OpenHouse

Newspaper for staff of The Open University

Issue number 405

Mar - Apr 2006



Professor Alan Gilbert, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester, signs the Memorandum of Understanding in London last month. He is seen here with the OU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley

Manchester united with OU

THE University of Manchester and The Open University have agreed a new partnership to develop and offer combined degree programmes, focused initially on overseas student markets.

The partnership will allow the UK's two largest universities to access each other's curriculum and draw on their complementary strengths in serving both part- and full-time students.

The President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester, Professor Alan Gilbert, and Professor Brenda Gourley, Vice-Chancellor of the OU, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in London in February.

Professor Alan Gilbert said: "The OU is undoubtedly the world leader in modern distance and open learning, in the development of multimedia-based learning materials and in the excellence of its student support systems.

"These competitive advantages, coupled with the OU's growing strength and sophistication in online delivery, make it an ideal partner for the University of Manchester as we seek to enrich the learning experience of our campus-based students and embark on our ambitious international plans."

Professor Brenda Gourley said: "The OU has 30,000 international students all around the world and has much experience in delivering learning outside of the UK. The curriculum and research experience that Manchester brings to the partnership will allow us to jointly explore new learning and teaching opportunities in order to serve new markets overseas.

"Our joint commitment to global social justice will also be supported by this initiative, helping us provide access to higher education to people in developing countries around the world, including those in Africa, and thus contributing to the poverty agenda that Manchester has recently announced."

"These competitive advantages, coupled with the OU's growing strength and sophistication in online delivery, make it an ideal partner for the University of Manchester"

The OU and Manchester University, which has 35,000 students, including 7,400 international students from 180 different countries, have already identified several potential areas for collaboration, which will provide a range of flexible options for overseas students to combine study in the UK with distance learning in their home country.

Initial offerings will be targeted at key markets in China, India and other parts of Asia, as well as smaller but just as important markets in Africa and Latin America.

OU launches gift voucher scheme for Openings courses

THE OU has launched a gift voucher scheme that allows you to buy a family member, friend or colleague their choice of an OU short course, ***reports Yvonne Cook***.

On offer from February, the Course Vouchers come in two price ranges: an Orange Voucher (£115) lets the recipient choose from one of five 10-point Level One courses on: *Life in the oceans*; *Mammals*; *Fossils*; *Introducing astronomy*; *Human nutrition*. With a Purple Voucher (£135) their choice is extended to include five arts courses: three in the 'start writing' series (*family history, fiction, poetry*); *Shakespeare*; *Leonardo Da Vinci*. Vouchers bought now are valid for courses starting up to 31 May 2007.

The scheme is the brainchild of the university's Marketing department who say their inspiration comes partly from the students themselves. "Our market research suggests that there are students who are asking family and friends to give them money for Christmas and birthdays to support their OU study," said Tracy Carlton of Marketing. "Vouchers are another way to do that."

But they also aim to introduce more people to the joys of OU study – and the underlying theme is that study is a joy and a life-enhancing experience.

"We know there are students who have studied a course and got a lot out of it, and want to share that experience with someone else, said Tracy. "The idea is that learning is a pleasure – when you give someone a gift, you give them something they will enjoy."

Marketing hopes to extend the scheme to other courses later this year.

Answer the qualifying question on the OU Life Screensaver before Monday 17 April, and you could win a Gift Voucher pack worth £135. To download the Screensaver, go to **www.open.ac.uk/oulifescreensaver/staff/**



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COMMENT

Checking the Black Box

SOME years ago we started sending questionnaires to students who'd withdrawn to ask why they'd done so, and was there anything we could have done to help keep them going. The returns didn't tell us much; the reasons given were often the same – not enough time, changes in circumstances and so on.

Then it struck us that we were like aircraft crash investigators, trying to find out why an aircraft had crashed from only looking at the wreckage on the ground. But real life investigators also look at the 'Black Box' – the record of events leading up to the crash. If we looked at what happened in someone's life before their dropout decision, then maybe we could spot what, if anything, might have helped keep them going.

So one year we selected a group of new students we thought were likely to withdraw and interviewed them by phone at weekly intervals from the start of the course. You'll guess the end of this story – hardly any of them dropped out and we never got anything publishable. But we thought we'd spotted something – it seemed that the students who kept going when others facing similar problems dropped out were those who had good support networks, especially from immediate families, but also from friends, workmates, employers and other students. So when they ran into problems there was someone close by they could turn to for support – not tutoring, but morale restoration and practical help.

"This support is particularly important for our youngest students"

I learned two lessons from this exercise. One was the importance of the OU taking the initiative to contact students, not waiting for students to contact us. That's beginning to happen for new students via the 'ProActive Student Support' (PASS) project, which is proving successful. The second was the importance of support networks for students and the need for the OU to help families and friends support 'their' students as effectively as possible. So there's now a website for 'Families and Friends' on the OU's website **www.open.ac.uk/family/**, and a leaflet in the FirstClass Info Centre (Conferences>Open University>Info Centre>Advice>Families and Friends), which students can give their family or friends, on what will happen to 'their' student, and how they can help them best. One day I hope there will be something similar for employers.

This support is particularly important for our youngest students: surveys have shown that their most important form of support is – their mums. And of course getting families interested is a great way of recruiting them to be students too…

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

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

NEWS

See more news on the Intranet OU Life
//intranet.open.ac.uk/oulife/news

USS pension changes

PENSION A-Day (6 April, 2006) is upon us and a number of sweeping changes have been made to existing pension rules under the banner of Pensions Simplification, reports ***Sheila Forman***.

The changes will affect all current members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) and former members with deferred benefits in the scheme. They should not affect the USS pensions of retired members and those receiving spouse's, dependant's and children's pensions that commenced before A-Day.

The majority of OU staff are in the USS and will therefore have received a comprehensive explanation of the changes along with their Members' Annual Report 2004/05.

For those that didn't get round to reading them or didn't quite understand what it actually meant to them, *open house* attempts here to simplify the simplifications.

The basis of the new system is that there is a lifetime allowance (LTA), which is the maximum amount of benefit that can be built up on all UK pension schemes while still receiving favourable tax treatment. In its first year (2006/07) the LTA will be £1.5m rising to £1.8m in 2010. Anything above the LTA will be taxed. Understandably, it is not expected that many USS members will exceed this allowance, especially in the early years. High earners who might be affected should have already been contacted by USS Ltd.

In addition to the introduction of the LTA, there are five other key changes to USS that will directly affect most members when the new A-Day pension changes kick in on 6 April 2006.

Five key changes to USS

Removal of the 40-year service limit: The current limit on pensionable service accrual in USS of 40 years will no longer apply. An active member of the scheme will be able to build up service beyond 40 years without any restrictions. However, it should be noted that employers can choose to stop contributing once 40 years' service has been achieved. At the time *open house* went to press, the university had not made a decision on this.

Introduction of 25 per cent tax-free cash: Members will be able to take up to a maximum of 25 per cent of their benefits as tax-free cash on retirement instead of being limited to a maximum that is broadly equivalent to three times the amount of the pension as at present. For most members the new maximum is nearly double the present figure, but of course if the maximum 25 per cent is taken then the pension paid will be lower.

Increase in the minimum retirement age to 55 from 2010: From April 2010 the minimum retirement age will be increased from 50 to 55 (except where members are retiring for reasons of ill-health).

Increase in the contribution limit for additional voluntary contributions (AVCs): Currently members are limited to a maximum contribution of 15 per cent of their salary into the pension scheme. This limit will be increased from April 2006 and active members will be able to make greater contributions to USS in the form of AVCs. Members should note that revised Added Years rates will apply to new Added Years contracts taken out from 1 April 2006.

Removal of statutory earnings cap: This will only affect some high-earning members of the scheme.

The Pensions Manager has arranged a presentation for USS members on Wednesday 5 April in the Berrill Lecture Theatre on the Walton Hall campus. It is hoped that the presentation will address many of these issues. More details of the presentation will be available on the OU Life intranet page.

