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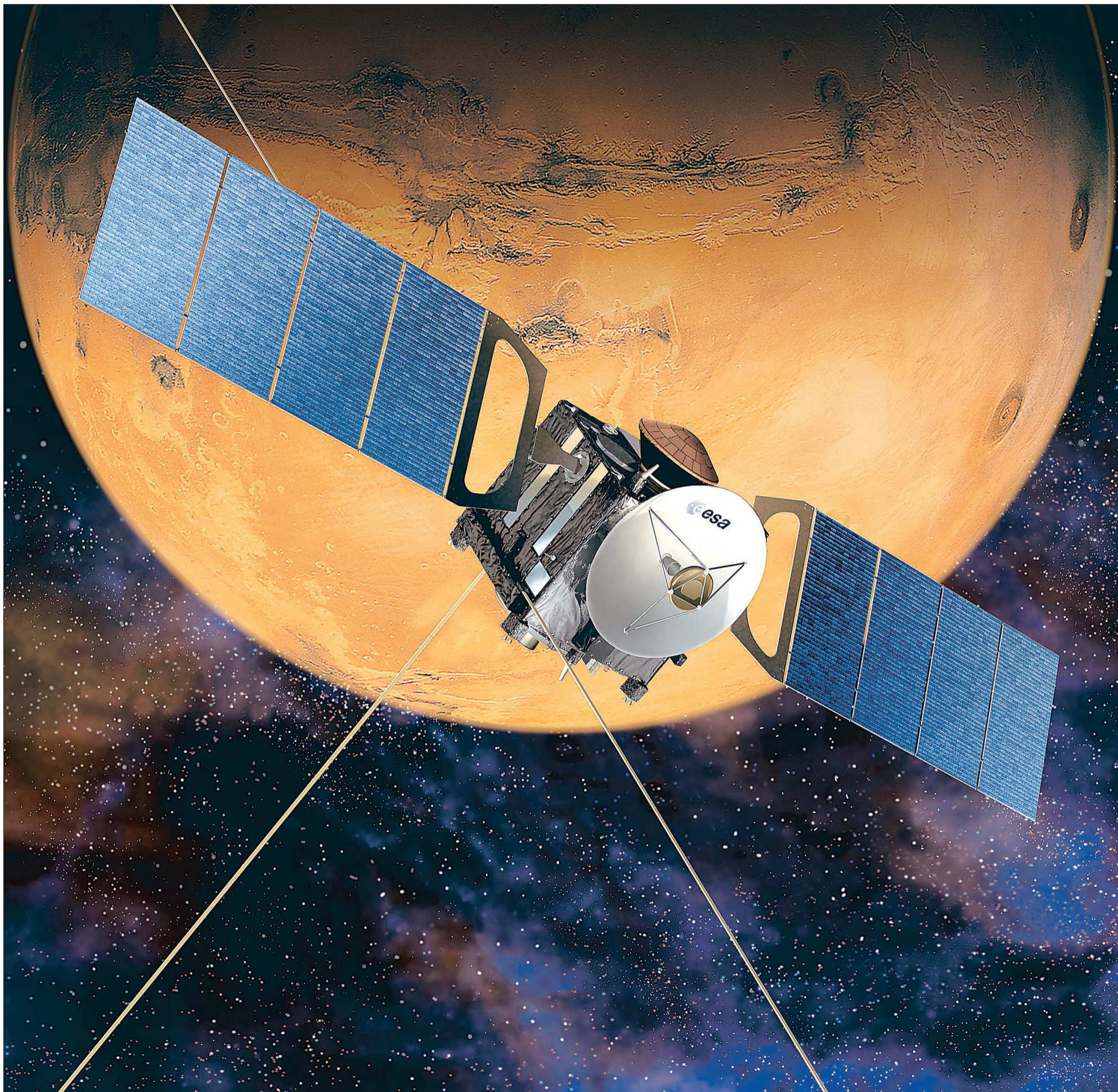


Sesame

November/December 2003

Reaching the Open University community worldwide

Issue Number 218



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Picture: Mars Express artist's view, ESA-D.DUCROS

Letters letters letters letters letters letters

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ETMA views

Sesame 217 celebrated the 10th anniversary of ETMAs – but not everyone joined in the toast...

WELL, Yippee, the ETMA system saves the OU money and saves the students posting letters. What about the poor benighted tutors?

Unless one possesses a laptop, marking is no longer a comfortable, possibly outdoor activity. Marking takes much longer: compare the time taken scrolling up and down pages to that required to skip around a printed page. The interface is not intuitive so that it has to be relearnt each time. Even with broadband, collecting and returning assignments can be slow, and only one assignment can be returned at a time, each one requiring multiple operations.

Susan Bramer
Loughborough

.....
YES faculties have certainly saved 17p per TMA but at whose cost?

Needless to say the burden has fallen once again on associate lecturers and students.

My estimate of the minimum costs, which few achieve, for labour, computer usage and communication cost is 25p per minute. The time to up- and download five minutes. Therefore the student cost is £1.25 as against postage of 88p.

The associate lecturer cost for the bulk work is around £5 against the previous method where there were no costs.

Alan Radford
London

.....
ON one TMA day last month, I answered the doorbell three times within ten minutes, dressed tastefully in a large yellow bath towel, direct from the shower. Number one was the regular postman with a

pile of TMAs, number two was a student hand delivering, and number three was to give a signature for a registered post TMA. Later the same day, I collected an insufficiently stamped TMA, paying 6p underpaid postage and 80p statutory fine. Add to this the occasional hand delivery at 11.55pm, (which in our house means that the dog barks and wakes everyone up), and the picture of TMA day chez Jarvis is complete.

Over the past few years many students have asked me if they can email TMAs to me, but unless they are temporarily working abroad I always, very regretfully, have to decline. Once I get an emailed TMA, I have to print it off and mark it on paper, and the OU will not refund tutors for printer cartridge and paper consumption. But why does anyone have to print anything at all? It forces either tutors or students to fund an unnecessary waste of trees.

What do others think?

Pam Jarvis
Colton, Leeds

No comment

HAVING almost completed two years of OU courses I'm surprised how little opportunity I have had to offer feedback.

When I was teaching in higher education, all our assignment forms had a space for student comment, and, at the end of the year, a number of methods were used to obtain feedback from all students. Is the OU not obliged to receive feedback from ALL its students?

Philip Simpson
London

Alison Ashby, head of the Student Statistics Team, replies

The largest courses survey is sent out annually after the October examination period to 40,000 students on 160 courses in 2003.

This invites feedback on the quality of the teaching and learning experience and services provided by the university, whilst studying a specified course. At present it is university policy to survey a sample of students across a range of courses. One of the reasons for the sample basis is because the survey is not completely generic. Course teams have the opportunity to ask specific questions about their courses. In addition, the university invites feedback from all students who formally withdraw from a course and undertakes periodic awards surveys.

Age bias

Fight ageism argued Sesame's last Fifth Column.

SUZANNE Lockyer's Fifth Column article (*Sesame 217*) addressed an issue that is high on the agenda of the OU Careers Advisory Service.

Many OU students are studying to progress their careers and we know that age discrimination is rife in the labour market. OUCAS is actively working with organisations such as the Association of Graduate Recruiters to promote the wealth of experience and huge potential that OU students have to offer in the workplace.

Legislation is due in 2006 dedicated to addressing age discrimination in the workplace. I am keen to collect some examples of how OU students have experienced age discrimination in finding work. Conversely, positive examples of your job market experiences would be equally useful to promote to employers.

Please email me on e.cocking@open.ac.uk

Ellen Cocking
OUCAS

.....
I AM pleased to confirm that the Open University does support equality on grounds of age. As the article referred to was about race equality, it was not felt necessary to refer to age on this occasion.

The university's EO policy states: The Open University aims

to create the conditions whereby students and staff are treated solely on the basis of their merits, abilities and potential, regardless of gender, colour, ethnic or national origin, age, socio-economic background, disability, religious or political beliefs, family circumstance, sexual orientation or other irrelevant distinction.

Margaret Stewart
Equal Opportunities Administrator

Pointless

I AM half way through my first course with the OU, the Openings course Y001, and I will be going on to do A103 working towards a degree in history. Unfortunately I cannot count the 10 points available for completing assignment four of the course towards this degree, indeed I am told that you cannot count any Openings course towards a History degree.

I have enjoyed the course and believe it is the perfect launch-pad for further study but feel it is unfair that some who study it are able to count their points towards a degree whilst I cannot.

