinion, well'.

For details visit www.open.ac.uk/courses

You may need a muse, but you must also have the clear-headed thinking of a mathematician to bring all the components together

Keeping IT secure

THE hot topic of IT security will be the subject of a new 15-point course for professionals in commerce and industry, due to launch in May.

M886 will look at how organisations can keep their vital information secure, and follows in the wake of the Enron scandal and the government's Turnbull Report which called for higher standards of information security in business.

"Information assets can make up to 95 per cent of the value of a business," said Jon Hall, chair of M886. "If a company such as Coca Cola or Microsoft can't protect their information, they will lose their market advantage."

The course, which is part of the postgraduate Computing for Commerce and Industry programme, covers all aspects of information security including hardware, software and the large amount of relevant legislation. Students do not need an IT background.

Course material includes the book *IT Governance* by Alan Calder and Steve Watkins, leading experts in the field.

For more information see www.open.ac.uk/courses

Ethical e-commerce

ONE of the OU's most popular courses is now offering students the chance to influence their natural environment through electronic communication.

T171 *You, your computer and the net*, which introduces students to computers and the internet, now includes an optional stream exploring sustainability and social justice in e-commerce.

Students will look at how the spread of computers and the internet can create new

types of commerce in which trust and reputation take over from profit. They will also get the chance to use the PlaNet weblog (<http://planetaritizen.open.ac.uk>) which aims to create a shared vision of a desirable future for the planet.

Inspiration for the course option comes from a book written by course chair Dr Gary Alexander, *e-Gaia: Growing a Peaceful, Sustainable Earth through Communications*.

Cinemas of the world

Cinemas of the World is a non-chronological account of the development of cinema in its various national and regional guises, and a comparative study of the social and cultural relationships that exist between geographically diverse film industries and genres, and the populations they serve. This is a two-way interaction encompassing not only the historical and cultural impact of society on film, but also the influence of cinema on society.

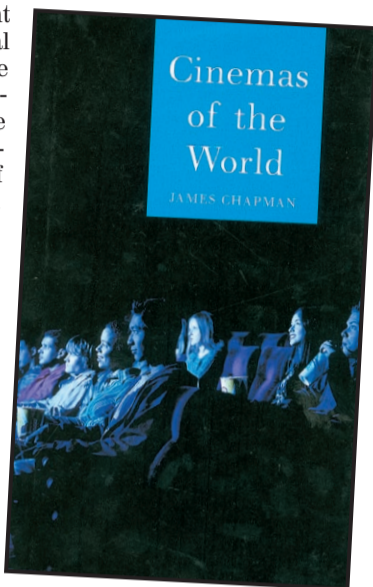
Although by no means Dr Chapman's first foray into the world of film literature (previous studies include *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-1945* [1998] and *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* [1999]), this highly accomplished and instructive volume must surely be his most wide-ranging endeavour.

A senior lecturer in Film and Television at the OU, the author's target readership is the undergraduate or graduate student of film history or the social sciences, rather than film studies' specialists or theorists. However, his subject matter has universal appeal and both presentation and writing style suggest there is much to be gained here by the general reader. This is especially true if one adopts the writer's suggestion of treating the book, 'as a series of related critical essays on film and society rather than a pure narrative history of cinemas around the world.'

An undertaking on this scale (it embraces an alphabetical ambit that stretches from Argentina to Zimbabwe) inevitably relies heavily on the published works of others, and the author readily acknowledges their valuable contributions. By bringing together often disparate strands of published knowledge into a cohesive synthesis, and by adding his own perceptive observations and analysis, Dr Chapman has conjured up a valuable and unique addition to the literature of world cinema.

Cinemas of the World, Film and Society from 1895 to the Present is published by Redaktion Books price £19.95.

Roy Henderson



Leading by the book

"THE art of leadership," said Tony Blair, "is saying no, not yes. It's very easy to say yes."

While there's no question that the British Prime Minister has single-mindedly reinvented his party, his simple evaluation of what constitutes good leadership will probably find little favour in a new book about the subject by OU Professor John Storey.

Leadership In Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends may well be the first volume to deconstruct so comprehensively the notions of what makes a successful leader and whether such attributes can be taught.

The book offers innovative ideas about what really constitutes 'leadership' and ways in which it can – and cannot –

be developed. Bringing together expert contributors, the book also critiques many of today's leadership training and development products and approaches and offers some constructive alternatives.