Further information on the changes can be found from the modeller section available from the USS website at **www.usshq.co.uk**

From April 2010 the minimum retirement age will be increased from 50 to 55



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The Communications Group would like to thank the following contributors: Ken Hudson, Ormond Simpson, Stuart Thorogood, Robin Wilson and Alan Woodley.

The editorial content of this supplement was correct at the time of going to press.

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Next issue
The next issue of *open house* will be published in May. If you would like to contribute an article please contact the Editor, Debbie Dixon, at **open-house@open.ac.uk**
Deadline for submissions is 23 April.

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See more news on the Intranet OU Life
//intranet.open.ac.uk/oulife/news

NEWS

OUAUT strike action

MEMBERS of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the University and College Lecturers' Union (NAFTHE) staged a national one-day strike in protest over pay in March.

OUAUT members handed out more than 900 leaflets to colleagues during their picket of the Walton Hall campus at Milton Keynes and various regional centres across the country.

The strike was called after members of both unions, which are due to amalgamate on 1 June 2006, voted for strike action, demanding better pay. John Bennett, president of the OUAUT branch told *open house*: "For those who are uncertain what the dispute is about, it is because we have fallen 40 per cent behind our comparators over the last 35 years. This year we are looking for a substantial increase and an element of catch-up pay."

As well as the one-day strike members of both unions are being asked to boycott all assessment activity, staff appraisal schemes, providing cover for absent colleagues and existing call-out arrangements.

However, Director, Students Will Swann told *open house*: "The university's main concern is to minimise disruption for students while this national dispute is resolved. The major impact on students in the near future is likely to be in relation to the grading of Tutor Marked Assignments. Associate Lecturers participating in the action have been advised by the AUT to comment on, but not grade TMAs and to send them to the Assignment Handling Office at Walton Hall in the usual way, whether the assignment has been submitted on paper or by the eTMA route. Photocopies of ungraded TMAs will be taken before they are returned to the student. By taking this action we will be in a position to deal with ungraded TMAs when the dispute is resolved. Computer marked assignments are not affected in any way by the action and we are not anticipating any changes to the April, June or July examinations".

The Unions were due to meet with the employers on 28 March to begin talks. For further details visit **www.ucea.ac.uk** and **www.aut.org.uk**



Picketing at Walton Hall Picture: Fiona Carey

9 out of 10…

NINETY-FIVE per cent of students who responded to a recent Courses Survey said they were satisfied with their overall study experience with The Open University, while sixty-one per cent said they were very satisfied.

The survey, which was conducted by the Student Statistics Team in the university's Institute of Educational Technology, was sent to 38,497 students on 122 courses.

The results also showed that 82 per cent of those who responded were studying their course as part of a programme to achieve an OU qualification or award.

The survey also found that:

- 98 per cent of students were satisfied with course choice information in OU publications or OU websites, while 83 per cent were satisfied with the advice and guidance from an OU member of staff.
- 48 per cent of students found the amount of time studying their course more than expected and 57 per cent fell behind the study calendar – around the same level reported in 2004.
- Personal motivation was the most important factor in keeping students going (96 per cent) followed by support from family and friends (71 per cent), and an extended deadline/special arrangement (63 per cent).
- Learning materials are highly rated by students – particularly the course guide (97 per cent satisfied) and the printed teaching material (96 per cent). 72 per cent or more were satisfied with all printed and electronic components provided in support of their learning as part of their course.
- 85 per cent of students were satisfied with tutor support on their course overall. 87 per cent were satisfied, 60 per cent very satisfied with tutor support received at tutorials, while 85 per cent reported that feedback from their tutor improved their understanding of the course.

Using the survey results, the team will continue to work with Student Services and Central Academic Units to investigate ways of improving student retention rates and the quality of the learning experience.

John Byron to perform with OU Orchestra

RENOWNED concert pianist John Byron will be performing Beethoven's *Piano Concerto no 3 in C Minor* with the OU Orchestra in the Old Lecture Theatre at Walton Hall on 12 May 2006. The Orchestra will also be playing Mozart's *Overture to the Impresario* and Faure's *Pavanne*. The OU Orchestra still has vacancies for wind, violin and viola players. For further details on the concert and how to join the Orchestra, which rehearses each Friday in Milton Keynes, visit **www.open.ac.uk/ouclub/ou-orchestra/**



IN BRIEF

War, intervention and development

THE official launch of OU course TU875 *War, intervention and development* took place at the Royal United Services Institute in London in February. Guest speakers at the launch included Air Chief Marshal and OU Business School graduate Sir Brian Burridge, Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley and Helen Yanacopulos, Senior Lecturer in International Politics and Development, Technology and Course Chair. The launch was attended by MPs, civil servants and other dignitaries and OU staff. There are currently 130 students studying TU875, which had its first presentation in November 2005. For further information on the course visit **www.open.ac.uk/courses/**



Baroness Shirley Williams of Crosby with the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley at the course launch

OU Teaching Awards 2006

CONGRATULATIONS to the following staff who have won an OU Teaching Award. Keith Honnor (Business School), Ingrid Jefferys (Health and Social Care), Sally Jordan (Science), Elizabeth Manning (Student Services), Linda Price (Institute for Educational Technology), James Robson (Arts), Norma Sherratt (Social Science), Scottish Online Support Team (Student Services), T160 Course Team (Technology), Foundation Degree in Working with Young People Team (Faculty for Education and Language Studies). The following Associate Lecturers were also presented with Teaching Awards: Patricia Ash (Science), Linda Corlett (Student Services) and Eluned Jeffries (Social Sciences) from Region 02 (Oxford), Isobel Falconer (Arts) from Region 11 (Scotland), Peter Hull (Social Sciences) from Region 05 (West Midlands), Edward Hurst (Technology) from Region 08 (North West), Keith Jessop (Student Services) from Region 13 (East Grinstead), Richard Jurd (Science) from Region 06 (East Anglia), Ian Oldham (Student Services) from Region 10 (Wales), and John Spencer (Technology) from Region 09 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne). The OU's nominees to the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme this year are: Bob Lambourne (Science), James Robson (Arts), and Gill Needham (Library). Staff will receive their award at a special ceremony at Walton Hall on 26 April.

Learning with the OU

A NEW conference which explores how students learn with the OU when English is not their first language is set to take place at Walton Hall on 24 May 2006. Entitled 'Learning with the OU when English is an additional language: implications and opportunities', the one-day conference will examine the external environment and the OU's resources and services currently in place to deal with students who don't have English as their first language. There will also be workshops looking at issues such as tutor resources, enquiry handling, assignment marking and referral routes. The findings from the discussions will be fed into policy and practice development. Of 190,000 students currently studying with the OU, around eight per cent speak English as an additional language. The conference, which is sponsored by Will Swann, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Student Services, is open to all members of staff. For further details and to book a place contact Joanna Mutlow on 01865 327000 or email Jo at j.mutlow@open.ac.uk

Are you the next Freddie Flintoff?

WERE you bowled over by England's success last year when they won back the Ashes from the Aussies? Do you have some cricket whites lurking in a cupboard somewhere at home? The OU Cricket Club is currently looking for new members. The club is open to all staff and their families. Each season the club plays 65 to 70 games of varying formats and standards, ranging from 15 evening friendlies to more serious league games midweek and on Saturdays. For further details visit **www.open.ac.uk/ouclub/CricketClub** or email the Cricket Club at ou-cricket-club@open.ac.uk



OU Cricket Club is looking for new members

OU/UNISON partnership

A NEW partnership between the OU's Faculty of Health and Social Care and UNISON (the UK's largest union) was marked with an official launch at London Zoo earlier this year. Professor Monica Dowling, Director of Social Work Studies, said at the launch: "The launch was a real celebration of all that The Open University has achieved in developing social work programmes. We currently have more than 1,000 students in work, sponsored by their agencies, who are studying for a professional social work qualification. The OU/Unison learning partnership route aims to offer opportunities to existing social care workers without traditional academic qualifications to become qualified social workers while continuing with their employment".