Chantal Chatfield
Hastings

Chris Baker, from the Centre for Widening Participation, replies

The issue with named degrees is that they have specific discipline-related learning outcomes, usually in line with national benchmarking guidance. This means that what may be right for one degree may not be right for another.

Named Degree Boards make decisions on what courses are appropriate for inclusion into the degree, taking into account its learning outcomes. Currently none of the Openings courses, which are interdisciplinary, have enough relevance to History to fit with the national benchmarking requirements for a History degree. They do count for the general degrees and any named degree which has an element of free choice. I am pleased you feel Openings is providing "the perfect launch pad for OU study", which is what we intended.

See the latest news on the web at: www.open.ac.uk/sesame
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Just a thought

I AM really pleased to see that the OU has been ranked fifth in the national table regarding teaching quality.

It dismays me that students feel that an OU degree is inferior to those obtained at more conventional universities. This debate should now be put to rest.

Graham Neilson
Herefordshire

WITH reference to Sesame 217 'Celebrations', I celebrated by turning my graduation day into my wedding day.

We married at Torbay Registry Office in the morning and took wedding guests to the graduation ceremony in Torquay that same afternoon.

Julie Wright
Somerset

I HAVE just read your article on Ray Jeffrey (Sesame 217) and am inspired to respond at once.

Ray's determination and hard work in the face of the debilitating prognosis that he may only live five years moved me deeply. To read of his success and the continuation of his plans fills me with hope. Well done Ray. I admire you. Long may you study and succeed.

Kate Pain
Linton, Cambs

IN 'Letters' (Sesame 217), a writer from Birmingham asks for the introduction of "a range of courses that have a more global context", but all the editor mentions is "see special report on diversity".

There is no mention of the courses that the OU already offers, such as its undergraduate development courses (U213, etc.) or its postgraduate courses in development management.

Those interested can visit the Faculty of Technology's 'Development Policy and Practice' page at <http://dpp.open.ac.uk/>

Michelle Eriksson
Italy

HAVING just started my OU degree course, I was surprised and delighted to find Sesame such an entertaining publication.

I was doubly pleased to see the article about Ms Heppell, commencing medicine following her OU qualification, as I too plan to study medicine on graduation from OU. To have such relevant and inspiring content this early in my course has given me a 'warm fuzzy' feeling about my decision to study.

James Radvan
Kingston upon Thames

Star letter

A write pain



SIXTY five years ago, at the age of eight, I won a prize for 'most improved handwriting'. Since then it has been downhill all the way.

Freed from the need to do more than sign my name for the last 33 years I now face the hurdle of the Open University's handwritten three-hour exams. The first year I was lucky: French demanded a limited script plus a tape. Next year, as I looked at my scrawl I was appalled and wrote a short note apologising to 'The Examiner'.

Two months later I received a ferocious missive from the OU chief examiner saying that

she had been informed that I had included 'material other than answers to questions'.

Last year I received another letter: my script had been declared officially 'illegible'. I could either have it scrapped or pay £75 to dictate it, under supervision, onto a tape from which it could be typed and marked.

In the twenty first century, with the OU going overboard elsewhere for use of modern technology, must we still have to demonstrate our learning by the same methods as medieval scribes?

Dennis Witcombe
Beeston Notts

New steps to awards

A fairer and speedier system for students to accept awards and book ceremonies has arrived with the introduction of a new online service.

Students expecting to graduate with an OU degree at the end of 2003 and beyond will have the resources at their fingertips to accept their awards, book a place at a ceremony, book places for guests, hire their academic dress and take part in the university's graduate publicity – all on the web in a few steps.

Jo Durward, Student Services Manager (Ceremonies) said: "From December 2003 the main way to accept an award and

to book your place at a graduation ceremony will be on the internet. If you don't have access to the internet you can do it over the phone or by post – but we hope as many graduates as possible will log onto their record and use the web."

Until now the university has had to identify prospective graduates and post ceremony information and provisional invitations until examination results are published.

Explained Jo: "This is a more modern way of communicating with our students. Before the online service there was a lot of paper going back and forth, it was really slow.

The system will also be fairer to our mainland Europe students

"What took a number of months can now be done in minutes – from accepting your award to booking your ceremony and browsing through information about hotel accommodation or graduation photographs." Booking online is faster, gives the graduate more control and there's no waiting weeks to find out if the ceremony of your choice is booked – the whole process is instantaneous. The system will also be fairer to our mainland Europe students, said Jo. "They often have to wait longer to receive their post and have occasionally missed out on booking their place at the most popular venues."

From December 8 the Awards and Graduation site will be live for graduates who have deferred their ceremony from a previous year. 2003 graduates should be able to book from Monday 22 December. www.open.ac.uk/ceremonies

● The university's graduate publicity exercise, in which all the UK's press and broadcast media receive information about the amazing success of OU graduates, has been linked to the new site. So at the same time as organising their ceremony students can give brief details about the effects of study on their lives and careers.

Expecting to graduate at the end of this year?

If you are expecting to graduate at the end of this year with a qualification that entitles you to attend a degree ceremony, and have not heard from us by the middle of November, your student record may need urgent attention, writes **Tony Barker**, who is Head of the Awards and Ceremonies Centre.

The only way we can work out whether you have qualified for any OU award – whether that's a degree, diploma or certificate – is by checking your student record and matching the OU course credit and any transferred credit you have asked to be linked to it against the rules for the award. So it's really important to ensure all your credit is linked to the award you want.

If you don't it may mean we don't send you any information about the offer and acceptance procedures for your award and – for those awards that have a degree ceremony attendance entitlement – about how to book your place at a degree ceremony. As places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis any delay can mean you may not be able to attend the ceremony you want.

With nearly 200 taught awards to choose between, it is not possible for us to second guess which award you want your courses to count towards. You need to tell us for each course you take. The easiest time to do this is when you reserve your place or register on the course. The expansion of the undergraduate programme to include honours degrees in named subjects has meant many students' records are in need of attention. Perhaps you linked credit you completed some years ago to the BA/BSc award (code BD), which was the only bachelor's degree awarded at the time, and more recent credit to one of the new named degrees – each of which has its own award code.

While you may have sufficient credit for an award, we do not know this because it is spread across two award codes.

If you have any doubts about this, you can check your record with Student Services either at your Regional Centre or at Walton Hall. If you have internet access, you can also check your own student record at www.open.ac.uk/your-record. If you find it is not in order, there is an email facility within the site for you to ask for changes.



Future graduates can book a ceremony instantly

OU students targeted by trainee teacher scheme

OU students could be the solution to England's teacher shortage following a new initiative to give them an opportunity to try out life in secondary school classrooms.

The Faculty of Education and Language Studies will receive £2 million from the Teacher Training Agency to attract undergraduates and postgraduates studying mathematics, science, design and technology, modern foreign languages, music and geography to try out 'taster' teaching activities in a school placement in England.

The new Student Associates Scheme will be offered in two parts. Part 1 is a 10-day placement for those who have no experience working in schools and want to find out more. Part 2 consists of a 20-day placement preceded by a study schedule. Participants in Part 2 will be able to gather evidence of progress in relation to selected Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). If they successfully apply to a PGCE programme, such as the OU's, they can present this evidence for assessment. This

assessment could result in some reduction of study time.

Students will receive £40 a day while in placement and the scheme will begin in January.

"We see this as a great opportunity for OU students," said Education and Languages Dean Will Swann. "It will encourage students to explore the teaching profession with their particular skills and knowledge."

An OU survey found that one in seven undergraduates questioned were interested in becoming teachers and would want to take part in such training. The university will offer 100 places in 2003/4, 500 the following year and 600 in 2005/6.

Clare Riding, Head of the OU's Careers Advisory Service said: "Regional Career Advisers have told us that students see a value in this new scheme, enabling them to explore whether a teaching career is right for them, while giving them experience, and financial support."

Any student interested should call 01908 858685.

It will encourage students to explore the teaching profession

Law alumni meet TV legals

TV ACTORS Jenny Seagrove and Caroline Langrishe from the BBC1 series *Judge John Deed* joined top lawyers and OU law graduates at an anniversary dinner.

Cherie Booth, patron of the OU's Law Alumni Group, was guest speaker at the event, held to celebrate the first anniversary of the graduation of the OU's first law graduates.

Speaking on the theme of 'Legal Fact and Fiction' she said the popularity of legal series such as *Rumpole of the Bailey* and *Judge John Deed* had healthily enlivened debate about the law.

Said Ms Booth: "A public animated by legal drama on television, and a population enriched by good law graduates, will want constantly to monitor its law and legal processes, and to democratically change them when, and if, necessary."

In the popular BBC1 series Jenny Seagrove plays Jo Mills QC and Caroline Langrishe plays George Channing QC, lover and former wife of the swash-buckling judge. Their creator, Gordon Newman, was another distinguished guest at the dinner, which was sponsored by global law firm Clifford Chance.

Cherie Booth hears about the OU's law programme from student Orchid White



Students wanted to trial 'local' book borrowing scheme

HAVE you ever wanted to be able to borrow books from academic libraries in your area? From Plymouth to Paisley, Newport to Norwich, over 100 academic libraries up and down the UK are participating in the UK Libraries Plus access scheme which allows just that.

As a result of a recent survey conducted by the Open University Library - in which many students said they would find it useful to be able to borrow books from their local academic library - volunteers are now being invited to take

part in a trial of UK Libraries Plus.

The library needs 400 students to trial this scheme, from December 1, 2003 to the end of July 2004. Numbers are limited, so tickets will be given out on a first come first serve basis. If you would like to take part please contact 'Learner Support Team, UK Libraries Plus, The Open University Library, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA'.

Please include the names of the academic library or libraries (up to three) you would like to join.

Fast-track MBA

AN MBA in two and a half years instead of three is the Business School's response to growing demand for an accelerated route to the leading management qualification. The new route comes into effect for students enrolling for the MBA from this month and will enable them to take a new third compulsory course at the same time as two six-month elective courses - shaving six months from the programme. Said Programme Director Dr Mark Fenton-O'Creery: "We are confident the changes we have made to the format, and the introduction of a third compulsory course, will introduce a more integrated approach to the study of management."

OU's getting younger

THE numbers of young people opting for the OU continue to rise with more than one in ten students now aged under 25. Figures to be released next month show almost 16,000 people in this age group are studying with the OU - a ten per cent rise on the previous year and almost three times the number who were enrolled just five years ago.

The Beckham factor

DAVID Beckham may be the reason for a huge increase in the number of people wanting to learn Spanish, according to Cecilia Garrido, sub dean of the OU's Faculty of Education and Language Studies (FELS). "In the few weeks after his move to Real Madrid, the number of students wanting to learn Spanish rose rapidly. We now anticipate 1700 new students will start our beginners' Spanish course," she said.

And her message reached Spain itself, where FELS colleague Cristina Ros was interviewed on TVE1's lunchtime news bulletin. "This may well be the first time an OU person has appeared in the Spanish League football results," said a FELS spokesperson.

Hypnotic appearance

PSYCHOLOGY students attending summer school at Sussex University saw the science put into practice at a session led by TV mind-reader Derren Brown.

"It was really good fun," said OU student services manager Sue Graves. "At one point he hypnotised the audience to think the course timetable was hilariously funny. When somebody started reading it they all fell about laughing. But he was very careful not to humiliate anyone and at the end students were able to ask him questions about the psychology of what he did. They found out why some people were more open to hypnotism than others, and how he could judge the personalities of the people he chose so he would know they wouldn't react violently."

Development Director

PROFESSOR Ian Steadman joined the OU on November 1 as Director of Development. Formerly a Professor in the School of Dramatic Art at the University of Witwatersrand, Professor Steadman has for the last five years been on secondment to Witwatersrand's Foundation, where he trebled donor income to around £15 million.

Human Mind a hit

The first programme in the BBC series *Human Mind*, made with OU academic consultants, prompted a flood of enquiries to the OU information line given out during the programme. Over 1400 calls were dealt with within 15 minutes of the programme ending, with the web address Open2.NET generating a similar number of hits. All enquirers are sent a copy of *Ozone*, the OU broadcasting magazine, plus a leaflet about the series and a flyer about OU courses.

Language conference

Independent language learning may be taking the place of classroom language learning but conferences have tended to separate out the strands. A major meeting organised by the OU's Department of Languages aims to put that right by bringing together debate about the use of learning technology with all the other key issues in learning a language: motivation, attitudes, learner strategies, language interaction and task design.

Further details about the conference, which takes place on December 4-5 with plenary speakers from the US, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, at <http://dol-conf.open.ac.uk>



Robert Saunders with the fruit flies whose genes are similar to humans'

Secrets of ripe old age

RESEARCH on the fruit fly being carried out by Open University biologists could help unlock the secrets of ageing in humans, writes **Malini Sen**.

Dr Robert Saunders, reader in Molecular Genetics, and his team, are researching the relation between oxidative stress, a natural biological process in humans and fruit flies, and the ageing process.

"Oxidative stress is a chemical event, in which the normal biochemical activity of the cells of the body generates highly reactive chemicals which go on to damage important cellular components, such as proteins and DNA," said Dr Saunders.

"All animals and plants have evolved mechanisms to eliminate as many of these reactive chemicals as possible, but damage still occurs and is thought to be one of the causes of ageing."

The team is trying to find out how the level of glutathione, a chemical used by animals and plants to eliminate reactive chemicals, correlates with lifespan and resistance to oxidative stress.

The fruit fly, *Drosophila melanogaster*, is one of the most valuable laboratory subjects for studies of genetics – genes similar to those in fruit flies have been found in humans and in recent years biological research on the tiny fly has become increasingly important for human health.

"Our research will add to the understanding of the subject and hopefully inform medical strategies on ageing in the future," said Dr Saunders, whose previous research involved studying malarial mosquitoes. He said: "Mosquitoes are difficult to keep. I used to feed them on my blood by placing my forearm on the cage, but it can be very boring to sit still in the dark!"

For more information on research into Molecular Genetics at the OU see: www.open.ac.uk/science/biosci/research/molecular-genetics/

Research round-up

- CARERS from minority ethnic families who are involved in dementia care can feel excluded and isolated, according to research led by Dr Liz Forbat while at the School of Health and Social Welfare.

Said Dr Forbat: "Research in this area has tended to focus on people from white-British backgrounds or not to address questions of ethnicity. Having staff with appropriate language skills is only part of the battle; much more needs to be done to ensure that staff's own stereotypes and assumptions do not prevent them from offering assistance to members of minoritised communities."

- THE world's largest experiment in climate prediction is looking for two million people and their computers to help forecast the weather for the next 50 years. The project, launched by the OU and partners in London in September, uses the combined power of special screensavers installed onto PCs to generate data for the world's most comprehensive probability-based forecast of 21st century climate. To take part see www.climateprediction.net

- TWO new research projects put the growth of consumer power firmly in the spotlight.

The impact website information has had on relationships between consumers and professionals in the medical, legal and financial sectors is the theme of research being led by Professor Angus Laing of the Business School. It will consider how the public uses that information and professionals respond to their clients who use it.

Meanwhile *Creating citizen-consumers: changing relationships and identifications* will examine how the health and social care and policing sectors are reacting and adapting to the pressure to become more consumer-oriented. Prof John Clarke, Prof Janet Newman and Dr Louise Westmarland of the faculty of social sciences are leading the research. Both OU projects are funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

- A MAJOR new OU centre to research the implications of genomics and life sciences is spreading the word about its work. Innogen was launched in Edinburgh this summer and aims to provide a sound base for decision-making in science, industry, policy and public arenas." More details at www.innogen.ac.uk or email innogen@open.ac.uk

A drop in the ocean

Professor Chris Wilson from the university's Earth Sciences department describes his six weeks on a ship drilling more than a mile under the ocean floor in the North Atlantic to uncover vital clues to our planet's history.

Unlike most people over the summer months, I spent six weeks at the same place – despite being at sea. This was as part of the last ever Ocean Drilling Program taking core samples from deep beneath the ocean floor.

Ocean drilling has contributed tremendously to our understanding of how the Earth works and key events in its history. Without it we would not have evidence of the 50 episodes of glaciation that have occurred over the past 2.5 million years.

Before deep ocean drilling began, land records suggested that there were only four glacial episodes. This was not because geologists working on land had missed key evidence but because they were unable to obtain information from sediments in the deep ocean that provide a kind of complete tape recording of past environmental change.

I boarded the ODP ship (the Resolution – named after Captain Cook's ship) on July 7. The transit to our position about 600 km east of St Johns, Newfoundland, took 5 days.

The Resolution is about 160 m long and its drilling derrick towers 60 m above the sea. It carries a crew of 110 people: about 25 scientists, 30 technical staff, plus three other teams who maintain the ship, run the drilling operation, and look after the 'hotel'. We work 12 hour shifts, as at \$60 000 a day to run, we must make the most of the expensive time we are on board.

We have scientists on board from Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Taiwan, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA, reflecting the truly international nature of the Ocean Drilling Program which has been running for almost 20 years.

The food on board was good – lots of choice. But the fresh salad stuff is now long gone. We have only chopped carrots, onions and cabbage, plus cooked beetroot, a range of cold beans, and bean shoots – hardly a diet for living in confined spaces. Ten days ago fresh tuna, caught daily, was on the menu. It was really delicious but eventually we got tuna-ed out, and told the crew to stop fishing.

We spent about six weeks at our first site in a water depth of 4500 m. The ship is kept in place above the borehole beneath by a dynamic positioning system.

To drill in such deep water requires a lot of drill pipe. Six kilometers of drill string were hanging under the ship when we had drilled down 1,800 m below the sea floor. The entire drill string, which hangs through a big hole in the middle of the ship called the 'moonpool', is rotated so that the drill bit on the end of it cuts into sediments and rock. Water is pumped down to keep the bit free of debris and move it up to the top of the hole and on to the sea floor.

The main purpose of this cruise is to find out what happened when Iberia broke away from the Grand Banks off Newfoundland about 120 million years ago. At this time new ocean crust began to form by a process known as sea-floor spreading. It resulted in the two continental areas moving slowly away from each other at about the speed our fingernails grow.

In 1993 and 1997 I participated in two ODP cruises that drilled 10 holes along an east west transect opposite Oporto in Portugal. The two sites drilled on this cruise are exactly in line with Iberian transect – in fact the most westerly Iberian site was, before the North Atlantic opened, only about 70 km to the east of where we drilled on this cruise!

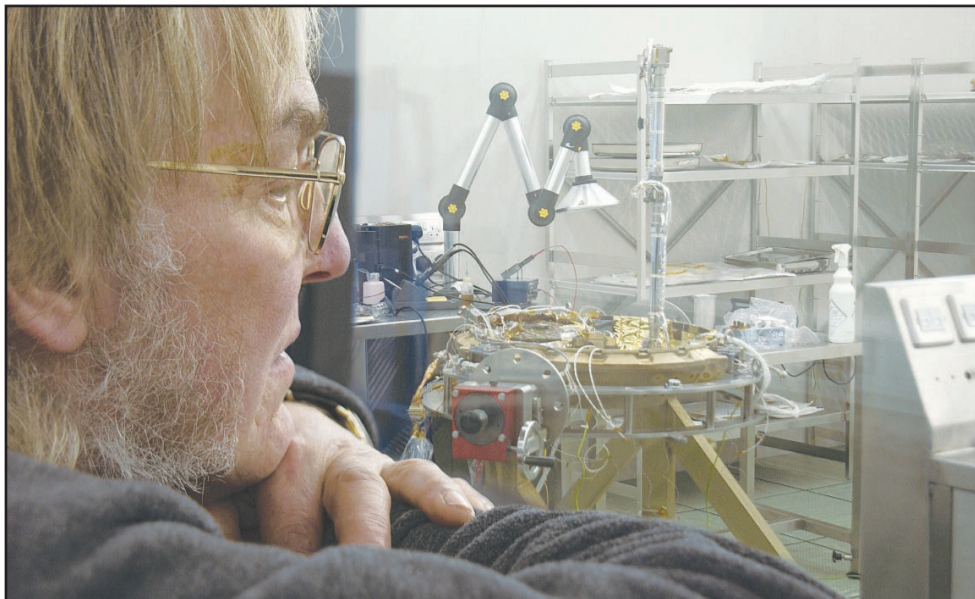
The scientists will now work on the huge amount of data and samples we have collected and we plan to meet again in the French Alps in two years time to review our findings.

Photos taken on board can be viewed at: www-odp.tamu.edu/public/life/210/



Chris Wilson and the Resolution's drilling derrick

FRONT PAGE STORY



Mars course leaves launch pad

A chance to join the OU's exploration of Mars is being offered with the launch of a new course inspired by the Beagle 2 mission.

Exploring Mars: Beagle 2 and the search for life (S198) appears not only as the OU-led team begins its countdown to Beagle 2's Christmas Day landing, but while a number of other space missions are closing in on the red planet.

The race to get it out on time to enable its students to understand the news headlines means it is bang up to date. "I have never produced a course so quickly and as a result it is state of the art," said course chair Iain Gilmour. "*Exploring Mars* contains much of what we know about the red planet right up to November 2003."

He added: "Next year there will be active exploration of Mars by a number of missions. The red planet is going to be in the headlines a lot and this is an ideal way of understanding the science behind those missions."

At the core of the materials is a specially produced course-book *Understanding Mars*, packed with images. Also included is a stunning topographic map of Mars, and a copy of lead-scientist Colin Pillinger's own unique

account of the Beagle 2 mission *Beagle: From sailing ship to Mars spacecraft* (see below).

The course looks at the questions Beagle 2 and other missions hope to address: is there life on Mars and did life exist there in the past? It aims to help students understand why it is the most likely planet in our Solar System where life may have existed, and shows how those missions will search for evidence. S198 also aims to develop students understanding of the geology of Mars and its atmosphere and environments.

Worth 10 points, the course is also a 'brilliant introduction' to the OU's other planetary courses, says Iain. "But it is suitable for anyone with an interest in our exploration of Mars. All students need to provide is their mind!"

Exploring Mars will run in November 2003 and February and May 2004 – but its creators are aware there are pitfalls to producing something quite so current. "We know we may have to rewrite parts of it because of what we learn from Beagle 2!" added Iain.

Registrations for the November presentation were still being accepted as *Sesame* went to press. Information on this and other short courses: 01908 659521, www.open.ac.uk/science/short

...Now read the book

THE Beagle story by the man leading the Mars mission has been published in time for the craft's Christmas landing.

Beagle – from sailing ship to Mars spacecraft is lead scientist Professor Colin Pillinger's fascinating record of the Mars lander craft's journey, from the eighteenth century when people began speculating about extraterrestrial life and the Navy began to name ships Beagle, through to Beagle 2's spectacular take-off as part of the Mars Express mission in June.

It successfully weaves together Professor Pillinger's own journey with the story of the first Beagle mission – Charles Darwin's journey round the world that led to him writing *On the Origin of Species*.

In his preface Prof Pillinger, head of the OU's Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute, describes his growing awareness of the parallels between the two missions. Where the histories diverge is in the multinational nature of Beagle 2. The author notes he has counted contributions from 13 countries, but also adds "everyone will recognise it as a quintessentially British project".

The same might be said of his book: its style is as passionate and individual as its author, as well as being thoroughly accessible and punctuated with wonderful illustrations. Whatever the mission's outcome, it has its own historical value as a unique record delivered straight from 'the horse's mouth'.

You can obtain signed copies of Professor Pillinger's limited edition, price £20 including postage. Order from OUSA using the code 'SSM-094623' by one of the following methods:

- Online www2.open.ac.uk/ousa, select OUSA marketing, mail order, place and order online;
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Jane Matthews

Showcase for Irish writing

One of the contenders for the title 'European Capital of Culture' in 2008 was Belfast. Alas, the bid did not get through the first round, but from the process has emerged *Irish Pages*, a splendid new journal of contemporary writing. The editor, American-born poet Chris Agee, is an OU Associate Lecturer, teaching courses in Arts and Social Sciences.

Although based in Belfast, *Irish Pages* has wide-ranging editorial ambitions. Chris Agee wants to move beyond the often inward-looking cultural life in the North of Ireland, what he calls the 'deeply self-referential, monocultural, and homogeneous flavour of its society even in the mirror-like expressions of its sacrosanct differences'. His aim in *Irish Pages* is to reflect instead the ways in which regional, national and international levels of human relations mesh and interact.

For the inaugural issue he brought together a superb list of over 30 contributors, not only from Ireland, but from Poland, Croatia, Japan,

USA, Scotland and England. Articles included autobiographical sketches, meditations on historical and political themes, poems, translations and photographs. Among the pieces that caught my eye was Seamus Heaney's wonderful short poem marking the passing of the famous Irish coinage depicting common animals, birds and fish, now that Ireland has joined the euro: 'Oh henny penny! O horsed half-crown! / O florin salmon! O sixpence hound'. Elsewhere Eileen Battersby celebrates the work of the magnificent German writer, the late W.G. Sebald, Daniel Tobin contributes a brilliant essay on modern American poetry, and George Watson writes with honesty and perception about growing up in Portadown.

Irish Pages is handsomely produced, and amazing value for money: 240 pages for £8. It will appear twice a year. To subscribe, send £16stg to: *Irish Pages*, The Linen Hall Library, 17 Donegall Square North, Belfast BT1 5GB

Bob Owens, Head of Literature

Routes in research

"If you steal from one author," wrote the American dramatist Wilson Mizner, "it's plagiarism. If you steal from many, it's research."

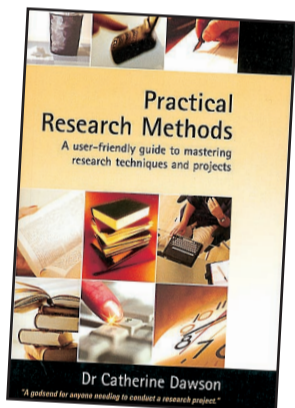
So I hope Dr Catherine Dawson will forgive me for unashamedly stealing the first line of her book. But there's no better way to describe this volume than, as her preface calls it, "a practical, down-to-earth guide for people who wish to conduct research".

Practical Research Methods will prove an invaluable tool to anyone whose OU course requires them to conduct social research as part of their journey to a qualification. Dr Dawson takes the would-be researcher through every step with clear, well-set-out passages and examples.

The work is aimed not only

at those who are embarking on their first such study, but also people with some research experience who are interested in learning different methods. And here is where the book truly works – it is clear and simple enough for the novice to follow easily, but has enough respect for more experienced researchers never to come across as patronising.

After establishing the fundamentals – getting students to answer the "five Ws" questions to ensure sufficient *raison d'être* for their project – Dr Dawson goes on to guide students to establish whether the results they want are best achieved through quantitative or qualitative research, whether they should gain their information through focus



groups, observation, questionnaires or other methods, and how to select sources to ensure the results are fair and balanced.

Practical Research Methods by Dr Catherine Dawson is published by How To Books, priced £9.99.

James Milldale

Book shelf

● PROFESSOR of Literature Dennis Walder has made it part of his mission at the OU to introduce students to the richness of South African and other post-colonial writing. His new book *Athol Fugard in the Writers and Their Work* series will enable a much wider audience to understand why the South African playwright is widely recognised as one of the most important living dramatists – employing his art to bear witness to some of the most extreme events of our times. Walder is editor of three volumes of Fugard's plays. In this comprehensive critical study he asks how successfully Fugard's work continues the search for reconciliation and harmony in a country still haunted by its terrible past.

Athol Fugard is published by Northcote House, 2003 (ISBN: 0746309481).

● AS Director of the OU's Centre for Educational Guidance and Support, Ormond Simpson has been a regular contributor of advice and study support articles in *Sesame's* pages. But while there is plenty of useful advice for students about staying the course in his new book, *Student Retention in Online, Open and Distance Learning*, its main target audience is colleagues, both within the OU and in further and higher education generally. At a time when the convenience – and isolation – of online learning puts retention higher on the agenda than ever, Simpson offers a clear and accessible analysis of what works and at what cost, strategies for increasing retention, as well as 'reclaiming' those who drop out. As ever, his approach is laudably practical; he blends the theoretical with illuminating case studies and examples. But underpinning these is another challenge: the biggest barrier to increasing retention may be the institution itself.

Student Retention in Online, Open and Distance Learning is published by Kogan Page, 2003 (ISBN: 0749439998).



PVC's VIEW

Linda Jones
(Curriculum & Awards)

Being open to change – we hope so

In whatever part of the OU you are studying you may well have heard from your student representatives on committees, from your associate lecturer or from an e-conference that the university is engaged in a period of rapid change. Since being an “open” university means being open to people, places, methods and ideas maybe that isn't surprising, but it is worth considering more closely.

The OU has grown year by year to its present size of nearly 200,000 learners, but we can't afford to be complacent. Many other universities are getting into e-learning and many FE colleges are expanding their higher education provision. New corporate and private providers are appearing. In this situation the OU needs to become more responsive and demonstrate its value-for-money, while retaining its reputation for excellence.

Three recent initiatives (out of many) exemplify our determination to rise to the challenge: the Autumn Starts project, the Course Models work and Business Appraisal. The Autumn Starts project team has been working carefully with faculties and schools, and with student support services, to enable some large population courses to be offered twice: in February and in October. This will give students more flexibility in choosing when they start to study and prevent applicants from having to wait so long for the course they want.

The Course models project has focused on harnessing all the learning course teams have done in recent years and ensuring that this is applied to create frameworks for course development. Sometimes students find a puzzling variety of approaches to study across faculties – or even in the same faculty. And we know that some courses are better at getting the workload and the pacing of study right than others. The project will enhance the student learning experience by using evidence of best practice to drive change.

Business appraisal is one of a clutch of planning tools that have been developed over recent years for faculties and schools to use in their curriculum development work. It requires academic units to gather robust evidence of the likely demand and benefits of developing a particular new course or programme. OU courses cost a great deal to develop and we need to ensure that public money, and your fees, are spent wisely.

Alongside these initiatives, the Vice-Chancellor has introduced a strategic forum – an informal workshop style sequence of meetings to engage a range of people right across the institution in developing a “strategic conversation” about how the OU should move forward. This builds on the scenario planning work, in which diverse views of the future were proposed to challenge us to consider alternative strategies. It's another example of how we are trying to be open to change and better at reading signals about the future.

Of course, none of this work could have been done without the active co-operation of OU staff and the involvement of people in all parts of the organisation, and this includes students. Inevitably, not everyone agrees with all the changes but there is a constructive dialogue and a “coalition for change” emerging, proving that OU staff have open minds as well as their students!

Special report prisonsprisons

Number of prison students set to soar

The government has announced a major expansion in the OU's work in prisons. Below and right *Sesame* goes inside to see what that will mean.

A £1 million injection of government cash will see a massive increase in the number of prisoners studying with the OU.

The funding – to be spread over the next five years – was announced by Alan Clarke, director of the Offender's Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) at the DfES during a conference held at Walton Hall in September. The meeting attracted prison heads of learning and skills, education managers and governors responsible for education, who heard that by 2006 up to 1,250 places on OU courses would be available.

In 1972, only four prisons were OU centres. This increased to 80 by 1999, but continuity was difficult as prisoners moved about.

Now, all prisons will offer Open University study giving prisoners comparable opportunities to people in the community. As they serve more of their sentence out of custody, education provision will have to be moved and supported outside.

OLSU will provide just over £100,000 in 2002/03 for another 200 undergraduate places and 200 on the OU's access programme,

Openings – a total 650 undergraduate prisoners.

From 04/05, over £350,000 will allow 850 undergraduate places and 250 Openings, while in 05/06, £500,000 will fund 1,000 prison learners on OU undergraduate courses and 250 on Openings.

Heather Laird, assistant director for Ireland and chair of the OU's prison liaison group explained: “We have been involved in prisons since the 70s with more than 6,000 prisoners studying with us since 1996, and our model suits them well. All UK prisoners who study with us are HEFCE funded,

which is also a big plus for the university.”

She added: “Openings is one way we hope to increase numbers

and the conference was a chance to tell people involved about it.”

All prisoners applying for Openings and undergraduate courses are asked to contribute where they can, either from private means, families, charities etc, before receiving OLSU funding. Those who contribute are considered more likely to complete courses successfully.

However, Mr Clarke sounded a

All prisons will offer OU study giving prisoners comparable opportunities to people in the community



Heather Laird introduces Alan Clarke to the OU's Openings courses

note of caution about the OU's migration to e-learning. He told the conference: “It threatens to become a big issue. How do we replicate, in prisons, the online learning opportunities, by which many people access courses,

course content, assessment, advice and guidance.

“So far we have found no general solution which can give prisoners internet access as a matter of course and meet legitimate security concerns.”

The go-between

John Paton, OU co-ordinator for HMP Albany, Isle of Wight, describes his role:

“I'm walking down the long corridor. An inmate hurries up to me. “I'm sorry to bother you John,” he says, handing me an envelope, “but could you ring my tutor. My TMAs due in tomorrow and I don't want him to think I haven't done my best to get it to him on time.”

A few steps further on another inmate waylays me. “Could I have a word sometime about next year's course?” By the time I get down to Education I've collected several OU jobs to be done.

They say that the OU becomes a way of life. As an OU tutor with students both ‘on the out’ and in all three island prisons, a good deal of my time is spent juggling teaching with administration and problem solving and the seemingly endless round of marking TMAs.

Albany opened in 1967 and pioneered the OU in prisons in 1971, along with HMP Wakefield. The experiment proved a success and Wormwood Scrubs and Gartree joined the scheme the following year. Now there are 12-16 students. There are also always several members of staff studying with the OU.

My prime task as OU co-ordinator is to

act as liaison and go-between for students in their dealings with the OU. They cannot make contact by phone with tutors or support staff and, being inside, problems or queries that would normally be sorted out easily by a quick call, fax or email can assume worrying proportions.

Anybody unfamiliar with prisons might think an inmate would have all the time in the world and that working for an OU qualification would be far easier. In fact prison regimes are highly regulated and the days – and nights – run to a rigid schedule. Then there are all the tensions associated with prison life which affect individuals in different ways at different points in their sentences.

Experience at Albany has taught us that students benefit from being properly prepared before embarking on an OU course. A number of our OU students have actually progressed over several years through the courses we offer in the education department and it is most gratifying to see the way these men have grown in confidence and academic ability to the point where they can study at university level.

Ron's big moment

PRISON can provide some moving moments. Ron was an ex-lorry driver and built like an Eddie Stobart trailer unit. At some time during his 15-year sentence he'd discovered a talent for applied maths – and after studying some of the OU's more obscure courses, graduated as an expert on vector algebra, Lagrangian transformations and other exotica.

To mark his achievement, we had a little graduation ceremony in the prison chapel – watched by his parents, who had been allowed to see his big moment.

I presented the degree and then Ron, dressed in his hard-earned academic robes, spoke. He didn't say much – but the tears flowed as he told everyone there – the governor, officers, education staff and some fellow inmates – that this was the very first time in his life he'd been a credit to his mum and dad. There were more than a few damp eyes in the house.

Ron was released a year later. He had an inoperable cancer and died shortly afterwards. But I still think of that one moment in the chapel and hope he had earned some forgiveness.

Ormond Simpson, director, OU centre for Educational Guidance and Student Support

Learning a lesson – OU style

By Peter Taylor-Whiffen

“Sure, education changes you,” reflects Billy. “It’s given me great confidence. But I don’t expect it to alter some folks’ opinion of me. No matter what I achieve, to most people I’ll just be a criminal.”

He turns back to his text books without obvious sign of resentment. That is, he shrugs, the realistic prospect of anyone who gets an OU degree in prison.

“You see, there will never be a time when these people say ‘he used to be a crook, but he’s not now’”, continues the 53-year-old Glaswegian. “And if I use that education to challenge someone who doesn’t believe I could ever change, I won’t be seen as better educated. I’ll be seen as subversive.”

To be fair, he’s not looking for sympathy, and there are maybe few people who would offer it. Billy is serving his time at HMP

Whitemoor, one of only six maximum security jails in the UK.

About one third of Whitemoor’s 403 population are taking advantage of its education opportunities, which include everything from learning to read, through GCSEs and A-levels, to taking a degree course.

They’re aware not everyone on the outside thinks they deserve the chance and know full well many law-abiding citizens would rather prison taught them a harsher lesson. “It’s perfectly understandable. We’re criminals,” says Tom who is halfway through his first OU social sciences course.

Though open learning doesn’t go to any environment more closed than this, in the Whitemoor study room the dozen prisoners who have progressed to degree level are just happy to share their passion for learning with each other – even though they are all doing different courses. They have developed a camaraderie over and above being fellow cons, and education is, if you’ll pardon the expression, an escape.

It’s also an opportunity. Keith, a 43-year-old Londoner, plans to use his new-found knowledge to challenge a prisons psychologist’s report on his ‘enhanced thinking skills’, a cognitive assessment technique used across the penal system to assess prisoners’ chances of reoffending.

“I’m two-thirds of the way through

a psychology degree but they reckon I haven’t developed at all,” he says, with some bitterness. “I’m up for parole next year and a bad report could mean me spending another three years in here. The irony is, by then I might be better qualified than the psychologist assessing me.”

There are, of course, practical limitations. These OU students have access to a significantly smaller number of courses than those on the outside. They are prohibited from gaining any qualification that requires attendance at summer school. Some courses – mainly science – are on the banned list because the prison cannot bring in equipment required for the experiments. And some individuals are banned from a particular course because of its content – paedophiles, for instance,

will never be allowed to access studies about children.

These restrictions mean even Whitemoor’s brightest students may never get the degree they want, as long as they remain in prison. This may elicit little sympathy but it doesn’t make it any easier for Wayne, who, with ambitions to manage a restaurant when he’s released, can’t get his named degree in business studies – even though he rarely drops below 90 per cent in his assignments. “I can’t do the third-level course I want,” he says. “So my level three studies have to be in economics, which I don’t like, and will take me twice as long. I’m prepared to do that, but it’s going to be hard – especially as the level two economics course is on the banned list, so I can’t do any preparation for it.”

The biggest single problem the prisoners face is lack of access to the internet. “We don’t expect to be allowed to go online, of course,” says Tom. “But the OU wants all its students to be online by 2005. That will probably

wipe us out completely. At the very least, it will give us almost no choice in what we can study.”

Not all the challenges faced by students in prison are as tangible. Matt, who is doing an OU computing course to help while away his sentence at HMP Swaleside in Kent, says his surroundings sometimes make it

The irony is I might be better qualified than the psychologist assessing me

The OU has plans to ensure all its students are online by 2005. That will probably wipe us out completely



Swaleside prison officer Andy Davy assisting Simon with his studies

difficult to concentrate. “You face so many emotions in here,” he says. “It’s a melting pot, and there are days when I get really depressed. Studying is a way to take my mind off it, but studying is hard and if I can’t get the hang of a subject the fact that I’m in prison, with all that that entails, doesn’t exactly help me to focus my mind.”

Whitemoor education manager Moira Bristow admits prisoners can get depressed but says their circumstances give them many advantages over other OU students. “People studying on the outside have to run homes, families and go out to work,” she says. “Here, they’re fed and watered and have only to walk down the corridor. They have five, six, seven hours a day to study.”

Whitemoor’s Open University Co-ordinator Liz Waller says that while ‘the vast majority’ of officers are positive about prisoners studying, support from OU tutors can vary. “It’s not the nicest place to come to, and it’s understandably intimidating for visitors, so it can be difficult to find tutors prepared to come in,” says Liz. But she says some tutors are so committed to prison education they make a point of visiting their students once a month.

The prisoners are realistic about their prospects when they are eventually released. “I want to be qualified and get an education,” says Simon, who is studying for a business degree at Swaleside. “But my prison

record will always make it difficult for me to get a job. That’s why I’m doing business studies – to help me to become self-employed.”

It’s giving them more of an opportunity to go straight

Certainly the prisoners are getting support from within their own education departments. Swaleside’s education manager Paul Cossali wants to see them given even more opportunity. “I’d love to see laptops in cells,” he says. “It must be possible for the inmates eventually to access a prison intranet, so they can download information relevant to their studies without giving them access to outside websites. It’s the only way forward.”

Such measures, he says, would recognise the notion that education not only develops prisoners’ minds – the confidence it brings also improves their behaviour. “It has an enormous impact,” he says. “We’re finding some prisoners even start to look at the length of their sentence as an opportunity. Some of them who started coming to classes grudgingly because they had to as part of their sentence plan are now really into it. There’s

one guy in here who’s one of the most erudite, polite and well-mannered people you could meet. But he hasn’t always been. He apologised the other day. He said ‘I’m sorry. I must have been a difficult, hard bastard.’”

Moira Bristow has also seen a thirst for learning spread through Whitemoor. “When we first opened the study centre, the prisoners came along because it was something different to do,” she says. “It attracted a lot of prisoners who were not in the slightest bit interested in learning. At times during the first year we couldn’t even get them to sit down.”

“But then there are those who really, really want to change their lives with education. And the belief spreads. A few years ago one student got eight GCSEs. The next year three of them did, and now they are really competitive and encourage each other. And it’s giving them more of an opportunity to go straight.”

But the prisoners all know it takes more than an OU degree to do that. “There are some extremely well educated criminals on the outside who have simply never been caught,” says Billy. “Equally, there are a few uneducated blokes in here who were never guilty in the first place.”

“Education isn’t the be all and end all, but it does motivate you, it sharpens your mind and it keeps you going. And all of us want to come out of here something other than older.”

Engineering update

Engineering is about extending society's horizons by solving technical problems – whether that means meeting basic needs for food and shelter or generating wealth by trade.

In 2004 the OU's engineering department extends its own horizons with the launch of three new courses.

The engineer as problem solver (T207) builds on the learning in T173 *Engineering the future* by exploring six themes: the nature of problems, static structures, dynamics, energy, endurance and human factors.

The opening block develops a view of engineering problems as challenges and opportunities for technical people. It is followed in block two by the study of static structures, based on building things so that they don't fall down.

Block three looks at a variety of mechanisms that are at the heart of machines and considers how those machines use power to do useful things, from cleaning teeth to operating a commercial airliner. From there, block four examines electrical energy as an essential resource



A geodesic dome – one of the structures covered in T207

A new postgraduate MEng degree is being launched in 2004

in modern life.

Having made useful structures and devices it is in our interests to know about the factors that limit their useful life, the theme for block five, while the course closes with a human factors theme. We can survive only in narrow ranges of temperature, pressure, air composition etc, yet we expect to be able to plunge to the depths of the ocean and to travel into space. The ultimate solutions to find are those that enable us to extend our horizons while staying within the limits of survival.

Also new is a residential school to be held at Nottingham University, TXR220 *Engineering in action*. The school offers students an opportunity to gain some practical experience in developing engineering solutions. Activities will include designing and testing a load-bearing beam; designing and testing a vehicle powered by a small spring on a purpose-built test track; exploring the limitations on electricity generation, transmission and use; investigating endurance and failure; and a group project. The course is one way in which students can fulfil part of the residential school credit requirement for a BEng degree.

The final new course is T450 *The engineering project*. This course gives engineering students an opportunity to apply the tools, ideas and skills from four broad project headings in the areas of solid mechanics, fluid mechanics, materials failure and electronic materials. Students must have studied one of the compulsory prerequisite Level 3 courses (T331, T353, T354 and/or MST322). T450 fulfils the compulsory project requirement in the BEng degree.

Last presentations of T353 *Failure of stressed materials* and T354 *Inside electronic devices* have now been extended to 2005 to give students an opportunity to do these courses prior to studying T450.

And following the successful launch this year of the OU BEng Degree a new postgraduate MEng degree is being launched in 2004, replacing the existing degree which finishes in 2006. This new qualification will meet the standards set out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Engineering Council's recently published UK-SPEC (UK Standards for Professional Engineer Competence) and will assist students seeking CEng status.

For advice on engineering courses contact engineering@open.ac.uk.

Winning ways for fundraisers

HELP for fundraising professionals who don't want to take time off from work is available with the launch of a new course from the Business School, *Winning resources and support*.

The six-month course focuses on the skills and knowledge necessary for successful fundraising and leads to the Institute of Fundraising's Certificate in Fundraising Management.

It has been developed in collaboration with the Institute of Fundraising with backing from Lloyds TSB Foundations.

Terry O'Sullivan, who heads up the OUBS academic team for the course, says: "The result of this collaboration has been to create a course that will provide a positive contribution towards halting the decline of the public's trust of fundraisers in society by raising standards and ethical aspects of the profession."

And Jill Mordaunt, a member of the course team at the OUBS, says: "Considerable attention has been paid to ethical issues as well as skills such as identifying, communicating, planning, implementing and evaluating fundraising projects."

Further information about the course can be found within the Management and Development and Leadership section at www.open.ac.uk/courses/

Doctorate benefits students and schools

The OU is the only institution to offer a Doctorate in Education by open learning. Below and right **Lorrie Rickett** reports on the results.

Ninety seven per cent of education professionals who have achieved their Doctorate in Education say it has improved the way they work.

But there have also been benefits for their schools and students through the original research projects candidates complete for their EdD.

Those were among the findings of a paper by the OU's Hilary Burgess, John Butcher and Sandy Sieminski to an international conference on education in Athens this summer.

Since its launch in 2000, 70 professionals working in schools, further and higher education or education policy-making, have graduated from the programme – including 21 this year.

The doctorate is designed to contribute to professional knowledge and practice by developing students' skills in educational research and deepening their understanding of contemporary educational issues.

The OU is the only institution offering the EdD by open learning.

On completion, 97 per cent of the new doctorates said they found their EdD studies helpful in making links between theory and practice and the same percentage said taking the degree

improved their own professional practice. Some 92 per cent felt their professional standing had improved.

See right for a flavour of the research being done by EdD students.

92 per cent of students felt their professional standing had improved



Successful students from this year's EdD graduation, with OU staff

Improving practice in education

● IAN Moody achieved his EdD partly through his research into IQ-style CATS (cognitive ability tests), which are, he found, a better indicator of children's future performance in some subjects than Key Stage 2 and 3 SATS (standard assessment tests).

"All schools have to set targets, but how do you make a judgement on where a child will be in two or three years' time?" said Mr Moody, an assessment manager at Hayesfield School in Bath. "Increasingly, government has encouraged schools to look back, at say Key Stage 2 at the end of junior school, and work out where children will be by Key Stage 3. But the relationship between the two is fairly poor.

"Exam performance at the end of junior school is not a good indicator of how they will perform at Key Stage 3." He admitted CATS was not the answer for all subjects but found that in maths they made a much better base for setting targets. "When children come in at Year 7," he said, "CATS can predict their GCSE maths results with 95 per cent accuracy.

"The difficulty is that we are being asked to set these targets and we need reliable data. If we replace SATS tests with teacher assessment it is almost impossible to standardise the results, so at the moment I think CATS are the best measure we have."

● IRIS Keating focused on the impact mothers' involvement in their children's schools had on their children and themselves.

"I discovered that by inviting the mothers into the school and my class, the children's experiences improved. But while some of the mothers did feel empowered by their involvement, for others their involvement or their decision NOT to become involved (for many reasons including not feeling 'clever' or 'good' enough) became a source of oppression for them," said Iris.

The effect on the mothers was really complex and largely determined by their own self image and feelings of self worth, added Iris, a former OUSA President who first joined the university when she realised she was the only teacher in the staff room without a degree.

She also discovered that although many primary schools say they involve parents, there is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. "There are costs and benefits to all the stakeholders – mothers, staff and the children. These costs and benefits need to be explored by the mothers and the staff to ensure that the model of involvement they develop is one that meets everyone's needs."

Iris now works in Manchester, managing a project for the DfES which is designed to encourage teachers to undertake small scale classroom-based research.

● PAUL Evans' research targeted a common problem faced by secondary school teachers – stress. Mr Evans, a department head at Hitchin Boys' School in Hertfordshire, explored the way heads of department's management styles impacted on their staff's well-being. "I noticed teachers seemed more stressed in some departments than in others, but when the managers of these departments moved on, the situation changed," he said.

"I felt passionately that the research I was doing was valuable. Having completed my doctorate, I never regret the time I spent working on it, and believe my findings were important."

Open line

The place where you ask – and you answer!

Do you have a question you'd like other students' thoughts on? There's a £10 book token for every question we use, and for the senders of those responses we publish. Write to: Open Line, *Sesame*, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA or email sesame@open.ac.uk, not forgetting to include your full address.

Dear Sesame

I WORK for Student Services where we produce online advice and guidance sites.

We'd be very interested to know if there is anything that helped students get through their first year – what makes the difference?

Jane Lunsford

THE thing that really helped me was having an excellent tutor. The support and encouragement I received, the constructive feedback and guidance fostered confidence and helped me believe that I could do it.

Amanda Williams
Blandford Forum

THE main thing that kept me going through my first year was the willingness of friends and family to accompany me on course-related trips to museums etc. These gave me the feeling my studies were part of my social life, rather than a hindrance to it, and kept me excited about my learning.

Sophie Lizard
Bracknell

TWO things kept me going. The first was when I told people I was going to get a politics degree they said I was being ridiculous. This made my mind up that I would have to get my qualification even sooner.

The other was my DD100 tutorial group. Just to know there are others juggling the same commitments made it

easier and informal chats with my tutor helped me realise I was not struggling as much as I thought.

Adam Brown
Crawley

MY advice is don't just sit in silence and struggle on – ask!

My partner died three weeks before my first exam and my tutor was a tremendous support. She told me to remember no-one asks for your grades when you get your degree: "a pass is a pass". Being disabled, I've also found FirstClass is invaluable.

Kiren Khosla
Aberdeen

I AM just completing my first 'full' year of OU study and got through it OK, mainly due

to the advice I received from present and past students before I began.

They recommended I take some short courses before I took on a full course to give myself an idea of the workload. I also saw the pace that I needed to work at and did an assessment before I went in at the deep end.

Keith Manning
West Drayton

Next time...

I AM currently trying to revise for resitting the AA 303 exam and am getting very frustrated as to what to do. Can anyone tell me how they coped with resitting an exam?

Eileen Crouch
Halstead

How may we help you?

More than one in three callers to the OU's computing helpdesk has the same problem – see below for the most common queries. But the message from those at the sharp end is that students should never worry about calling for help. **Peter Taylor-Whiffen** reports.

Good afternoon, computer helpdesk, how may I help you?" The voice is quiet and relaxed and instantly puts you at your ease. A few minutes of these reassuring tones and you can believe the problem that had you tearing your hair out really isn't as bad as you thought.

But that's what makes the OU computer helpdesk such a success with the thousands of students and associate lecturers who call it every week. These people can restore your confidence and calm you down – and have a happy habit of solving your computer problems too.

"Many people who call us are fraught, or upset, or frustrated," says manager Barbara Everatt. "Computers can be frustrating things and, understandably, people are not at their most patient when they get through to us.

"Our job is to guide them through to a solution so by the time they end the call, they're able to continue with what they were doing."

Computer problems used to be the exclusive domain of technology students. But as more and more courses develop an IT element so the helpdesk becomes in ever

greater demand.

"We get the whole range of problems, from what some people would see as very, very basic questions to very challenging queries," says Barbara. "We welcome them all, and we will not end the conversation until we are happy that the caller is satisfied. No-one should be worried about calling us about any PC problem."

The 23 staff, who work four separate shift patterns to cover the desk daily from 9am to 10.30pm, handle an average 200 calls a day. At busy times – such as when a TMA is due on a very popular course, or when a server is down – this figure can double. And during a manic fortnight in February, as new students hit everything from passwords to FirstClass for the first time, the team can deal with as many as 3,000 calls a week.

"Ultimately, we are here only to help students get through their courses," says one team member. "I've been a student, and I've called a helpdesk, and it's so important to have someone on the other end of the line that can give you confidence.

"That's why if I get a particularly anxious caller, I will stay on the phone as long as it takes. We want them to leave us feeling we've solved



Helpdesk staff work shifts to handle an average 200 calls from 9am - 10.30pm daily

Picture: Sheila Forman

their problem – and with enough reassurance to know that if it still doesn't work, we're happy for them to call back."

OU courses contain a total of more than 200 separate pieces of software – and because no helpdesk member can expect to know everything about all of them, their own computer system enables them to key in the course number and instantly access a range of information including frequently asked questions and solutions. They also share knowledge verbally, as well as through a call

logging system (which helps them to see solutions they have suggested previously) and with course project managers. Often the number of calls received by the helpdesk can alert course creators to persistent niggles among students so these can be ironed out.

"Ninety per cent of our job is reassuring people," says another team member. "A lot of older students who didn't grow up around computers often worry they're wasting our time with trivial queries.

"It's true some problems can be easily solved, but that doesn't make them trivial – especially if, say, you've got a TMA to submit and can't do it."

Naturally, callers' computer knowledge varies – as does their perception of what they know. "You can get more challenging calls," adds the team member. "Sometimes we have difficulty persuading people to follow our instructions because they're convinced they know all about their computer. But often the reality is they know about the one small part of it that they use. But no two PCs are alike and because it's so easy to install programs and upgrade hard disks, sometimes we'll find, say, conflicting software has been installed

and is causing the problem."

But there is one occasion when the helpdesk won't provide a solution – even when they know it. "We do get the occasional call from people on computer courses," says one team member. "Sometimes they'll ring and ask us for help on how to do something in their studies. We can help with technical support, but we can't help them

solve a problem they have been set on their course. They probably don't realise they're doing it, but it's a kind of cheating."

But the overall message is, never be afraid to ask for help. "We'll help callers put things into perspective," says a staff member. "It's really satisfying to be able to help people. Hopefully we can help people and we are happy to do so – even if they ring at 10pm on a Friday and their TMA has got to be in by midnight.

"But even if we can't solve it, we can hopefully help them keep it all in perspective. After all, if it's computer problems, we remind them they can always ring their tutor and ask for an extension. It's rarely the end of the world."

To contact the helpdesk phone +44 (0) 1908 653972 or email: LTS-Student-Helpdesk@open.ac.uk

Often the number of calls received can alert course creators to persistent niggles so these can be ironed out

FORGOTTEN your password? Don't worry – it's far and away the most common reason students and associate lecturers call the helpdesk.

Almost one in three callers have queries about FirstClass, and ten per cent have difficulties sending their TMAs electronically.

Below the helpdesk has set out the top four queries and offers solutions for some of them.

1. Forgotten passwords (35 per cent of calls and emails)

Go to www.open.ac.uk/students. Click on, sign in, then click forgotten password and fill in the details requested (including email address). You should be issued with a new temporary password within two working days. This is used only once to gain access to the system. Once in, you can choose your own permanent password.

2. 1044 error when connecting to FirstClass client software (20 per cent)

In the service setup screen next to server by default it says `oufcntx.open.ac.uk`. The 'x' needs to be replaced by the FirstClass server number used by the student's course. (For instance, students doing business school

courses would need to put 'oufcnt1.open.ac.uk' next to server.) The server number for a course can be found by logging in to your personal menu and clicking on the little information "I" after where it says FirstClass desktop.

With dialup connections a 1044 error will occur if the student has tried to connect to the web whilst logging into FirstClass. A connection to the internet needs to be established prior to attempting login. Sometimes a firewall can cause this error. Most firewalls can be configured to allow FirstClass to pass through them without a problem.

3. FirstClass general queries (10 per cent). These include general usage issues, FirstClass personal, and FirstClass administration problems.

4. E-TMA queries (10 per cent). These students and tutors need help submitting/marking/returning TMAs. This also includes helping tutors to use the filehandler software.

The remaining 25 per cent of calls cover a range of topics such as course specific software, third party software and access to web pages.

Tutors log on to student experience

In a reversal of roles, tutors turned students as part of a unique staff development initiative. Associate lecturers studied an online course TU170 *Learning online: computing with confidence* to improve their ICT skills. The project was coordinated by Region 6 and received an OU award for support of excellent teaching.

"The TU170 project aimed to provide the opportunity for tutors both to gain skills and to reflect on the experience of being a student," said James Warren, Region 6.

The tutors were from nine different faculties and studied for 12 weeks, around six hours a week.

They were asked to self-assess in eight areas: email, word processing, FirstClass, computer conferencing, web browsing, html, virus detection software and file management. "Not

surprisingly, most were already competent in the use of email and word-processing before the course began, but after the course was complete most tutors moved 'up' in their competence in most categories," said James, adding: "Around 70 per cent of those taking part showed an improvement in their ICT skills."

Studying the course made the tutors more aware of problems that students face. Also the tutors were able to relate the experience of the course to tutors' own teaching and encourage 'students'/colleagues to reflect on their work as an OU tutor. "For example, when there had been few contributions to online discussion, the tutor would prompt his colleagues by asking them how they encouraged students to contribute if they had a quiet group," said Anne Gaskell from Region 6.

● A bullet point in the article 'Is email easier?' (*Sesame* 217, page 10) suggested that 48 hours is an appropriate time to wait for a reply to an email message. However, students' expectations of realistic response times should take into account that tutors fit OU work around other commitments which means that priorities have to be juggled, said Peter Wilson, secretary for technology development, Learning and Teaching Office.

"The OU has set guidelines (in paper 12/1 of the Learning Technologies and Teaching Board) that on courses where online tuition is a requirement, associate lecturers are expected to logon at least twice a week, and for other courses, they are expected to logon at least once a week. The tutors should advise their students in an introductory message on what their preferred contact times and methods are," he added.

Testing times for applicants

Seven out of ten people will face a psychometric test during their working life. Some assessments are well thought-out, others are more hit and miss, but if you want the job, you've got to take the test. So how can you give yourself the best chance of success?

Most psychometric assessments fall broadly into two categories – those which test aptitude, and those which analyse personality.

Psychometric/aptitude tests

These are timed and taken under exam conditions and, just like an exam, preparation will help you through. It's useful to have some idea of what you're in for: some companies will volunteer this information when they invite you to interview and others will tell you if you ask.

Opinions differ as to whether practice for these tests does really make you perfect. Preparation can be helpful particularly if you haven't used the skills being tested for a while, eg numerical reasoning (maths) – remind yourself how to do the basics such as fractions, percentages and estimating. Don't spend every waking hour before a test practising as this is not likely to significantly change your performance, but practice tests are available through links on the prospects website: www.prospects.ac.uk and will help you get used to performing under time pressure.

Ellen Cocking of the OU's Careers Advisory Service has these tips to help you prepare:

- Pay careful attention to the instructions and ask for clarification if you don't understand
- Skip over any questions you get stuck on. Most tests are designed so only a few candidates both finish and get the correct answers: it's more important to get the right answers than to finish.
- If English is not your first language or you are dyslexic declare it before doing the test. