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Sesame

January/February 2003

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 213



Picture: BBC

Life of mammals: seen the series? Now study the course ● page 11

Letters

Write to: Letters, Sesame, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
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Other side of contract coin

I seem to differ from Liz Hartnett's views (*Sesame* – 212) in that my motivation to my AL duties is professionally rather than financially driven.

The new contract will not impact on this. My contractual responsibilities to the OU require that I mark TMAs within a clear timescale. Whether I am paid per assignment or not will not alter this adherence to a core aspect of my tutor's duties. The necessity of an efficient turnaround of students' work is particularly necessary within a distance teaching system. To suggest that the absence of the carrot of payment will diminish my professional standards and responsibilities is insulting.

I have yet to experience how this new AL contract will impact upon my work but at this point I welcome the move away from 'piece work' conditions. Fixed numbers of tutor/student allocations brings the positive aspect of a manageable and defined group within which I can work and maintain my tutor responsibilities.

Liz Hartnett asks what encourages tutors to be tenacious and resilient? For me the answer is simple – professionalism and clarity of working conditions. I shall continue to follow up and support struggling students.

Ruth Forbes
 Edinburgh

Reference books should be allowed

The most valuable component of A216 *Art and its histories* was, I was constantly informed, the development of analytical thought. The simple reproduction of empty 'facts' was not the guiding principle by which my tutor marked my TMAs, nor was it to be the basis upon which my final examination paper was assessed. Analysis and argument have been the fundamental principles upon which this course, and others like it, have been built.

When I came to prepare for my examination, however, I found myself devoting a great deal of time to simply remembering the names of artists and titles of their principal works.

My revision time could have been made more productive if I had been able to use valuable revision time actually thinking, analysing and preparing arguments rather than simply remembering basic facts which, if incorrectly remembered or spelt inaccurately, are bound to alienate examiners.

Students sitting scientific examinations may use certain types of calculators, for example, so it remains unfair that arts students should not be permitted to use basic reference materials during their examinations.

Gary Williamson
 London

Article blew blues away

I am compelled to write regarding Ormond Simpson's article *The will to continue studying* (*Sesame* 210). Having just sat my exams for K257 and D213 I must admit it was mostly down to Mr Simpson's inspirational article.

I most definitely was suffering from mid-course blues and was not sure if I was going to put myself through the exam-sitting torture! However, once I had read the article I felt a new surge of determination to sit the two papers and to try and pass. Even if I scraped through I would get precious points towards my 360 point degree goal.

So, in a nutshell, what I really want to say is thank you. Thanks to *Sesame*, Ormond Simpson, family and friends and the OU. At least I gave it a go. Who knows, I may just pass.

Gillian Cunningham
 Bangor, Co. Down

Science course caused problems

The new course S216 *Environmental science* was offered to students in the knowledge that study materials were not available. In fact many units had not even been printed and consequently could not be dispatched to meet the study calendar deadlines. Instead, we received CDs, eventually! This seriously disrupted flexibility in study patterns that are so important in distance learning.

All the problems were acknowledged by the course team who did keep students informed of problems 'beyond their control'. A statement was made by the course team to the effect that certain subjects would not be examined due to late arrival of materials and at least one faulty CD. This was supposed to help in saving time when preparing for the examination. It actually did nothing of the sort as my preparation for the exam began months earlier, before this announcement was made, when I was struggling to read course text off my PC screen.

David Chadburn
 Warwickshire

Kevin Church, from the Science Faculty, replies

The late delivery of some hard copy material is something that the course team very much regrets, especially after so much time and effort was spent in producing it. The delays were caused by the large number of courses in production in 2002 and the consequent competition for time in the production 'system'. Whilst the team fully appreciates that S216 students were considerably affected by this, we believe that removing five weeks-worth of study material (a sixth of the course) from the exam was a proportionate response in the circumstances. It must be added that the first half of the course was delivered on schedule, that only one of the CD-ROMs was dispatched after its start date on the study calendar, and that all the hard copy materials were eventually delivered at least one month before the examination.

It is common practice for courses in their first year of presentation to be incomplete at the start of the year. Many people like doing new courses because the course content is bang up to date.

Despite the problems we have had many favourable comments about the quality of the course.

Sesame
 see the latest news
 on the web at:
www.open.ac.uk/sesame

Produced by the
 Publications Team of the
 Open University

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Why not split 60-pointers?

As a mother of two young children, who also works five days a week, I find I am restricted to the study of 30 points in a year (plus 10 point short courses to 'top up' in the winter months).

I wish to work towards a science degree, and need to take the S204 *Biology* core course, which is a 60 point module. Unless I am prepared to give up any sort of family life for the best part of a year, I cannot see a way of fitting a Level 2 60 point course in, having already struggled with the pace of the 60 point S103 course last year. As I wish to teach science in the future, I really do need to include one or two science core subject modules in my studies, but cannot see how this could be achieved.

Would it not be possible for such core courses to be taken as Parts 1 and 2, as 30 point courses over two years, thus enabling other students such as myself to study 60 point courses in the time available?

Sarah Spicer
 Llandysul

More architecture

Having just completed, and enjoyed, A103, I've been looking at the courses that are available for further study. A103 touched on architecture and there was an optional evening lecture 'Introduction to Architecture' at my summer school at UMIST. Yet there are no other modules at either Level 2 or Level 3.

I've been told that there used to be, but they were discontinued. Are there any plans to re-introduce modules on this topic? I've decided to do A206 next year, which appears to touch on architecture in a similar way to A103, but there must be a 'market' for a module dedicated to the topic.

Jeff Hopwood Enfield, Middlesex

Jane Fletcher, from the Arts Faculty, replies

While the Faculty has no plans to expand its curriculum in this area at present, some of our courses currently (or about to be) presented do offer elements of architecture or the history of architecture. Very briefly we would refer you to A216, *Art and its histories* (Bombay and Aleijadinho); A207 *From enlightenment to romanticism c. 1780-1830* (Soane; Brighton Pavilion); AA300 *Europe: culture and identities in a contested continent* (open air museums); A354 *Art, society and religion in Siena, Florence and Padua 1280-1400* (Cathedrals in Siena and Florence); A220 *Princes and peoples: France and the British Isles 1620-1714* (videos for the course); AT308 *Cities and technology: from Babylon to Singapore* (which, as a social history of the technology of the built environment, looks at buildings from a variety of cultures and periods); and our forthcoming short course AT272 *Ancient and medieval cities* (which will also look at buildings from various periods and cultures). To find out more, visit the Open University's courses and qualifications website www.open.ac.uk/courses, refer to the course descriptions newspaper, or talk to your regional centre.

Think again on ads

What are you trying to do to the Open University? I have just seen the television advertisement 'Think... Think... Think Open University' and am wondering if it was assembled by saboteurs in order to represent the Open University as a provincial 'hick' organisation with a 'night class in lacemaking' attitude and approach to further education.

A university with a Mars mission; a university which established a level playing field – to extend university education to within reach of every citizen, regardless of age, class, creed (or A' Level Results); a university which rejected the elitism of the 'old school' and truly opened the door for all potential undergraduates. This is not the university I saw represented on that advertisement.

Simon Crabb
 Christchurch, Dorset

Editor's note:
 See page 4 for news of a new TV ad campaign.

just a
 thought

Am I the only one who wonders what all the hype about the BBC programme *Rough Science* is for? A bunch of scientists are taken around the world and expected to perform science with only what's around them in the field.

Except, of course, they are also given electronics, wire, drills, tools, nails, screws, in fact whatever they need. The crystal set in the last series sprouted an amazing perfectly wound coil. In this series the wilderness of New Zealand offered up power tools and transistor radios.

Ben Nock
 Kidderminster

I was wondering if/when the Open University would consider supplying course material on DVD and/or CD? Not many people carry video recorders around with them, but for a DVD-equipped laptop the ability to watch course material on train journeys would be fantastic.

Ash Searle
 Birmingham

Students may be interested to know that the Regional Director at their OU regional centre can provide an academic reference.

They will try to contact a previous tutor for any comments they may have and include a paragraph outlining the dedication and organisation of time required for part-time distance learning. The Regional Office informs me they supply many references which are well accepted.

Andreas Weitzel
 Margate, Kent

Why could not the Open University acquire kudos by becoming the first in the world, in all probability, to return examination papers to their authors once marked?

Lance Haward
 London

I just wanted to drop you a quick line to say how much I enjoy *Sesame*. I have just completed an Openings course on the *Living arts*, and found it absolutely brilliant. Your publication has certainly helped me make up my mind to start another course next year. The articles and letters help you to appreciate that you are not on your own, and that miracles do happen.

Joanne Bentley

Your views on
 ICT for all,
 see Letters
 extra – page 13

Last compulsory Level 1 residential school to go

By Yvonne Cook

The compulsory residential school for A103 *An introduction to the humanities* is to be dropped from 2004, in a move to prevent fee levels rising and attract more students.

Students taking A103 this year will be the last to be obliged to attend the week-long residential, which was the last remaining compulsory residential at Level 1.

Plans are being made for an optional stand-alone residential school from 2004, which, it is anticipated, will not be directly linked to A103 but more broadly to the Humanities programme in general.

But the university hopes to encourage A103 students NOT to switch their study from 2003 to 2004 to avoid the integral residential school – pointing out that attendance this year will be a cheaper option

than attending a stand-alone residential in 2004.

The change has been made 'reluctantly', but the current financial climate will not allow the university to maintain A103 with its integral summer school at the same fee rate, said Arts Dean Dr Richard Allen.

"We are faced with the prospect of damaging cuts elsewhere, or an increase in the fee of A103 with residential school to around £700 – as opposed to around £450 which can be charged for a course without a residential school.

preferable

"We feel that detaching the residential school is preferable to either of these possibilities."

Students in this 'time poor' age are also reluctant to commit to a residential school, and the university hopes removing it will encourage more to sign up for A103, he said. Removing the integral residential should also reduce costs on Level 2 and 3

Arts courses, he added.

He said students who are taking A103 in 2003 will be taking advantage of the current fees policy 'which means in effect their residential school will only cost £85'.

More details of the stand-alone summer school, and any modifications made to A103 from 2004 as a result of the changes, will be available in the spring.

The financial squeeze, which is affecting all of higher education, has also cast doubt over the future of A421 *Post-colonial literatures in English: readings and interpretations*, the ground-breaking course featured in the last issue of *Sesame*.

"We are sure it will be a good course, and those students who do it will gain a great deal of satisfaction," said Richard Allen. But, he added, the evidence is that the recent increase in the Arts curriculum had not been matched by an increase in students, as was hoped, so the faculty is looking at cutting back on low population courses.



The OU's Colin Pillinger in front of the video link to the laboratory where Beagle 2 is being assembled

Final countdown for Beagle 2

The Open University-led mission to Mars inched a step closer to countdown when a large audience of journalists and VIPs were given a privileged look at the ground-breaking technology that will set off for the Red Planet in late spring.

More than 200 visitors, including astronomer Sir Patrick Moore, balloonist Per Lindstrand, and representatives of the majority of the national media, seized the chance for a glimpse at the technical wizardry which scientists hope will finally answer the question: are we alone?

The event, on December 19, marked a crucial stage in the journey of Beagle 2 – the lander craft which, after a seven month trip, will spin off the European Space Agency's Mars Express to land, five days later, on the surface of Mars.

'barbecue'

After a sustained fight to both prove the viability of their mission, and secure financial backing for it, the Beagle 2 consortium is about to close the lid on the lander. Beneath an exterior described by lead scientist Professor Colin Pillinger as looking like 'a garden barbecue' lies an astounding amount of tightly packed instrumentation.

Indeed its contents bear testament to the determination and ingenuity of the team of scientists and engineers who have not only had to miniaturise everything but ensure it can work at one third gravity and survive temperatures as low as -70C at night.

Beagle 2 is the first mission capable of collecting sub-surface soil samples through its mechanical 'mole'. These will be baked in a tiny onboard oven, and the gases they release analysed by a mass spectrometer for evidence of organic matter.

Also on board are cameras, a pop-up mirror and microscope, all powered by

solar-powered collectors. "The most important thing will be to get through the first night and then charge the batteries during the day," said Colin. "There are 160 watts of power in the battery so we will be taking it very slowly through the sequence of experiments." The team has worked out a 50-day programme of tests.

challenges

But even before Beagle 2 reaches the surface it faces other challenges. Once the lander craft leaves its mother ship it has to survive a journey at 14,000 mph then, as it reaches the martian atmosphere and the heat shield falls away, a parachute will open to slow its final drop and airbags inflate to cushion its landing on Mars.

Its arrival will be announced by the call signal composed by the band Blur, while a tiny spot painting designed by Damien Hirst will be used to calibrate the instrumentation.