Make time for games

PLAYSTATIONS, X-Boxes and Gameboys are being offered to OU staff to help them see the potential of virtual environment learning.

The library has a number of games consoles and software which academics and other OU employees can borrow so they can learn the value of interactive computer games as a learning tool.

"We want to reassure people who are nervous about such technology that it is nothing to be afraid of," said Digital Services Development Manager Keren Mills. "This is a pilot project which we hope will motivate academics to see the possibilities.

"The way many OU students learn means they can't come into a laboratory and it becomes more of a problem to do practice-based learning," she added. "Many courses already include multimedia simulations which help to overcome this. But the really sophisticated computer games can help staff even more to tap into the potential."

The scheme is available to all OU staff and postgraduate research students. They can use larger consoles such as Sony Playstations or X-Boxes in the library, but can also take away smaller machines such as Nintendo Gameboys or PSPs (Playstation Portables).

"We have a range of games which tend to focus on strategy and role playing," said Keren. "We have avoided shooting and racing games. But we have various versions of The Sims, which can help people learn to plan and design, and Civilisation III, which encourages people to think strategically."

She added that such games could in future be developed or adapted to help OU students on specific courses. "For example, battle strategy games can help history students to see clearly how and why wars were won," she said. "You could see, say, Wellington's strategy against Napoleon, or even take Napoleon's place to see how you would have planned your strategy to fight that battle."

"We want to reassure people who are nervous about technology that there is nothing to be afraid of"

The pilot project links into the government's e-strategy for education, Harnessing Technology, which suggests borrowing ideas from interactive games as a way of motivating reluctant learners to practise complex skills and achieve more than they might through traditional means.

But staff do not need an academic reason to borrow the games, stressed Keren. "They are being loaned out for an academic purpose but we do know people will want to borrow them just to relax with," she said. "Part of the research does include asking people how they have used the consoles and what they got out of it – but if they just want to play with them, that's absolutely fine!"



Pictured (l to r): Mark Stride, Keren Mills and Non Scantlebury

VC'S VIEW



PROFESSOR BRENDA GOURLEY

A GROUND-BREAKING partnership agreement was signed in February between the University of Manchester and The Open University, primarily to deliver high quality learning and teaching opportunities to previously untapped student markets overseas. The UK's two largest universities will draw on their complementary strengths to develop and offer flexible degree programmes to overseas students who want to combine study in the UK with distance learning in their home country, as well as to campus-based students in the UK.

This partnership symbolises the dramatic changes in higher education the world over. The combined force of the demand for higher level skills in this knowledge economy, the democratisation of access to higher education and the marvels of technology (and in particular, the internet) have created an entirely new world from that of higher education even ten years ago. Education has not only become big business (and not simply the domain of the public sector), it has, for the first time in history, gone global.

Demand

We see evidence of this in the massive demand for education worldwide, in the huge migration of students seeking educational opportunities – with more than 275,000 students from more than 200 countries studying in the UK – and in the amount of cross-border education where growing numbers of institutions have e-learning offerings or some form of distance education. We see it also in the changing age profile of students as they come to universities to add to their portfolio of knowledge and skills throughout their lives, and in the behaviour of students who are picking their courses from different universities across the world depending on where it is they believe they will get best value (and brand leverage). And crucially we see it in the rise of the 'corporate' university and the private sector moving aggressively into the domain of the public sector.

This is a world of fierce and continuing competition where the playing fields are daily becoming flatter (to use Thomas Friedman's phrase) and where even institutions like the University of Manchester and The Open University – both distinctive and illustrious in different ways – come to find themselves in a situation where they may well be stronger in a collaborative partnership than they are outside one – for certain purposes at least.

It is no accident that 'working in partnership' is one of The Open University's strategic priorities. It is not possible to contain all facets of any discipline within geographical or cultural boundaries – nor indeed to understand markets in every sphere. To this end, the OU has partnerships in both the public and the private sector, in places as far flung as India, Asia, Turkey, Russia and parts of Africa. This partnership with Manchester represents our first very large strategic alliance in our home base, the UK. It is different in scope and potential from the many other partnerships we have developed over the years, and will enhance our joint capacity on various fronts.

Together we can offer students possibilities that extend beyond what we could individually offer – and that is true not only on the international front. We will not do everything together but will pick and choose where there are synergies that make sense. And that, in the end, is the best basis for a successful partnership: a union where together we are more than the sum of our parts.

Moving theme

LEARNING and teaching on the move is the theme for the Learning and Teaching Conference 2006.

The conference replaces the Knowledge Network (KN)'s previous TTAA (Tracking Technology for Academic Advantage) conferences.

Themes will include 'Students on the move', 'Staff on the move' and 'Changes in our strategies and thinking' and 'Using the latest technology to support our learning and teaching activities'.

The two-day event, which begins on Wednesday 26 April, will include the presentation of this year's OU Teaching Awards, which recognise and reward good teaching practice. (For a list of the winners see page 3.)

The event, open to all staff, will be launched with a keynote speech from Mike Sharples, Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Birmingham.

The conference's other main address will be given by the OU's Josie Taylor, Professor of Learning Technology and Director, Institute of Educational Technology UserLab, which researches e-learning tools and how they can be best used by teachers and students.

Confirmed plenary sessions include 'Pedagogical possibilities of the virtual learning environment', led by Niall Sclater, and 'Open Content: Implications for learning and teaching', led by Professor Andy Lane.

The conference will also feature a number of parallel workshop sessions, with themes including how accessible teachers' email should be, a so-called andrologocal approach to learning in which students rather than tutors dictate what they will learn, and how familiarity with games consoles such as Playstations can help mould the virtual learning environments of the future.

The conference is open to all staff. To book a place visit kn.open.ac.uk and click on the link to Learning and Teaching Conference 2006 or call Linda Price on 01908 652696 or email at l.price@open.ac.uk

Celebrate Interdependence Day

GOOD news on climate change or globalisation is hard to come by. We seem to be faced with a ceaseless flow of bad news stories about threats beyond our control.

Now an ambitious project being led from within the OU's Geography department aims to change that. "We're living in an interdependent world – ecologically, socially, economically – but our way of thinking hasn't caught up with that," argues Joe Smith, Chair of the Interdependence Day project. "The project aims to throw light on what interconnectedness means for politics, science, technology and culture. But this isn't just about analysis. We want to spotlight new thinking that has the power to change the world for the better."

Set to take place at the Royal Geographical Society's headquarters in London on 1 July, the first Interdependence Day will focus on participation, debate and learning. There will be well-known speakers offering 'Declarations of Interdependence', a fast-paced solutions workshop that will 'Save the World in Sixty Minutes' and a mini film festival where filmmakers will showcase their work.

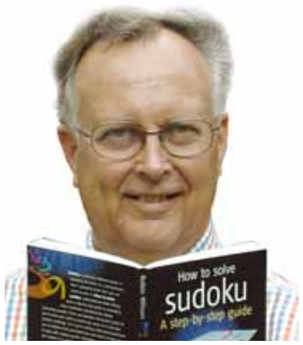
There will also be plenty of creative side events including arts and poetry workshops, music and performance, an 'Earthly Sins Confessional' and more. There will be a 'Doctor's Surgery' where you can book an appointment to diagnose and solve the world's problems. Displays will offer state-of-the-art design and technology for sustainability.

Tickets for the Interdependence Day event are £6. For more information on how to take part, visit **www.interdependenceday.co.uk** or contact Jan Smith on 01908 654456, email: j.f.smith@open.ac.uk

Joe Smith

OPEN SUDOKU

Win a £20 book token



ROBIN WILSON
PROFESSOR OF PURE MATHEMATICS

THANK you to all of those who sent in their entries for the Open Sudoku competition in the Jan/Feb issue of *open house* (issue 404). The three lucky winners are: Don Fay, Ben Palmer and David Stephenson.