Leadership In Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends is published by Routledge priced £22.99.

James Milldale

Book shelf

● GOLDFINGER, the man who gave his name to the James Bond villain, is the subject of a new book by OU academic Dr Nigel Warburton.

Ernö Goldfinger did indeed lend his name to 007 author Ian Fleming, but that is but a small part of Dr Warburton's biography of a British-Hungarian architect who is equally infamous for designing the hated city tower blocks.

The book reveals a fascinating life of a man who spent his youth in Paris with Max Ernst and Georges Braque, married a Cross and Blackwell heiress and emerged as a leading figure in the Modernist movement. His designs for high-rise social housing in East and North London were so controversial that he was personally vilified for creating the social problems which resulted from tower blocks – yet since his death Goldfinger has been widely recognised as a major contributor to British architecture.

Ernö Goldfinger – the life of an architect is published by Routledge priced £30.

● THE changing face of medical practice is the theme of a new book edited by Open University Professor of Health Care Celia Davies. *The Future Healthcare Workforce* will spark debate by collating views from leading commentators and researchers on topics including the future role of healthcare assistants and the reform of professional roles.

The Future Health Workforce is published by Palgrave priced £50.

● NO other work in English, except *The Bible*, has been as widely read as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in print since 1678 – explaining the appearance of a new edition. It is edited by OU Professor of Literature Bob Owens who has his own theories about the book's continuing relevance: "The heroes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* are ordinary people striving to hold onto their beliefs in a hostile and uncomprehending world. Their story might offer consolation and inspiration to oppressed people in any society."

John Bunyan *The Pilgrim's Progress* edited by W.R.Owens, Oxford University Press £3.99

Major grant for literature

The OU's Literature department has won a major grant of £223,116 from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) for a project titled 'The Colonial and Post-Colonial History of the Book'.

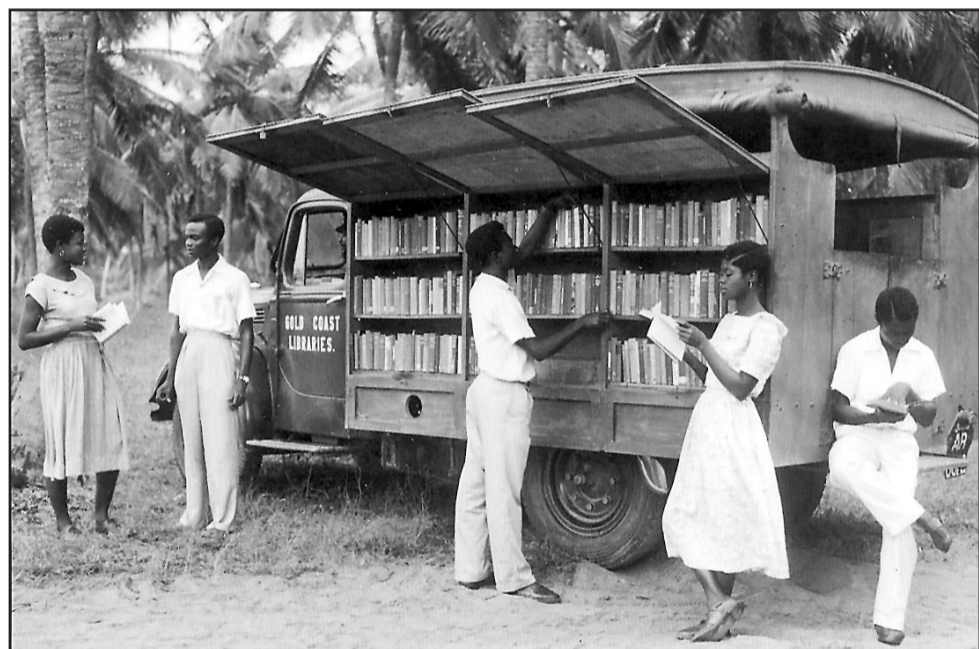
"I am delighted that AHRB has shown such confidence in us. It is a coup for the department to get such a major research award from the research body for arts and humanities," said Professor Dennis Walder, who with colleagues Dr Susheila Nasta and Professor Bob Owens applied for the grant.