Because of the need to prevent any contamination, visitors to the countdown event viewed Beagle 2 via a live video feed to the aseptic assembly facility at the OU's Milton Keynes headquarters where scientists and engineers are working flat out to solve one of the most challenging jigsaw puzzles ever – fitting it all in.

Asked whether he had thought about the possibility, a year hence, of being the first man to announce conclusive proof of life on Mars, Colin promised to share any news. "If we have exciting things to say we will share them with you in real time," he told the visitors.

"We are benefitting from the fact that this is the first and may be the only chance the team will get. We think we have left nothing to chance."

Added Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) Alan Bassindale: "Being open to Mars is probably the most extreme version of our mission to openness so far!"



OU Chancellor Betty Boothroyd (centre) and Vice-Chancellor Professor Brenda Gourley (right) cut the celebration cake with the help of the OU's Elaine Ellis

New look and location for R01

Baroness Betty Boothroyd was the guest of honour at the formal opening of the new London Regional Centre in Camden Town in November. Other guests included OU Vice Chancellor Brenda Gourley and former Pro-Vice Chancellor Naomi Sargent as well as representatives from other higher education institutions.

After the formal opening, when a celebration cake was cut, Professor Gourley chaired a forum on 'Widening Participation – key issues for London in 2003.'

The following day, the centre opened its doors wide to students and enquirers, giving faculties a chance to showcase their activities and visitors the chance to learn about the benefits of OU study.

'Freshers' site will ease way for new students

By **Jane Matthews**

An online equivalent to university 'freshers' weeks' has been launched to help ease OU students into the year ahead.

Rather than being bombarded with leaflets, invitations and too much information, the online induction 'Learning with the OU' website allows students to set their own time and pace for getting to grips with how the university works, and offers advice and guidance on preparation for study.

There's a guide to 'who's who at the OU', which outlines your tutor's role, explains what the regional centres can do for you and tells you how to make contact with other students and your

region. There's also information about the structure of your course and doing assignments.

Based largely around practical advice and exercises, the 'get set for study' and study tips sections include advice on when and where to study, planning the first two weeks and keeping your momentum going.

Helpful tools include a contact sheet, guide to relevant OU websites, a study planner and getting organised checklist. There's also an explanation of OU jargon, a section of frequently asked questions and, for those desperately short of time, the top five essentials to look at if you look at nothing else.

The New Technology for Supporting Students team (NTSS) used their own student and tutor experience as well as

collaborating with regional centres and others in the university to bring resources together.

"We hope it will give new students confidence about who they should contact and how they set themselves up to be successful, as well as providing a sense of joining a big, friendly community," explained Senior Project Manager Rachel Hawkins.

"But I think there are things there that existing students will also find very helpful."

Alison Day of NTSS said they would welcome feedback on the site, which you can find at: www.open.ac.uk/learning/induction (you will need your OU computer username and password).

More on preparing for study on pp 8-9.

Field leaders

New performance indicators for higher education show the OU leading the field in provision for disabled students. Figures show an average of 2 per cent of disabled part-time undergraduate students across higher education institutions in England, compared to the OU's figure of 4.6 per cent – 3,999 people. The figure is nevertheless lower than the almost 8,000 recognised by the OU as the Higher Education Funding Council numbers only count those in receipt of a Disabled Students Allowance.

AOUG award winners

Exceptional research by two OU PhD students has been honoured with an award and cheque from the Association of Open University Graduates. John Barker of the university's Physics and Astronomy department was nominated for his work computer-mapping an unusual type of star known as a cataclysmic variable; Jack Cawkwell, Technology, was selected for his research into autonomous vehicles, which are capable of steering without a driver.

The AOUG awards are for outstanding OU PhD students in their final or penultimate year, who also did their first degree with the OU, and are not OU staff members.

Leverhulme prize

Professor Bashar Nuseibeh of the Maths and Computing faculty has won one of the 2002 Philip Leverhulme Prizes awarded for research achievement among outstanding young scholars. The £50,000 prize recognises his 'seminal contributions' to software engineering.

Rethink on resits?

Exam resits in January instead of October, and more support for resit students, are among proposals submitted by OU regions this month to the university's Student Support Research Group, as part of the ongoing Student Retention Project. More on these in forthcoming editions of *Sesame*.

Minister at seminar

A year after launching the university's access bus, the Minister for Disabled People, Maria Eagle, saw it in action at a seminar on inclusive higher education organised by the Open University in the East of England. Involving nine higher education institutions the event was also attended by Barbara Waters, Chief Executive, SKILL (the national bureau for students with disabilities).

European award finalists

Three OU projects were among the finalists of the European Academic Software Awards, a prestigious competition for academic software within higher education and research. The spectroscopy CD-ROM attached to *The molecular world* course (S205), the software attached to *The physical world* (S207) course and the OU Knowledge Network were among 30 finalists from across Europe. Like all finalists, the projects were "deemed by the jurors to be of exceptional quality".

New Pro-Chancellor

Have a say in the appointment of a new Pro-Chancellor. That's the invitation to all OU students and staff as current Pro-Chancellor Sir Bryan Nicholson prepares to step down.

The successful candidate is likely to be someone with a high profile in their own sphere of influence, a network of contacts in government, business and the wider community, experience of large organisations and associated management issues and preferably with experience with an academic institution.

As well as chairing the university's Council and a number of committees, the Pro-Chancellor may be called on to represent the OU at formal and informal occasions, and to act as an advisor and consultant.

A full job description and person specification is available from Jane Duffield, Senior Assistant Secretary, telephone 01908 653218, email j.j.duffield@open.ac.uk – to whom any suggestions should be sent by January 24 2003.

TV ads transformed

The OU is to transform its TV and print marketing with a new message – Transform your life. From January 13 a new TV advertising campaign hits screens, using the slogan to fit with New Year's resolutions. The lively, modern ads emphasise the fact that the Open University is active, fun and improves lives. They will be shown on satellite channels as well as Channels 4, 5 and ITV. Let *Sesame* know your views on the new look.



Members of the Asian community attend an event in Bradford

'Ask the family' a success

Proof that OU study is a family affair came when almost 600 members of the Asian community in Bradford heard what OU study could do for them. The event, held at the city's Alhambra Theatre, was one of the highlights of a campaign targeting under-represented groups in the Leeds, London and Manchester

areas, and drew many family groups. "It was a fantastic event: the hall was packed and there were children sitting on their parents' laps which showed the importance of tuning into cultural customs," explained event organisers Lisa Clennell and Kath Bridger. "Attending events in the Asian community can often be a family affair."

Team to monitor Citizens' Council

The work of a new Citizens' Council, designed to involve the public in crucial areas of National Health Service policy, is to be monitored by a team from the Open University.

Professors Margie Wetherell from Psychology and Celia Davies from the School of Health and Social Welfare, have won a two-year contract to evaluate how effectively the group of 30 'ordinary people' can fulfil their role as advisors to NICE, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

NICE is the high-profile organisation responsible for developing guidelines on

how the NHS should use new drugs and treatments, including such sensitive areas as the use of 'flu jabs and what drugs should be available on the NHS to treat conditions such as multiple sclerosis.

Margie Wetherell said the evaluation will be looking at what information and support members of the Citizens' Council need to reach 'high quality' conclusions about the treatment dilemmas facing them. "The Citizens' Council has a difficult task. We will be studying film and audio records of its deliberations to see how this task can best be

managed," she said.

Celia Davies welcomed the move to involve ordinary citizens in health care decisions. "It is about democracy and social inclusion. How do you facilitate the work of a group of people, some of whom have never sat on a committee before?"

The OU team, which also includes Psychology researcher Sarah Seymour-Smith, will work in partnership with the College of Health, a voluntary sector organisation, on the project. See www.nice.org.uk for more information on the Citizens Council.

Open line

£10 book token if your question or advice is published

The place where you ask – and you answer!

Dear Sesame

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

Asgar Mapar, Middlesex

I WOULD suggest you telephone your regional centre and ask them if they are running any preparatory workshops relevant to you. There you will meet other new students in the same boat. If your course has tutorials you will have your first one after the course start date and will meet your tutor and student group. If your course has day schools or a summer school these are also great for meeting students and reducing isolation. But if you still

find you are feeling alone during your course discuss this with your tutor or contact study support at your regional centre. A word of warning though, don't spend too much time on your social life. It's important to get the balance right and submit your assignments on time!

Maureen Edgar

Tutor on K100

Understanding health and social care, London

THE OU works through distance learning but this does not mean you have to be out of touch with other students. Self-help groups are a good way of maintaining contact. A good opportunity to make arrangements would be at your first tutorial. For initial meetings it may be a good idea to use a quiet pub or public place that is convenient to all. Towards the end of the year revision can be shared within the group, maybe working through past exam papers and swapping for comparison.

Andreas Weitzel

Margate, Kent

I AM a member of HM Forces, based in Gibraltar. I certainly thought I would feel isolated. However, I have found the FirstClass conferencing facility absolutely invaluable. I have received some excellent advice

and notes from other students – and discovered I am certainly not alone and the problems I encounter are also being encountered by others.

Jenny Rusyniak

Gibraltar

YOU could join your local OUSA branch.

Ana Hawxwell

Birmingham

Next issue...

I have almost completed all of my Level 1 and 2 courses and decided that next year is as good as any to start on Level 3 work. However, I feel anxious about this jump to the next level of study. I can see that one more TMA is expected of me but don't know what else to expect by way of difference between the two levels. Have other students found the move to Level 3 study very much harder? What advice can they give?

Lynda Mason, Manchester

Round up

New space laboratory

Exploring space will be safer in future, thanks to a new laboratory opened at the Open University's Walton Hall campus in December.

Equipment in the HyperVelocity Impact Lab will seek to recreate conditions in outer space, to examine the behaviour of space debris and cosmic dust. Natural space dust and discarded terrestrial objects – even an astronaut's glove – pose a serious threat if they strike a spacecraft, because of the immense speeds at which they travel. The lab is operated by the OU's Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute, see: www.pssri.open.ac.uk for more details.



Professor Tony McDonnell demonstrating the effects of a grain of dust on equipment

Poverty in spotlight

One in three Scottish children lives in poverty, according to disturbing new research published by the Open University.

The study also shows that one in four Scottish adults lives in a low income household and one third of households claim income-related benefits, housing and council tax payments – way above the British average.

The figures are contained in the new edition of *Poverty In Scotland*, just published by the OU, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland (CPAG) and the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU).

OU social sciences staff tutor and CPAG member Gerry Mooney said the book proved poverty remained a 'crucial' issue for the UK government and the devolved Scottish Parliament.

The book also reveals that lone parents had the lowest average weekly income (£204) in the UK, about one in seven Scottish youngsters aged between 16 and 19 was not in employment, training or education and almost one quarter of Scots entering the government's New Deal work scheme had no qualifications at all.

Said Gerry: "There has to be recognition that the most significant processes that contribute to poverty, deprivation and disadvantage are to be found in the wider structures of inequality and social division in this country."

Poverty in Scotland 2002 – People, places and policies, was launched at a conference addressed by Margaret Curran, Minister for Social Justice in the Scottish Parliament. It is available direct from CPAG, 94 White Lion Street, London, N1 9PF at £10.95 plus £2.95 p&p or post free for benefit claimants. Cheques/POs should be made payable to CPAG.

Online offer

If you want to get online more cheaply take a look at the OU's internet service provider partners LINK2OU. The company offers four differently priced choices to match the way you use the internet. See the Alumni Association's website: www.openlink.org/affinity.htm for further details of this and other offers including online wine and book services, plus special deals from Choice Hotels.

Meanwhile, if you're shopping online, or anywhere else, don't forget to show your support for the OU by carrying an OU credit card. The Alumni Association now manages an OU Platinum MasterCard alongside the existing Visa schemes. Call freephone 0800 015 2204 for further information and to apply.

The Open University Alumni Association is there to provide a lifelong link to the OU when you complete your studies and has a very broad membership – ranging from graduates at Doctor, Masters and Bachelor levels, through to diplomates and certificate holders (including those from the OUBS). In addition those who have successfully completed an OU course and are not currently studying are welcomed. Keep in touch through *Open Eye*, the OU's unique alumni bulletin which appears in *The Independent* on the first Tuesday monthly and the website: www.openlink.org. Or contact: alum@open.ac.uk



Top of business class

Business School student Phil Parvin (pictured left) has been named MBA student of the year 2002 by AMBA, the association of MBAs.

Phil, a lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy, received his award from Margaret Hodge MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education, at an awards ceremony in London in November. The award is the most prestigious for business school students in the UK and involves a rigorous selection process.

He was nominated by his tutor John Evans for his "grit and determination" and his commitment to continue studying despite obstacles such as the September 11 terrorist attacks which prevented Phil from getting back for his pre-exam tutorial – and the exam itself. Instead he sat it while on patrol, close to HMS Sultan's torpedo tubes, with the submarine's education officer acting as invigilator.

