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Sesame

October/November 2002

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 211



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Letters

Write to: Letters, Sesame, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
e-mail: M.D.France@open.ac.uk Fax: 01908 652247. Please supply your full postal address if you want your letter considered for publication. Letters without full addresses will not be considered.

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

Why CD-ROMS have the edge

I agree with Rosalind Riley (*Sesame* 210) that "newer is not always better" but in her letter favouring video over CD-ROM she is missing some very important points.

1. Not everybody owns a VCR but there are very high chances of having access to a PC at home, at work or in a public library.
2. Many students have chosen the OU because it allows you to organise your studies around your regular work life. Many students study on the train, airport lounges or in a hotel in the evening. A laptop is normally part of their kit and they can follow the study schedule with a CD-ROM – try this with a video.

3. A video can show a clip or film. On CD-ROM often different media are inter-linked: for example a film clip with an animation where the animation has links to open documents or where the student has to choose from various options how to continue.

A CD-ROM is not just a new way to store video sequences but a media with a lot of new and enhanced possibilities which will (hopefully) be used by the course teams once each course is up for review. It gives students the freedom for flexible studies that video took away.

Olaf Lipinski Germany

Expand for our tomorrows

TODAY... my four year old grand-daughter on a 'try out' visit to her school worked on a computer.

TODAY... a visually impaired lady in her 80s at the Adult Education College passed a BBC 'online' computer test... I celebrated with her.

TODAY... just like every other day since February I exchanged emails with my tutor and fellow members of the A103 'online' pilot. Right across the educational spectrum this technology can deliver great learning.

TODAY... has been great, but what about the 'tomorrow' of next year's study? Please OU, extend and expand quickly your 'online' learning opportunities... TODAY!

Mary Fuller
Leicestershire

Going back is tough

The time has arrived for floods of information on choosing my course for next year. As usual there is advice to new students to start with a level 1 course. This is extremely valid but has prompted me to write about an experience I have had over the last two years.

When I first enrolled to study I found that a course I was interested in – SD206 *Biology: brain and behaviour* – was running for the last time. Should I take the easier introduction of DD100 *An introduction to the social sciences* and miss out on SD206, or take SD206 in the hope that I could cope with a level 2 in my first year? I tried to do both, but quickly found it was too much so after consideration I continued with SD206 and planned to return to DD100 in 2002.

I have found that since starting DD100 this year, my commitment to the subject is not as strong. I believe this is due to knowing that I can pass the higher level and finding this comparatively easy.

There is a lot of advice regarding taking on a tough level 2, but very little about the 'difficulties' of going back a level in the following years. Needless to say, I'm looking forward to tackling another level 2 next year.

Sarah Gribbin Mickleover, Derby

Letters extra – page 6

OU should spread the word to others

I was inspired to write after browsing through *Sesame* 210 and reading Mandi Holt's letter about being thankful for the OU.

I tried the conventional university system but I only lasted four months. I didn't really fit in with 'the life'.

My one wish is that I could

have discovered the OU sooner. When it was time for me to choose university courses through the UCAS system at college, not once did I hear the OU mentioned and I was not made aware of it by any of the further education teachers.

Lois Saville
Essex

Are we wasting the earth's resources?

I know that the OU encourages students to help it make economies in its consumption of paper by using online course information and registration and also putting *Sesame*

online, however the amount of paper used in the provision of course materials and press releases and all other communications with students must still be considerable.

I was wondering whether the OU is making efforts to use recycled paper wherever possible and from paper processes not involving chlorine-bleaching?

Vivien Schoneich

Bob Heasman, Head of Print Buying, replies

We have used recycled papers for the production of course books and have generally found them to be unsuitable in terms of strength and surface for printing good quality illustrations, tinted panels and two colours. Also, the de-inking process is by no means perfect, leaving tiny spots of ink on the surface of the paper. This is not a problem if a heavy coverage of ink is used in the printing process (magazines and brochures for example) but can be distracting when producing books with large margins of white areas. We are also concerned about the amounts of energy used in the de-inking process. As far as grades suitable for book production are concerned, recycled papers are more expensive to purchase than their non-recycled counterparts. We do however deliberately make extensive use of recycled materials in our outer packaging and in our envelopes.

We devote our efforts to ensuring that the papers used in Open University publications are manufactured

Grade system 'fails' us

Why are 'fail' grades handed out when someone, having done the full course, is unable to sit the exam due to bereavement or ill health? I've picked up a few of these myself and feel they unfairly penalise students who are experiencing difficulties in their personal lives.

I'm not advocating giving passes away. A letter of course completion with a note

saying 'examination: did not attend' would be fine. This would then lead a prospective employer to ask why. As it stands the word 'fail' makes them think they already know the answer and so they don't ask, and gain an entirely erroneous view of your capabilities. Could the OU please consider this and perhaps come up with something less ambiguous?

Krys Stephenson W. Yorks

Jenny Bull, Head of Examinations and Assessment, replies

If a student is unable to attend an examination, and they have applied for, and been given, a 'deferred' examination, the course result letter will indicate this, and will not imply that the student has failed the course. The course result letter will also show, for students who did not take the examination, the score they achieved on continuous assessment.

Thoughts on full-time

I was so glad to read Anita Whitehouse's letter 'Full-time success is possible' (*Sesame* 210).

I have just reserved myself onto D214 and DD201 for 2003 and was feeling apprehensive but it was reassuring to read this letter. Thank you to the writer

and for *Sesame* for printing letters that are not always in full support of the OU's practices. I think the OU is great and a far greater motivator than any of my employers.

Good luck to all part-time and full-time OU students out there.

Elaine Brown Cambridge

Creative writing on way

I have good news for Geraldine Gibson (letters *Sesame* 210), and for other students who would like to see courses in creative writing at the OU. In 2004 three short, 10 point courses at level 1 will be offered. These will be taught online, and will introduce writing poetry, fiction and plays.

Then, in 2006, as part of the Literature degree programme, we will be presenting a wide-ranging second level 60 point course on creative writing. The course will be chaired by a leading expert on the teaching

of creative writing who has just been appointed, and will offer a combination of online conferencing and face-to-face tuition.

It will be designed to attract not only students with ambitions to become writers, but students who want to enrich their wider study of literature by finding out more about the process of creative writing. We hope that a future issue of *Sesame* will carry a feature on this exciting new development, so watch this space!

Dr Bob Owens
Head of the Literature Department

just a thought

I disagree with the idea of giving a certificate on completion of each and every course.

It seems to me that such proliferation can only devalue 'genuine' qualifications. However, given that the OU started with an unnamed BA and now offers named diplomas, how about an unnamed diploma Dip (Open), as an interim qualification requiring 120 points with at least 30 at level 3?

Peter Fletcher
Ipswich, Suffolk

Anyone else feel, as I do, that it's a waste of space having just a picture on the front page of *Sesame*? It makes it look more like a 'tabloid'. I much preferred it when it had stories on the front page.

Rita Daggett
Faculty of Technology

The introduction of short courses is a great step forward – I would have to give up studying for the next few years due to other commitments but with the new science short courses it looks like I may be able to carry on doing 'bits and pieces'. However, I'm really an arts student so would suggest short courses on the life and works of various authors and artists.

Sue Knight
Defford, Worcester

It was with great sadness I noted in *Sesame* that Alison King had died. She and Martyn really were inspirational in their attempt to trek around Britain during such a difficult time. I am sure that I speak for everyone when I send my sincere condolences to Martyn.

Lisa Kerr
Enniskillen

I was very pleased to see the amount of letters printed in *Sesame* 210 in response to the letter by Laura Richardson about low grade passes.

Seeing there are other students out there who also have problems studying, like myself, but didn't feel they should be treated as failures, was uplifting.

Thank you *Sesame* for printing the not-so-high-flyers' point of view.

Tracey Croft
Cumbria

I wondered if it is possible to have an annual 'Thank you' page in *Sesame*, for any students who graduate and know they would not have made it without the help and support of family and friends. I thought it could be a special and fun way for students to express their gratitude.

Jenny Brown, Kent

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Key changes to 'ordinary' degree

The university is announcing significant changes to the structure of its Bachelors degrees, which may have an impact on your future course choices. Below, *Sesame* looks at the new 300-point 'ordinary' degree, and on page 5, the changes to the honours classification scheme.



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

The new structure for the BA and BSc degree without honours (or 'ordinary degree'), endorsed by the university's Academic Board in July, reduces the credit requirement from 360 to 300 points, but, for the first time, requires some Level 3 study. These changes come into effect for students graduating from 2004, and are designed to align the OU non-honours degree with the rest of the higher education sector.

The new credit requirement means that at least 180 points of the required 300 must be from courses above Level 1, and at least 60 points must be from one or more courses at Level 3. The current requirement is 240 points from courses above Level 1, but there is no requirement for study at Level 3.

"We know that many students who are aiming for the degree without honours have included some Level 3 material in their studies; for many of them, therefore, there will be no need to change their study plans," says Tony Barker, Assistant Registrar (Awards and Ceremonies).

stepping stone

"However, if students were expecting to complete a programme of study leading to a BA or BSc without honours that does not include any credit at Level 3 – and they were not expecting to complete this until the end of 2004 or later – they will need to consider their study plans so that they meet the requirements of the new structure. If they would like some help, we recommend that they talk to an adviser at their Regional Centre in the first instance."

Dr Linda Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Awards) has commended the new structure as a sensible change, providing a logical academic and credit transition between the degree without

honours and the honours degree. It will create a stepping stone from a requirement of 60 points at Level 3 for non-honours to 120 points at Level 3 for honours. She told *Sesame*: "The existing non-honours degree has set high standards and provided an important benchmark of quality in an era when there was no defined national framework. But it is now time to move on and align ourselves with the rest of the sector and the new credit guidelines for the qualifications.

wide consultation

"We have worked closely with faculties and schools, with OUSA and with our registry to ensure that the new regulations are sound and acceptable. Consensus was reached in the Qualifications Framework Group, which has student representation, and there has been wide consultation in the university.

She added: "I am aware that for a few students who are towards the end of their non-honours studies there could be a feeling of disappointment. Some of their Level 2 studies will not, from the end of 2004, be able to be counted towards the OU degree without honours. However, we have phased in this change as far as possible and I am sure that few or no OU students will view this in a negative light."

new structure

The new regulations for the ordinary degree will be in place, subject to confirmation by the University Council, in March 2003, with the new award structure coming into effect for students graduating at the end of 2004 and later.

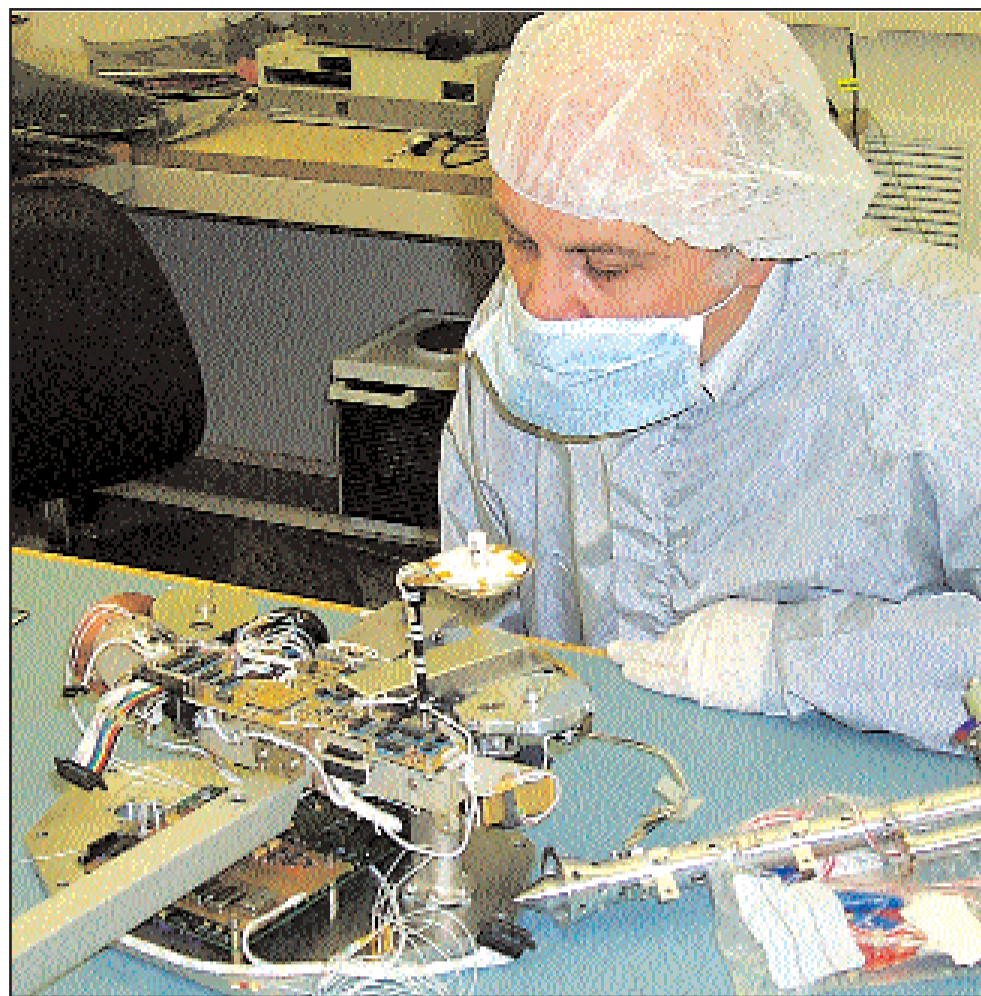
If you are currently studying towards the BA or BSc degree without honours, these are the key points to bear in mind:

- You can complete your programme of study under the current regulations, either at the end of 2002 or the end of 2003.