The purpose of the project is to investigate book production in the Colonial and Post-Colonial period. "We plan to do a comparative study of book production in Ghana (West Africa), Cape and Natal (South Africa) and Bengal (India), looking at the roles of the missionary press and overseas-based publishers like Macmillan and Nelson, Longman, Heinemanns, OUP, and Andre Deutsch in the pre-Independence and post-Independence period," said Dennis.

The idea for the project came from the shared interests of the Book History and Bibliography Research Group and the Post-Colonial Literatures Research Group in the department.

"We have brought together two dynamic fields of study in the project – Post-Colonial Studies and Book History. In fact, these are what make our literature degree distinctive. There is a strong thread of Post-Colonial literary study running through it and now we are encouraging students on the undergraduate level to look at book production as well," said Dennis.

AHRB described the study as 'timely and extremely valuable'. Its grant will fund the work of senior research fellow Dr Robert Fraser in researching the archives in Ghana, Cape and Natal and Bengal to find out more about how books were produced, why certain authors were published, what material conditions influenced their production, and about readers' feedback.



The first mobile library on the Gold Coast (Ghana), 1952 Courtesy of: The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum

Flipping mat

ONE of the world's best-loved pub games is about to get a lot easier after OU scientists designed a new type of beer mat – that's easy to flip!

Cider makers Strongbow commissioned a team led by Engineering Programme Board director Ian Johnston to study techniques in the traditional drinkers' pastime of balancing a mat on the edge of a table, flipping it up from underneath and catching it with the same hand.

Their studies, which involved working out mathematical equations, helped them to design the Aeromat, which is made of corrugated card with a foam centre and acetate wings. These give it a more predictable flight-path – making it easier to catch.

"The science behind dripmat ballistics is absolutely fascinating," said Ian. "We've conducted in excess of 1,000 spins to produce the Aeromat, which has a considerable advantage over standard dripmat designs."

While he and his colleagues are proud of their achievement, no-one is taking the design too seriously. After all, the machine which tested it – designed to replicate the movements of the human forearm – was called the High Energy Cardboard Kineticiser (the Flipping HECK).

Lessons from the GM dialogue

INNOGEN, the ESRC Centre for Social and Economic Research on Innovation in Genomics based at the Open University and at Edinburgh University, held its first international conference in November. It explored the big gap between the regulatory framework for GM, both present and prospective, and the concerns expressed by

many members of the public. The GM debate has highlighted the wider question of what we want from UK agriculture in the future. Where should the balance lie between productivity and biodiversity? Full report at www.innogen.ac.uk/

The Centre is currently offering two PhD studentships.

Research rewarded

By **Sheila Forman**

Research into possible landing sites for the Beagle 2 lander (see p3), and the part indigenous people play in biodiversity conservation, featured in the latest round of awards from the Association of Open University Graduates.

Each year the AOUG invites faculties to nominate a research student, whose first degree was achieved at the OU, to

receive a £400 cash prize intended to help support their work.

For 2003 the John Horlock Award went to Ashley Seabrook who has been based among the Volcano Dynamics Group in Earth Sciences. His project 'Characterisation of Beagle 2 landing sites on Mars' led to him playing a key role in establishing the possible range of surface conditions (terrain types) among which Beagle 2 was scheduled to land on Christmas Day. His work has also led to increased understanding of the nature

and history of the whole of Isidis Planitia, which is the 1000km basin containing the landing site.

The Baroness Lee of Asheridge award went to Maurizio Ferrari (Systems Discipline, Centre of Complexity and Change), who has been studying with the OU for 9 years. His research is closely linked to the work he does in promoting the role of indigenous people in biodiversity conservation.

Accepting the award on Maurizio's behalf, Jim Frederickson, Research Co-ordinator, said he was delighted to be representing Maurizio who – showing his tremendous commitment to his research – is back working in Malaysia. "Maurizio is a man of great passion who believes in involving ordinary people in all walks of life," said Jim. "He is a great ambassador for the indigenous people of any region he works in and has become an expert in his field, writing reports for the UN." Mr Frederickson added that Maurizio wished it known that he was deeply honoured and believes the OU is one of the finest and most influential universities in the world.

Jean Barnet, who has been with the OU since 1983, received the Sir John Daniel Award. She was put forward by the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, with whom she has already achieved a BA and two Masters degrees.

Jean's research explores learning and computer literacy, focusing on formal and informal learning in relation to computer technology and the workplace.



Maurizio Ferrari with his hosts, a family of Tagbanwa people on Coron Island, Philippines

Empire seminars

THE Ferguson Centre at the OU is collaborating with Bristol's British Empire and Commonwealth Museum on a seminar series called 'Conquests, Commodities and Cultures'. Taking place within the restored former boardroom of the Great Western Railway the seminars provide a platform for new research on the diversity of the British Empire. They culminate in a conference 'Trade, technologies and transnationalities within the British Empire from the 18th to the 20th century' on September 11. Further information about the seminars is available on the website www.empiremuseum.co.uk/ or by ringing 0117 925 4980.

Award for advice

THE Open University has been awarded the matrix quality standard for the provision and delivery of information, advice and guidance services through its 13 regional centres, including its careers advisory services.

Matrix is the benchmark standard which is being promoted by the Department for Education and Skills as a way of raising standards in the provision of information, advice and guidance in public and private sector organisations. It is awarded only after rigorous assessment.

Meeting on Bunyan

THE international impact of John Bunyan's work will be the theme of a conference jointly organised by the OU and De Montfort University this September. The event, from September 1-5 is being held in Bedford with its many nearby links to Bunyan's life and writing. It is open to OU students, up to 20,000 of whom have studied *The Pilgrim's Progress* on A203 *Seventeenth century England*. Bunyan's most famous work will also be a set text in a module being produced for the MA in Literature. Details www.arts.ualberta.ca/~dgay/Bunyan.htm

Competition Prizewinners

Sesame Christmas Crossword

The first correct entry drawn out of the hat in our Christmas 2003 crossword competition and the winner of £100 cash plus a *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* was: **Hugh L. Halpin** from Redcar in Cleveland.

The four runners-up, who each receive a copy of *The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* were: **Ian Ryle** from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, **Patrick Osmond** from London, **N.D. Thomson** from Lanarkshire and **June Parker** from Cumbria.

Answers Across

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. In the doldrums | 9. Antbear |
| 10. Topside | 11. Ihram |
| 12. Hairshirt | 13. Greenwich |
| 15. Tosti | 16. Husky |
| 18. Cutsadash | 20. Metacarpi |
| 23. Elfin | 24. Sfumato |
| 25. Acrilan | 26. Clandestinely |

Answers Down

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Interne | 2. Theomancy |
| 3. Earth | 4. Out with it |
| 5. Dopes | 6. Unifies |
| 7. Sheet lightning | 8. Facing the music |
| 14. Incurious | 15. To a degree |
| 17. Satsuma | 19. Awfully |
| 21. Chard | 22. Iraqi |

Reader survey results

The winner of the DVD/Video player in our readership survey draw was computing and technology student Heather Ross, from Bishop Auckland, who started studying with the OU in 2000. More than 1,500 survey forms were returned. Many thanks to all those readers who took part. Together with the results of focus groups in January, your views will help shape the future direction of the newspaper and its associated website.

Spotlight on Societies

In 1973, two years after the foundation of the Open University, a small group of students visited a production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. From these humble beginnings the London Region Arts Club was formed, and is still going strong some 30 years later.

The idea behind that first visit, students experiencing a particular text first hand and in the company of other students, has driven the club, and it continues to flourish with, at present, around 1,200 members.

A few words about our name. We are the London Region Arts Club as the majority of our visits are in and around London with its huge range of resources. But we have many members from adjoining regions and any past or present OU student is welcome.

The word Arts has changed its meaning over the years and we support the whole range of humanities courses, not only fine art, but literature, music, philosophy, history and all the other areas that the OU's humanities programme touches.

Day schools are run throughout the year by OU tutors, increasing the amount of face-to-face tuition available. Study weekends are also offered for those courses which do not have the benefit of a summer school.

Other events include readings for literature courses, tutor-led art gallery and museum visits, coach trips and weekend visits to places of interest such as Bath or Chester and overseas trips. There is also a very active Theatre Group as well as an Opera and Ballet group and an Art Discussion group.

The club element is important to us. The events are not just for academic purposes but are also opportunities for students to meet socially and compare experiences of courses.

We are always keen to gain new members, and hear suggestions for future events. Membership for 2004 is £13 for new members, and we publish a newsletter four times a year. If you wish to join us, please contact Mary Ann Tarver, 37 Balham Grove, London, SW12 8AZ

Stan Bond, Vice-Chairman, LRAC



Art historian Warren Hearnden makes a point to a group of LRAC members on a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum

Exam delay proves test of nerves

So how was it for you? *Sesame* always welcomes your firsthand accounts of OU life. In this issue **Yasmin Hamid** (right) describes an exam nightmare, while below **Kerry Davies** proves even isolation is no cure for those who love to put things off.

I will never forget the day of my exam for D831 *Environmental valuation and policy*, which will count towards an MA in Environment, Policy and Society. The exam was to take place in Harlow, even though I live near Southend-on-Sea which is the largest town in Essex. But luckily I knew a fellow D831 student who lived nearby and, most importantly, had a car.

The plan was to set off early, avoiding the school run traffic while also giving us plenty of time to mentally prepare for the exam once we reached Harlow. My friend's mum arranged time off work to act as chauffeur and for the first 30 minutes we faced clear roads and beautiful views of the Essex countryside. Ominously, we began to hit traffic shortly after turning onto the Harlow road. I remember the car crawling past a sign announcing 'Harlow: five miles'. With over an hour to go before the start of the exam I was not worried yet. After all, it wasn't going to take an hour to travel the remaining five miles, was it?

No. It took two hours!

...Possibly the hardest two hours of my life. The exam was due to start

at 10am. For me, the worst moment was at 9.50am when I realised that I would have to walk into the exam hall after the exam had started. The shame of it! I knew we had to arrive within half an hour of the start of the exam to be sure of having our exam scripts marked, so by 10.20am I was feeling pretty low. Talk in the car

When your worst fears actually come true sometimes there is no fear left to interfere with performance

turned to our radically revised exam technique – we settled on answering each question in bullet points, leaving plenty of space to fluff up the answers where time permitted.

I was now less worried by the worst exam performance of my life, and more worried about whether I would get any mark at all. While I was getting depressed, my friend was getting hysterical (well, she was

six months pregnant!).

We finally arrived in the exam hall 80 minutes late. The invigilator duly informed us that we could sit the exam if we wanted to but that our scripts may not be marked. I sat down, leaving such extravagances as spare pens and energy foods with my bag at the back of the hall.

While the first 10 minutes of my previous exam had been spent in panic-stricken amnesia, 10 minutes into this exam I had nearly finished the first question – after all, I had already travelled well beyond the 'panic barrier' on my journey to the exam. I skimmed the paper long enough to identify three questions that I could answer, and to this day have no idea what the other nine questions were. I scribbled faster than I have ever scribbled before, and even finished with enough time left to read through my answers.

Exam nerves can disable a perfectly prepared student, but when your worst fears actually come true, sometimes there is no fear left to interfere with exam performance. The OU does make allowance for exceptional circumstances with performance – so long as you submit the



Yasmin Hamid

appropriate paperwork – and my friend and I both got our precious passes. I had prepared well for this exam, but I could not have prepared

for the two-hour tailback caused by sheer weight of Monday morning traffic entering/exiting the M11 at Junction 7.

Cut off in Cambodia



Kerry and colleagues at the Provincial Hospital in Svay Rieng

I am sitting here writing this by torchlight. It is the rainy season in Cambodia and nearly every night I sit and watch a storm come over the flat rice plains to where I am working as a volunteer with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), writes **Kerry Davies**. The storm has inevitably blown the electricity – and also my chances of finishing my TMA tonight.

My role as Hospital Management Advisor involves working for UNICEF to ensure that the standards of medical care and drug use in the hospital conform to national guidelines. I am also responsible for promoting breastfeeding and infant child feeding practices as the under five mortality rates here are the highest in South-East Asia.

This work is very different to my life in the NHS in England. And it was for this reason I joined the Open University to help me work towards a change of career path. I am studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Development Management and have just finished the global online version of TUZX872 *Institutional development: conflicts, values and meanings* which I have been studying in my traditional wooden house here in Cambodia.

When I found out that I was to be working in a rural area of Cambodia, three hours drive away from any other Westerners, I thought study with the OU would be an ideal opportunity to expand my mind, to get a worthwhile qualification and help me cope with the isolation. I had visions of me studying diligently without any TV to distract me, finishing my TMAs early and revising in short sensible chunks. Well, how wrong could I be?

Week one and I laid out all my study material on the table, ticked off the contents and arranged all my heavier items strategically to

prevent my papers been blown away by the fan. Good start. I decided to reward myself with a small gin and tonic to keep the malaria away, read the newspaper, then the electricity went off. Oh well, there was still plenty of time.

Week two and the temperature soared to 39 degrees Celsius. At this temperature even blinking makes you hot so there was no point in even attempting to start work. Instead I settled down to read the *Harry Potter* that had just arrived in the post. By week three I was starting to feel a bit stressed, not to mention guilty. I settled down to read my course notes

when I was interrupted by the first of seven days of amoebic dysentery (very common here). I was forced to travel three hours to Phnom Penh to see my GP. My stress levels started to soar as high as my fever.

By week four the rain had cooled the temperature down to a pleasant, almost chilly 30 degrees, my fever had subsided and I managed 12 hours study on Saturday and 10 hours on Sunday. Now I just had my TMA to submit by email. There are two phone lines in the town where I live and it seems that every time I have to submit a TMA they cease to function the day before the cut-off date.

I worked on my assignment until the electricity went off but there are some advantages to living in Cambodia: we have a three hour lunch break and we are seven hours ahead of GMT which gives me extra time to finish my assignment. The phone lines were back on and the electricity was functioning. I saw those words on the computer screen 'Your assignment has been successfully submitted' and experienced a wonderful sense of achievement.

Well that wasn't so bad, and it is a public holiday next week... I think I'll have a week off studying to celebrate.

I thought study with the OU would help me cope with the isolation

If you've got a story of OU study to share write to: *Sesame*, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA or email: sesame@open.ac.uk

How not to get your dream job

Even if you're happy in your current work, chances are at some point you'll be looking for a change. Statistics show those born between 1957-64 held an average 9.6 jobs up to the age of 36, though it slows down after that. On the grounds that everything in life that goes wrong can be turned into a learning experience, **Ellen Cocking** of the OU's Careers Service has these tips on how *not* to do it.

The Application

● *Be unfocused and unprepared*
Lack of preparation at any stage is a recipe for disaster: not only do you need to be thinking about why you want that job but also why that particular employer. Employers are likely to feel more positive about you if you demonstrate your knowledge and interest in them – unlike the candidate who applied for a job at the OU and asked why there were no students on campus.

● *Don't bother to check your application or CV*

PR Consultants Lewis found that 90 per cent of speculative applications sent to them had spelling and grammatical mistakes, one candidate chalking up 17 errors – and the fast-track to the bin. Get someone to proofread your application and don't rely on the spellchecker like the applicant who wrote 'reason for leaving – maturity leave'.

● *Adopt the scattergun approach*

Adapting the content of your application to each job is crucial. Better to put your energy into half a dozen customised applications than 100 photocopied shots in the dark. Ensure you address employers' individual requirements by giving evidence of relevant skills, rather than simply telling them everything you can do.

The Interview

● *Shake hands like a wet fish*

A recent survey by the consultancy Peninsula found one in ten interviewers take an instant dislike to an applicant if they have a limp handshake. And no matter what you say you're unlikely to be successful if your body language sends another message. Employers say they're irritated by inappropriate



Did you really mean to do that...?
Even interview disasters can be turned into learning experiences

dress, lateness and lack of eye contact.

● *Bluff and bluster*

It's unlikely you will sail through without stumbling on one question that stops you in your tracks. Rather than try and bluff your way through an answer take a deep breath and either ask for a moment to think about it or ask the employer to rephrase the question – demonstrating how you'd deal with stress in the job.

● *Don't ask questions*

The worst thing you can do is say nothing when you're asked if you have questions; at the very least you should say your questions were

answered during the interview. If you're worried about forgetting them, write them down so the interviewer knows you've thought about the job beforehand.

● *Don't get feedback*

The best way to minimise your chances in future is to do nothing when an application is unsuccessful. Return to the employer to find out why you weren't chosen – even if you're feeling angry, embarrassed or lack confidence – to see how you might improve your performance next time.

For more help on applying for jobs, visit the Career Planning

website at www.open.ac.uk/learn-ers-guide/careers and explore the section on applying for jobs, or contact your regional centre.

Other useful websites include: www.realworldmagazine.com/adv-interview.asp for its article on the ten golden rules of interviews; www.prospects.ac.uk/links/appointments the national higher education careers website with information on what employers look for, types of interview, and making online applications; and www.doc-torjob.com includes more examples of how not to compile CVs and application forms.

Picture: Getty Images

Do as I say, not as I do

I HAD to do a presentation to a panel interviewing for a family support worker and decided to use an overhead projector. I knew from past experience that these things weigh a ton so when the main panel member turned to pick it up I grabbed hold too and hit her very hard on the head with it. I was so nervous and embarrassed but I couldn't stop laughing either: somehow the effects of poverty on families doesn't have the same ring to it when said with a big grin and much giggling. They must have liked me as I got the job but I wouldn't recommend it as an interview technique!

Jayne Lewis

MY friend's brother went for his first job interview after leaving school and was asked about his keyboard skills. He said he had grade five piano. He didn't get the job.

Gemma Bessant

I TRAVELLED down to London for an important interview which seemed to go well. I felt confident until I visited the washroom on the way out. I had been reading the newspaper on the train and, in my nervous sweaty state, the newsprint must have rubbed off onto my hands – it was now all over my face!

Chemistry graduate quoted on doctorjob.com

I WAS shown to a low armchair and, being slightly challenged in the height department, when I sat down my feet didn't touch the floor. I was immediately handed the coffee that I'd previously said yes to and found myself unable to move without spilling piping hot coffee all over me. I had to sit there looking absolutely ridiculous with my feet not touching the floor, unable to reach my briefcase which contained all my notes about the company and questions to ask them. Since then I have never accepted a drink at interview and always sit on the edge of low seats.

Sheila Forman

ONE of my colleagues once found her interviewee asleep in the foyer. Getting enough sleep may be an important part of interview preparation but this is taking it too far!

Geraldine Lyons

I TURNED up for an interview for a job as a reporter on a magazine, not having ever read or seen a copy of it. I got an interview and left it rather late to get hold of a copy of said publication, and then couldn't find one anywhere. I wasn't clever enough at interview to conceal the fact I hadn't read it; I didn't get the job.

Margaret Johnson

I RAPPED firmly on the door, walked in and sat down. The interview was going brilliantly until I glanced down and noticed blood literally pouring from my knuckles. I must have cut my hand on the nameplate on the door. I froze: had the interviewer seen and – horror – had I got blood on him? Did I need stitches? I tried to mop up the blood while continuing to answer his questions. I could tell he wasn't impressed. Needless to say, I didn't get the job.

Mike Grahame quoted in Guardian Unlimited, What Body Language Says

Careers in brief...

Advantage graduates

LOOKING for work in the West Midlands? Then you may want to consult Graduate Advantage, a new 'one-stop' shop set up for job seekers by the region's universities, including the OU.

The Graduate Advantage website allows anyone with an HND or above to register their details for employers to browse, to search graduate vacancies, and to apply to its graduate placement programme offering a chance to develop skills with smaller companies. www.graduateadvantage.co.uk

Words worth noting

YOU'VE heard of power dressing, but what about power words, which could help you talk your way into the job you want.

From 'abundant' and 'ambitious' to 'resilient' and 'responsible' the list of words employers want to read has been compiled by the OU Careers Service's Jane Timms for the UK's official graduate careers website www.prospects.ac.uk/links/AppsInterviews. The site also has a useful list of phrases to use when describing your experience, to avoid repeating yourself in your application.

Facts and figures for the forgetful

Is poor memory slowing up your studies? You're not alone, says **Peter Taylor-Whiffen** – but you may find help in the unlikeliest places...

I found George III taking a shower in my house the other day. I knew it was him because he still had his clothes on.

Edward VII, meanwhile, was hammering on the toilet door, waiting for Victoria to get off the throne. Then George VI asked me where my washing machine was – and I recognised him, too, because he took ages to say “utility room”.

To say it was surreal is a right Royal understatement. But say what you like about my disturbed psyche, at least I can reel off, in order, all the English monarchs since 1066. And when you've got a memory as poor as mine, you need all the help you can get.

But I'll let you into a secret. To learn things, to retain facts you don't actually need a good memory at all.

All you need to do is to bring the facts and figures alive, turning them into something you will remember. And, say psychologists, the more bizarre your fantasy, the more chance you have of retaining the information.

When I encountered all these Royals in my house – in my imagination actually, but Edward and Wallis giggling behind a locked spare bedroom door seemed uncomfortably real to me – I made sure I met them all on a route I would normally take through my living space. That is, I saw William of Normandy gathering conkers in my front garden then encountered all his descendants in order of succession until, at the other end of the house, I went into the back garden to admonish our present Queen for letting her corgis desecrate my dahlias.

The more bizarre your fantasy, the more chance you have of retaining the information

But that's all very well, you cry – you're remembering larger-than-life personalities, but I'm trying to study dry figures. Fear not, the secret is still the same – you simply turn the facts into images or statements you won't forget. Remember, because Richard of York gave battle in vain (presumably after I'd ushered him out of my larder), we can recall the order of the rainbow colours. How many of us, when working out dates, mutter to ourselves that 30 days hath September, April, June and November?

There are hundreds of these – ‘every good boy deserves favour’ indicates notes on the musical treble staff and ‘never eat shredded wheat’ refers to points on the compass. At school we giggled at the thought of tights coming down, but we all remember to this day the difference between stalactites and stalagmites.

And we don't stop learning – my favourite recent discovery is that by asking: “May I have a large container of coffee?” and counting the number of letters in each word, I can recite the value of Pi to seven decimal places.

The glory of these memory aids is that you can make up your own – and still they stick. In an English class at school, I decided most Viennese eat marmalade and jam sandwiches under newspapers, a statement whose veracity is, to say the least, dubious. But that's irrelevant (unless, of course, you're an Austrian grocer/baker/



newsagent) because it has ever since reminded me of the order of the planets.

There are many other ways to retain and recall information. Simply writing out the vital facts from your textbook as bullet points will help you to remember, partly because your brain has processed the information by writing it down, and partly because you have now seen the same fact in two different forms – on the printed page and in your handwriting.

Experts appear to differ as to whether or not reading a statement aloud will help you remember it more clearly. Some say whispering it to yourself has as much impact as reading it twice, while others say that because the eyes process the information so quickly, the immediacy is lost by the time your lips form the words.

You can also build up a solid, weighty memory base by varying your approach to learning. As well as simply reading, try drawing charts or diagrams to prove to yourself you've understood the concept of what you have been learning. The variety will also help your brain stay fresh – few of us can concentrate on a very difficult subject for more than 20 minutes – and therefore be more

receptive to new information.

It's also important to reinforce your memory by revising what you have learned as soon as you can. Most people know you get better exam results by revising over a period of time than you do by cramming. If you've tried to learn everything in a rushed, last-minute effort your brain does not have the time to process the information, because you haven't been training it to do so. And yes, Mr Kite who taught me O-level physics, you can now say: “I told you so.”

It helps to be interested in your subject. This is why I can recall every FA Cup final goal-scorer since 1970

and it's true. Because between you and me, I can't remember.

• Further techniques and exercises to support your studies can be found on the OU's dedicated website *Learning with the OU* – www.open.ac.uk/learning

Finally, of course, it helps to be interested in your subject. This is why, to my wife's understandable exasperation, I can recall every FA Cup final goal-scorer since 1970 and every host Olympic city since 1896 – but am at a loss to recall what she asked me to do half-an-hour ago.

“Why do you need to recall these useless bits of information?” she regularly asks me, with increasing weariness. “I don't know,” I say –

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

I blame myself

moans

John

Dickson



While the gripes covered in this column are varied, a common thread tends to be that they concern forces outside the writers' control. My criticism, however, is levelled not at other students, tutors, or indeed any specific aspect of the OU. My problem, quite simply, is me.

I was fully aware when I joined the OU back in 2000 that self-discipline would be paramount to my success. But I could do it. No problem. OK, so self-discipline had not been a strength in the past, but I could change.

Four years on, my experience as an OU student is consistently characterised by frantic late-night essay-writing and pitiful grovelling to tutors in the hope of an extension.

There is invariably good intention on my part, a promise to myself that the study calendar will be adhered to this time. But alas, unforeseen circumstances arise (for instance, friends in need – of a drinking partner on their pub outings) and the study schedule slips.

Exams are a similar story, but with my self-induced stress becoming magnified to reflect the higher stakes.

September and October are not a good time for me. The chaos of my study area reaches an all-time peak, with books and notes diffusing throughout the house. And the revision plan becomes itself revised, with more and more of the reading I should have done already being re-scheduled for some point during the ever-decreasing time remaining before the big day. And then the frantic cramming in the final week, when my head comes close to exploding with the obscene volume of information it is being fed.

Who knows? Perhaps one day I will wake up and be the highly organised, super-efficient student I planned to be. However, based on my track record, I doubt it. Now, back to that overdue assignment...

John Dickson is studying for a degree in environmental studies and is hoping, if his studies teach him self-discipline, to become a freelance writer.