Presenting the award, Margaret Hodge described the MBA as a passport for life: "If we are to secure economic prosperity, we need to create a highly skilled and qualified workforce, especially in areas of management and leadership."

Phil, who is 36 and lives in Poole, Dorset, chose the OUBS MBA for three reasons: personal recommendation, need to study via distance education and the fact that it has an AMBA accreditation. "I am always banging on to people who work for me to improve their qualifications and skills. I am a huge fan of lifelong learning and continuing professional development," he said.

Arab students launch into learning online

More than 3,000 students in the Middle East have just begun their first experience of distance learning following the launch of the Arab Open University (AOU) in November.

Participants from Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan were the first to take part in this venture which it is hoped will eventually take in students from 22 countries across the Arab world.

"The students are all beginning with TU170 *Learning online: computing with confidence* to get them used to computers and the concept of distance learning," said Arab OU special projects director Vicky Amos. "Once through that they'll start on the usual Level 1 courses."

AOU was created by Open University Worldwide (OUW) and a consortium of Middle Eastern organisations, led by Saudi Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz, president of the United Nations-funded AGFUND, which supports educational and social projects in the Middle East.

The agreement with AOU is on a 'whole course user'

basis, which requires little active involvement from the OU once the courses are supplied. "OUW will supply and license OU courses and provide consultancy support," said Vicky. "But tutors will be recruited and trained locally in using OU teaching methods."

The successful launch is the culmination of months of preparation. More than 200 metric tonnes of teaching materials were shipped out to Kuwait in the summer, where they were distributed by the local AOU "university branch" – the equivalent to one of the OU's regional offices.

The new university, whose doors open wider early next year to students from Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, has faced other hurdles including an uncertain international situation since September 11, and the challenge of adapting OU material to an Islamic culture.

The first batch of student enrolment figures show slightly more women than men – 1803 as opposed to 1765 – are studying, although the gender balance varies across the three countries.

Indian doctors study HIV

Doctors in southern India will be able to treat HIV and AIDS patients more effectively after signing up to distance learning courses developed with the expert guidance of OU's Professor of Education in Medicine Janet Grant.

The project team was led by consultant physician Dr Anand Zachariah of the Christian Hospital Medical College in Vellore, Tamil Nadu – who Janet had previously taught about the design, development and introduction of distance learning.

"Dr Zachariah, like many physicians across the country, is seeing more and more instances of HIV and AIDS," said Janet, who is Director of the OU's Centre for Education in Medicine. "As the conditions spread, more and more doctors, particularly in distant regions, need more education on how to treat them."

India has had a sharp increase in the estimated number of HIV infections, from a few thousand in the early 1990s to a working estimate of about 3.8 million children and adults. Said Dr Zachariah: "Most of the doctors trained in the pre-HIV era and are therefore reluctant to provide care to people living with the infection."



Workshop participants discuss their work with Janet Grant (far left)

Janet visited Dr Zachariah in Vellore where their proposal for the course became a successful bid for funding from the Population Council of India. They ran a workshop for all course authors to develop course materials, then finalised the draft via email.

"I was able to bring my distance learning knowledge to the project, but it was vital that the courses were written by local authors," added Janet. "It's no good preparing a

course that bears no relation to the conditions that doctors find in their regions. The course authors have to take into account how doctors can treat their patients in this part of India, how much money can be spent and, of course, local traditions. There are many cultural beliefs around sex, and therefore around HIV."

The first students were due to begin studying the course in December.

Penpals cheer degree

Keith Poulton's BA graduation in Paris had an extra dimension – because the post-ceremony party was thrown by his French penpal of 50 years.

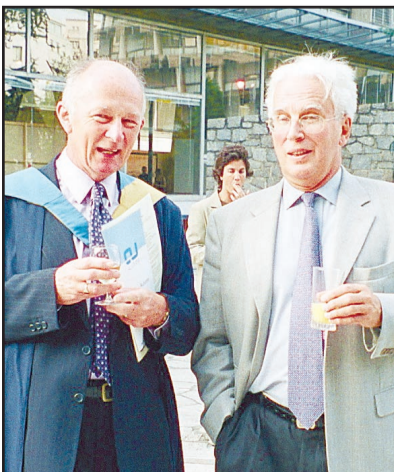
Keith first met Edmond Tabusse on an exchange visit to France when they were both schoolboys in 1950. Ever since he has kept him up to date with his life, his work... and his OU studies.

"We last saw each other a couple of years ago when one of Edmond's sons got married," explained Keith. "Before that we hadn't seen each other for about 20 years, but we've kept in regular contact all along."

Many of Keith's childhood holidays were spent with Edmond's family. "His grandparents had the largest patisserie in Marseilles. We used to swim in the morning, then eat a few pastries and ice-creams."

The regular trips helped to turn Keith into a fluent French speaker and when he began his OU studies in the mid-1990s he studied French then concentrated on the history of France and the rest of Europe during the post-war years.

"Edmond helped me to learn the language and it's wonderful that he put on the celebration for me," Keith added.



Keith (left) and Edmond share a toast



Phetole Rabohale with PVC Professor Linda Jones

OU of Africa

By **Fiona Leslie**

The first South African students to qualify for an Open University Business School MBA have graduated at a degree ceremony near Johannesburg.

Their studies were made possible by a partnership between OUBS and the University of South Africa's School of Business Leadership (UNISA SBL), which has already attracted more than 1,300 students.

Among the first 13 graduates is 42-year-old Phetole Rabohale, who was promoted three times, from production engineer to general manager, with the South Africa Post Office during his studies. He credits his OU work with helping him implement changes which have improved the amount of mail being delivered within 'on time' targets from 63 per cent to 90 per cent.

"I have grown as a person while studying and feel that no matter what challenges are put in front of me I will be able to deal with them," he said.

At 24, graduate Lizanne Kolver is one of the youngest students ever to achieve the MBA. She completed the certificate and diploma in management to enter the programme and in four years has shot up the career ladder from secretary to business engineering consultant. Lizanne has loved studying: "It's been the most wonderful few years of my life and I am thinking about what I can do next, I don't want to stop learning," she said.

Russell Harris, 40, is founding partner of a software company and says the practical application of what he has learnt has helped his business to triple its income in the last two years. "The only way I could achieve an MBA was through distance learning and the course fees I have paid are irrelevant – I've made my money 10 times over," he said.

During a period of dramatic change within South Africa, programme manager Herman Potgieter said studying for the MBA helped to break down divisions between black and white students.

"For many students it is the first opportunity they get to relate to people of other races in the context of the workplace and how they experience management decisions. The programme is helping to heal some of the wounds of society and teaching people to work together on an equal basis," he said.

UNISA SBL executive director Professor Anton Ferreira added: "All managers deserve access to world class management education and our partnership with the OUBS enables us to provide this."

● *Twin events in Hamburg and London claimed business is failing to take advantage of the e-commerce revolution. 'E-business: myth, reality and future', was the theme of the Open University Business School's annual lecture, held first at CBI headquarters in London, then repeated in Hamburg. A panel of expert commentators from both countries claimed early 'dot bombs' had been a deterrent to others. And that too many companies view e-commerce as a new strategy rather than a technology to integrate into existing practices.*

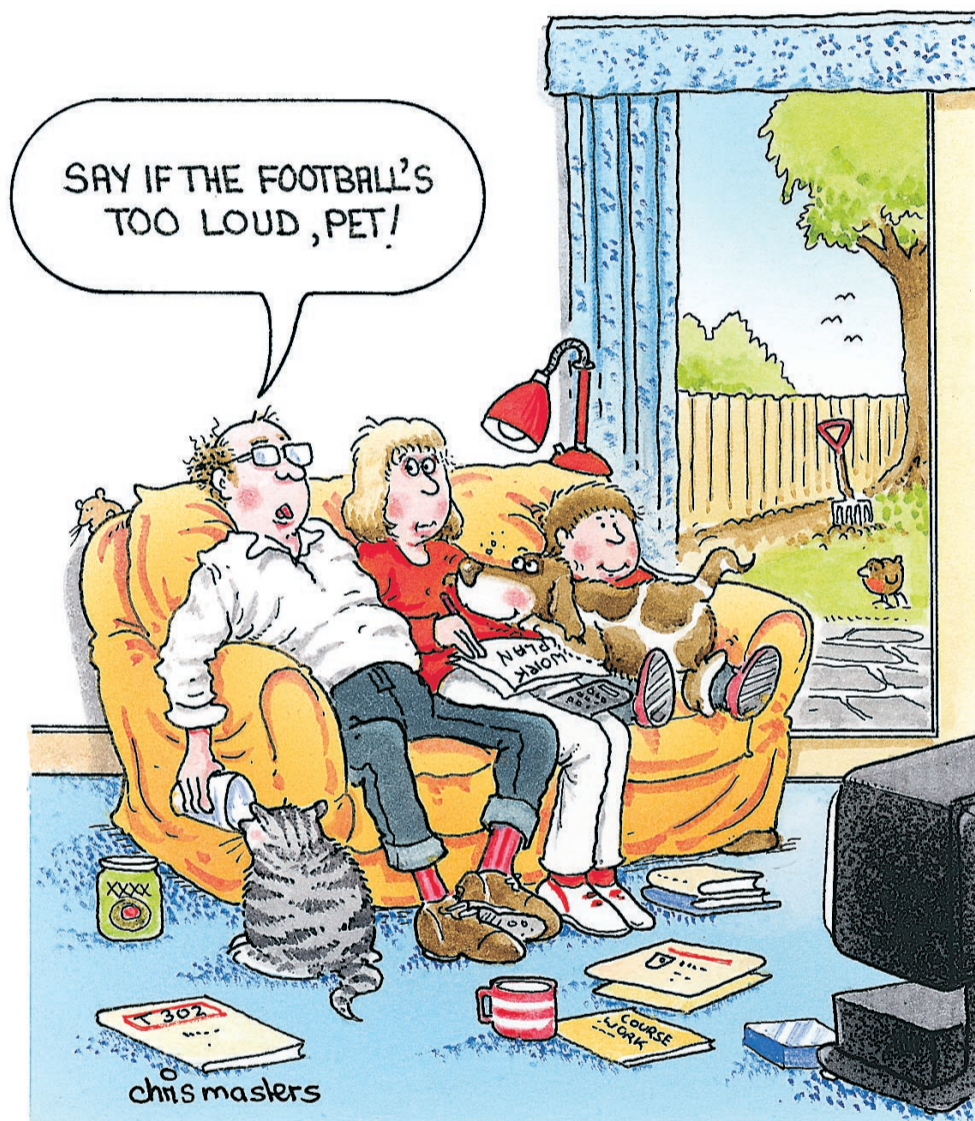
● *The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has granted official recognition for OUBS's Professional Certificate in Management. Accreditation means the 1,600 students who have completed the Certificate since November 2000 will automatically be granted licentiate membership of CIPD.*

Support

Get set for study

For most OU students the countdown to their course has already begun. But whether this is your first time or your fifth, it makes sense to spend some time setting yourself up properly. Below *Sesame* has some suggestions on preparing for your course. Plus there's an introduction to library services and (page 8) a glimpse at how other students and tutors are getting ready.

Top tips for a smooth start



You will need to make space for yourself!

Make way, make way. The OU is entering your life! Whether you're new to the OU or about to renew your acquaintance, you can make the coming months easier on yourself – and anyone you share your life with – by doing a bit of forward planning and a lot of organisation. **Peter Taylor-Whiffen** has some suggestions:

1. Find your own space.

It's easy to think you can just get your books out on the kitchen table after dinner every night and that may well suit you – but if you don't live on your own, it's unlikely to.

Ideally you need somewhere you can leave your materials out – and that means somewhere you won't spill gravy on them.

2. Shut yourself off.

Unless you have superhuman powers of concentration you'll find it impossible to work against the backdrop of family rows, slanging matches and fights. And that's just when *EastEnders* is on. Don't think you won't get distracted. Even the blandest TV programme will take an unprecedented, hypnotic hold over you when it's a choice between that or your studies.

3. Make room.

So where to go? If you are lucky enough to have a spare room, that's the natural choice, although make sure it's got enough power points for your purposes and, if you need an internet link, a phone point. Alternatively, after years of vague intentions, your forthcoming OU studies might have prompted you at long last to convert the attic – or even the garden shed! If your home is already bursting at the seams many stores now sell the kind of self-contained desk unit you can tuck into the corner of a bedroom and shut the doors on when you're done. You need a defined working space for three reasons: firstly, being in it will prepare you mentally for study, so you should be more productive; secondly, it gives a signal that you are not to be disturbed; and thirdly, you can walk away from it when you need to – and for the sake of your sanity, that is just as vital.

4. Go out to work.

Of course not everyone has, or even wants, the space to work at home, so the alternative is to go out, to a local library or a college – or even an e-café. A useful OU website can help you locate the nearest suitable study location: www.ouit.co.uk

5. Make time.

For many students, especially those with work, family and other high-priority commitments, this is the most challenging thing about being an OU student. A good starting point is the online *Learners Guide* which lets you plan your week: www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide. Discuss this with your spouse/partner and with other family members to ensure everyone's expectations are clear.

6. Be prepared for flak.

A word to the wise, however. Just because you have agreed study times doesn't mean your family won't miss you and occasionally resent your absences. Make it up to them whenever you can.

7. Take a break.

If at any time you are simply too tired to concentrate – and there's a difference between being too tired and not being bothered – take a break and ideally, get some fresh air. A relaxed mind will work far better than one that is overtired.

8. Find some study buddies.

You may struggle with some of the work. You may think that every OU student is finding it easy except you. Some have found getting to know others in their tutor group helps them through, while others find buddies through the huge number of course-related and social conferences on the FirstClass network (accessible from your student home page). By making contact with other OU students you could get a lot of encouragement – and you could be helping someone else, too.

9. Remember why you're here.

OU study can be a fantastic – even life changing – experience and thousands like you achieve their goals every year. It can also sometimes feel like a very draining one. When this happens think of why you signed up for the course in the first place – was it to fulfil a personal ambition? Was it to further your education? Could it get you a pay rise? Remember, every little thing you do – every time you do half-an-hour's study – brings you closer to your goal.

10. Don't be afraid.

Help is all around you at the OU. You can always ring your tutor, or your regional centre if you have a question about any aspect of your studies. We're here to help you succeed.

Library guides you through the IT jungle

Even if you're just beginning your OU experience, you'll already be aware you're now part of the world's largest university. But did you know you've also joined one of the world's biggest libraries?

As an OU student, you are automatically a member of the Open Library, an electronic resource containing 100,000s of e-books, e-journals, digitised theses and papers – as well as training materials and library catalogues.

This huge resource at your fingertips could help you with assignments, background reading or just general interest – and it's free. For example, you have free access to Oxford Reference, a collection of 100 Oxford University Press reference books and dictionaries, and you can scour newspapers and other journals in a database called Lexis Nexis. Some of the information is available to anyone with access to the internet but much is password protected, making it only available to OU students and staff.

All libraries have, of course, been expanded by the internet, but the Library has made surfing easier with the introduction of ROUTES – Resources for Open University Teachers and Students. Course teams have done the legwork identifying the most relevant and useful websites to help with your study, and by entering your course code or key words, you'll be directed straight to the best sites.

The sheer amount of information on offer can make it hard to select

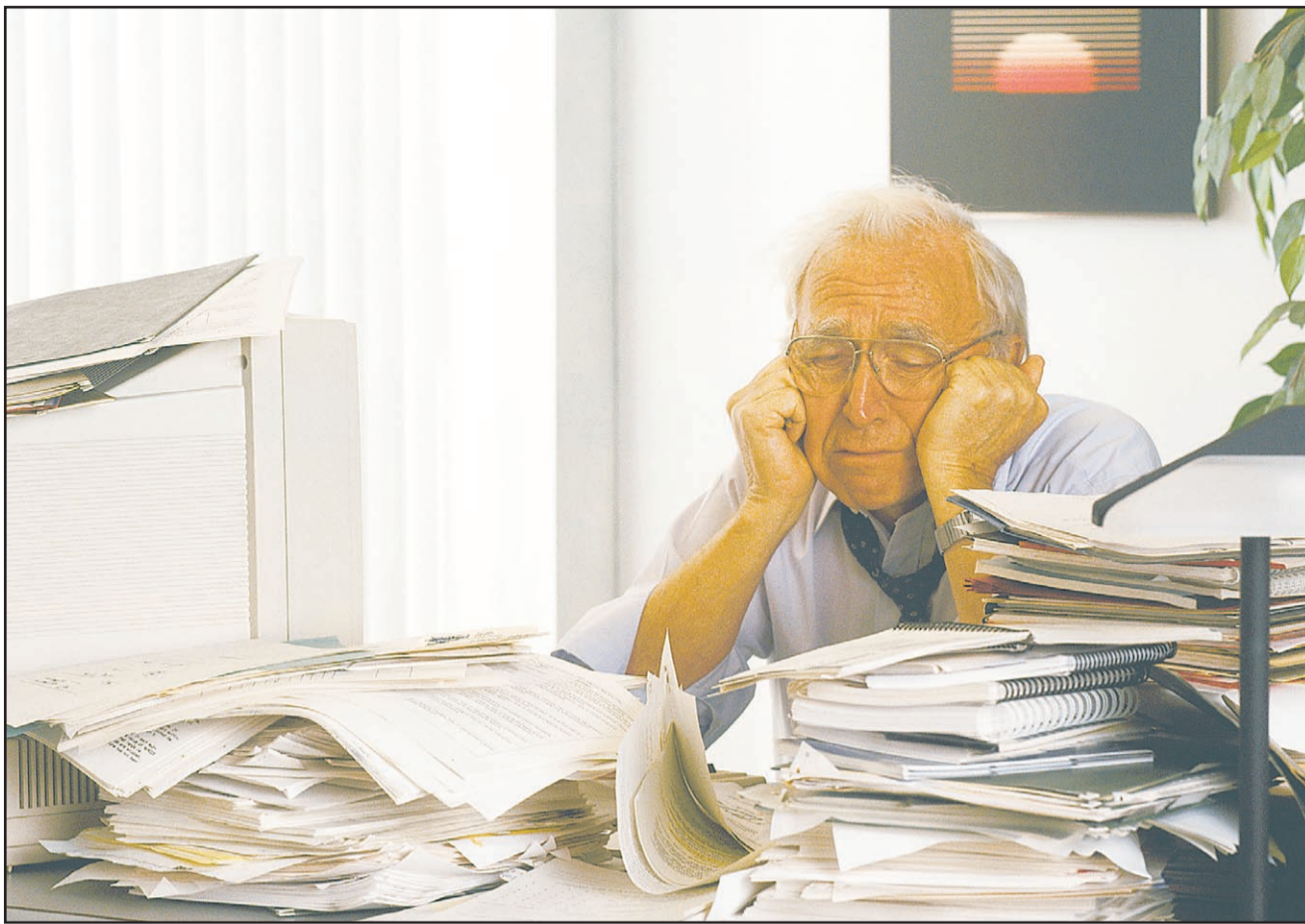
exactly what you need, so the Open Library also invites you on 'Safari', an interactive, online tutorial which helps you to improve your information management skills (see picture right).

Missed that vital OU TV programme? Don't worry – the Library can also direct you to the broadcast loan service. Other sections offer you the opportunity to download from a vast resource of past dissertations on a range of subjects, and the staff can even help you to track down past exam papers.

The OU's main library is at its primary site at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes, but if this is not local near your home, it is likely to have links with other university and academic libraries in your area – which you can access as an OU student.

"One of the many skills you can gain as an OU student is to be able to find, evaluate and make use of information from a range of sources," says librarian Linda Wilks. "The Open Library website is an excellent starting point for discovering the vast store of electronic resources which are available to you."

The first thing to do is to get your passwords, which you can find on your student home page. If you get stuck the librarians are available to help you, either by email at lib-help@open.ac.uk, live via the on-line Librarians On Call system, on the phone at 01908 659001 or on a minicom at 01908 655455. Or try the virtual tour of the Library's website which will give you an overview of what's available.



Knowing where to start with the piles of paper can be a problem
Images

Picture: Getty

A funnel in your letterbox

By **Ormond Simpson**

"So how would you sum up your experience of being an OU student so far?" I said.

Pete thought for a moment. "Well Ormond," he said, "it's a bit like having the narrow end of a funnel jammed in your letterbox. And scores of people standing round the wide end chucking stuff in."

If that's how it already feels for you, here are a few suggestions on surviving the first weeks of OU study:

- Organise the stuff from the funnel into three piles – one for course material, one for admin guff and one for support information – stuff about your tutor, who to contact and of course *Sesame*. Then throw the admin stuff away – no! I'm only kidding. Keep it somewhere safe – you will need it.
- Look at the course material. It may be easier not to try to read it all in one go – just skim through and get a feel for it.
- Do try to get to your first tutorial if you can. Not only will it

make it easier contacting your tutor afterwards but it'll be great for meeting other students – your next best resource. If you can't get to it then don't worry but do contact your tutor. It's not easy to phone someone out of the blue but they will be really pleased to hear from you. Ask them for a list of students on the course who'd like to make contact. Again it's not easy to contact other students – they're all much brighter than you aren't they..? No they're not. They're all in the same boat wondering what's going to drop out of the funnel next.

- The first assignment – this is the biggest hurdle that all students face. Do your best and get it in. Your tutor won't mind if it's not the greatest assignment they've ever read – 'the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single assignment on crime as a social construction' as Chairman Mao used to say.
- Get the family and friends on side – their support will be the most helpful you get. There's a simple leaflet in the 'Advice' area on FirstClass that you can give them and there'll shortly be an OU web page just for them.
- Now stop reading my meanderings and just get on with it.



The library and OU team behind the Safari tutorial, designed to help you manage all that information

Books, batteries and post-Christmas blues

How are you preparing for the study year ahead? We asked four students and tutors to share their schedule with *Sesame*.

“ I'll be studying MST121 *Using mathematics* in 2003 – my fifth course. My preparation includes: going through the preparation materials, making sure I have the right stationery, putting new batteries in my calculator etc. But most importantly, I'm already getting my support system organised. I've posted a couple of messages in the course conference and once the tutor posts the list of fellow students who want to form a self-help group to me I'll contact everyone on it. I know from past experience there will be times when I find it hard to study and in the past it has been the support of other students that has kept me going. I hope I've been supportive to others in return: distance learning does not mean having to study on your own.”

Judith White, Frome, Somerset

“ I mainly tutor level 1 courses (S103 *Discovering science*, T172 *Working with our environment*) and receive my initial allocation of names, addresses and previous OU course histories in December. I like to make initial contact by letter rather than phone – I don't want to be mistaken for a double-glazing salesman. My letter attempts to tell students a bit about myself and when/how I'm available for phone contact, plus a copy of the tutorial programme. I try to phrase it so that it invites a response as I'd like to know which students on my list are definitely taking the course (plans do change). I also hope to get to know the students as individuals as soon as possible, particularly if there are special needs or circumstances. If I've had no reply by mid-January I try to make phone or email contact to check they are OK and making a start on the course. I feel so much better when the full group has been established and the lines of communication are open.”

Chris Ashley, Norwich

“ For me preparation starts a couple of weeks after the last exam! I always make sure that I get at least the set books so that I can read ahead and get a feel for what I will be studying next – sometimes I'm really lucky and get the course material too, which is absolutely great! Studying 120 points as I will be again next year means that preparation is vital as TMA dates can be very close together – but the preparation means there's no time to 'rust' in between study years. As soon as the materials and study calendars arrive I get everything organised on my table: calendars on the walls and big colourful reminders of what is due when... and then the real fun starts, the courses themselves.”

Sonja Hilborne-Clarke, North Yorkshire

“ Beginning a new OU academic year is always a great antidote to the post-Christmas blues. In my case, this means preparing for both A103 *An introduction to the humanities* and A206 *The enlightenment* and re-establishing contact with my continuing students to convene the February meeting of 'The First Tuesday of the Month' at the White Horse. I give A103 students immediate attention – they are invariably new to the OU and I look forward to getting to know them and seeing their progress during the year. I like to make contact as soon as possible, to introduce myself, to allay any fears they may have, to check they have completed the pre-course assignment and to offer advice and strategies to overcome any problems that might arise. This is a good time also to encourage students to complete the preparatory exercises, to browse through the set texts and to attend the pre-course tutorial. I also alert them to the early TV broadcasts and emphasise the importance of the course calendar. As for A206, January is the time to organise my teaching materials and to bring the tutorial programme up to date ready for the group list to arrive. My introductory letter will encourage these students to read the course guide, paying close attention to Darnton's essay. Once the administration has been completed I can concentrate on meeting my students for another challenging and enjoyable year.”

Hilary Birkett, Bedfordshire

AL conference



Chair of the AL Committee Meg Hopkins with Vice-Chancellor Brenda Gourley during a lively plenary session

Closer links with employers, more attention to skills development in the curriculum and more short courses offering professional updating.

Those were among suggestions appearing on an action list drawn up by associate lecturers at their annual conference.

Invited by Will Swann, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, to consider whether the OU is doing enough to meet the needs of the employment market, ALs also homed in on the need to 'educate' employers about its programmes.

Their debate was given a sharper edge by a recent survey of the way the OU's arts graduates are perceived by employers. Alongside many positive responses about commitment, time management and motivation, outdated attitudes still persisted, said Will.

"On the negative side there were comments like 'hobby academia', 'not a proper degree' and 'spoonfed learning'. We are doing a disservice to students by not addressing these kinds of perceptions," he said.