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

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

The first puzzle is a practice one – the solution is given on page 6.

The second is more difficult, and is set as a competition. When you have solved it, send the completed grid, with the hidden word, to Debbie Dixon, Editor, *open house*, Communications Group, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. Closing date is 23 April.

A £20 book token will be awarded to three lucky winners.

Below is the solution to the *open house* issue 404 competition.

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

Hidden Word: P O L Y H E D R A (Column 8)

		B						A
E			B		T			
N	S			O				C
	T				S			E
	N			C			O	
B			A				L	
O				A			B	S
			T		N			L
A						C		

Practice puzzle, Hidden Word: ?

L	R					E		
			I	A	O		X	
O	C	I				X		
	L						C	
		D				I	L	E
	O		X	L	D			
		C					D	A

Competition puzzle, Hidden Word: ?

Learning to lead

THIRTEEN OU administrators, secretarial and clerical staff from the Institute of Educational Technology, Social Sciences and Student Services have successfully completed the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) Introductory Certificate in Team Leading programme. This 30-hour programme encourages individuals to reflect on team leader practice and develop skills in delegation, team-working, motivation, time management, problem solving and managing conflict. The OU is now accredited by the ILM and can deliver a suite of Leadership and Management qualifications. The first, now underway, is the Introductory Certificate in First Line Management, aimed at new managers and individuals aspiring to management positions. For further details on the ILM programme visit **http://intranet.open.ac.uk/human-resources**



Staff who received their certificate from University Secretary Fraser Woodburn were Michelle Stannard, Anna Page, Rehana Malik, Helen Labrum, Phyllis Elkerton, Deirdre Bethune and Olivia Acquah. Those gaining certificates but not able to be in the picture were Verena Ford, Clare Gordon, Jayne Hayton, Margaret Marchant, Lynda Preston and Janet Smith

Sorry

THE last issue of *open house* incorrectly stated that Yvonne Raw was chair of the Open University Bicycle Users Group. We apologise for any confusion this may have caused. Visit **http://technology.open.ac.uk/oubug**

Misplaced moon

IN the last issue of *open house* we mentioned that OU scientists will be involved in a mission to probe another of Saturn's moons, Europa when in fact it is Jupiter's moon. The web address should also have read as **http://robots.open.ac.uk/space** We apologise for any confusion this may have caused.

LETTERS

Is coup ethical?

I HAD just watched the video footage on the BBC of British soldiers beating Iraqis in a Basra compound when I picked up my *open house* (issue 404) and read its triumphal front page lead.

'Military Coup' confirmed a partnership agreement with Cranfield University to provide Open University MBA courses for the military until 2028. This 'very good news', as Edmund Dixon, the OU's Head of Strategic Partnership, put it, took me by surprise; just like a military coup itself catches the unsuspecting.

The German philosopher, Hegel once argued that all aducation was the art of making people ethical. In light of recent international events I wondered whether the deal raised some ethical issues which the article did not explore.

The MBA curriculum must be one which adds to a students' understanding of the complex and demanding environment which shapes both war and peace.

The university already has one course which could be attractive to the Ministry of Defence: TU875 *War, intervention and development*, where key questions include how violent conflicts erupt, where wars come from, and how intervention can provide for peace keeping. Let us hope that what we will provide the military is rooted in a wider ethical context.

The coup represents a shift towards establishing contracts with organisations to train a specific workforce and thus develop new strategic markets. The OU has to be flexible and adapt in a changing world where competition between providers can drive and shape the curriculum more than any other element. But do these new market relationships threaten our basic values?

In July last year, a House of Commons standing committee heard that 'a third of the people recruited into the Army have a reading age of 11 years old or lower'. In such contexts the education of officers through MBA programmes is an important step. This is especially true in the current international climate. In February the Pentagon upgraded the 'war on terror' to the 'long war', and predicted 'large-scale irregular warfare campaigns including counter-insurgency and security, stability, transition and reconstruction operations' in the foreseeable future. In the 22-year span of the agreement to provide MBAs for the military this may become the disturbing backcloth against which our curriculum is delivered. It would be fascinating to hear from the university what kind of skills and course content they have in mind to equip our military should the 'long war' become a reality.

Dick Skellington, Project Officer, Faculty of Social Sciences, Walton Hall

Response

THE newly signed agreement between the Ministry of Defence, Cranfield University and the OU is significant for the OU on a number of grounds. At one level, of course, it is simply an extension of the excellent links with the MoD that we have enjoyed for more than 30 years. But it also highlights how employers are taking a much tighter control over the education of their staff.

OU research on "Corporate Universities" (Paton, Peters et al. 2005) such as the MoD's Defence Academy, has found organisations pooling different strands of education and training under one roof, and more tightly managing their relationship with educational providers.

Often, as with the MoD-OU relationship, the status quo is not an option. Either we tender for the right to supply courses and programmes or we are excluded and lose students. In this case we would have lost the current Army funding for OU MBAs which was rolled into this contract; as it is we are now on the inside track for 22 years.

We also have a chance to benefit all our students by working with employers to create a more attractive and up-to-date set of courses. Ethics is a good example. While it is important to remember that 99 per cent of the British military's job is to negotiate and manage peaceful situations, such is the nature of the MoD's work that they have been dealing explicitly with ethics as a key aspect of leadership development for many years. We may well be able to learn from their experiences.

Better relations with employers can help us develop new courses as well. A recent example is TU875 *War, intervention and development*. The Army not only provided the idea; they brokered significant funding from MoD, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. Without their help, it is unlikely we would have ever produced such an innovative, fascinating and worthwhile course.

Professor Geoff Peters
Faculty of Technology, Walton Hall

No alternative

IN ISSUE 404 of *open house*, you allow two contributors to assert, unchallenged, that the East Campus shuttle service represents an 'unofficial subsidy to car users.' It is important to nail this falsehood before it becomes the conventional wisdom.

As part of their work, many OU staff are required to travel between the new East Campus and the old Walton Hall site, often on a daily basis. Without the shuttle this round journey would take at least 30 minutes on foot via the university-approved route; this hardly represents an efficient use of staff time. In addition, many of these trips involve the transportation of boxes full of documents, plus computers and other equipment. Your contributors do not seem to have considered how such trips could be made in the absence of the shuttle, nor have they considered how disabled colleagues could travel between the two sites.

While it is true that many of the shuttle passengers will have arrived on site by car, others will have come by bike, on foot and by public transport. To single out one of these groups and allege that the shuttle represents a 'hidden subsidy' for them is utterly bogus.

The shuttle represents not just the most cost-effective method for enabling OU staff to go about their business, it is also the most environmentally friendly option. It is ironic that your two contributors, who are both arguing for the university to adopt 'greener' transport policies, fail to see this.

John Jefferies, Examinations Administrator, Student Services, Walton Hall

On the buses

SO WHY do all these supposedly environmentally conscious people who work at Walton Hall ('On the buses, what buses?', issue 404) live in London or Northampton, not Milton Keynes?

Chris Jones, Professor in Statistical Science, Maths & Computing, Walton Hall

Editor's comment

THE irregular bus service in Milton Keynes affects people who live in Milton Keynes as well as those who do not live locally. It is in the university's interest to try to get a much better bus service to reduce car usage and pressure on parking. A better bus service would benefit all those travelling to Walton Hall, whether daily or occasionally, regardless of where they live.

Should have gone to Specsavers?

AS A result of a recent visit to my optician I found that I was a 'DSE user' requiring 'a basic corrective appliance where recommended exclusively for DSE work', to quote Occupational Health Dept document d6662 (that's 'needing glasses to stare at a computer screen all day' to you and me). As such the OU is required to pay for this 'corrective appliance' under DSE Regulations (1992), for which I am very grateful.

Having ordered my glasses from my optician I contacted Occupational Health to apply for this 'contribution' and was told in no uncertain terms that I 'should've gone to Specsavers' (sound familiar?).