- If you do not complete your studies until the end of 2004 or later, you will come under the new structure. The only exception to this implementation date is for students with particular combinations of OU study and old awards of transferred credit who were given until the end of 2004 to graduate under the old arrangements set out in section 8.7 of the *Student Handbook*.

- If you have an award of transferred credit towards the BA or BSc degree, you might need to note that the rule that sets down the minimum amount of credit required from Open University undergraduate-level courses – 120 points – has not changed. If you expect to graduate BA or BSc without honours under the new 300 point structure, you will be unable effectively to use more than 180 points of transferred credit.

For enquiries contact the Awards and Ceremonies Centre on 01908 653003, email: AACO-GEN@open.ac.uk



Work starts at the OU's new aseptic assembly facility

Yet another giant leap for Beagle 2

An OU-led mission to find evidence of life on Mars took another giant leap forward in July as engineers started assembling the Beagle 2 lander.

The build is taking place in a specially constructed aseptic assembly facility at Walton Hall. Said lead scientist Professor Colin Pillinger: "The assembly room will keep Beagle

2 free of terrestrial micro-organisms and other forms of contamination. In less than six months Beagle 2 will be leaving the UK to join up with the European Space Agency's Mars Express satellite. We hope when it arrives on Mars at the end of next year we will finally be able to answer the eternal question: is there, or was there, life on Mars?"

OU's highest ever place in UK league

The OU has scored two top tens in the annual university league tables published by national media.

In the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, published at the beginning of August, the university was placed in sixth position. A week earlier the *Daily Telegraph* placed the OU ninth.

Both league tables are based on similar data: the teaching quality assessment results. Carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the assessments rated teaching quality as 'excellent' in 18 of the 25 OU departments looked at.

This is the university's best result to date, having been placed 13th by the *Telegraph* in 2001 and

10th in 2000.

In the THES, whose table is based on average scores in teaching quality assessment rounds from 1995-2001, the OU is separated by little more than half a point from the leader, York. Cambridge, Oxford, Warwick and Loughborough also make it into the top five, with the OU tying for sixth place with Essex.

"It is good to see the OU yet again topping the league tables for the quality of our teaching," PVC (Strategy, Planning and Partnerships) Geoff Peters said.

"These results confirm the view the Open University is the most revolutionary idea in higher education since universities emerged in Europe more than 800 years ago.

"The OU has managed to



Geoff Peters, PVC (Strategy, Planning and Partnerships)

combine the highest quality teaching with the most open access policy. Thirty years ago everyone thought that quality and exclusivity were somehow linked. Now we all know differently."

According to UCAS, the universities' admissions service, such league tables are having a big impact on where students choose to study – despite healthy wariness of statistics. "With few exceptions, universities at the bottom of the table have suffered a slump in applications," *Telegraph* education editor John Clare reported.

New rules for honours degree classification

The OU has announced changes in the way it works out the final classification of honours degrees. The changes mean that from the end of 2002 the system will be 'fairer for students with large awards of transferred credit' and enable grades from courses of less than 30 points above Level 1 to count towards the classification, according to Tony Barker, Assistant Registrar (Awards and Ceremonies).

He told *Sesame*: "The classification scheme translates student performance at course level into an overall class of Bachelor's honours degree. It is one of the university's fundamental measures of academic quality and as such changes are not undertaken lightly."

"However, in recent years this scheme – relying on 240 points of OU study above Level 1 in 30-point 'chunks' has become

increasingly difficult to fit with new OU short courses and a growing number of students bringing more than 120 points of transferred credit to their OU honours degree."

classification

Said Tony: "Under the new arrangements your honours degree classification will be based entirely on the grades you get in your OU or collaborative scheme courses that have been specified for that purpose above Level 1. If you have transferred credit, you will no longer have any 'assumed, default' grades to make up for 'missing' OU work."

He added: "The best grades you get in all this work, up to 240 points, will be used regardless of the point value. For example, 10 point courses that are graded can count. As now, within the minimum of 360

credit points required, you must have obtained at least 120 points of work on OU or collaborative scheme courses at Level 3 to get an honours degree."

A leaflet explaining the changes in more detail will shortly be available and the university is currently building a website to help students part way to their honours degree to forecast the effect of their performance in particular courses on their overall classification.

Said Tony: "The current scheme has been used for many years, and has been widely endorsed as a fair and accurate reflection of performance that is in line with that used in other UK universities. The new scheme is designed to confirm these standards and it is very unlikely that any student will be disadvantaged. Indeed, for the vast majority, the changes will produce exactly the same result as the previous scheme."

Access Centre will fill gap

Disabled students and potential students are benefiting after the opening of an Open University Access Centre – where their specialist technology needs are assessed.

Staff at the centre carry out assessments to identify the specialist technology and other support disabled students need. The centre also offers training to students in using that technology.

The new facility serves students and potential students in an area bounded by Birmingham, Cambridge, London and Bristol.

At its official opening, Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley said the centre was a valuable extension to the already high level of support the university offers to disabled students.

The centre forms part of the Centre for Assistive Technology and Enabling Research. CATER head Ralph Keats said: "The area that the OU Access Centre will cover has few access centres and other recognised needs agencies and should therefore help to plug a gap in national provision."

Staff plan to extend the service offered by the centre to the region's employers and other organisations that are seeking to improve work and training opportunities for disabled people.



The Vice-Chancellor uses video-link to invite Northants student Sophia Chandler to become the new centre's first user

Partnerships office for US

The Open University is winding down its American operation, USOU, blaming low student numbers and the increasingly difficult conditions of entry into the US higher education market.

But the university plans to establish a US Partnerships Office to capitalise on the high level of interest in partnering with the OU and incorporating OU courses into US university programmes.

USOU was set up as a separate body from the British OU, but using OU methods and courses, with some adaptations for the American market. It took its first students in 2000.

The university says the US recession, and the difficulties of being a 'foreign institution' in a country where UK credentials do not carry such weight, contributed to a slow growth in

student numbers. Current USOU students will continue their studies until the end of the academic year.

The university should not treat the USOU experiment as a failure but something to learn from, says Vice-Chancellor Brenda Gourley. It has gathered a lot of experience in adapting OU courses, assessment and developing partnerships with other institutions, she says.

"In striving to meet the demands of American students, who are pretty demanding in terms of speed and quality of online services, USOU has developed some novel approaches."

The OU's international arm, OU Worldwide, will be responsible for the US Partnerships Office which was approved by the university's governing body, Council, in July. The office will seek ways in which the OU can work with US higher education institutions.

Fellowship accolade

The OU's Professor of Geography Doreen Massey has been elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

Fellowship is awarded to up to 35 academics each year, all of whom are elected for distinction and achievement in their field.

Doreen is the second OU academic to be elected. Professor Ruth Finnegan is already a Fellow of the British Academy, established 100 years ago to promote humanities and social sciences, recognise excellence and support and publish research.

Book success at 13

Award-winning graduate Jacqui Jackson's family is celebrating another success with the publication of a remarkable book by 13-year-old Luke Jackson.

Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome: A User Guide to Adolescence (Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2001) not only aims to help other youngsters live with this challenging and often-misunderstood condition, but "will change attitudes and replace bleak despair with insight and laughter", according to expert Tony Attwood, who wrote the foreword. In 2001 Luke, from Blackpool, celebrated with his mum Jacqui when she won the Sir John Daniel Award for OU graduates who have overcome difficult personal circumstances.

E-learning awards

Peter Bentley from the Shell Learning Centre in Holland has become the first winner of a new award for an outstanding contribution to corporate e-learning. The Centre provides a full portfolio of online courses for staff around the world, including business, management, commercial and interpersonal skills. The award, which will now be presented annually, was made by the OU's corporate arm, COROUS. More information at: www.corous.com, or call 01908 659570.

AL editor of *Irish Pages*

Associate lecturer Chris Agee is editor of a new biannual journal of contemporary Irish and international writing, *Irish Pages*. According to Chris, a tutor on D214 The United States in the twentieth century, "The journal is the first major new literary magazine in the north for a generation." With an editorial stance which is 'non-partisan, non-sectarian... and wholly independent', the journal's launch edition features contributors including Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Wendell Berry and Cathal Ó Searcaigh.

Short courses for OUBS

Four short courses aimed at managers who want to update their skills have been launched by the Open University Business School. The courses, which run for three months, are *Managing*, *Managing people*, *Managing finance and information*, and *Managing customers and quality*. While they are available on a stand-alone basis, those who complete all four and pass an exam for each course qualify for the Professional Certificate in Management. For further information call 08700 100311 or visit: www.open.ac.uk/oubs

How green are your studies?

Studying with the OU consumes on average 90 per cent less energy than studying at a conventional campus.

That is the finding of new OU research which also reveals distance learning courses produce 90 per cent fewer climate-changing carbon dioxide emissions. "The better environmental performance is mainly due to a reduction in the amount of student travel, economies of scale in use of the campus site and the elimination of much of the energy consumption of students' housing," says Technology Professor Robin Roy, who undertook the research with Dr Stephen Potter and Karen Yarrow.

paper consumption

However, the team found e-learning courses may not offer any environmental advantages over print-based courses because of high student use of computing, consumption of paper for printing web-based material and extra home heating during night-time internet access. Copies of the full report *Towards Sustainable Higher Education* are available price £25 by calling 01908 653970, or emailing a.s.swain@open.ac.uk.

Spotlight on OU Societies

FUSION unites physicists

Nine OU students were among a 38-strong party which visited CERN, the world's largest particle physics research centre, near Geneva, in June. The accelerator is currently being upgraded and, after a short talk, the group was taken to the construction site of the Compact Muon Solenoid (CMS), one of the four huge new particle detectors being built as part of the upgrade. At 12,000 tonnes, 20 metres long and 14 metres wide, CMS clearly gives a new meaning to the word 'compact'!

The nine were all members of FUSION, the Open University Physics Society, which was formed in January 2001 and now has over 400 members. While in Geneva, they met up with fellow member Jorge Sanchez, who works at CERN. As well as Jorge, the society has members in Austria, Belgium, Holland, Cyprus and the Ukraine, and one whose address is simply 'HMS Cattistock'; plus of course members throughout the UK and Ireland, including 21 tutors. It is also well represented in the OU's Physics and Astronomy Department, with eight research students and 19 members of staff, including the head of department, Bob Lambourne.

Members receive a quarterly newsletter, which includes articles on cutting-edge physics, departmental news, history of physics, staff profiles, and details of events organised by the society. These have included, to date, visits to the Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire, London's Science Museum, the Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory near Cambridge, and Jodrell Bank, and there are plans to go to Sellafield and the nuclear fusion research centre at Culham, Oxfordshire. There is also a FirstClass conference and a website (www.oufusion.org.uk).

FUSION members rub shoulders with physics students from other universities through NEXUS, the Institute of Physics' student wing, which co-ordinates activities for physics students all over the UK and Ireland (such as the CERN trip), and is affiliated in turn to the International Association of Physics Students. NEXUS is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and is running a Best Physics Society competition, which FUSION has entered.

FUSION works closely with the Department of Physics and Astronomy, helping to promote dialogue between staff and students, and to increase the profile of physics throughout the university. It is currently planning a practical weekend for students of S381 *The energetic universe* which will probably be held early in 2003 at a UK observatory.

The society is open to any OU student, tutor or member of staff who is interested in physics. Membership costs £5 a year, and there is a special rate of £12 for those who wish to become student members of the Institute as well. A membership form can be downloaded from the website, or you can order one by calling 01273 505550.



FUSION members and other students at Cern, Geneva

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

Letters extra

Write to: Letters, Sesame, The Open University,
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
e-mail: M.D.France@open.ac.uk Fax: 01908 652247.

Summer school allocations not sensible

The course I am doing has a compulsory summer school. I consider myself extremely lucky that being retired I can attend anywhere at practically any time. However others from Brussels are not so lucky. Not only were their requests ignored as far as choices were concerned, but we have longer journeys involving either air flights or

boat and train journeys.

Everyone seems to have been sent to Stirling, involving long complicated trips. Why can't a few places for overseas students be reserved at more accessible places beyond the first day for enrolment? We didn't get the necessary information in time to enrol on the first day.

Fredericka Beets
Haubourdin, France

I too have been the victim of the illogical A103 summer school.

If OU will not take account of geographical considerations, then some thought must be given to the cost to the student of travelling to compulsory summer school. National Rail allows mature students to obtain Young Persons Railcards so long as their course is for a minimum of 15 hours per week and 20 weeks per year – but OU will not participate in the scheme. I must therefore pay a train fare of £50 out of scant resources.

I look forward to hearing that this anomaly is being addressed with some urgency.

Meg Corrick
Bridgwater, Somerset

Tessa Holroyde, Head of Residential Schools, replies

Residential school venues are selected partly on location, but also because of the academic facilities they offer. Although we do our best to respond, there is not always space to accommodate everyone's preference.

Allocations are processed first come, first served, because experience shows it is difficult to predict who will want to attend where and this seems the fairest

approach. We try hard to ensure a level playing field for overseas students by providing web and telephone booking options, and sending their forms out first.

The Young Person's Railcard scheme is run independently by the rail companies. They set the rules on what constitutes full-time education, which unfortunately does not include the majority of OU students.

Tell us about course changes

Since the introduction of named degrees by the Open University, I have planned my degree course so as to qualify for the BSc/BA (Hons) European Studies.

At that time I already had the 60 points from modern languages required by the prospectus, and my subsequent courses including the compulsory Level 3 course for which I have already registered and which became available only from 2003, have been taken from that list.

I now find the Open University 2002/2003 prospectus states that 120 points in modern languages are needed for this degree. Not only has the OU apparently changed the ground rules, they have failed to notify existing students. This represents a breach of trust with existing students and undermines their considered decisions.

Keith Turner Hants

Having received the course descriptions for next year I am enjoying reading through and trying to plan my future studies. There is, however, one thing which is always annoying, and that is the courses that are presented for the last time. It is rarely clear what this actually means.

Next year, for example, is the last year for A206 *The enlightenment*. I find it hard to believe that such a popular course, on such a central topic, is going to completely disappear. Surely there will be an updated version, or something similar. But how can I know? Should I view next year as my last chance to study the topic?

In a few cases, the course descriptions do provide information about future plans – most notably in the languages faculty. But for the most part we are left guessing. I'm sure the OU has problems sorting out all its future plans, just like the rest of us. So if it included a lot of caveats about dates not being certain, and contents subject to change, I wouldn't complain. But I'm sure I'm not the only one who would find planning my future studies far easier, if I had some clue as to what the course providers were planning to offer me.

Paul Johnson Bristol

My letter concerns the replacing of course U206 with course U216 *Environment*. I was scarcely able to contain my disbelief and disappointment when I began reading the 'changed' course descriptions to learn that my intended course for next year requires potential students to have a home computer as well as access to the internet. I do not even have a British Telecom land line or plug-in phone socket.

To my mind, this is indeed offering a similar course for 2003 as promised, but it also radically alters the opportunities for some students to be able to choose this course at all. Such a fundamental change as this one should at least have been hinted at.

Colin Baker Gwent

Sue Rippon, Office for Curriculum and Awards, replies

We realise that most students are planning their route towards their chosen award and we try to give as much notice as possible of changes to awards. Normally, when a change limits choice, students who are linked to the award are notified of the change and the transition arrangements as soon as possible after the change has been agreed. Unfortunately, in the case of BA/BSc (Hons) European Studies, an error meant that

the information appeared in the prospectus before a letter was sent to individual students. For new courses, planning and production can span several years and changes to content and structures may take place during this period. We try to avoid raising expectations until we are sure of the details. This is usually a year before the date of first presentation – which is when the information appears in the prospectus.

Distance is normal

I did my Bachelors degree at the University of Liverpool and wanted to start a Masters degree in psychological research methods right after graduation.

I did not because I was tired of being broke and wanted to get some work experience. I regretted many times that decision because I could have done in one-year full-time study what I have done with the OU in five years.

My regrets vanished when my efforts were recognised and I got my dream job working as a European Research Officer for a charity organisation working on drugs in prisons. The last five years gave me the time I needed to find myself, my interests and gain some experience.

I got this job thanks to my studies with the OU, not my full-time work experience as a marketing executive. The BA is important but I graduated in 1995, so it is a bit outdated and my boss was more interested in my studies with the OU, which concentrated on research methods and research projects.

I am from Brussels and, even there, employers now know about the OU and take it seriously. Moreover, distance learning has become a 'normal' way of gaining further knowledge and qualifications.

Laetitia Hennebel London

OU an advantage on job applications

I always look forward to my copy of *Sesame* and enjoy the letters page as I live too far away to attend tutorials and have no contact with other students to share experiences.

Unfortunately I am physically unable to work now but a few years ago I applied for a job and was given an interview. I was one of seven selected out of over 500 applicants and thought perhaps it was to show that disabled people were not being discriminated against. Imagine my delight when I

was told that that information had been withheld and it was because I was studying with the OU and they appreciated the discipline and commitment required.

My daughter is an admissions officer at a well-known university where preference is given to applicants with previous study with the OU. Perhaps there is some other reason why some OU students are not making the desired progress in their careers.

Edna Doswell
Winkleigh, Devon

News

Social policy degree to go in 2006

The university has announced it is withdrawing the BA/BSc (Honours) in Social Policy degree at the end of 2006. Students who have been contacted with news of the decision by the Dean of Social Sciences.

The move is a response to the introduction of UK-wide benchmarking statements by the Quality Assurance Agency, intended to standardise the content and approach of universities' named awards, Sub-Dean Peggotty Graham told *Sesame*.

"The current Open University degree in social policy is innovative in that it combines a number of theoretical and professional practice-based issues across the fields of social policy, health

and social care," she explained. "This distinctive interdisciplinary approach is central to the faculty's overall course provision but is not mirrored by the guidelines in the benchmarking statements.

"Rather than adjust this approach, the faculty has decided that it will cease to offer the degree in four years time."

resits

Those sufficiently advanced in their studies to complete the degree requirements by the end of 2006 will still be able to receive the award and there is provision for resits in 2007. Those who do not expect to be able to

complete by then are being advised they may wish to consider the BA/BSc (Honours) *Social Sciences with Social Policy* (B06).

Said Peggotty: "This degree contains the same core courses in social policy but also provides a wider choice of 'core electives' from across the social sciences." Full details of this award can be found in the undergraduate qualifications newspaper *Certificates, diplomas and degrees* and on the OU's courses and qualifications website.

Anyone with questions about their eligibility or wishing to discuss course choice in the light of this announcement can contact the Awards and Ceremonies Centre on 01908 653003, or email: AACO-GEN@open.ac.uk .

Kiev chums linked by OU

OU students are often pleasantly surprised to find their colleagues are also studying, but it was a shock for Jackie Connor – she works in Kiev.

The British Embassy worker was interested to learn at least three of the people she knows in the Ukrainian city are also taking OU courses.

Jackie is following an international studies profile; Nicole Davison is just moving on from an Openings course to A103 *An introduction to the humanities*; a workmate's wife, Christine Pert, is studying science and astronomy... and their Ukrainian colleague Olga Sandakova is doing an MBA.

"We have one mail bag to and from London per week, so it is always quite full with OU material," says Jackie, who is working as a secretary in the Embassy's consular and visa section until 2004.

"I had considered studying with the OU for many years but had never thought myself clever enough. When I did well in an Openings course it gave me the confidence to start a degree this year."

Because her studies are relevant to her work, the Foreign Office has sponsored Jackie for 50 per cent of her costs. Nicole, a political secretary, also admits taking a long time to make up her mind.

She said: "My partner started doing an OU course and I realised how much more modern it has become. The brochure made it sound attractive and it was clear that there was a good support network so I took the plunge."

The support network is, as every OU student knows, important in making such study workable – but it becomes vital in a country where phone lines have a habit of going down without warning.

"I study in a completely isolated way," admitted Christine. "I have no tutorials and tutor contact is limited. This is difficult in the run up to exams where previous papers with answers would be invaluable for my revision – but they are impossible to come by."

Jackie said email has become a crucial tool. "I was worried about not being able to attend tutorials at first but I can send messages electronically to my tutor."

Despite the telephone system's vagaries Olga tries to log



Pictured (l-r) Christine Pert, Nicole Davison, Jackie Connor and Olga Sandakova

on regularly to get in touch with fellow students. "I use the conference facilities and I like them," said the programme officer whose courses are paid for by her employer, the Department for International Development.

All of the students report they are progressing well but all would appreciate one more thing to make their lives easier.

"I'd like to be able to send TMAs by email," said Nicole. "Our outward bags to the UK leave on a Monday so it's important to bear this delay in mind when writing your assignments."

Added Jackie: "The TMAs all get to the UK via diplomatic bags. I am usually a little late with submitting my assignments – but fortunately my tutor is very understanding..."



New home for London Region

After 25 years at Parsifal College in West Hampstead the London Regional Centre has moved to Camden Town.

The striking new four-storey building (pictured left) on Hawley Crescent close to Camden Town tube station provides reception, meeting and café facilities and a small garden at ground-floor level with two further floors of offices and a basement available for training, storage and some car parking.

It is hoped the new centre will provide a more accessible resource for students, enquirers and the local community. A launch event, when students and prospective students will get the chance to drop in and see faculty displays, course materials and children's entertainments, is planned for Saturday November 30.

News in brief

Open Day winners

The Alumni Association has announced the winners of a range of competitions run for Open Day by its partner organisations.

Amanda Day from Bristol will be enjoying a weekend break worth £150 with Choice Hotels after successfully completing the Alumni Jigsaw Trail. Mr D Woolley from Loughborough won a Nicam portable TV with DVD and surround sound in a draw hosted by Norwich Union Insurance. Beneficial Bank awarded a £100 hamper to Mr Bates from Milton Keynes, and a Crayola drawing case to Nicky Marshall in competitions to mark the launch of its new platinum credit card. And a crate of fine wine from Fortnum and Mason went to Mr T McKay, also from Milton Keynes, courtesy of Hamilton Direct Bank. Finally, all entrants in the RSPB's colouring competition, attending Open Day to promote green electricity, won bird calendars and magazines.

OUBS Annual Lecture

Leading researchers in e-commerce are set to explode the myths, examine the reality and explore the future for the dot.com sector at OUBS's 2002 Annual Lecture. Speakers include OUBS's Dr David Barnes presenting the latest research into how companies are using e-commerce, internet entrepreneur Dr Simon Murdoch asking 'is e-business still relevant after the dotbombs?', and Gary Jesson, Managing Director of e-Financial Management, talking about developing innovative web-based services. The event takes place at the CBI's Centre Point headquarters on October 15 with tickets, price £25, available from Nicola Mitchell on 01908 652097 or at N.Mitchell@open.ac.uk.

Sample our accounting

Aspiring accountants can get a flavour of the OU's Certificate in Accounting programme by registering for a series of six free online course samplers. The materials are sent direct to enquirer's PC or laptop by registering on the Open University Business School website at: www.open.ac.uk/oubs Samples are also available for the Business School's MBA, Professional Diploma and Professional Certificate in Management, and the MA in Marketing.

Singapore relations

The OU's relationship with its Singapore partners entered a new phase with the granting of 'unconditional accreditation' to the Singapore Institute of Management's Open University Degree Programme. Accreditation from Open University Validation Services will allow SIM to take greater ownership of course material development and assessment, enabling it to better meet the needs of the Singapore market through the tailoring of courses and qualifications. To mark the shift SIM officially relaunched itself in July as Singapore Institute of Management – Open University Centre.

New NHS webpage

A new chapter in the OU's relationship with TV has opened with the creation of a website to support a peaktime series made by the BBC's political documentary team.

Viewers of BBC2's hard hitting investigation of the NHS, *The Service*, have been directed via the web to a specially created OU/BBC website – the first time the OU has been so clearly linked to a series it did not commission.

But the site's value to the university is broader than simply marketing, according to Mick Jones, Sub-Dean in the School of Health and Social Welfare, who believes it has great potential in adding value for OU students.

He told *Sesame*: "We first became interested in the series because it seemed to offer an opportunity to use footage we would never normally get access to: hundreds of hours of stories of what is happening on the ground."

"The lead time on courses means the material is always out of date for an area as volatile as health policy, so we began to discuss keeping the site live after the programmes finished so we could use it to send our students news and updates."

modernisation

Courses which are likely to link to the site include K203 *Working for health*, K302 *Critical practice in health and social care* and K307 *Managing health and social care*, Mick said.

"I am keen we do more of this kind of thing enabling us to route students to a site where they can see how the NHS modernisation developments are going."

Said Fiona Kerr of the BBC's Interactive Team: "The site features not only informed articles on the current status of the NHS but also a set of systems thinking tools that the Faculty of Technology kindly allowed us to adapt to an NHS case. They're highly interactive learning devices, and well worth a look."

Support

Friends united in study

For six of this year's new graduates there were at least that number of reasons for their study success. All were part of a self-help group formed when they met on the arts foundation course – and which helped them through the usual ups and downs of lifelong learning. Below, *Sesame* finds out how the 'study buddies' managed to stick together and how their partnership helped them. Plus we have some tips and suggestions for those interested in following their example.

“We had the OU in common, so we always had something to talk about,” said Janet, who graduated alongside 'study buddies' Yvonne, Babs, Daphne, Caroline and Paul at the London ceremony in June. A seventh member of their self-help group, Doreen, will graduate in 2003.

It was seven years earlier, as the arts students anticipated a lonely summer with no tutorials to look forward to, that the idea for a self-help group was born. Someone passed around a sheet of paper on which those that were interested were invited to write their phone numbers.

“Our first meeting was arranged in a pub round the corner from Kingston College where we were studying. Quite a few people turned up and we all got on pretty well,” recalled Janet.

The second meeting had to be a bit more organised so Janet offered to host it at her house. They knew the idea of self-help groups wouldn't suit everyone's study-style, but 14 people turned up. “I was a bit daunted at first, I

thought I might be a bit too old – but how wrong I was,” said Doreen, now 64. “We discussed the course to date, then cracked open the first (of many) bottles of wine – and got on famously.”

From then on the group quickly became study buddies, getting together most weeks to discuss coursework.

“We were a friendly group,” said Doreen. “If someone talked about their interpretation of something in the course book which seemed way off the mark, no-one would say 'that's wrong'. Someone would say 'I'm not sure that's the way I understand it' and we would all study the passage again, which meant every one of us was able to understand it better.”

discussion

Even more importantly, TMA questions were discussed before they each embarked on their individual effort.

The group took turns to host meetings “creating a very relaxed and informal atmosphere”, said Babs. “One of the hardest things



Graduation day at the Royal Festival Hall – pictured are: (back row, l-r) Doreen Hazeldine, Daphne Tonna-Barthet, Yvonne Fraser (front row, l-r) Caroline Dorrell, Babs Smithson, Paul Riches and Janet Donin

for me, studying with the OU, was spending a whole weekend on my own, writing the assignments. However, having people I could call on for a bit of encouragement helped me to complete all 42 assignments over the six years.”

But studying together was only part of the support the group offered each other. Explained Yvonne: “We organised several trips to course-related venues such as the National Gallery. And as the years went on, the afternoon trips stretched into long weekend trips to Europe.” Added Caroline: “While studying *A318 War, peace and social change*, we visited WW1 areas and some memorial sites in France, and I even managed to find the grave of one of my ancestors.”

“Doing these social trips made it much easier on my home life,” said Doreen. “Spouses and partners came with us, so they too began to feel part of the course.”

benefits

It helped that the students all lived on the south-west outskirts of London, in a line from Wimbledon to Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. After the first year, though, some of the group went off to do their own courses. “But we know, from having kept in touch with them, that they'd experienced so much benefit from group efforts many formed their own groups on their new course,” said Paul.

From the early meetings developed a core of seven study buddies with others coming and going through the six years. Most had a good idea, from the start, of four or five courses they knew they wanted to do in order to complete the degree, but were unsure about the other two. Continued Paul: “Generally, we found that we were interested in the same things. We didn't control each other's choices. Caroline, for example, did a different final course from the rest of us – but Daphne chose one course over another just because everyone else was doing it.”

One other area where the group's support was invaluable was residential schools.

“It was really valuable to have others who knew what you were going through,” said Caroline.

She recalled the end of one day at residential school when she told Daphne that she really felt like giving up. “We were sitting having a beer and there were quite a few students around. Daphne said 'hands up those who have seriously felt like giving up their OU studies.' Every single person raised their hand and it made us all smile.”

Most of the group graduated this June, organising it so that they could graduate at the same ceremony – three with first class honours and two with 2.1s.

support

Said Daphne: “Because all the families have got to know each other, the support was fantastic. When we went up to get our awards the cheering was seven-fold!” Although Doreen is not graduating until next year she was there to support her buddies – and says it gave her a boost realising what she has to look forward to next year – when the group will turn up to support her.

Daphne believes team spirit motivated the group to its excellent results. “Getting through six years studying with the OU is not easy, but I cannot imagine what it would have been like to study on my own, and I wonder if I would have even completed the course,” she said.

“You need to be brave to kick off a group in the first place – I had to really want to phone those strangers on the list. It takes a bit of nerve and determination to set something like this up, and then until it becomes established you've got to really work to keep it going. But it was all worth it – my study buddies made the OU a great experience, and I have made some great new friends.”

How to help yourself to self-help

Our research shows that students who get together can find the mutual support as helpful as support from their tutors. So link up with other students if you can. There are various ways:

- Your tutor will be happy to help – probably at the first tutorial. If you can't get to that give your tutor a ring anyway.

- Some regions have systems for putting people in touch – usually a form (what else?) which you can complete. Give them a ring.

- If you're currently on a course then a good way of linking up is to see if there are other people on your course going on to the same future course.

- If you're on FirstClass then

there are the OUSA course conferences in which you can virtually meet up – Campus Map > OUSA > OUSA Study Rooms. If there isn't currently a conference for your course OUSA will set one up. If you want to link up one-to-one with someone then go to 'Find A Friend' – Campus Map > Info Centre > CC Fair > Find a Friend.

Ormond Simpson

A way through the web

The OU is making more resources, services, advice and support available electronically all the time. But like the worldwide web itself, the sheer volume of information can be confusing. So to help you find your way through the web, here's *Sesame's* poster-sized guide to the sites you're most likely to need during the course of your studies – for your notice-board or wall.

● **STEP 1:** Using the web addresses below will take you straight to most of the sites, but you should also bookmark your own student home page –

www.open.ac.uk/students – from where all the sites below are accessible. This is your gateway to your personal record, as well as to other important sources of information and guidance such as: course-related and faculty sites, buying set books, the full range of learners-guide resources, IT sites like advice on choosing an internet service provider, and the OU community including jobs at the OU.

If you sign on using your OU computer user name you can get more personal information such as your

personal study record, the online student handbook, plus access to the FirstClass conference system. FirstClass is an entire online community, offering you the chance to meet other students, tutors and staff via hundreds of discussion groups or 'conferences'. These include everything from conferences for your course to the OUSA common room where there is a vast range of social conferences to choose from. OUSA also runs conferences on residential schools and offers support through its peer support online service.

You choose: you can reach all of these sites with one click on your student home page, or type in the addresses below

OU on your desktop

● Get to know the OU – teaching, study options, funding.
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/course-choice/study

● Choosing a course: what to think about
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/course-choice

● Choosing a course: every course in detail, register online
www.open.ac.uk/courses

● Getting to know the OU in your region: contacts, maps, events
www.open.ac.uk/near-you

● OU Students Association: branches, societies, exam papers, support, representation
www.open.ac.uk/ousa

Support

● Preparing to study: what to do, getting organised, brush up on study skills
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/course-choice/prepare

● Services and advice for disabled students
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/disability

● Learning skills including effective writing, note taking, charts, managing information, learning strategies
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/learning-skills

● Revising for and taking exams, including planner, techniques, managing anxiety and further resources
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/learning-skills/revision

Services

● OU Student Budget account (OUSBA)
www.open.ac.uk/ousba

● Book your residential school
www.open.ac.uk/residential-schools

● Register for your next course by choosing it at:
www.open.ac.uk/courses then click 'register'

● Qualifications planner coming this autumn. See next *Sesame* for address.

● Check your degree ceremony choices by date, venue and capacity
www.open.ac.uk/ceremonies/listdate.shtm

● Course materials dispatch: what's been mailed, when
www.open.ac.uk/dispatch

● Check your exam allocation details. Accessible from your student home page.

● Link your study to an award and check your course award links. Accessible from your student home page.

Resources

● Open library online
www.open.ac.uk/library

● Career planning: about you, finding and applying for jobs
www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers

● OU/BBC broadcasts
www.open2.net

● Buy OU materials
www.open.ac.uk/ouw

● Latest OU news and bulletin service plus *Sesame* online
www.open.ac.uk/sesame

● Alumni Association, open to all with news, discussion, special offers
www.openlink.org

Readership survey

More information on courses, more study support features and more articles on other students' experiences topped readers' wish list for future *Sesames*.

At the same time you'd be happy to see fewer Travellers Tales, adverts and reader holidays.

But opinion was split on readers' letters and our regular Fifth Column feature, with some readers reporting they are weary of 'the whingers' and others agreeing with Margaret Chapman from Lanarkshire that "I love reading people's opinions especially as being an OU student is rather lonely!"

These were just a few of the headlines from a wealth of feedback you gave us through the Readership Survey run in our April/May edition. And already we're using that information to try and improve *Sesame's* usefulness to the 190,000 students, Associate Lecturers and staff who receive it.

Explained *Sesame* editor Jane Matthews: "Even before we'd got the final results we'd got the message that readers want more support from *Sesame* with their studies and have introduced a number of new features.

"Many readers also said they'd like to read responses from the university to the letters we print – it's not great having to wait two months to the next edition – so we're trying to do this whenever we can."

The full report also showed:

- 82 per cent of respondents read *Sesame* cover-to-cover or read most of it
- 53 per cent keep the newspaper for at least a few months or share it with others
- 70 per cent think six issues a year is about right with 27 per cent wanting more issues

- 58 per cent prefer to receive a printed copy with a further 29 per cent in favour of having both print and online versions

- 85 per cent agree that *Sesame* keeps them up to date with what is happening at the OU

- 81 per cent agree *Sesame* helps them feel part of the wider OU community, and

- 84 per cent are happy with *Sesame's* quality overall.

Apart from more on courses, support and students, other suggestions for improvement included special features on particular subject areas, more competitions and special offers, advice on careers, better geographical coverage of the OU community – and a little more humour.

Added Jane: "Every single response has been read and we hope that over the coming year readers will see many other changes and improvements as a result of their comments.

"We would like to thank all those who took the time to help us by completing a survey. But we should also remind readers that we're happy to hear their views at any time, and to receive their contributions to *Sesame*, as letters or articles about their own experiences of OU study."

- The ten winners of £20 book tokens, randomly drawn from all those who returned surveys by post or electronically, were: Helen Blagden, Clacton; Jonathan Brown, Southampton; Imelda Fawcett, Middlesbrough; John Harry, Lincoln; Rosemary Holbrook, West Molesey; Brian James, Waterloo; Andrew McLeod, Aberdeen; Lois Murray, Norfolk; Sue Tunstall, Newbury; Stephanie Williams, Tewksbury.

A small selection of your comments

"I cherish *Sesame*! Whenever I am flagging – it can get lonely out here! – the arrival of *Sesame* serves to spur me on. I only wish it could be published every month." *Jill Burton*

"I'd like more copies, more analysis of course results and more

about the ordinary students, not the very clever ones. How do others manage study with life?" *Olive Smith*

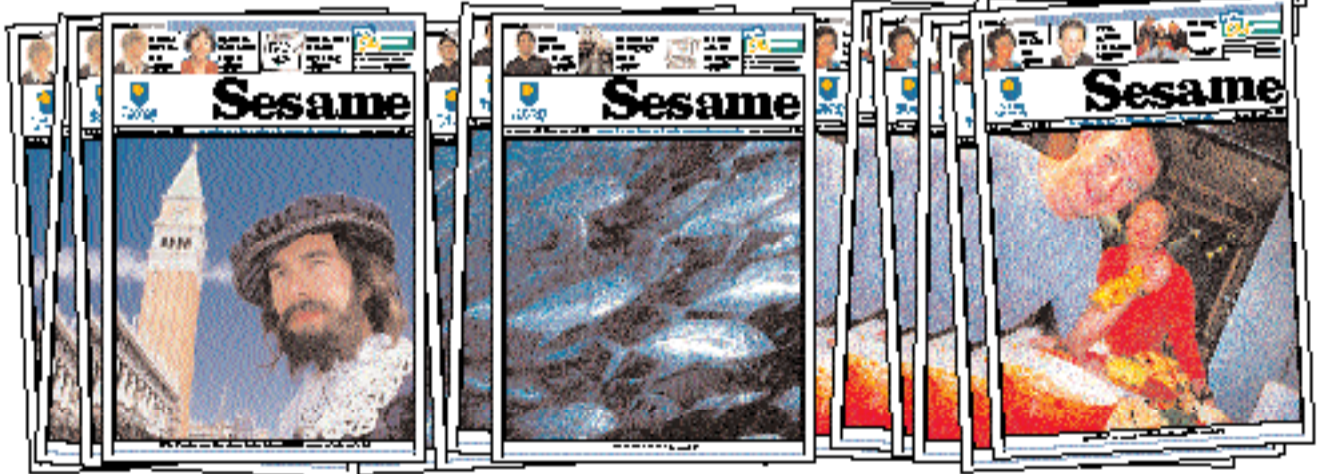
"I think you should keep sending it to people in the year after finishing with the OU – you would be more likely to re-enrol the following year. I'll miss *Sesame* when I finish next year." *Helen Thomas*

"I'd like to see less celebration of new technology without

addressing accessibility issues." *Helena Cooke*

"I'd welcome greater encouragement of both students and staff tutors to stimulate debate – a little more rebelliousness would not go amiss." *Roman Kozlowski*

"Does it have to be useful? Can't it continue to be diverting, entertaining and enjoyable, a light relief from our studies?" *Cynthia Higgins*



Awards for adult learners

Do you know an adult learner who could win an award?

To celebrate Adult Learners' Week 2003 the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is once again looking for people and community groups who have improved their lives as a result of learning, and who have often helped other people into the bargain. One award, part-sponsored by the Open University, recognises projects that have offered new and creative opportunities to encourage more people to learn.

For more information on the awards and how to make a nomination please call: 0116 204 4200, email: alw@niace.org.uk, or visit the website at: www.niace.org.uk/alw

The great anthem debate

Why should we play the National Anthem to honour the queen for our graduation when she hasn't given us a hand with any of our TMAs?"

A heated discussion among students in the *Sesame* FirstClass conference was sparked by a report in the last issue (210) about the university's decision to end the playing and singing of the National Anthem at graduation ceremonies in England.

Describing it as a "particularly depressing funeral dirge," many contributors said they prefer *Ode to Joy*, as it is more "uplifting" but are worried that "it could be equally divisive amongst Europhobes".

But others defended the National Anthem, suggesting "there is a generalised movement that says being English is shameful somehow". And "the more English stop singing these sort of things the more they become frowned upon. We must take pride in our country".

Is there a more appropriate tune? "*The March of the Slaves* from Verdi's *Aida* – given the amount of work required for students to reach this stage," suggested one student. Or Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* – which, according to another, "captures the sentiment that graduations are a celebration of both individual achievements of students and collective achievement of the university".

How about "Billy Bragg's song *Tender Comrade*?" asked someone. "It has the feeling of togetherness through rough times." "*My Way* is quite appropriate," said another. Last word to the contributor who said "as long as it isn't Cliff Richard's *Congratulations*".



Rhine Cruise to Christmas Markets

**Four days full board
departing 14 December**

from £169 (three sharing one cabin)

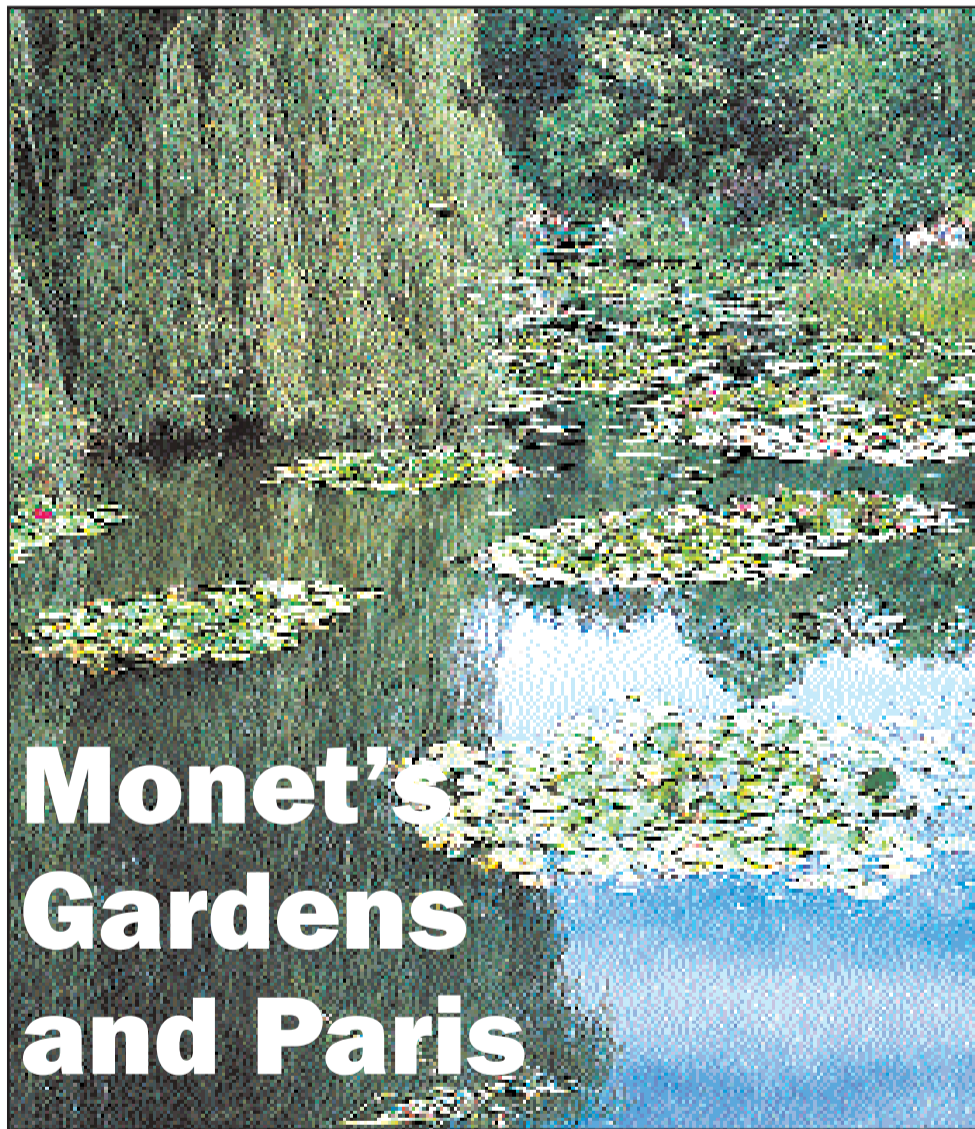
What better way to experience the famous German Christmas markets than by a cruise ship on the legendary river Rhine?

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

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

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

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



Monet's Gardens and Paris

Claude Monet's Garden, Giverny, France

Picture: James Davis Travel Photography

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

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

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

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

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

Guernsey Island Hopper

3 nights from £127

Guernsey and its neighbouring islands make an ideal choice for a romantic autumn break and with our Island-Hopper offer you can enjoy a fly-drive or sea-drive holiday of three nights or more from just £127.

Our special deal with Channel Islands specialist Travelsmith includes return travel by air from selected UK airports or by sea via fast catamaran, a minimum of three nights B&B accommodation in a 3-crown Guernsey hotel and free hire car*.

You will stay in a twin/double room with private facilities at the Abbey Court Hotel, on the outskirts of Guernsey's historic capital, St Peter Port, which makes a perfect base from which to explore. (Please note children under 12 are not accepted at this hotel).

Travel by sea with Condor from Weymouth, or by air from Southampton (with free airport car parking). The following excursions are available: Sark day trip from £19.90 per person by sea; Jersey day trip from £38 per person by air; Alderney day trip from £56 per person by air.

Extra nights B&B including car hire are available from just £21 per night. Supplement per person for other airports and seaports on request.

*Airport/harbour collection/return based on a minimum 2 adults sharing a Fiesta or similar Group A car and excluding collision damage insurance payable direct.

For more details, brochure or to book telephone the Travelsmith reservations line on [0870 748 1000 or 01621 784666](#) quote holiday reference code C173/OU.



Picture: Guernsey Tourist Board

Travellers tales

Swiss city with something for every OU student

The birthplace of the worldwide web also boasts colourful history, beautiful views, talking buses, Tintin – and the fastest atomic particles in the west, writes T171 *You, your computer and the net* student **Jonathan Briggs**.

A good way to see Geneva is to visit France. The Swiss city is so near the French border that it can be clearly seen from le Salève, a small mountain just yards from the border post.

We were there in May, and took the Salève cable car hoping to see massed alpine flowers on the mountain top. This proved a forlorn hope – all but a few bedraggled crocus flowers had been buried under recent wet snow. But the views were good: Geneva laid out below us, nestled around the end of Lac Lemman, and with the distinctive water fountain, Geneva's famous Jet d'eau, easily visible even from this distance.

Geneva is one of those cities where you could spend a week seeing the sights. Historians can visit the many museums, old fortifications and take part in the annual commemoration of a military victory due to a marmite (cauldron of soup). Geographers will enjoy the lake and riverside walks (the newly-born Rhone is crystal-clear as it leaves the lake – a marked contrast to the milky glacial waters of the Arve which join it just downstream). Perhaps more importantly, Tintin fans will go straight to the Hotel Cornavin (from *The Calculus Affair*) where a lifesize Tintin and Snowy gaze onto the streets.

Getting around is easy, with integrated trains, trolley-buses, and modern bendy-buses everywhere. Transport buffs will be impressed by the buses that talk to you (though their Swiss French accent takes some getting used to) and the solar-powered roadside ticket machines.

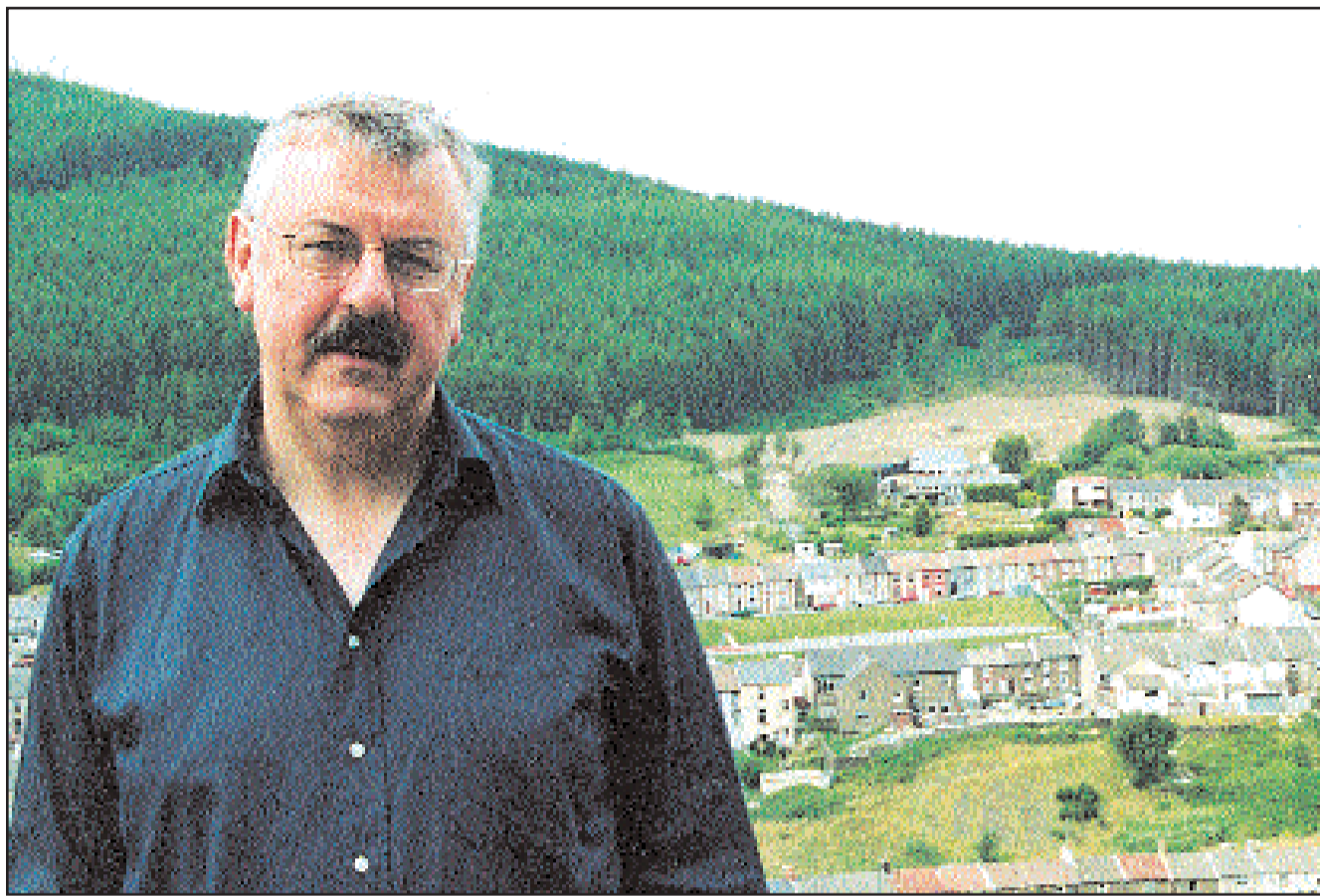
The city is awash with foreign nationals, as it hosts the headquarters of many global agencies, including the Red Cross, WHO, ILO, WWF and, out on the outskirts, CERN. This is the huge multinational atomic particle accelerator, and among its more obscure claims to fame is that the worldwide web was invented there, by Englishman Tim Berners-Lee. This is covered in my course, T171 *You, your computer and the net* and so we went along to see what information CERN could offer.

Though the CERN visitor centre isn't widely advertised it has an exciting (for kids of all ages!) hands-on display called the Microcosm. It's worth going just for that. And they have plenty of multilingual visitor information on particle physics and the 27 kilometre accelerator tunnel extending under the border to France and back. Only the www literature seemed to be in French only! Perhaps I was expecting too much – www may have changed the world but it isn't exactly CERN core business. But a friend had already suggested the CERN Archive would serve us better and, after a maze of corridors, we managed a sneak look at a recently catalogued archive of early www proposals. There was far too much to absorb in a quick visit, but it was fascinating to see 1989 www project justifications with headings like *Losing information at CERN!* It didn't help the course in any practical way, but it did help me get things into perspective, demonstrating just how far information technology has come in the last decade.



Geneva's waterfront vista with the distinctive Jet d'eau

Courses



Trevor Herbert against the backdrop of his Rhondda Valley birthplace

Why music study is a labour of love

By **Yvonne Cook**

For a Professor of Music, Trevor Herbert's early musical education was limited. On joining his new secondary modern school – having failed his 11-plus – the Welsh coalminer's son expressed a desire to play in the school band.

"The only instrument available is a trombone," he was told. He asked how it was played. "Well, you just blow through this end," came the reply. And so began a lifelong passion.

Picking it up as he went along, young Trevor made enough progress to join the National Youth Orchestra before ever taking a single formal music lesson. He finally received professional tuition thanks to the National Union of Mine-workers, who paid for him to have lessons at the Royal Opera House, and even threw in his train fares to London.

unconventional

With such an unconventional academic background it's perhaps no surprise that Trevor should end up at the Open University – first as an undergraduate student, then doing his PhD in music, finally as head of the music department poised to launch the university's first MA in Music.

While researching for his PhD Trevor became fascinated by what lies behind the notes. "I had always loved playing and listening to music, but I became absorbed by how it works – particularly the historical dimension, how people used to perform." It was in this spirit that the innovative Music Masters programme was conceived.

So what's innovative about it? For a start, prospective students don't need a first degree in music; a Bachelors degree in any subject is an acceptable entry qualification. They don't even need to be able

to play an instrument, although they must, says Trevor 'have sufficient musical background to follow a score when they are listening to a piece of music. Also, they must be able to read an encyclopaedia entry about music and more or less understand what it means'.

Nor is classical music alone the focus of the programme. "We encourage people to listen widely – it could be world music, jazz, popular music or whatever."

expertise

The programme gives access to a huge number of relevant databases, which students can access at any time, for free. They include the music 'Bible' *New Grove 2*, numerous musical journals and even full-text versions of *The Times* from the eighteenth century. And, says Trevor, 'there are links to 1,000 websites to do with music, which we in the music department have spent two years compiling'.

Trevor is keen to dissolve what he sees as the artificial boundary between the academic study of music, and its performance; he expects performers and listeners to come away from the programme doing what they like to do, better.

"People may wish to use this MA as a stepping stone for developing quite an important expertise in their particular area of music; they may want to go on to do a PhD, or to become the greatest authority there is on, say, Welsh chapel music in the nineteenth century.

"There is lots of virgin territory out there in music, waiting to be explored."

Trevor's open-minded approach to music owes something to his background. He was born in the mining village of Cwmpare, near Treorchy in the Rhondda Valley, one of the most famously musical parts of Wales. He recalls: "There were choirs and bands everywhere, and it seemed as if any modestly sized collection of people were likely to burst in to

song at the slightest provocation."

His first career was as a trombone player, and he performed with most of the major orchestras and chamber groups, notably the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Taverner Consort and the Wallace Collection. In his early days, though, Trevor's repertoire was by no means strictly classical.

"I used to play in a seven-piece dance band led by a local milkman. We played different styles – trad jazz, and things like *The Last Waltz*." In the interval, another band took over led by a local singer named Tom Scott, who later became somewhat better known as Tom Jones.

Nowadays Trevor heads an OU music department which produces, as well as the MA, three undergraduate music courses: A214 *Understanding music: elements, techniques and styles*; AA302 *From composition to performance: musicians at work*; and AA314 *Studies in music 1750-2000: interpretation and analysis*. It also produces an appreciable amount of music research, some of which will feed through into the MA.

authority

Trevor himself has become known as an authority on Victorian brass bands. It was the comparative cheapness and availability of brass instruments, he says, that helped fuel the working-class brass band movement to which Trevor's home community, and the many other colliery bands in the UK, are heirs.

But no one community has the monopoly of musical creativity, Trevor believes. "I have always been fascinated by the way that all sorts of communities in all sorts of conditions use music as part of their self-expression.

"For me, it has been a sustained passion throughout my life. There has never been a moment when I was tired of listening to music, or playing music, or when I have not wanted to know more about it."

All in a virtual day's work

Health and social care managers will soon be learning vital skills to assist in running their businesses by visiting a community centre for older people – on their computer.

A CD-ROM accompanying the new K303 *Managing care* course introduces students to the fictitious community resource centre of Wellbridge – and the challenges faced by its new manager.

The CD-ROM is the first produced by the School of Health and Social Welfare as an integral part of a mainstream course and includes film shot in a real centre – with real clients – in the Midlands. And while an actress plays Wellbridge's manager Julie Stokes, the scenarios she faces are scripted to reflect current issues and management practice.

"The course is aimed at new or potential frontline managers in social care and community health settings," explained the school's lecturer in teaching and learning with new technologies, Ingrid Jefferys.

practical

"Especially for those not in management yet, it gives students a practical context in which to explore the theory they have learned on the course. They then use this shared experience as a basis for discussions at tutorials and in online conferencing."

Key characters are played by actors but there is also input from actual staff at the centre and from other professionals

on how Julie performs in her new post.

The CD-ROM shows Julie learning management skills including listening to her staff, understanding what motivates people, budgeting and team-building. She receives emails, phone calls and attends meetings. Her staff, many with different types of experience and opinions on how the centre should be run, provide many of the challenges, which also include working with her own supervisors, local authorities and, of course, the clients and their families.

"The point of the CD-ROM is to provide a context to practice and reflect on management skills," said Ingrid, who worked with the level 3 course team, consultant writer Jane Isaacs, software designer Ali Wyllie and BBC producer Rissa de la Paz to create the finished product.



The *Managing care* CD-ROM simulates real challenges

Agreeing to green

A ground-breaking course will see social science students combine theory and practice while acquiring key negotiation skills... and maybe even learning how to save the world.

D833 *Environmental practice: negotiating policy in a global society* places students in a virtual United Nations conference – giving them, say course authors, a completely new OU learning experience.

"The students go online for a summit in which they each represent a country trying to agree a global treaty on forests," explains Dave Humphreys, course chair. "It's policy relevant, as are many OU courses, but what makes this different is the fact that the online conferencing enables students to put their theory into practice while still doing the course."

"They learn the theory of negotiation, they take that to the conference and the simulation enhances their understanding of the theory. It's a continuous loop and, unlike other learning experiences, this is all contained very tightly within the course itself."

The dual learning process also enables students to approach the subject from different standpoints. "When working on the theory, students will be social scientists with a very objective take on how negotiations work," says Dave. "But once they become delegates with very strong vested interests they begin to look at the subject very subjectively. This, too, helps their understanding of how negotiations work."

At the virtual UN summit, the students use asynchronous conferencing (through the OU's FirstClass programme), synchronous

conferencing (through Lyceum), a website and printed material, which makes this truly multimedia study. Dave was so keen to make the virtual debating chamber as realistic as possible that he even toured the United Nations building in New York.

"I think we've recreated it as closely as we can," he says. "I saw UN delegates huddle together privately before coming back to their seats, so our virtual UN has whispering spaces and corridor simulation. It's as close as you can get."

The issues themselves also mirror the type of discussion held at such summits – only last month world leaders flew into Johannesburg for the Rio+10 World Summit on Sustainable Development. They met face to face – but could the OU's virtual world shape the future of international conferencing?

"I think certainly within a couple of generations we could see virtual UN conferences," says Dave. "But I think people will always want to be there in person. Negotiations are also about body language and that would need to be accurately represented in a virtual environment before that happened."

But could D833, which starts in November, and the issues it raises actually help to save the world? "This course is about negotiating," says Dave. "It's all around us and this course helps people to understand negotiation better and improve their skills."

"Specifically it's about negotiating in and around a global environment so it gives people a broader understanding of global issues. I don't know about saving the world but in a small, modest way, it could help."



Pictured (l-r) OU academics Laurence Newman, Mark Yoxon and Rod Barratt with Sallyanne Lindsey and Russell Foster of IEMA

Door opens to IEMA membership

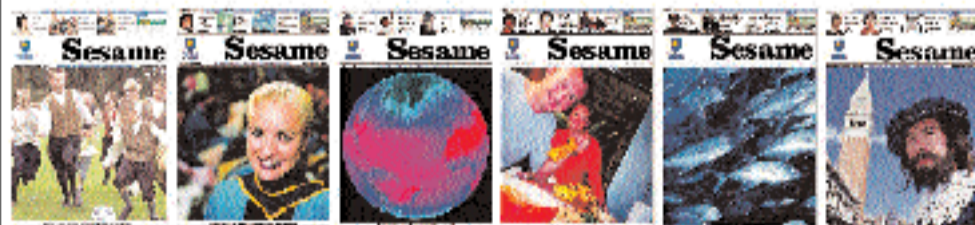
OU students can now qualify for associate membership of Britain's lead body for environment professionals by completing three courses from the postgraduate programme in environmental decision-making.

Accreditation for the courses T237/T210 *Environmental control and public health*, T862 *Enterprise and the environment*, and T860 *Environmental decision-making* was awarded by the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA).

Said the OU's Mark Yoxon, liaison officer for environment: "The partnership with IEMA is really important for both the OU and the institute. More and more employers are expecting environmental applicants to have IEMA membership. The benefits of an OU direct route to IEMA Associate Membership will add significant professional value to our students."

Those finishing the three courses will be provided with a letter of completion to use as evidence, he added. And IEMA recognition can be applied retrospectively. For more information contact Laurence Newman on 01908 652565 or visit: www.open.ac.uk/technology

Not studying next year but still want Sesame?



For just £6 (£15 overseas) you can be added to Sesame's list of subscribers. You will receive all copies published in 2003 and be invited to renew your subscription annually. Don't forget all OU students receive Sesame free while they are studying. If you wish to subscribe just fill in the form below and return to:

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Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

Please send me Sesame in 2003. I enclose my subscription of £6/£15.
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Name: _____

Address: _____

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Open Line

£10 book token if your question or advice is published

Dear Sesame

My exams are looming and I'm really worried about them. I usually get decent marks for my TMAs but when I get into the examination hall I seem to go to pieces and my final marks reflect this. Instead of getting easier it's getting harder each year, in fact I'm seriously wondering whether I should bother to turn up. Can anyone offer me any advice?

Marguerite Johnson
Harrogate

HERE are some suggestions. If you're online go to the OU Learner's Guide, click on 'Learning skills' and go to 'Revising and taking exams'. Or if you're on FirstClass go to the OU Symbol > Info Centre > Advice and look up 'Anxious about the Exam' – a section on exam stress.

If you're not online contact your region and ask for either the 'Revision and exams toolkit' or the 'Getting through' leaflet. And some regions have an exam counselling service and other materials.

Don't tell yourself it's not worth sitting – always have a go. You'll need to sit to qualify for a resit and in any case you may have done better than you think – go to the [unofficial] site: www.marxonline.org.uk/ to see what you need to do to pass the exam. You'll probably be pleasantly surprised! If you're not online just phone your region who'll be happy to help.

A student once told me that she used to get really wound up in exams. Then one day she ignored all the advice about choosing the questions carefully, planning answers and so on. She just started writing about the first thing that looked even slightly familiar. After about 20 minutes she was able to relax and start answering questions systematically.

Just see what works for you.

Ormond Simpson

Director, Centre for Educational Guidance and Student Support

YOU'VE got good TMAs, so you can clearly do it; don't give up! My advice is:

For moral support, speak to other students on your course (you may even get practical help like tutorial notes), or contact Peer Support Online, through OUSA's Firstclass site.

In the exam itself, 1. Don't be sidetracked from the question – keep checking that you're not answering a different one altogether. 2. Even if you think something's just too obvious to write down, write it down anyway – you'll get no marks for what isn't there. 3. Keep an eye on the clock and spend no more than one hour on each part, even if you haven't finished.

Lorna McHardy King's Lynn, Norfolk

Two heads may be better than one but from now on *Sesame* is offering you the chance to seek the advice of up to 200,000 students, staff and ALs through 'Open Line'.

In each edition we'll pick one of your letters and see what other readers have to say about

your study problems or concerns. Whether you'd like to submit a topic, or share your thoughts on someone else's suggestion, write to: 'Open Line', *Sesame*, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, email: m.d.france@open.ac.uk

IT is, I know, a huge frustration when your exam marks bear little or no relation to your continuous assessment scores. Many students feel as you do, that to be subjected to a three hour ordeal where stress becomes overwhelming, is not a test of actual academic ability.

However, as exams are part of the university's assessment criteria, let us look at the various ways in which we can help.

As a first step, contact your regional centre for a Student Toolkit on revision and examinations, which you can work through at your own pace. In addition, find out if your regional office offers workshops on revision skills and exam techniques. In Region 2 these take place at various venues and include a session devoted to handling 'exam stress'. We can also – if you wish – put you in touch with a specialist exam stress counsellor who will be able to help you on a one-to-one basis at a more personal level.

Pat Romans

Student Services Manager – Advisor, Open University in the South



MY advice would be to log on to FirstClass and discover that many people suffer from exam nerves.

It may not help with the nerves, but at least you're not alone.

Judith White
Somerset

WE have a lot in common! This will be my first year of exams since 1988, when I scraped through my A levels so, like you, I am petrified to say the least!

I too, have managed decent TMA marks, but how can I perform at my best, and present my best answers in three hours? These TMAs have taken hours, if not weeks to do, and if that is how I am getting good marks, how will I cope in three hours I ask myself!

There are plenty of books in the library on exam skills, even sites on the internet, so I intend to borrow a book or two and surf the

web, but at the end of the day I know my nerves will prevail and I won't be thinking very clearly.

To summarise, I suppose I should say, you're not alone. If you look behind you in that exam room and see a nervous, hand-wringing, wide-eyed, gum-chewing individual, it most probably won't be me... there are hundreds of us!

Good luck to fellow students as exam time approaches...

Tina Milledge
Chatham, Kent

EXAMS are a nightmare for me... I am literally paralysed with fear... I can neither think, nor write... my heart pounds and I feel like running away (haven't actually done this yet though!).

It is so traumatic that I am trying to adapt my degree to include courses which don't have an exam (particularly at level 3) as I never do myself justice.

I have tried everything... relaxation tapes and techniques... music... you name it, but nothing worked until I went to the doctor and asked her to prescribe me something to calm me down! It probably sounds awful, but I now take one betablocker two hours before an exam – no other time and that does the trick, amazing, but it does!

Sonja Hilborne-Clarke
North Yorkshire

Next issue...

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



Jo's hunt for course books

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

However good value an OU course is the costs incurred in pursuit of learning aren't helped by having to buy all the books.

But for the last two years former student Jo Hunt (pictured left) has been helping to ease the pain by running a register to put those who want to buy course books in touch with those who want to sell.

Jo had the idea of setting up the register after reading the small ads on the inside back page of *Sesame*. "It's a very good way for people to advertise," she says. "As someone who's been through the OU, I'm aware of how many hundreds of attics and shelves there must be out there which are groaning under the weight of all these books. Their owners have finished with them but the books are too good just to throw away."

But she thought students would benefit from being able to see instantly which books were available, rather than waiting for the next *Sesame* to come out. "I couldn't help thinking how frustrating it must be for people to ring up in response to an ad, find the books had gone and then hang on for the next issue to see if another set might come up for sale."

Jo runs the register from her home in Budleigh Salterton, Devon and says she has about 500 course sets on the register at any one time. As facilitator

she receives a cheque, including money for postage, from the buyer. She then takes 10 per cent administration fee before sending the money to the seller, who then completes the circle by posting the books to the buyer.

"Some sellers have a very good idea of what their books are worth but others do perhaps try a price which is a little over-inflated," says Jo, who completed her own OU degree in maths in 1999. "Then you get some who are happy to sell the lot for a tenner. They can sell them for what they like but I will say something if I think they are charging the wrong price."

Topping the league table among buyers and sellers are course books for A103 *Introduction to the humanities* but there are some books, says Jo, she can never trace.

"Books for Level 2 maths courses M203 *Introduction to pure mathematics* and MST207 *Mathematical methods, models and modelling* are obviously so good that no-one ever wants to sell them when they've finished the course.

"Many people do hang on to the material for reference or because they've worked hard with them and don't want to let them go. Then I get others who are on the phone the night after their exam asking me to find a buyer because they're sick of the sight of their books!"

For more information on Jo's register visit her website at: www.universitybooksearch.co.uk or call her on 01395 442174.

People

Been there, done that

A septuagenarian graduate, **Stanley Hall**, reflects on his years of study

In my 75th year I have just received my BA (Hons) from the Open University. The last study course I managed to complete successfully was the School Certificate way back in 1944. And then only because the German Luftwaffe obligingly sent over some V1 flying bombs sufficiently near to where I was struggling with the compulsory French exam for the invigilator to report that the boys had been exposed to what I suppose would now be called 'stress'. Anyway they bumped up the marks in compensation and I passed!

As the tide of learning recedes I find there are odd bits of flotsam lying on the beach; miscellaneous impressions and recollections gathered over six years of study which will remain with me when much else has been forgotten.

In the first place I recall the arts foundation course in my first year being by far the most challenging. The switch from subject to subject every few weeks was quite bewildering. It had its compensations: my struggles with pop music advanced my status in the eyes of our cleaning lady who admiringly declared that she had no idea I was a fan of Queen. But it also had its downside in that my ambitions to study philosophy were rudely exposed in a burst of incomprehension.

This particular chicken came home to roost subsequently when the *Enlightenment* philosophers demanded attention. How I wrestled with them in my TMAs! But, finally, a triumph of sorts. Way out of my depth I submitted my last one playing the philosopher's game by not understanding what I had written. Imagine my horror when the tutor praised my line of argument and looked forward to discussing my ideas further.

mistake

From knowing too little it was sometimes a disadvantage to know too much. Since I was seventeen when the 1939-45 war ended I made the mistake of correcting my tutor on points of detail in the *War, peace and social change* course. A reminder of the famous *Sesame* cartoon in which a youngish tutor enquires of an elderly student: "So you are saying, Mr Jones, that you advised Mr Churchill not to take that course of action?"

On the subject of tutors, I often wondered, as the years progressed, why so few of my fellow students actually turned



Stanley Hall – got through his degree thanks to his 'handy little highlighter' Picture: Sheila Forman

up for tutorials. I took the view that the tutors required as much study as the course material if one had any hope of decent marks. Indeed it is my tutors who remain most vividly in my memory. At one of the day schools I was fortunate enough to attend a session on Mozart and *The Magic Flute*. The tutor had a pleasant tenor voice and sang us through Tamino's love song in Act I. It was a remarkable experience.

Other tutors had their idiosyncrasies. One spent all his time altering my English and eliminating all my semi-colons rather than addressing the brilliance of the observations in my TMAs. Once I was casual enough to commit the sin of using the phrase 'at the end of the day', the consequences of which were dire indeed. If I had resorted to 'basically' I think he would have had a heart attack. Another tutor would scamper through my essays showering ticks all over the paper and awarding me alarmingly high marks. I was thus so assured of my mastery

of the subject that I practically sleepwalked into the exam, with devastating results!

Ah, the exams! The elderly student may have learnt a few tricks on his way through life, a certain facility with the pen, a certain cunning, but is unlikely to have improved his memory. It is no exaggeration to say that I got through the degree solely because of my handy little highlighter. How else would I have remembered each morning when I opened my unit where I had got to the day before? But the exams were a nightmare.

So how did I pass? Simple really, I sat in the car park endeavouring to memorise my notes and learn the acronyms I had invented until a few minutes before the exam was due to start. Irrespective of its relevance to the question I would work into the answers anything I could still remember. Judging by the results the examiners seem to have been happy to reward me for an original turn of mind. I think.

Brain work boosts his foot work

The OU claims with bold accuracy to have altered thousands of lives, but few can have experienced such a change as Gordon Booth.

He celebrated his 70th birthday having just climbed the last of the 284 Scottish Munro peaks and has, over the past 10 years, been the world's fastest marathon runner in his age-group. And it all started when an OU leaflet came through his door.

"It was about 17 years ago and I'd just retired," he recalls. "I hadn't requested any OU material but I received a brochure about a study pack called *Health Choices*. It interested me so I started studying – and I've never looked back."

Gordon took the teaching to heart, radically changing his fast food diet, losing

the weight he'd put on since redundancy and reforming himself from the "physical and mental wreck" he says he'd become.



Gordon Booth – reformed 'wreck'

He also started jogging and realised he was good at it. So good, in fact, that he twice won the London Marathon over-60s title, the second time in an astonishing 2hr 53m 04s – faster than the first four winners of the modern Olympic marathons.

"Without question I have the OU to thank for turning my life around," says Gordon, whose wife Sheila is an OU geology student.

This summer saw Gordon from Almondbury, East Yorkshire, achieve his latest goal – to climb every Munro (peaks over 3,000 ft). "I didn't set out with the idea of doing them all," he says. "But when I got to about 90 I thought I might as well give it a go. To be honest I did want to complete them before I was 70, but one week late isn't so bad."

Professor
Brenda
Gourley

Access and quality do mix

Amidst some of the depressing news that August brought us was a story that told us something interesting about higher education today. This was the publication of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* league table, based on the results of the national teaching quality assessment exercise, which places the OU equal sixth out of 99 UK universities in terms of the excellence of its teaching. It follows the publication of a similar table the previous month in the *Daily Telegraph* which, calculating on a slightly different basis, placed the OU ninth.

Statistics, of course, do not tell us everything. Nevertheless when two league tables independently place us among the top 10 UK institutions for teaching quality, they cannot be lightly dismissed. Not the least because of the challenge they present to some of the assumptions of our competitive, goal-obsessed society.

When the OU was founded, there was a common, implicit, presumption that excellence implied exclusivity. A university education was generally the privilege of an elite minority whose superior ability was the guarantor of high standards. The standard riposte to those who wanted to make higher education available to greater numbers was "More means worse".

Thirty years on, this presumption may have lost some of its elitist trappings in terms of social class and gender bias, but it is far from dead. A number of the institutions featured among the top ten would say unashamedly that they seek to admit only "the best" – not in terms of social or educational background, as in the past, but in terms of intellectual and academic ability as demonstrated by school results.

In direct contrast, the Open University's policy has been from its earliest days one of totally open access; no A levels, entrance exams or interviews are needed to embark on one of our courses. No-one is excluded. Everybody has the chance to prove themselves. Each student's commitment and motivation are measured against the challenges of the learning experience. Not all will succeed in obtaining the prize of a degree, despite the university's best efforts. Those who do not will not necessarily count the experience a failure, but rather one which has enriched their lives and perhaps, allowed them to achieve goals they have set themselves. Those who do obtain the coveted letters after their name will know how hard won they were and will also, one hopes, attest to the truth of the league table.

With such diametrically opposed approaches to entry qualifications between the OU and other universities, it is interesting to note that in the THES league table, little more than half a point separates the OU from the leader, York, second place Cambridge or third place Oxford.

More broadly, the results of the teaching quality assessment demonstrate that the overall state of UK higher education is good, confounding those who predicted that its recent rapid expansion would bring about a decline in academic standards. More does not necessarily equal worse.

FRONT PAGE STORY

A wizard way to learn about parenting



Janet Seden

By Jane Matthews

Wizards and goblins, castles with secret passages: from the Brothers Grimm to Enid Blyton, childhood's love affair with the world of fantasy was around for centuries before *Harry Potter* was a twinkle in JK Rowling's imagination.

But now one OU academic is suggesting there are more subtle reasons why the *Harry Potter* stories have become required bedtime reading for parents as well as their children, creeping under our grown-up defences to remind us how it is to be a child.

And that it is precisely this journey into a child's inner world, and what the books show us about the nature of parenting, which could offer a new dimension to the understanding and practice of social workers.

Lecturer in the School of Health and Social Welfare Janet Seden's starting point was her own contribution to the thinking that informed the Department of Health's Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.

With a professional background which includes working as a probation officer, family centre manager and social worker and in a child protection team, Janet is as familiar as any social care professional with the mantra of what constitutes good parenting: physical and emotional care, help in developing living skills – and a whole list of other ingredients.

unpredictability

"All those things are really important but as well as that there is this other dimension," she says. "Because the world is a very unstable, changing place what you need as a parent is the capacity to deal with unpredictability and it's something these books allow parents to engage with."

In a paper to be published shortly in the journal *Children and Society* Janet compares the styles of parenting in Rowling's books and what both parents and – crucially – social care workers, can take from them.

Both metaphorically and literally larger than life, the Dursleys, Janet concedes, 'stand in the tradition in children's literature of unreasonable authority personified, pompous and comically misguided'.

She says: "The Dursleys are not particularly good parents for their own son either, as their partiality and overindulgence of his whims make him increasingly unable to fit with society outside the home.

"They would not be accepted as suitable foster carers by current criteria. They fail to provide the basic standards of physical care. They cannot nurture Harry's sense of identity or self-esteem. They operate as a closed unit with little contact with the wider world, and show no empathy for anyone else. Let alone the disadvantaged or different."

A world away, in many more ways than one, the Weasleys, parents of Harry's best friend Ron, are, in that phrase beloved of every mother or father currently doing their best, 'good-enough parents'.

"While they can argue and disagree, they show strong affection, loyalty and warmth for each other, with acceptance and good humour," Janet says.

ability to survive

Like most real-life families, there's a fair amount of chaos, father stepping in to sort out problems such as Ron and Harry crashing the car, mother embarrassing her family by knitting garish outsize jumpers. But what social care workers would home in on from this mix, says Janet, is their ability to survive what is thrown at them and help not only their own children but Harry, too, to understand the world.

In Janet's words: "It is the Weasley family that shows that identity and difference can be maintained harmoniously. They live as wizards in a non-wizard community and make it work. They appear to have values about honesty, fairness and caring."

These very different families are not the only ones who stand in loco parentis to Harry in Rowling's books. Among the ranks of wizards at Hogwarts Professor McGonagall provides protection and a practical sort of care, while from beneath Dumbledore's silver beard come philosophical nuggets of wisdom of the kind a wise father might share, such as "You fail to recognise that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be."

In following Harry through the four *Harry Potter* books we come to understand what it is he is searching for from his stand-in parents:

nurture and belonging. Which is where the world of books – which Janet believes have a power to 'slip beneath our defences and show us things in a different way' – may be so useful.

Working in a field where tragic situations (from the death of Maria Colwell in the 1970s through to the death of Victoria Climbié in 2001) continue to be scrutinised for better ways of protecting our children, Janet suggests: "Alongside failures of the system such as poor inter-agency working and communication another concern is the seeming inability of practitioners, despite tools and checklists, to enter empathically into the world of the child who needs support and/or substitute parenting.

child-centred

"In all JK Rowling's work all events are seen through the eyes of the child, with whom the reader is invited to identify and understand his struggles and concerns. Staying child-centred in this way is something that still needs to permeate social care practice."

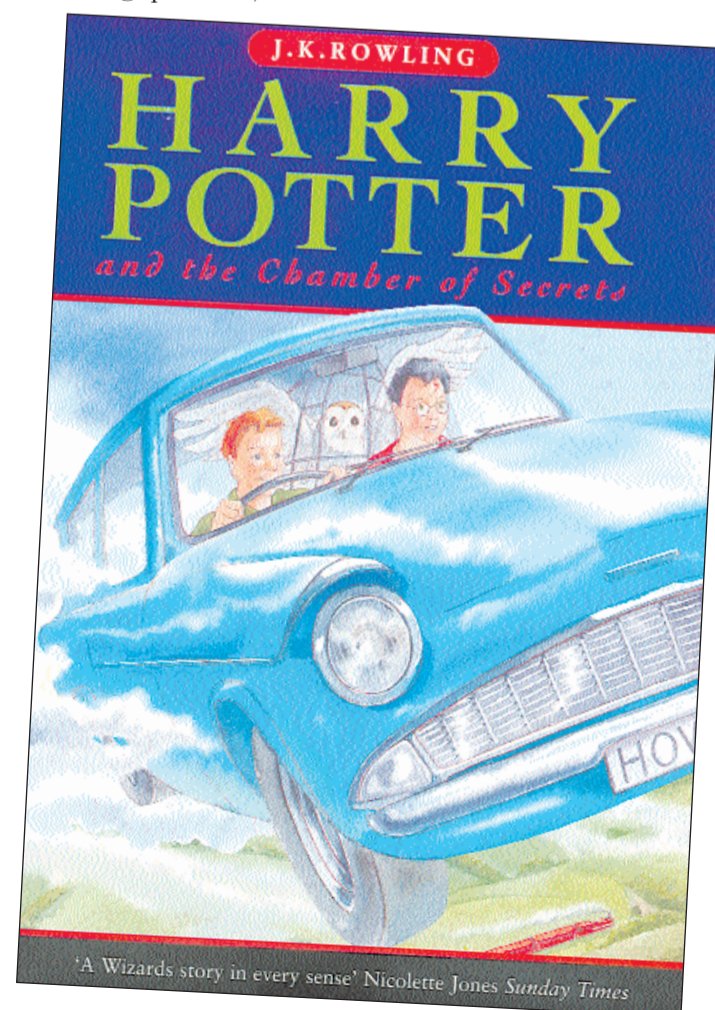
Meanwhile, there is a message too for every parent who has read *Harry Potter* with their child or smuggled the copy away after lights out to read under their own bedcovers.

"Parents need imagination to be parents and to be able to enter the child's world," she says. "It is tough and risky being a parent. Staying with a child through anything that happens, and having the empathy to interpret the world to the child and make sense of it makes all the difference, even if you feel you have lost control."

But it is not all work, indeed, anyone who beamed with Harry as letters thudded through every crevice into the Dursleys' Privet Drive fortress, or who wept with Harry over Ron's courage in sacrificing himself to an outsize chess piece, is probably already there.

Says Janet: "Parenting that can foster a sense of the magic of everyday life, joy, wonder and creativity offers children tools to combat other adversities and builds the inner strength known as resilience in adversity."

● Janet would love to hear from *Sesame* readers with a view on a parent or parent figure in children's books that they like or dislike, explaining what it is they are responding to. Or from those with views on her research with the *Harry Potter* stories. Email her at J.P.Seden@open.ac.uk, or write to her at the usual OU address.



The last word

A devilish job for a researcher

It's 100-plus degrees in the Nevada desert. The arid, barren landscape stretches without interruption for miles into the distance. The atmosphere is still.

Suddenly, in the distance, appears what looks like a mini whirlwind. At first it's just an innocuous few feet high – but as it starts to whip its way across the horizon it gathers momentum, growing faster and higher with every second.

Those observing are well-prepared. With a cry of recognition they pile into their truck and are soon driving as fast as they can as the 'dust-devil' reaches 100 feet high and powers across the land at 50 mph. They are not, you understand, feverishly trying to escape it. Their aim is to drive straight into it.

"It's very exciting," said the OU's Tim Ringrose, but it is not thrills he is seeking. Rather, he and fellow OU PhD student Martin Towner hope their work into the phenomenon of dust-devils will shape the quality of research done by the university's Beagle 2 mission to Mars.

"Dust-devils are very prevalent on Mars," explained Tim. "Our research into terrestrial activity will help protect spacecraft instrumentation against possible damage."

Dust-devils are caused by the convective heating of a planet's surface by the sun and, unlike tornadoes and cyclones, do not rely on atmospheric moisture, which is why they are so common on Mars. Said Tim: "It used to be thought that the vortex was a reaction to the rotation of the Earth but now we know it is formed by eddy currents or wind deflected by rocks and other obstacles. It need only be a very tiny obstruction to make a huge difference."



Preparing the instruments ready...

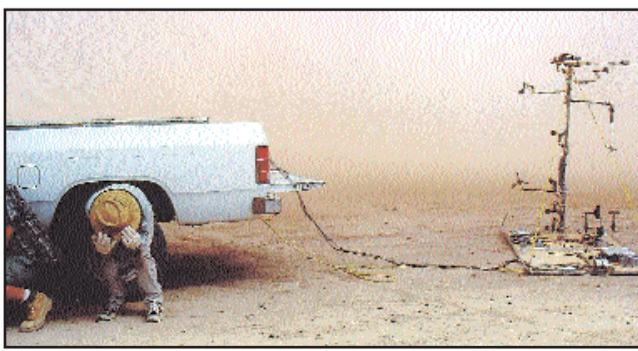
While dust-devils are spectacular forces which can do minor damage, they are not particularly dangerous to humans, who are more likely to be affected by dust inhalation than any physical injury caused by the velocity of the whirlwind.

Their research helped the team understand why the phenomenon occurs on Mars at all, given that science states only winds with a higher surface speed of more than 200 metres a second can lift such quantities of dust off the ground – and the force on the Red Planet never rises more than 35 metres a second.

"It would seem these whirlwinds' low pressure core enables them to 'loft' the dust," said Tim. "This explains how they gather such momentum and gain their height and velocity even at much lower wind speeds."

The experiments also helped with testing the instruments the team is developing for the Beagle 2 lander craft, which takes off for Mars next year, enabling them to calibrate the settings for what will be the voyage's Gas Analysis Package.

Peter Taylor-Whiffen



...for the dust devil's arrival



Jim Taggart on the new bridge at Linn Gardens

Building by numbers

Visitors admiring a pretty stone bridge in a Scottish botanical garden don't need to work out how it was built – its OU student designer has carved the algebraic equation into the rock.

Jim Taggart added the finishing touch even though he actually designed the elliptical bridge using a piece of string. But it was his frustration at not knowing how to do the maths that guided him towards the OU – and now he's learned the algebra he's engraved the formula on a stone as a permanent reminder.

"There used to be a wooden bridge but it needed replacing," explained Jim, who founded Linn Gardens near Cove, Dumbartonshire more than 30 years ago.

"Because the new one was to be made of stone, which had to be carried up some steps, I thought the most economical design would be an elliptical bridge.

"I'd studied higher maths so I thought I really ought to know how to work out how to construct it. But I didn't. I ended up using a piece of string." So Jim resolved to study MST121 *Using mathematics* and MS221 *Exploring mathematics* and learned the algebra necessary.

"By that time, of course, we were already building it but it was nice to see that it worked

algebraically as well as practically," he said.

The 17ft 6ins span bridge was officially opened to the garden's 6,000 visitors a year in June.

Among the first to see it was Jim's tutor Felicity Bryers. "I had invited her to the opening and I was walking along the other side of the stream when I glanced across and happened to see her look at the carving on the rock.

"I was sure I'd done it correctly but I couldn't help thinking, as Felicity looked at it: 'I do hope I haven't made a mistake...'"



Set in stone: how to build an elliptical bridge

FIFTH COLUMN

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

Equality for Mac users

pleads
Teresa
Wilson



You can't study with a university because you're physically challenged... you're in prison... you don't have a car... you have kids. These statements cannot be applied to the OU because of its enviable reputation for making education available to anyone, anywhere, irrespective of personal circumstances.

So why can't I study with the OU?

Two years ago I studied A103 *An introduction to the humanities* – no problems. Last year, partly due to the OU's discrimination, I reluctantly gave up on S103 *Discovering science*. This year, despite the OU's best attempts otherwise, I managed to complete TT280 *Web applications: design, development and management* but I'm probably excluded from future courses.

Why is that?

Because I am different. I don't talk the same language – literally. I use an AppleMac PC instead of complying with the world's 'Windowfication' by using a Windows PC. I am discriminated against because I prefer a round peg in the OU's world of square holes.

Apple is the world's third largest manufacturer of computers; there is no reason at all for denying its users access to OU courses. Please don't spout the 'Windows is the industry standard' line; why bother teaching non-English languages when English is the 'industry standard' language for the largest percentage of countries in the world as well as the 'industry standard' language of the sea, air and internet.

Cost shouldn't be an issue: the OU already invests in alternative study aids and could easily accommodate Apple users; after all the CD-ROM received with S103 and TT280 was made using Macromedia and Adobe (Mac-friendly companies) and QuickTime (Apple-made software).

Teresa Wilson is an IT Teacher, OU student and internet addict from West Sussex, with a much-loved purple iMac.