Ravina Talbot, a K100 tutor and north west panel member, agreed the OU needed to make employers more aware of how its curriculum has changed. "It seems to me we have the products but they need to be repackaged and rebranded. People just see us as somewhere

they go for a degree."

Kevin Hilson, panel member for the north and tutor on U206, added: "It is our students who find out about the OU rather than going to their personnel department who say 'here's the OU which could be useful to you'."

But fundamental changes to delivery may also be needed, suggested Elaine Walker, T171 and S280 tutor and north panel member. "Six years' study is a problem for students and employers and we need to address that in presentation patterns. Students ask me 'can't we look at the business school model of six months, then another six months?'"

"If we want to complete in the young students market we need to be able to offer a degree in three years."

Young students, who represent the biggest growth area in the OU, also concerned other ALs, who said moves to beef up the university's career service, help students construct their own learning plans, and continue development of vocational offerings would be particularly attractive to this audience.

Said Garyth Orton, D218 tutor and north panel member: "People now swap jobs and they need to have the necessary skills. They need to be able to communicate, to use ICT, and to develop – and they want to know what we are going to do to help with that."

Call to woo employers

By Jane Matthews

Summing up, Will Swann concluded there was a great deal to do: "Many employees need to update their skills. Why aren't we thinking about repackaging these into small CPD packages? Online CPD in particular has enormous potential in reaching the large numbers of small and medium sized employers."

● Another urgent theme for the OU is to assist its associate lecturer staff in getting fully online by 2004 – and being able to exploit the potential of that in their teaching, conference heard.

Though some ALs continued to express their concerns about the additional costs to tutors and students, those who were already using information and communications technologies (ICT) shared their excitement at the way it is able to bring the OU community closer together.

Summing up the debate in two lively focus sessions, PVC (learning and teaching) Paul Clarke pledged to look at support and advice services for ALs,

and how the experience of those tutors already working enthusiastically with ICT could be captured and shared.

He said: "There were a number of requests for regional advice and support. People felt Walton Hall was too far away which is something we have to investigate."

"One of the other striking things is the way in which really good experience is locked into course teams. It goes back into the course but doesn't go anywhere else in the university."



Throughout the conference's main day queues formed among ALs keen to take up the invitation to attend training and troubleshooting workshops on FirstClass

£50 goes to the writer of any published Travellers tale

Travellers tales

Soapbox helps Sylvia make sense of studies

Travellers tales is an occasional series, giving *Sesame* readers the chance to share their stories of travel relating to their OU studies. In 2002 Staffordshire student **Sylvia Keris** took time out from her U213 *International development* studies to see development in action. She joined the aid organisation Soapbox, working in the Kibera Slum on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya.

Having read so much in the course about poverty and hunger through lack of endowments and entitlements, and issues of social exclusion, I desperately wanted to do something positive to help.

The Kibera slum is one of the largest in the world. Over 1.2 million people live in a two square kilometer area, and the slum is growing every day. Families live in one-roomed tin and mud shacks amongst stagnant streams of rubbish, human waste and dead animals, with no electricity, running water or sanitation. Disease is rife and, for many, a basic meal doesn't happen every day. The slum is the result of urbanisation – rural families 'coerced' from their lands looking for opportunities in the city.

Our group raised funds for the cost of building materials and the employment of local labour, and physically helped with the construction of an extension to one of the crammed classrooms at the Jolysa Primary School. The small school has about 130 pupils ranging from age three up to 14, and is run by Pastor Evans Okwalinga and his wife Rose, with the help of mainly untrained teachers. Pastor Evans explained that education offers the only hope for these children to escape poverty and hunger, by learning academic and practical skills that will enable them to gain employment.

As we walked through the maze of dirt-strewn pathways I could see how the slum dwellers were managing capabilities – trying to earn a livelihood by offering for sale all manner of goods from stalls at the front of their homes. For some, the only endowment being the sale of their labour, the services offered

included hair braiding, counselling and even unqualified surgical operations to cure all ills!

I had taken an OU course book *Poverty and Inequality* to Kenya, (thinking that I might have time in the evenings after work to do some reading...), and the first day I opened the book I thought I was seeing things. There pictured was a hair salon I had passed earlier on in the day!

eager for education

The pupils and their teachers begged us to help teach in the classrooms. Despite their appalling surroundings and constant hunger the children were so desperate and eager for education, and to learn everything they could from us while we were there. Many of the girls told me they considered themselves lucky to be at school at all, as many families with hardly any income can only afford to pay for some of their children to be educated, and where they have to choose it is only the sons that attend school.

I learned from conversations with many families what help they really wanted from development agencies, and of their immense vulnerabilities – including to violent crime and extortion. I also learned that bad governance means official development aid from western countries rarely reaches poor people in Kenya. I initially disagreed with the views of Peter Bauer on one of my OU course cassettes, but now believe he makes a valid point about stopping



Education in action: Sylvia Keris

overseas development aid, where necessary.

Despite taking out valuable weeks halfway through my course, I eventually managed to catch up on my TMAs with the help of a time extension, and I consider the experience helped enormously with my understanding of development issues, and bringing U213 to life!

Reader Holidays 2003

Jersey Spring & Autumn breaks – 2 nights from £115 with free car hire

Enjoy a sea-drive holiday to beautiful Jersey for two nights or more from just £115, including a FREE self-drive hire car and some FREE child places.

Valid until May 24 and then throughout October 2003 – and if you take a three-night break before March 28, you can enjoy an extra night absolutely FREE.

As an extra bonus all bookings for departures

from April 1-May 24 and in October will qualify for FREE half board providing they are confirmed by February 28 2003.

Your hire car will be waiting on arrival and you will stay for a minimum two nights bed and breakfast. The price includes return sea travel from Weymouth (Sun to Thurs), car hire and two nights B&B in twin/double room with private facilities. **£159/OU**

Walk in Unspoilt Corfu from £339

The beautiful resort of Arillas on the north-west coast of Corfu offers the perfect setting for an ideal family holiday or romantic getaway in a traditional Greek setting. With our exclusive offer from Travelsmith you can enjoy a 7 or 14 night self-catering summer holiday from just £339.

With two escorted off-road walks of approximately four hours each and two coach excursions, providing a full day's sightseeing and a half-day shopping all included in the price, you will

discover some of the hidden magic of this Emerald Island.

You will stay in a privately-owned apartment, with a balcony, bathroom, and dining area, not more than 800 metres from the beach and close to free swimming pools.

Our offer also includes return flights from the UK to Corfu, including all taxes, private transfers to Arillas, a welcome pack including vouchers for free wine, cocktails, watersports and other discounts, and the services of English-speaking Arillas Travel representatives. **£100/OU**

Jersey Camping – 7 nights from £79 per adult

Sunny friendly Jersey is ideal for a relaxed family camping holiday and now with our special offer you could enjoy a seven-night stay at the best site on the island, with a free car bonus and free child places.

If you choose to travel with Condor by traditional ferry from Portsmouth or on the high speed jet catamaran from Poole or Weymouth you can take your car for FREE and if you decide to fly from Southampton a complimentary hire car will be waiting for you on arrival.

As an extra bonus on sea departures, all children under two travel FREE when sharing a tent with a minimum of two adults, and children under 12 years travel FREE on any date up to July 17 (excluding departures May 23-25) based on a ratio of one adult to one child.

These super fun holidays organised by leading Channel Islands tour operator Travelsmith (ABTA V1290/ATOL 1917) can be taken on selected dates from May 22 to August 24 2003. **D155/OU**

Cornwall, Eden and Isles of Scilly – 7 nights from £99 per person

Our self-drive holiday is based at the Trenerry Lodge, a quality well-equipped bungalow, close to the coastal footpath and National Trust sandy beach of Chapel Porth, near St Agnes.

The Lodge makes an ideal base from which to explore the many attractions of Cornwall, including the new National Maritime Museum, which is set to become a major world-class attraction on Falmouth's waterfront.

Magnificent gardens abound in Cornwall's mild climate, and at The Eden Project, near St Austell, a series of giant bubble-like conservatories provide a spectacular theatre in which the story of human dependence on plants is told.

On selected dates you can also take a boat trip to the Scilly island of Tresco, and explore the world-famous Abbey Gardens with their fine collection of 20,000 sub-tropical and exotic plants, which grow with a luxuriance unknown elsewhere in the UK.

Prices are per person for 7 nights self-catering including admission ticket to the Eden Project. For arrivals from 29 Mar to 25 Oct, holidays also include a day trip by ferry from Penzance via St Mary's to Tresco on the Scilly Isles with admission to the glorious Abbey Gardens.

Short breaks up to April 18 for a minimum 3 nights are available on request, from £49 per person including an admission ticket to Eden Project. **£158/OU**

For a free colour brochure or more details of any of these holidays just telephone Travelsmith Ltd (ABTA V1290/ATOL 1917) on 01621-784666 or 0870-748-1000 quoting holiday reference code.

Monet's Gardens and Paris – 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.

Holiday price includes: 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; a sightseeing coach tour of Paris plus the services of a Diamond Holidays representative.

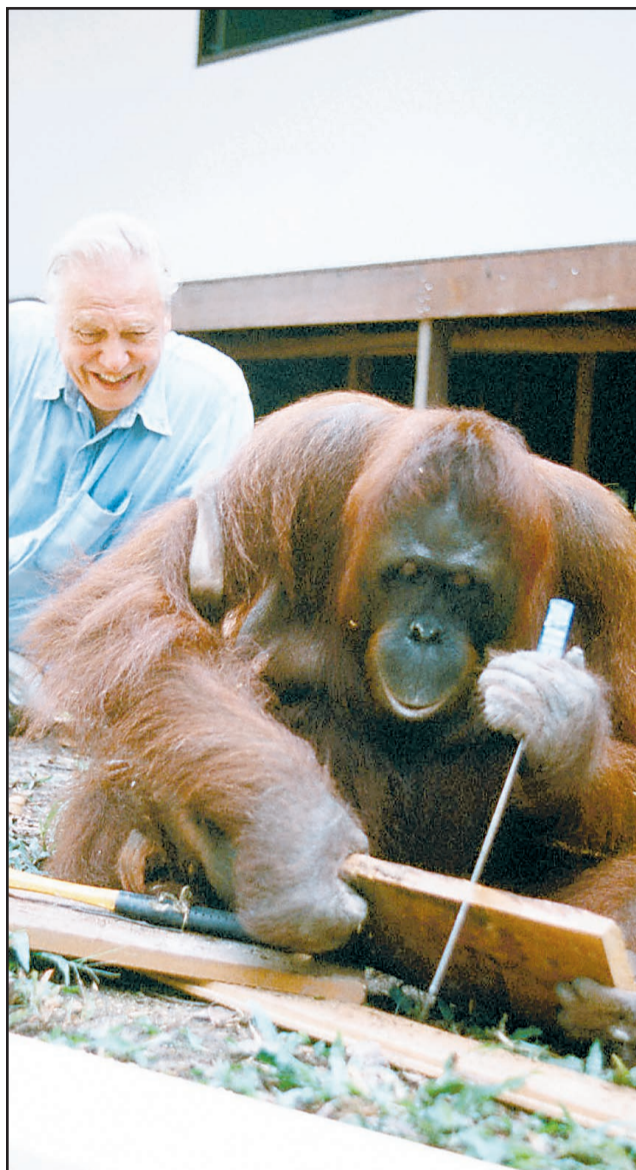
Pick up points for coach: Milton Keynes, Luton, London or meet at port (Dover).

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.

Courses

FRONT PAGE STORY

Animal magic from OU



David Attenborough and friend

Picture: BBC

From the small screen to the syllabus, David Attenborough's hugely popular *Life of Mammals* is the latest BBC TV series to be linked to a specially-produced short course from the OU.

Studying mammals is one of two new science short courses for 2003 likely to appeal to armchair naturalists and fans of TV science.

Available from May, *Studying mammals* aims to take that interest to another level by showing how mammals differ biologically from other animals, discussing their social habits, modes of feeding and reproduction. The course also considers to what extent species' survival

is threatened by human interference and exploitation and offers the chance to study both the familiar, such as cats, dogs and foxes, and the rare, exotic and spectacular – tigers, whales and polar bears.

Students on the 10-point course do not need to have studied biology or have practical knowledge of mammals and will complete their studies knowing how to find out more for themselves.

Launched at the same time, *The fats of life* is designed as a way forward for all those worried about their diet and where their food comes from. It aims to help students understand many of the scientific issues involved in diet and food

– from how to interpret the labels on food packaging to why people differ so much in how readily they lose or gain weight. The course brings together scientific knowledge developed from the study of people, wild and laboratory animals, plants and microbes with information from ecology, palaeontology and archaeology. Though some general knowledge of botany and zoology would be useful, the science short course team says having watched Sir David Attenborough's TV programmes over the years with a lively interest will be more than enough.