Somewhat dismayed, I studied document d6662 more closely. It states quite clearly that if I want a free eye test then I must submit the form attached. It also says that, when spectacles for DSE users (as described above) are ordered with Specsavers 'the OU does not pay a contribution'. I assume some sort of arrangement is in place here.

But it doesn't seem to me that it states anywhere that the order must be made with Specsavers in order to qualify for financial support.

I phoned Occupational Health to discuss this further. I was told that the OU was perfectly entitled to make any arrangement it likes and that the previous system (of vouchers) had been wasteful and that the current arrangements were much better. This is where it all seemed to get rather blurred and unfocused to me. Better for whom? Not better for me; I've already paid my optician for my glasses (and they hadn't charged me for the eye test). Not better for my optician who stood to lose my business. Better for the OU? I can't see how; after all, a contribution is a contribution. So I can only conclude that it's better for Specsavers?

Jeff Lewis
AACS, Walton Hall

Community spirit?

I HAVE always believed that an in-house newspaper should play a key role in engendering a spirit of community across a workforce. It should be a vital source of news and features about staff and topics that affect them and it should be fun – and people should look forward to receiving it. The new, bland, on-brand, improved, infrequent *open house* is increasingly irrelevant to the vast majority of its readers. My copy and those of my colleagues were 'recycled' almost before the plastic wrapper had hit the bin. I know that the Vice-Chancellor's Executive is concerned to build (re-build) the OU community – *open house* would be a good starting point.

Jessica Magill, Channel Strategy Manager (Advertising), Marketing Services, Walton Hall

Editor's comment

WITH a readership of 14,000, the majority of whom are not based at Walton Hall or have never visited Walton Hall, it is a difficult balancing act ensuring that all the stories featured are relevant to all members of the OU community. Since taking over the editorship of *open house* I have introduced an editorial panel which staff are invited to sit on and help with the planning of content for future issues. If you would like to sit on an editorial panel please get in touch. In addition please see the readers' survey on page 11.

Technological tapeworm

CONGRATULATIONS to our communications people for the big splash about the OU/Manchester link in the *Education Guardian* on 28 February 2006. But it was interesting that *The Guardian's* editor started with a long list of e-learning ventures that have failed. Maybe there's still some scepticism out there.

Of course OU ventures never fail, but I still worry that we're not addressing the issues of access, retention, popularity and cost that I questioned in my article in *open house* 'Do we want to be an E-OU?' (issue 400). I still worry that e-learning may be a 'technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education feeding off its host' (Noble). And I still wonder if we're ignoring other technology that might be effective in reaching our students, especially our younger ones, such as texting, digital TV and so on.

In 1927 Thomas Edison said that the invention of motion pictures would make classroom textbooks obsolete. Let's hope we're better forecasters!

Ormond Simpson
Institute of Educational Technology

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

OPEN SUDOKU

Practise puzzle, page 5 solution

T	O	B	S	L	C	E	N	A
E	A	C	B	N	T	L	S	O
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O	E	T	C	A	L	N	B	S
C	B	S	T	E	N	O	A	L
A	L	N	O	S	B	C	E	T

Hidden Word: C O N S T A B L E (column 7)

NEWS

Fun for all the family

CALLING all culture vultures – the Open University is sponsoring cultural festivals across the UK in 2006.

Brighton Festival, 6 - 28 May. The largest multi-arts festival in England, celebrating its 40th anniversary. The 2006 festival features more than 700 events across theatre, dance, music, books and debates. To mark the centenary of the birth of Samuel Beckett, The Open University is sponsoring *Access All Beckett*, a programme of classic Beckett prose pieces performed by the internationally renowned Franco-Irish company Gare St Lazare Players. The recitals will be performed in dedicated areas, taking Beckett out of the theatre and into the city. **www.brighton-festival.org.uk** or call +44 (0)1273 709709.

Swindon Festival of Literature 1 - 13 May. Authors and speakers not only from the world of literature but also politics, science, sport, entertainment and television contribute to this exciting festival of exploration and ideas. Highlights include the Clive Brain Memorial Lecture, the Swindon Performance Poetry Slam Competition and the Children and Families weekend. The OU will be running a creative writing workshop at this event. For further information visit **www.swindonfestivalofliterature.co.uk** or call +44 (0)1793 771080.

The Hay Festival 26 May - 4 June. Following on from the success of last year's partnership, the OU will once again be sponsoring the Hay Festival. Hay will be hosting some wonderful first-time visitors this year, including poet Seamus Heaney, the Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, sculptor Antony Gormley, artist Howard Hodgkin, Princess Michael of Kent and writer and cooking star Madhur Jaffrey, as well as celebrating new work from some old friends such as Maya Angelou, Simon Schama, Margaret Atwood and John Pilger. The OU will be running creative writing workshops at Hay, so please look out for further information, or call 0870 990 1299 and quote 'Open University'.

Shrewsbury Summer Season, 1 June - 3 September. The Shrewsbury Summer Season incorporates a myriad of events including the first Shrewsbury Folk Festival, an extensive music programme, free concerts, outdoor theatre and the Young Summer Season. This diverse festival celebrates cultural and artistic enterprise from the medieval era to modern times. The OU will support creative writing workshops; for more details visit **www.shrewsburysummer.co.uk** or call +44 (0)1743 281218.



Brighton Festival fun

IN BRIEF

Japan space telescope launched

THE Open University is providing some of the expertise behind an ambitious Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) satellite telescope. ASTRO-F, launched in February, is on a 500-day mission to make a map of the universe. The OU's contribution to ASTRO-F is building the software that will translate the data received from the satellite into images. The OU is part of a consortium with Imperial College, University of London, the University of Kent, Sussex University and SRON-Groningen with University of Groningen (IKSG consortium) all contributing to the data reduction of the All-Sky Survey. From Japan, Dr Stephen Serjeant, Senior Lecturer in Astrophysics at The Open University, said: "The launch was magnificent and thrilling. You could feel the vibration even at our 2km distance. After so many of us have put in so much work for so long on this mission, it's wonderful to see it blasted off into space safely."

English Language and Literature BA launched

NUMBERS of students studying English at the OU rose by nine per cent between 2002 and 2004, said Professor Bob Owens at the launch of the new English Language and Literature degree in the Berrill Lecture Theatre, Walton Hall in February.

The degree is a collaboration between the Arts Faculty and the Faculty of Education and Language Studies. Vice-Chancellor Brenda Gourley, speaking at the launch, said that the combination of literature and language in one English degree will make the subject even more popular with students.

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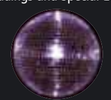
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NEWS

See more news on the Intranet OU Life
//intranet.open.ac.uk/oulife/news

Making computers think

THE Knowledge Media Institute's recent £4 million European Union grants have underlined its place as one of Europe's leading experts in the field.

The awards, including KMi's largest ever individual grant of £1.55 million, will help the institute to push forward its research and development of ontologies in the so-called semantic web – enabling computers to communicate better with each other and even to search the internet as effectively as humans do.

The six separate awards were won by the OU's Professor Enrico Motta (pictured right) and Dr John Domingue (pictured below), who had applied for grants for three Integrated Projects (IPs) and three Specific Targeted Research Projects (STREPs). Their applications so impressed the awarding body – the EC's Framework 6 Information Society Technologies programme – that of the 150 applications the OU's IPs were rated first, third and fifth and OU STREPS claimed the top two places in their category.



"We're delighted to be rated so highly and this money is a huge boost to our research," said Dr Domingue. "It affirms KMi as an international centre of excellence in the fields of ontology engineering and semantic web services."

The funds are all for projects focused on semantic web design. "We're creating programmes and networks that enable machines to read websites," he added. "To give a simple example, when humans go on to the internet to, say, book a holiday, we know how each piece of information relates to what our needs are. We'll take a bit of information from here, and add it to a bit from there, and process it all. We are working towards giving machines that same level of understanding and processing. By achieving this, we can delegate more and more tasks to computers."

The money, which will fund 22 new research posts at KMi, was awarded as follows:

- £1.55 million for NeOn: Lifecycle Support for Networked Ontologies. This four-year project will create a platform and 'toolkit' to help create and manage ontologies.
- £565K for XMEDIA: Knowledge Sharing and Reuse across Media.
- £391K for OK: Openknowledge – Open, coordinated knowledge sharing architecture.
- £711K for SUPER: Semantics Utilised for Process management within and between Enterprises.
- £484K for LUISA: Learning Content Management System Using Innovative Semantic Web Services Architecture.
- £222K for LHDL: Living Human Digital Library.



To find out more about all of these projects visit **www.kmi.open.ac.uk**

Special celebrations to mark first anniversary of SRS

AT THE beginning of April the Student Registration and Enquiry Service (SRS) will mark its first birthday.

The new service operates from Walton Hall, Region 08 (Manchester), and Region 05 (Nottingham) and is responsible for handling initial enquiries and for undertaking most registration activity.

Establishing new teams and ways of working has been immensely demanding at a time when student recruitment is being undertaken in a highly competitive environment.

However, the hard work has paid off. During the last ten months, SRS staff have received approximately 241,000 emails and 533,000 phone calls, achieving an average of 94.4 per cent of calls being answered live, a fraction under the target of 95 per cent.

The SRS management team have received plenty of feedback from colleagues across the university, which has helped develop and improve the training available to all SRS staff and in turn the service they provide to students.

However, there is still a lot to do and management is working hard to develop staff to provide an increasingly robust and responsive service.

IN THE HOT SEAT Face-to-face – wither on the vine?



KEN HUDSON
CHAIR OF THE AL COMMITTEE

SOME weeks ago I gave my first face-to-face (FtoF) tutorial to my tutorgroup for my third-level OU science course on this current year's presentation. My students and I are very lucker – the 'study centre' is the London School of Economics (LSE) in central London.

The nicely decorated allocated teaching room, as always, has good quality seating, with individual swing-over 'desks', a whiteboard, and modern ICT infrastructure comprising PC and data projector. Wonderful ICT learner support facilities I can hear you say? Well, I suspect they might be wonderful facilities – except I can't use them! The hire cost to the OU is too great.

Now, I have no issues with my Regional Centre over this – even as a mere scientist, I understand budgetary constraints. But, what message does it give out to my students?

Online

All Associate Lecturers must now be online. Students are expected (well, will be presumed) to be online soon(-ish). I find it ironic that I can sit in the comfort of my own home office and can download on to my own PC (at my own cost!) the administrative details of my students (contractual obligation to do so), but go along to a tutorial (also contractual obligation), and I then cannot use similar systems to support their learning. I am reduced to the clichéd 'sage on the stage'!

At least one of the TMAs on my course requires students to carry out literature searches, in order to find published papers in scientific journals – an excellent, very relevant and valuable study skill.

It would probably be asking too much to expect to be able to demonstrate such a database search directly online in a tutorial, but I have 'screen captured' pages from an example search, and have them incorporated into a PowerPoint presentation – going through the process step by step. Can I demonstrate this, on screen, from that presentation? No chance, for the reason given above. I am reduced to working from printed photocopies. Better than nothing – but not exactly a 21st century learning experience!

Now this isn't to imply that if a tutor cannot use ICT in a tutorial, the tutorial has no value – far from it. But, if I can see that what I am offering my students (in my particular context) is second best, then my students will be able to work it out also.

The university's e-learning strategy requires that more and more of its courses have ICT elements – great, I agree! The much-lauded Virtual Learning Environment (to which I look forward) will provide an environment that is more interactive, and should give better student support, i.e. provide a modern learning experience, that is fully 'fit for purpose'.

So where does the FtoF tutorial fit into this – and indeed does it? Or, will it wither on the vine, and be withdrawn? I for one, would mourn the demise of the FtoF should it go this way, but, I have to say, I have no great confidence it will survive.

Ken Hudson

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

It's good to teach

OU students are not the only ones who can get behind with their coursework. Susan Mackessack explains how she fits in teaching two OU law courses while holding down a full-time job with Fife Council and spending time with the family. Interview by ***Peter Taylor-Whiffen***



Susan Mackessack got into teaching purely by chance

SUSAN MACKESSACK
Age: 45, Lives: Kinross, Scotland, Teaches: W221 and W100

I HAVE a full-time job but every single day I'll also do some Open University work. I enjoy it but I also need to fit it in or there's a danger I'll get behind.

I teach two courses, W221 *Employment law and practice* and W100 *An introduction to law*. They fit really well with my job as team leader of Fife Council's litigation department. I got into teaching quite by chance – it was a rainy lunchtime so instead of going out of the office I browsed through that day's edition of *The Scotsman* and happened to see a general advert for OU Associate Lecturers. Employment law is my specialist subject so last year I started teaching W221 and was asked this year if I'd be able to take on W100 – so I've ended up being quite busy!

The key is organisation. In the morning I'll go to work in Edinburgh, and every lunchtime I check my OU emails to see what I might be doing later. When I've finished work, I always make sure I get a couple of hours' 'family time'. My husband and I have a daughter of 12 and two sons aged ten and six, so between the hours of 6pm and 8pm is when I'm cooking tea and we sit down to eat together. And then I spend from 8pm to 11pm every night doing my OU work!

Much of it is preparation, especially when there's a tutorial coming up, but a lot of it is also reacting to queries and problems that students might have. I'll spend those hours reading materials, organising questions that we can discuss in a tutorial, marking TMAs or answering individual students' questions. The number of queries varies depending on the time of year and the type of student. Some call or email regularly, which is absolutely fine because I enjoy the one-to-one aspect of the job, and it's what I'm here for. Others I never hear from at all except when they send me a TMA. I tend to get more queries straight after tutorials – perhaps reacting to a discussion we've had – and of course there are a few more than usual around exam times!

"That's the thing I love about teaching for the OU – the flexibility"

Associate Lecturers are told to try to encourage our students to call at certain times, and I'm generally available between 8pm and 11pm Monday to Thursdays, and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. That said, if a student has an urgent problem outside those times I'm obviously happy to talk them through it – and by the same token I don't deliberately wait in during the dedicated times just on the off-chance that a student calls. Most of the time I'm there, but if they do call and I'm not, I make sure I always return their calls as soon as I can.

I enjoy the tutorials and meeting the students, but this only happens in W100 as W221 is taught entirely online. That makes a tutor's work a bit lonely sometimes so I enjoy contributing to OU tutor chatrooms.

The online students do have tutorials as well, which last three days – but that's not as heavy as it sounds! I'll set them questions for them to talk through among themselves and although I am leading the thread, once I've set the task I merely respond to their replies. That means I can be reading, or even watching TV, while I'm waiting to hear the ping on the computer to see someone's posted a comment!

But that's the thing I love about teaching for the OU – the flexibility. Aside from the fixed tutorials, and the fixed dates I schedule in for marking, I can choose when I work. If it was more fixed I couldn't do it. I love the fact that I'm teaching and that I'm reacting to situations – no two days are ever quite the same. It's always interesting.

And it's useful, too! Only today in the office a small matter came up about discrimination. From experience we all knew the legal position but we were going to have to research some previous cases to back it up. I was able to quote one straight away because I was marking TMAs about it yesterday! My colleagues were very impressed!

It does take up a lot of my time but I do still find a few hours for hobbies. And my husband works every other weekend, so when he's at home we make sure we use that time to do things together as a family.

I'd like to do an OU course myself one day – computing, probably, which would certainly help me communicate with my online students. I have had occasion to call the tutor help desk every so often! At the moment I'm too busy with my full-time job and my teaching to think about studying, but I can certainly see myself getting round to it.

If you are interested in becoming an Associate Lecturer visit **www3.open.ac.uk/employment/associate-lecturers/main_1.shtm**

WOODLEY WISE This is no time for faint hearts



ALAN WOODLEY
SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

'TAKING coup' was a Native American tactic in warfare that involved touching the enemy with a blunt stick but not killing him. It was the equivalent of saying, "I could have topped you... But I didn't." Unfortunately this type of bravery proved no match for the Gatling gun.

My point is that, having made great progress with the OU re-branding exercise, we must press home our advantage. This is no time for faint hearts. The new logo and notepaper are fine but now we need to finish the job! Here are a few suggestions.

We are currently held back by a gallimaufry of arcane job titles. I propose a new, simple binary system. Those involved in teaching will become Knowledge Enhancers, or "KEns" for short. Everybody else will be BARBIEs (Bureaucrats, Administrators, Researchers, Brand Invigorators, Etc). How cool is that?

"What of ALs?", I hear you say. Well, I read that in the USA the term "Gypsy Scholar" is used informally for lecturers with multiple jobs on several sites. So, in keeping with this I offer you Badly-paid Itinerant Knowledge Enhancers, or BIKEs .

Staff

Staff continue to be a major concern because they make the place untidy and demand parking spaces. So everything possible should be out-sourced. To start with I suggest the Indira Gandhi Open University as the obvious location for our call centre.

Older staff with their legacy mind-sets remain a problem. Early retirement packages have not worked so I would suggest:
a) Compulsory re-education in the countryside for those aged 40-50.
b) Confinement to the RAF Hut at Walton Hall for those aged over 50. There they could become part of the Bletchley Park Experience. People could wind them up and hear them mutter "We had Disciplines in my day" and "I remember when you could make a TV programme for ten shillings and still have change left over for the Supplementary Material".

The campus

Open Plan must be embraced with open arms. All remaining staff should be accommodated in a single hangar designed by Norman Foster. To maintain flexibility and avoid ending up with the equivalent of the Jeffrey Archer Building (nothing personal Joe), I think that the name of this building should be spelled out on a giant electronic screen. It could then be changed daily to suit important visitors, major sponsors, etc.

So, over to you now. Keep those ideas coming and "May the Brand be with you".

Alan Woodley



Tied up in taboos

Sado-masochism has been practised since the dawn of time but it was only when psychology was established a century ago that it really became a taboo. ***Peter Taylor-Whiffen*** talks to Dr Darren Langdridge about his research and asks whether attitudes are finally changing, and whether the law might do too

IT'S not what you'd call a regularly researched subject, even for an institution as apparently liberal as The Open University. But deriving sexual pleasure from pain is happily and, for the most part, safely practised by millions of people throughout the world – and Dr Darren Langdridge thought it time they were given a voice.

"It's about openness and honesty and explicit negotiation," says Darren, from the Faculty of Social Sciences about his latest research topic. "When it comes to healthy and fulfilling relationships, maybe we could take a lead from people practising sado-masochism."

"I realised that our culture is being bombarded with SM imagery," he adds. "It's pervading films, TV, advertising, pop videos – it's everywhere. It occurred to me that barriers about a seemingly taboo subject were being broken down, and it was gradually somehow being legitimised. I wanted to know what this meant to the people who practise it."

Darren, a former lecturer at the University of Huddersfield, said his research grew from an interest in what has been termed "sexual citizenship". "It's about people claiming legitimacy for what they do from the state. Sado-masochism has been and is seen by many people as pathological – something wrong with them that needs to be cured. But as it becomes more and more part of our culture SM is starting to become accepted by society."

"Sado-masochism has been and is seen by many people as pathological"

The drive for acceptance invites several parallels with similar battles fought by gay men and lesbians over the past 30 years. "There has been a huge change in attitudes towards homosexuality," says Darren. "That, too, used to be seen as an illness that needed curing, but now society as a whole simply acknowledges and accepts it generally without raising an eyebrow. Gay men and lesbians are now seen as having sexual rights. And while there is not yet total equality, SM is now on that demarcation line as to what is seen as acceptable."

Psychology

There are other similarities, too. Sado-masochism, like homosexuality, has been practised since the dawn of time but it was only when psychology was established a century ago that it really became a taboo. "The psychologists and medics decided it was a deviant practice, then it became a legal issue and society developed a negative attitude towards it – as it did with homosexual relationships before it."

But labelling a practice as deviant (much of the medical profession still sees SM as a psychological disorder) does not, says Darren, necessarily make it an unnatural act. "In physiological terms, our pain and pleasure sensors are inextricably linked," he says. "It's not in the least surprising that people get a lot of pleasure from sado-masochism."

And much of the research he has done indicates those who practise SM have a healthier sexual relationship because of it. "A major part of SM is speaking openly about your desires," he says. "So many couples don't have the courage to do that, so they second-guess, they're tentative, and frustrated – which spills over from their sex life into their everyday relationship."

Contrary to many people's perceptions, sado-masochism is not all whips and chains. It may be true that the term sadism, as many people know, came from the Marquis de Sade, whose 18th century novels *Philosophie dans la boudoir* and *Les crimes d'amour* were full of references to inflicting pain during sex. And masochism – named after the Austrian historian and novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, who first wrote about it in the 19th century – is defined as pleasure derived from suffering pain or humilation. But, Darren's research confirmed, many experiences of sado-masochism have nothing to do with pain or violence.

"In many cases it's about power, and playing with that power," he says. "It can be about bondage, or role-playing, costumes, scenarios – playing with authority. SM is seen as a taboo, but lots of sexual partners do a bit of, say, playful spanking – and that's a form of sado-masochism. SM may have a role in breaking down authority and I think often takes a more open, honest view of the world."

The key to losing the taboo, adds Darren, is an increasingly loudly voiced mantra among the SM community – "safe, sane, consensual". "With citizenship come rights but also responsibilities," he says. "'Safe' is about playing safe and openly negotiating boundaries, 'sane' is about countering the pathological discourse about SM, and 'consensual' means just that – no one is preying on or taking advantage of anyone else. That's what SM means to the vast majority of people who practise it."

Not everyone agrees. In 1990, 16 gay men were jailed for up to four-and-a-half years or fined for taking part in consensual sado-masochism. Police using the codename 'Operation Spanner' seized a videotape showing sexual acts which inflicted injuries including genital bruising and charged the men with assault occasioning actual bodily harm, even though all the participants had consented to the acts.

"Our pain and pleasure sensors are inextricably linked"

Most of the defendants appealed but the verdicts were upheld by the Court of Appeal and then the European Court of Human Rights. The men tried to use the defence of consent, which exempts prosecution in many other instances of what would otherwise be construed as assault, such as injuries suffered in the boxing ring or on the football field.

"It seems people who inflict bruises on willing participants in one leisure activity – sport – are exempt, but people who do so in another – sex – are not," says Darren.

The law has, however, proved inconsistent. Four years after Operation Spanner, one Alan Wilson was convicted under the same law after his wife Julie had asked him to brand his initials on her buttocks with a knife – but had his conviction quashed after the Court of Appeal ruled "Consensual activity between husband and wife, in the privacy of the matrimonial home, is not a proper matter for criminal investigation or prosecution".

Darren does wonder whether gender and sexuality made a difference in this case and has recently written about this and the implications of the intersection of gender and sexuality for citizenship. "This 'matrimonial home' line upholds a long tradition of heterosexual roles within marriage – after all, it's not so long ago that rape within marriage was legal," he says. "You do have to wonder if the outcome would have been the same if the wife had branded the husband."

Internet-based research

His research has been largely internet-based, which makes it difficult for Darren and his co-researcher Trevor Butt (from the University of Huddersfield) to pinpoint just how many people have contributed.

"We have gathered more than 100,000 words of material," he said. "We wanted stories of people who practise SM, and how they feel about their place in a world whose attitudes are changing."

Those attitudes will change even more following the publication of Darren's research, which he says has prompted a "very good response".

Initial work was featured in the internationally recognised sociology journal *Sexualities*, and more recent research on SM and sexual citizenship is soon to be published in another leading publication, *Citizenship Studies*. He has written theoretical articles attempting to understand the thrill of splitting off our mind from our body, a popular SM practice drawing on existential philosophy, and recently Darren was invited to contribute a chapter to a major new US teaching text on sexualities.

He is currently in the process of co-editing a new book on the subject, on the back of a very well received special issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, that he co-edited and contributed to, devoted to the topic.

Darren's work is also being used by the Operation Spanner Trust in its campaign to clear the names of those jailed following the police investigation – and most significantly of all, along with other research which does not pathologise this sexual practice, it could help to change the law in Britain and even help to stop sado-masochism being considered a psychological disorder.

"The Operation Spanner Trust is looking for that change in the law which will recognise consent as a defence, and research is helping them to push for that," he said.

So the barriers seem to be coming down, thinks Darren. "It is becoming more legitimised and the more research there is, the more people will be encouraged to talk about their own experiences and the more will be learned about it.

"Research of the kind I conduct is designed, to a certain extent, to encourage new stories, enabling people to voice their experience, and with that provide new narratives for others who find they are becoming aware of similar sexual interests".

Chance to have your say!

Now is your opportunity to have your say about *open house*. Would you like more stories about staff, more regional features or more university news, or is there anything you particularly dislike? We welcome your feedback and you may even win a prize...

PRIZE DRAW

All completed entries will automatically be entered into a prize draw to win £50 book vouchers. There will be two runner-up prizes of £20 book vouchers each. **Closing date for entries is 5 May 2006**. The winner will be notified by 15 May 2006.

1) When you receive *open house*, do you read:

- All of it
- Most of it
- Just a few items

2) These items appear in *open house* on a regular basis. Please rate them on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = not interesting, 4 = very interesting)

	1	2	3	4
News				●
Comment				●
VC's View				●
Features on the work of individuals/units/departments				●
Regional news				●
In the Hot Seat				●
open house Forum				●
Conference reports				●
The Voice of Region				●
Community				●
Letters				●
Noticeboard				●
Research				●
open house Interview				●
The Interview				●
Cartoons				●
Woodley Wise				●

3) Is there anything not mentioned above that you'd like to see in future issues of *open house*?

4) Do you look at OU Life (http://intranet.open.ac.uk/oulife/news)

yes ○ no ○ no intranet access ●

5) How frequently do you look at OU Life?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Never

6) On a scale of 1 to 4, how interesting do you find it? (1 = Not interesting, 4 = very interesting)

1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ● 4 ●

7) Any other comments about OU Life:

8) Do you have the OU Life Screensaver installed on your computer?

yes ○ no ● didn't know about it ●

9) If you do have the OU Life Screensaver, how interesting do you find it?

- Very interesting
- Somewhat interesting
- Not interesting at all

10) If you don't have the OU Life Screensaver installed, would you like to receive more information?

yes ○ no ●

Your details

Job title

First name

Surname

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Please send your completed copies by 5 May 2006 to:

Debbie Dixon, Communications Group, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA Fax: 01908 652247



THE VOICE OF REGION The IT crowd



STUART THOROGOOD
STUDENT SERVICES ASSISTANT, REGION 1

WELL here we are then... six months in and VOICE has been fully implemented in the London regional centre. Yes, we've finally caught up with the rest of you. And don't we know it: sulking SSAs; Traumatised Team Co-Ordinators; Stressed out Superusers; Sobbing Students.

Hence (yet another) decree was issued. *"Sorry Region One – you just aren't good enough! Please proceed to Refresher Training!"* Refresher Training? Us? How absurd, we thought! But apparently we needed further training on something called 'Activities'.

"Activities?" I asked, flummoxed. "What is that? Do they expect some sort of *action* from us?

"Mind you," Sue pointed out, "perhaps we do need a refresher. The other day I was informed on my screen that I had been timed out because I had been idle for too long. I wasn't being idle, I was in the pub!"

But alas, off we had to go to the IT training room. Our first challenge was to safely negotiate our way to the basement where said room is located. Of course, as the esteemed *Voice of Region*, I cried to my colleagues – the fragrant Marsha and Rachel – "Follow me. I know the way!" Down in the lift we went.

"Don't go down to the basement!" they cried.

"Why, what's there?" "The centaur! A centipede with one leg! Argh! Argh!" "No, not really, just the IT training room," I explained, before opening the one door, assuming it went straight to our destination. We found ourselves in the car park.

Back to the lift we went, but in our wonderful, state-of-the-art building our lifts only go down, not up.

"Oh great!" squealed Marsha. "Now we're going to be late. I knew we shouldn't have taken directions from Stuart."

"Don't panic, Marsh. It's just a little... miscalculation."

"This building!" she wailed. "If it's not noxious gases leaking into the East Atrium, it's doors that refuse to open, and air conditioning with a mind of its own, and now a lift that doesn't go anywhere."

Fortunately Rachel was ready with the chloroform, quickly silencing our overly opinionated colleague while we tried to find a way out of this mess. Into the car park we went, dragging our comatosed friend with us, banging on the cage doors until the kind security guard let us into the IT training room and proceedings could begin.

So, what with all these shenanigans, it makes me wonder just how the rest of you are getting on with it. Answers on a postcard please to the usual address.



Helen Yanacopulos

Senior Lecturer in International Politics and Development



Lights, camera, action!

When Helen is not busy travelling or making BBC programmes such as *Comic Relief* and *African School*, she enjoys meeting students and finding out how the OU has helped change their lives...

How long have you worked at the OU and why?
I have worked at the OU for five and a half years as a lecturer in the Development Policy and Practice Department. As I was finishing my PhD, I looked at various institutions and decided that the OU's mission and ethos matched my own.

In your opinion what does the OU do well?
Our teaching is first class and I see our textbooks being used by other Development Studies departments throughout the UK. I also think that the support that our students receive from our ALs is essential to their success. Finally, I think that the OU's reach through various forms of broadcastings is becoming more and more important in raising the general public's interest, awareness and enthusiasm for learning.

How do you think the OU could attract and retain more students?
Providing courses which are interesting, challenging and relevant is key. Additionally, forming partnerships with various organisations is also very important. From my experience of the MSc in Development Management, I know that organisations put students through our courses because they see that our teaching is relevant. We have developed relationships with organisations involved in development, but these partnerships take time which is typically difficult to find.

What's been the biggest change since you started working here?
The OU, like other universities, has become extremely focused on the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and a great deal of effort is going into doing research, which I think is great. But, academics must remember that research and teaching are related and doing one and not the other would be detrimental.

What do you like best about your job?
I am quite entrepreneurial, and the OU is a good place for this. I work on BBC programmes such as *Comic Relief* and *African School*, and the great thing is that these programmes can feed into my teaching and my research. I have also been fortunate to chair the production of a new course on War, intervention and development, which is going to have a big impact on people working in peace building and post conflict situations. Finally, I love meeting students who have studied our courses and hearing about their positive and frequently life changing experiences they have had because of studying with the OU.

And what do you like least?
Filling out forms and long meetings – don't have a lot of patience for either.

Complete the following sentence: The OU would be better if...?
It became a truly international university. There has been progress on this front, but it would be great if the process for registering and taking our courses was easier for Asian and African students. It would also be good if course fees were cheaper for these students, rather than more expensive.

What single thing would most improve your working day?
The impossible – that Walton Hall move down to London (where I live). I would then be able to come into the office early and every day!

Describe yourself in three words
Fun, interested and hard working.

What are your hobbies?
I love film and I also love to travel. I am currently taking a documentary film making course.

What's the best piece of advice you have ever been given?
Be true to who you are.

What do you miss most from your childhood?
The jasmine covered courtyard in my grandmother's house in Athens.

Who would you like to banish to the North Pole and why?
Racists and bullies.

Who would you like to be stranded with on a desert island and why?
Obviously George Clooney! If George wasn't available, Nelson Mandela would be interesting to talk to.

What are your top three holiday destinations and why?
Sydney – have lived there before and it is a beautiful, interesting and fun city.
The Perehntian islands in Malaysia – nothing to do there but look at the sky, the nearest palm tree and the ocean.
Vancouver – my home town.

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