For more information on both courses visit: www.open.ac.uk/science/short or: <http://www.open2.net>

Overhaul for engineering qualifications

A new Bachelor of Engineering degree launching this year is part of a major overhaul of the OU's engineering qualifications system which will also see changes to the existing Master of Engineering.

The BEng is a 360 point, honours-level qualification which includes a 30-point Level 3 project course, and can be made up from existing courses in maths, science and technology. Some students will qualify to graduate with a BEng this year.

And the BEng will be the sole entry point for the revised version of the MEng, due to launch in 2004, which includes for the first time 120 points of postgraduate-level study, bringing it into line with the National Qualifications Framework. The old MEng will continue to be available until 2006.

The new structure is designed to meet the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency, the higher education

standards-setter. New courses are planned and some existing ones will disappear.

Mark Edean of the Technology faculty said the new BEng would provide for the first time a qualification designed for students along the route to an MEng, but added: "Some students working towards the old MEng will not be able to complete it by 2006. These students will have to switch to the new MEng, which effectively means switching to the new BEng."

"We are dealing with quite a few enquiries, many from students who are very happy with the changes, but for some it means a fairly radical disruption of what they wanted to do. Unfortunately, whenever we make changes there is a proportion of students who are disadvantaged."

An engineering helpline for students needing advice is available by emailing: engineering@open.ac.uk.

Focus

Change of scene for actress



Rosalind Cressy: Cleopatra turns conservationist

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

There can't be many people who have played Cleopatra in a touring Shakespeare production and plan to dive off Borneo to collect data on fish – Rosalind Cressy's studies have opened up a whole new world.

"I started taking science courses, and got inspired by fellow students; then *The Blue Planet* came on TV and I was hooked," says the 39-year-old professional actress. "I said to one chap I met at summer school 'I wish I could see these wonderful animals in real life' and he said 'You can'."

Rosalind is spending the first three months of 2003 in the South China Sea as a diving volunteer for conservation charity Greenforce – a very different platform from the one she is used to.

Having gone to university from school to study drama and French the turning point came when she dropped out to get married. Rosalind was 19 and when she and her husband moved to Australia the terms of her stay didn't permit her to work. "I became addicted to learning," she recalls. "I studied painting, French literature, sailing, Russian, yoga, making cheese... you name it!"

Her passion was undimmed by the return to England – and she realised it could help her finally achieve her degree. "We moved to the country so I was learning about things like wood-turning, and then my brother, who was an Open University student, suggested I use credits from my previous university studies towards an OU degree."

By then Rosalind was earning a living as an actress and when the prospectus arrived she naturally turned to the arts courses. But she

wasn't inspired. "There were invitations to study Shakespeare, but I'd acted in several of his plays. I felt I'd studied him enough. I thought 'I'm an artist already – why do more of the same?'"

"Then the page fell open at geology courses and I read that they sent you a microscope and all sorts of other kit to play with."

So Rosalind, of Frittenden, Kent, developed her interest in science, taking courses based in geology, astronomy and ecology – and realised there were many links with her work as an artist.

"A lot of people think the two disciplines are mutually exclusive, but there's a lot of crossover," she says. "A lot of the acting work I do is fringe, experimental – and the methodology of science has made me a much better actress."

The courses have helped in other ways. Rosalind is co-founder of touring company The Lions Part, who work with local artists and community groups to make costumes and banners from recycled materials. It also has strong links with conservation groups and food producers. The company often performs at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London and was recently commissioned by the Manx government to produce *The Story Of Man... And All That*.

Rosalind's work for Greenforce will focus on collecting data on fish and the coral reef, which will then be given to Borneo's government department for wildlife, enabling it to draw up management plans which help protect and rebuild endangered ecosystems.

With an OU science degree now in her sights Rosalind is determined that she's remaining an artist and a scientist in equal measure. "I find that this all has a great effect on my friends who know me as an actress. Because of the OU, I guess they begin to see that all sorts of things are possible."

Creative writing courses a first

The notion that writers are born, not made, is romantic nonsense – says the woman at the centre of the OU's new series of creative writing courses.

Linda Anderson has had her work – two award-winning novels, short stories, poetry and a play – published on three continents, but is adamant hers is a skill that must be learned.



Linda Anderson

"A lot of people have raw talent," says the OU's newly appointed Reader in Creative Writing. "But learning the craft, learning how to plan, reshape and revise – knowing how to do these things at the outset can save writers years of their lives."

The creative writing programme, a first for the university, will begin in 2004 with three short 10-point courses on writing *fiction* (A174), *poetry* (A175) and *drama* (A176). Then in 2006 there will be a full-scale 60-point course at second level, offering an introduction to a wide range of creative writing. Bob Owens, Head of Literature, sees Linda as a key person in the development of this ambitious programme.

respected

"We're delighted to have her on board," he says. "She's hugely respected in the profession, and the experience she brings as former head of the ground-breaking creative writing programme at Lancaster University will help us enormously in planning how to teach this new subject in the OU context."

According to Linda, the new courses will show writers how to plan, and how to be critics of their own work, as well as teaching them about the special requirements of different genres and equipping them with a repertoire of techniques.

"Our focus will be on teaching people to write well," she states firmly. "We'll be encouraging students to write thoughtful texts of value. The 60-point course will contain information on publishing and marketing although publication will not be the main goal. Our emphasis will be on good writing. After all, there are some very bad writers about and some of them are millionaires!"

Students will benefit, says Bob, from the support of tutors who will be, in most cases, writers themselves with experience of the creative process, the way in which writers move from first visions to final drafts.

"You can become paralysed if you are encouraged to think there's a strict right and wrong way to write," says Linda. "A good writer does need imagination and audacity – a belief in that imagination. In that way creative writing is slightly more 'anarchic' than other subjects. But our students will be offered models of writing to plunder – they'll study examples of writing in a range of genres, as well as learning to criticise and discuss each other's works, and use that to build up confidence and understanding."

"These courses will be demanding, but they will also be highly enjoyable," says Bob. "They will cultivate the ability to write with clarity, precision, and liveliness – skills that will benefit students in their other courses. The



Bob Owens

60-point course will complement A210 *Approaching Literature*, and we would hope eventually to offer a creative writing MA and even opportunities to take a PhD. These are courses for people who always wondered if they could write. They don't assume knowledge or talent but will teach a discipline of writing."

Looking for an alternative?



There is a growing interest in therapies such as herbalism

Picture: Getty Images

Would you be interested in a course on complementary and alternative approaches to health?

With plans in the pipeline for a Level 2 30 point course examining issues and debates about this growing field, the School of Health and Social Welfare wants to gauge the amount and type of interest.

The course team sees the course as 'timely': "There is a real increase in interest in complementary and alternative therapies. A significant number now use them in some form and there is a corresponding increase in the number of practitioners."

potential

Likely to be available for the first time in 2005, the course will explore the cultural, historical and social policy contexts in which complementary and alternative approaches have developed – and enable students to investigate and evaluate their potential in a range of settings including mental health, palliative care, chronic illness and pregnancy.

Topics may include ethical and legal issues, regulation and control, evidence and proof, relationships with the NHS and conventional health treatments, as well as 'the wacky fringe'.

"We are also exploring the possibility of professional recognition by one or more of the big five – acupuncture, osteopathy, herbalism, chiropractic and homeopathy – or other high population training programmes in complementary and alternative therapies," the course team says.

"We'd like to invite anyone who thinks they might be interested in the course to contact us by email, giving their name, address and current role, if any, together with a quick note telling us what they hope to gain from the course." Email: SHSW-K221-Comp-Therapies@open.ac.uk

Partners launch e-University's first pilot

The Open University is making history by presenting, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, the first pilot course for the Government's 'UK e-Universities' (UKeU) initiative.

H806 *Learning in the connected economy* is a Master's level course focusing on knowledge management within an internet-based information economy. The first course produced under the new OpenCambridge partnership, its students will begin their studies in March.

UKeU has been set up by the government to market UK e-learning worldwide. All universities will be able to contribute e-learning materials, but OpenCambridge is leading the way with this, one of just three pilot courses.

Learning in the connected economy explores the use of different technologies and their potential effects on learning. Working in partnership with Cambridge, UKeU, Sun Microsystems, external consultants and the other pilot courses has "enriched the course, enabling us to offer multiple perspectives on e-learning", explained Professor Robin Mason.

The course is modular and makes optimal use of the digital format enabling fast updating of materials. It can also be easily altered to suit different markets.

Learning in the connected economy will form part of the global MA in Open and Distance Education qualification or can be studied as a stand-alone course.

For more information visit: www.ukeu.com

New NVQ standard

Howard Falkingham has become the first UK holder of an NVQ in Engineering Technology Management level 4 following the introduction of the new standards. He was presented with his award by Dr Kate Clarke, Director of Open University Validation Services, which approves centres to offer the qualification. The new award is designed to be more customer-focused and applicable through a wide range of units in recognition of the very different roles within the engineering sector.

Spotlight on OU Societies

Law group fills a gap

A meeting of likeminded souls in a Regents Park Café one rainy Saturday seems an unlikely launch pad for the OU Law Society but it was here that the seeds of law student Richard Hand's idea came to fruition. "When I began studying with the OU on course W200 *Understanding law*, I was surprised to learn that there was no functioning society for law students," said Richard.

Officially launched in August 2002 the society aims to give law students a means of contacting and supporting one another as well as sharing useful information on future careers in the legal profession.

There are almost 3,000 people studying OU law courses making the OU's law programme the largest in the country. The society has attracted members from all over the UK representing all four law courses, together with social sciences and a number of other subjects.

Members are from all age groups and come from a wide variety of backgrounds and careers. There is no restriction on membership and tutors and graduates are also welcome to join.

The appearance, in 2002, of the first graduates with an OU law degree, makes this a particularly important time for the OU Law Society. Cherie Booth QC, speaking at a ceremony to honour the first 107 holders of the LLB (Bachelor of Law) degree, described it as "a very significant milestone in legal history" and expressed her belief that the influx of OU graduates would influence the legal profession in the same way they had earlier influenced fields like science, geology, astronomy, psychology, sociology and computing. "The wider the social experience of those learned in the law, the better for both the development of the law and for clients and scholars," added Ms Booth.

But how the OU law degree is treated by prospective employers is a topic OULS will be closely watching. And it will also be closely monitoring whether age is a barrier to a legal career. Regular reports on both issues will appear in the society's newsletter the *Sunday Tort*, published six times a year.

OULS says it intends to fill a vacuum as much-needed information is relayed back from graduates entering the legal profession and going on to qualify as solicitors and barristers – but it is also promising its newsletter will be entertaining.

Membership costs £6 for UK residents, £10 overseas and includes six copies of the *Sunday Tort* newsletter. For more contact: Richard Hand, OULS Chairperson, 106A Merton High Street, London, SW19 1BD e-mail: Ftreader@ail.com



OU Law Society Chair Richard Hand

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.

In our last issue of *Sesame* (212) we reported on the OU's decision to operate from 2005 on the assumption of universal ICT access. There was a huge response, with many of you expressing concerns about the implications of ICT for all. A small selection appears below – but look out for the next edition of *Sesame* (due out mid-March) when we will be exploring the issues your letters raise, talking to those involved, and explaining how the OU plans to ensure access for all.

I am annoyed at the argument that the introduction of ICT is necessary to ensure the 'credibility' of awards. Such an argument implies that my degree, and those gained by many other past students of the Open University, are somehow less credible because they were obtained without the aid of current technology.

I had intended to return to the Open University to build on my BA, but if all courses are to have 'compulsory online components', then, regretfully, I shall not be coming back.

James Anderson
Essex

A computer capable of running CD-ROMS costs something like £1,000 new.

Workplace PCs are primarily provided for work purposes, and there are still many workers who don't sit at a desk – HGV drivers, nurses, careworkers, factory operatives, shop assistants. I checked with Hertfordshire public libraries (listed by the OU as providing computers) and found that the processors are too slow to run CD-ROMS and it is forbidden to load software for fear of viruses.

Please can the OU therefore think very hard about the introduction of CD-ROMS? They may have the effect of unintentionally excluding many of the people the OU was supposedly set up for.

Katharine Hall
Hitchin, Herts

It is completely unrealistic to assume that those students without computers will be able to 'go somewhere locally for computer use/internet access'. Never mind the question of loading OU software, availability of printers etc – how many libraries do any of us know that would be prepared to remain open until midnight several nights a week to accommodate the most usual studying time for many students?

Studying with the OU is not inexpensive. If future registration is to depend upon the purchase of a computer and accessing the internet, in addition to summer school fees, set books etc., these expenses can only escalate. Current internet access is not cheap. The most basic cost is around £15 per month (payable via a credit card). If credit cards do not form part of the student's fiscal policy, they can only access the internet on a 'pay-as-you-go' basis and the additional costs will be high.

Sue Shipman
Hanley Castle, Worcs.

I do agree that the OU has to keep up with technology and both the OU and student could benefit by using this technology. However, it cannot be made compulsory. As an officer in the Merchant Navy I spend more than half the year at sea, where an internet connection, if available at all, would be slow, unreliable and extremely expensive. I have already been unable

to apply for certain courses with an online component; if all courses were to go this way then I would find it very hard to complete my degree.

I question why an organisation set up to cater for those in difficult situations decides to stereotype all their students into one category of 9-5 workers with an internet connection at home.

Alistair Clack
Colchester

Instead of aiming for the honours degree I dreamt of I shall be completing an ordinary degree in 2004. Being unable to afford a computer, having a manual job (no access to IT), reliant on public transport and living in a rural area: there are too many difficulties to overcome.

Carolyn Merry
Denbighshire

E-learning may be cheap to provide, convenient, versatile, fun and politically correct. But it seems to be encouraging a premature campaign against books.

While courses are devised by people employed to spend their day in front of a pre-booted computer, they are studied in 'spare' time, when computer access can be less straightforward. We study in bed, in the bath, standing on a train; it's easier with a book. Books are cheap to buy and use, and can be accessed without competition from the family.

Fiona Williams
Malvern, Worcs.

I have noted that the university hopes to offer more courses electronically in the future – thank you.

For people like myself, who spend a substantial amount of time each week commuting to work and who also work extensive hours, electronic courses allow me to gain an undergraduate degree at my own pace, at 'unconventional' times of the day.

I found that the supply and delivery of information, teaching methods and support offered on the course T171 *You, your computer and the net* was absolutely first class.

Sheila Willson
Ely, Cambs

Even the sky is not the limit

Gil Kilshaw was so determined to prove how much people with multiple sclerosis can do that she started an OU course... and then did a parachute jump!

The single mother-of-two, who has used a wheelchair for 11 years, saw her 40th birthday looming and "wanted to do something with a bang".

So she jumped out of a plane over Cumbria... raising £1,000 for the local MS group which she chairs. "It was a fantastic experience," said Gil, from Rochdale, Lancashire. The money raised will help fund family holidays for people affected by MS.

Gil, who was strapped to an instructor for the 'piggyback' jump, took off from Barrow airfield and came down looking at spectacular views right across the Lake District. "The first 2,000 feet was freefall and took about 35 seconds – but believe me it felt a lot longer than that!" she said. "But then when my instructor Bobby opened the chute, we glided down and I could see the whole of Lake Windermere, and even as far as Blackpool."

Gil said she was keen to do "something mad" for her birthday to show the world the capability of someone with MS – which is one reason she began to study

K100 *Understanding health and social care*. "My ambition is to become a social worker," she said. "I've had MS for 14 years and as group chairman I help a lot of people in similar positions to secure services, care, benefits and equipment. But all the experience doesn't count if you don't have a piece of paper saying you're qualified, so I am

working towards a degree." She will shortly start on K202 *Care, welfare and community*.

"The OU course has helped me enormously," she added. "I did know much of it but there was a lot I didn't – and it's helped me to help other people with MS to access even more services!"



Gil Kilshaw and her instructor piggyback jump over the Lake District

Research



Janet with students at Harewood Junior School, Middlesbrough

Menu for change wins Janet an award

Better training and support for lunchtime supervisors could bring real benefits for the schools they work in.

OU-trained teacher Janet Madden has come up with a recipe for change as part of her project work for E828 *Educational management in action*, one of the modules in the Masters in Education programme.

Her research showed that because lunchtime supervisors come into school only at dinnertime they don't command the same level of respect as teaching staff from the pupils – or even from the teachers themselves.

"They come into school for that one purpose," said Janet. "But this makes it an incredibly difficult post because they're not able to build a relationship with the children in the same way that teachers do and the pupils don't tend to respect their authority to the same degree.

"I must confess that because of that, teachers quite often get supervisors coming to them with a situation they can't control. I know that before I did this research whenever a supervisor came to see me it was to deliver a problem to me, so I tended to view them negatively.

"I'm not sure they get the support from teaching staff that they deserve. They're not fully included in the life of the school or the development of the staff and are largely overlooked when

it comes to training," added Janet, who also did her degree and PGCE with the OU.

E828 requires students to undertake a relevant investigation in their own workplace and make recommendations which pull out the management implications of their findings.

Janet's solutions include staff development such as behaviour management training and encouraging the supervisors to lead the children's play during dinnertime.

"I found that if the children were given the option of organised play at lunchtime, they responded magnificently and were much less likely to misbehave," added Janet, who works at Harewood Junior School in inner-city Middlesbrough. "For example, I refereed lunchtime football matches in the playground and found that if they could identify me in a positive, defined role, it immediately created a situation in which we knew exactly what to expect of each other. If lunchtime supervisors can be trained and encouraged to lead similar activities, the children won't see them just as adults brought in to tell them off if they're naughty – and will respond in a different way."

Her recommendations are guaranteed a wider airing after she was nominated for a Practitioner Enquiry Award by the OU, one of 10 universities linked to the National College for School Leadership which makes the prestigious awards. A synopsis of her findings will appear on the College's website.

ICT 'liberates' special needs students

The virtual campus has opened up the OU to a huge number of students with special needs, according to new research.

People with long-term health problems report 'increased levels of motivation, enjoyment and autonomy' when they go online, according to the findings of graduate Margaret Debenham.

"The access it opens up is totally liberating," says the 62-year-old, who achieved her IET PhD in October. "The rise in the use of online communication over the last five years has been extraordinary and it is very enabling for so many people."

There are said to be 150,000 OU students with online access and 6,000 of these have declared special needs – although many people's reluctance to divulge such information means the figure is likely to be much higher. Margaret's research explored ways in which computer-mediated conferencing

(CMC) might address what she discovered were common barriers.

"Difficulties with handwriting, academic and social isolation, a need for better communication with support agencies and severe fatigue were all regular themes among students with special needs," she says.

But many of these challenges are being successfully overcome by the virtual revolution. One student's assessment of FirstClass, for example – "It allows me to communicate even when my face is painful – and I can [contribute to discussion] at the speed that is most comfortable with as much rest as I need" – was a typical response.

The electronic contact with people with similar problems through DOORway (Disabilities, Opportunities and OutReach), a forum for special needs students, proved reassuring and useful to many who would otherwise be studying in isolation. "The

benefit of being able to contact empathetic fellow-students by CMC is inestimable," said one. "It's a place where people understand what it's like to feel rotten, and where we can talk about our particular personal problems in a way which we might not want to in the wide open spaces of the virtual campus."

Margaret, from Newmarket, was prompted to begin the research when – as a special needs student with long-term health problems herself – she became one of the OU's first IT students in 1988.

Her research paper *CMC and Disability Support: Addressing Barriers To Study* was written for TechDis, an organisation which advises higher education institutions on how information and communications technologies (ICT) relate to 'disabilities and/or learning difficulties'. More details at: www.debenham.demon.co.uk.

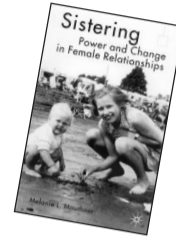
Books



Melanie Mauthner

The many sides of sisterhood

Sistering: power and change in female relationships
by Melanie Mauthner, Palgrave
2002, hardback £47.50



From *Cinderella* to *Pride and Prejudice*, literature has had a fascination with sisters. But along with that has gone a habit of airbrushing out any subtlety: sisters fit either into the angelic category – Beth: loving and best beloved of all her sisters in *Little Women* – or into the devil's camp – the vividly named Scarlett O'Hara stealing her sister's beau in *Gone with the Wind*.

Such polarisation has done few favours for the millions of real sisters whose experience, as OU lecturer Melanie Mauthner proves in *Sistering: power and change in female relationships*, is infinitely more complex.

Through the life stories of 37 sisters Melanie shows not only that there are as many shades of closeness and separation as there are colours in a Tara sunset. But that whatever Alcott, Austen and Mitchell might have us believe, the love between sisters is neither static nor unconditional. On the contrary, the sisters in her book describe everything from 'best friendship' and 'close companionship' to 'distant companionship', and movement between these states at different points in their lives.

Marriage, divorce, child rearing, the loss of parents, geography, other relationships: all have an effect. But so too do internal factors such as changing power relations.

Yet as Melanie points out, our habit of idealising these relationships – leaving their exploration to literature and popular psychology rather than sociology – means that when difference does emerge it can be hard to deal with. To those brought up on the fiction it may even, as her interviews reveal,

feel like a particularly raw failure when far from offering a haven of shared experience and unconditional support, sisterhood cracks apart.

In this, she argues, there are clear parallels with the women's movement – a movement which even adopted the language of sisterhood to embrace this notion of support. Says Melanie: "As a symbol of female solidarity sisterhood embodies such a strong notion of support that it almost silences or leaves out the tensions, the power relations in these relationships as well as in feminist politics."

There are lessons for both spheres: "The link I'm making is accepting and working with the differences which is what the women's movement has found difficult. How do we reconcile differences, whether they are based on race or different political priorities?"

monopolised

"For many of the women I spoke to for this book, the inability to incorporate difference had become a real problem. It's as though the idea of sameness has monopolised the idea of what it is to be a sister."

Melanie's interviews reveal conflict as a surprisingly common theme – but still "for most women the story of their individual trajectory was connected in some way to that of their sister".

But if the connection is generally inescapable, that owes less to nature than nurture. Blood is certainly not thicker than water, Melanie argues. On the contrary, through the sheer variety of the sister's voices speaking in her book, she concludes that girls learn to be sisters, just

as they learn to fulfil all the other cultural roles which our society demands of them.

Sistering has to be worked at and renegotiated through all the seasons of our lives. "Both biological and non-blood ties require maintenance, thought and emotional work," Melanie concludes. "This leads to the contentious idea that they are all socially constructed."

This complexity is partly responsible for a dearth of serious research into the role sistering plays in our lives, she believes. Her research, carried out for a PhD, was partly about 'putting it on the map' – and is now being followed up with an exploration into other sibling relationships in partnership with South Bank University.

In both cases, Melanie hopes the outcomes can feed into the more visible and increasingly urgent debates about child development within our changing family structures.

She says: "In social policy decisions about the family, for example, issues like schooling, fostering and adoption, debate is really centred around parent/child relationships.

"How can siblings have been pushed aside when they are such an important part of our experience?"

Meanwhile, Melanie is involved in writing two OU courses, U130 *Get connected*, and DD305 *Personal lives and social policy*. She joins the OU having had personal experience of the effect of OU study on lives: as a radio journalist and TV researcher she taught on the OU's groundbreaking women's studies course residential school. "I was influenced by that in then getting into teaching and it shaped my own research interests for the future."

Jane Matthews

PVC's VIEW

Allan Cochrane
PVC (Students)

Struggling, juggling, making it

As I write this, I am waiting for the results of my exam. By the time you read it, I'm afraid I will probably have begun to prepare for a resit. If there is one thing that makes someone like me realise the challenges faced by Open University students, it's trying to achieve what you do year in year out – somehow managing to cope with studying in the midst of all the other things that ordinary life throws at you.

And this year, I have a horrible suspicion that the exam did not go too well. So that is probably something else I can share with at least some of you. The difference is that in the past I have helped to prepare examination papers and have – as an associate lecturer – always been ready to provide advice on revision and exam technique. And I have also always been reassuring to those who tell me they don't think the exam went too well.

hope

Next time I promise to be even more understanding and to think still harder about the questions I set. And I do still have that faint residual hope that things really did not go quite as badly as I thought they did.

Many of you will not be facing your next examination or other form of end of course assessment for some time (although I know that for others it will be rather sooner). All the various assessments that we undertake are vital parts of the study and learning process. I know that I have learned a lot from my own experience – just when I thought I was too old to learn anything much!

It's only by reaching that end point in the course that we can finally celebrate our success – even if we soon begin to start our studies again, and set ourselves another set of challenges. There's nothing like the moment when you open the results letter and discover that you have made it through another course.

exciting

Sometimes though, however exciting the subject, at the start of a course it can all feel a bit of an uphill struggle. Are we ever really going to manage to complete all those assessment tasks, work our way through all those activities, take part in all those tutorials, read and think about all that material?

The good news is that most of us find ways of managing – of juggling with all the demands that face us. Many students are very successful and rewarded with grades that reflect that success. And even if we do not all do as well as we hoped this year, we will next year. The important point is that we do the best we can, seeking advice from our tutors and regional advisers when we need it. They really can – as I know from my own experience – help you to get over the obstacles that sometimes seem insuperable.

I'm already quite excited about the next course I am going to take. Lots of new ideas to engage with and lots of skills to develop. I might even finish the Diploma. And next time, I know I'll listen to all that good advice so that I am really well prepared for the examination. Honest.

Fun activities online

E-tivities: the Key to Active Online Learning, by Gilly Salmon, Kogan Page, 2002, £19.99

With the vast majority of their students now online, how can tutors make the most of the new e-learning opportunities?

E-tivities: The key to active online learning, looks beyond the hype to what teachers really want to know: how to do it. Based on her research and vast experience – including her work within the Centre for Innovation, Knowledge and Enterprise within the Open University Business School – author Gilly Salmon's starting point is the central role activities play in using online learning successfully and fully engaging learners.

The book aims to provide inspiration for tutors everywhere by demonstrating how to develop low-cost, worthwhile e-activities to get students participating. It is full of practical, tried and tested ideas, backed up with case studies.

Says Gilly: "Students see reduced social contact in learning contexts as a real threat. They are anxious about losing the stimulus and fun of having 'buddies', and the potential loss of a special relationship with their teachers, trainers and professors.

"Hence they need support to develop their skills of working together through text-based media as well as online contact with leaders and teachers. E-tivities are one answer because they focus on fun and on working together online."

Part I is an introduction to e-tivities, starting from the basics and including what e-moderators need to do at each stage to help make e-tivities successful. Part II extends the practical guidance given.

Malini Sen



Reader demand has added up to two new books for maths and computing lecturers Alan Graham and Barrie Galpin (pictured above).

The duo first got into publishing to satisfy the legions of students for whom MU120 *Open mathematics* was the start of a love affair with their TI-80 and TI-83 calculators.

Their company A+B Books aims to provide stimulating calculator materials for all those wishing to extend their knowledge of the machine and use it to continue learning maths.

Having pressed all the right buttons with the first series of books, Alan and Barrie have

now published *Calculator Statistics and Calculator Calculus*.

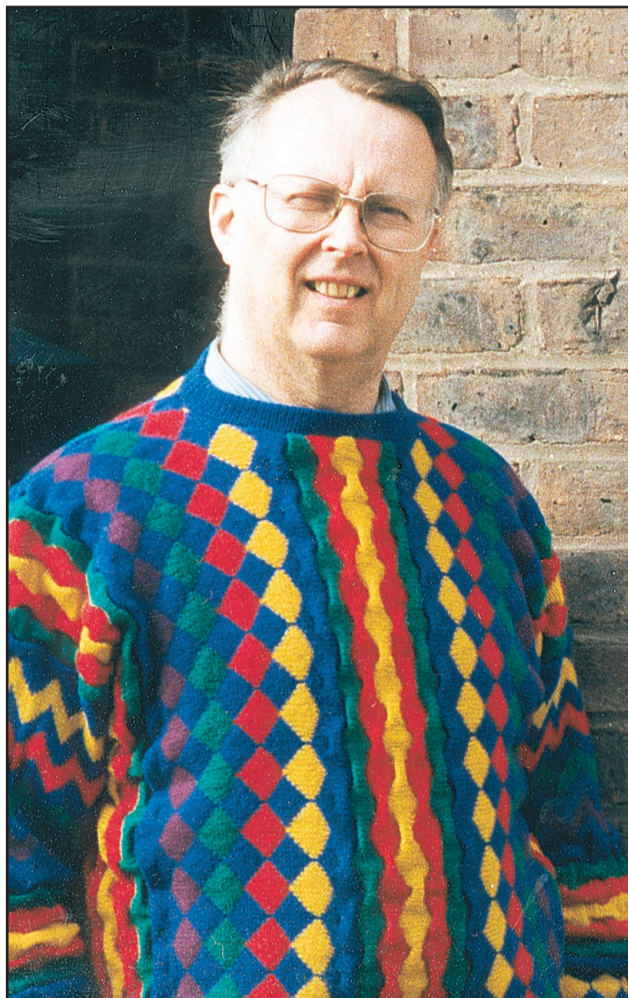
Said Barrie: "The new books are a response to students who have come back and said they wanted something that would take their maths further."

Added Alan: "There's a fantastic enthusiasm. MU120 attracts a lot of people who have never done any maths. Learning through their calculator is a new thing for them and when they switch it on it's dynamite."

Details: www.AplusB.co.uk or ring 01780 444360.

The last word

A colourful puzzle



Robin Wilson proves four colours is enough!

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

Here's a little problem. Take a map – any map at all – divided into regions and start to shade it so no region is the same colour as its neighbour. What is the maximum number of colours you'll need?

Actually, the first sentence is a lie. What sounds like a coffee-break teaser is not a little problem at all. If it was, the world's finest mathematical brains would not have taken more than a century to solve it. And the complexities of the solution are so great that some of today's great minds still aren't happy – although that may also be because their own coffee has long since gone cold.

The intriguing history of one of the most famous puzzles in mathematics is explored in OU senior lecturer Robin Wilson's new book, *Four Colours Suffice*, which achieves what is probably a unique combination of entertaining historical anecdotes and intimidating maths theory. It's a book he was prompted to write for the same reasons as thousands before him have tried to solve the puzzle – why is such an apparently simple problem so fiendishly difficult?

"I've been aware of the puzzle since my undergraduate days," he says. "Over the years I've presented papers, given lectures and worked my way through theories about it – but the simple concept of the puzzle itself means I've also been able to present it as a problem to schoolchildren."

The publication of *Four Colours Suffice* marks the 150th anniversary of University College maths student Frederick Guthrie

asking his professor, Augustus De Morgan, to explain Guthrie's discovery that he needed no more than four colours to shade in a map of counties in the British Isles. Dr Wilson's book tells a fascinating story featuring such mathematical sleuths as an astronomer, a golfer, a bishop, a honeymooning bridegroom and even an April Fool hoaxer – as well as explaining why the problem and its eventual solution 25 years ago had so many implications for designers and scientists outside cartography.

"It became clear relatively quickly that the answer was probably four," says Professor Wilson. "But only probably – because no matter how hard anybody tried, they couldn't prove it. Without that, no-one could say with absolute certainty that four colours suffice for any real or invented map."

verifiable

Even when the solution finally came, the problem had caused such consternation for so long that news of the success was not universally welcomed – partly because the pair needed a computer to prove it (an anathema to the purists who insisted the proof should be verifiable by a human) and partly, no doubt, because they were cross someone else had beaten them to it.

Professor Wilson's book *Four Colours Suffice* is published by Penguin Books priced £12.99 and its many examples of the map-colouring problems posed along the way are likely to have readers reaching for their felt-tips to have a go themselves. But be warned – if you like your coffee hot, drink it up before you start.

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.

Say what you mean

pleads Edwin Shaw



One problem for OU tutorials is the way in which most people speak in professional and academic Britain. This speech style values indirectness and understatement. Evasiveness is all. Outside of school playgrounds, late night TV and football matches things are rarely called 'good' or 'bad'. They are 'quite' good or 'quite' bad. Cause doesn't just lead to effect, it does so 'on the whole' or 'generally speaking'.

Hedging things around is useful in a supposedly tolerant, pluralist society: it erases rough edges and defuses confrontation. On a more banal level it helps correspondence tuition: written criticism of a TMA is easier to take when wrapped in qualifying phrases. The statement: 'At times you seem to wander from the point', looks less harsh in print, for instance, than: 'Do not digress'.

Yet tutorials are not like that. They need the opposite: not crafty equivocation but directness and the identification of opposing positions. The skilled management of conflict, not conciliation, makes tutorials interesting. But that rarely happens in the prevailing verbal culture. Even highly confident students are over-cautious in discussion. And the harder the tutor tries to get to the point, the more certain individuals hide behind obliqueness, killing the debate and the whole point of tutorials.

An answer would be to get students to examine their own styles of discourse, and to question, tactfully, their assumptions about face-to-face discussion, including the tacit notion that cleverness equals eagerness. This exercise might open things up and challenge the addiction to the low key and the elliptical. Who knows, it might also improve attendances, encouraging the buzz that draws people on a wet night. Generally speaking, on the whole, that is.

Edwin Shaw is a tutor on DD100 *An introduction to the social sciences* in the London region.

Topical TV for OU viewers

On the 50th anniversary of the worst flooding in British history, a new OU/BBC programme revisits the Essex coastline to discover how and why flood defences are being dismantled to prevent a recurrence of the disaster which killed 307 people and made 21,000 homeless.

Flooded Britain, to be shown on BBC4 at the end of January, wades into the controversy about how best to respond to the effects of rising sea levels and global climate change: on one side of the sea wall Mark Dixon, a special projects manager with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; on the other farmers and landowners whose livelihood depends on the flatlands from Essex to Lincolnshire.

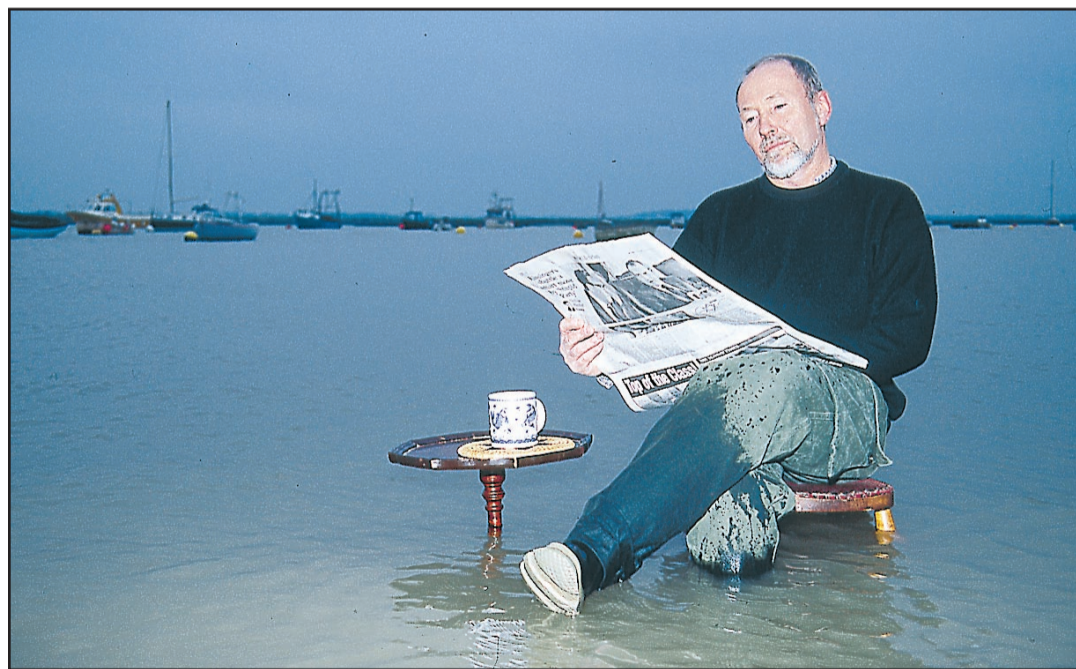
For the last 15 years Dixon has made it his mission to knock holes in sea walls, believing "the best defences are natural, not artificial". He claims: "If we take on nature we lose. It is the saltmarshes themselves that can handle dangerous tidal surges."

Adds the programme's academic adviser, Dr Joe Smith from the OU's department of geography: "For many years we've been building costly coastal defences to keep the sea at bay... the programme challenges the long-held view of protection."

Flooded Britain is only one of a series of OU/BBC productions due for screening during the first three months of the year. Fans of the partnership's talent in translating topical educational issues into gripping TV should also look out for:

Tales from the NHS, a fast-paced record of one day in the life of the nation's health service from Shetland to Southampton. Among the stories the BBC1 programme will document are those of a young Nottingham man donating a kidney to his sister, a teenage cancer patient in Belfast waiting for news of her chemotherapy, a busy shift for the Essex air ambulance, a neurosurgeon in Newcastle attempting a new type of operation on Parkinson sufferers, and a medical director juggling resources and funds.

Also on BBC1 is another 60 minute programme



Wading into the flood debate: Mark Dixon

timed to coincide with the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition 'Art Deco 1910-1939'. *Deco Desires* is the story of how the Art Deco movement went global, adding an exotic, vibrant life to precious and popular art, and dominating skylines from Hollywood to Shanghai.

Over on BBC2 there are two major series on offer. *Mysteries in the Landscape*, to be broadcast over eight weeks, will set out to solve some of the intriguing mysteries of the British landscape: why is there a network of tunnels under Gloucestershire with evidence of human occupation? What happened to the major river which flowed in the Bronze Age through Derbyshire? And what was the disaster which overcame the west coast of Scotland 7,000 years ago.

Hollywood Science sees the return of the

popular series testing whether some of the big screen's most memorable special effects are based on real science and technology – or sheer make believe. Among the stunts under the spotlight: how did Clint Eastwood break out of Alcatraz using a spoon, matches and silver dimes; and was Kevin Costner just jesting when he catapulted over the castle wall in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*?

Finally, to be shown on BBC4, *Eurofighter* is a record of the twists and turns accompanying the development of Europe's most expensive defence project, including footage of the Spanish prototype's crash near Madrid.

As usual, please consult press for latest details of programme titles and broadcast times, or visit the OU/BBC website: www.open2.net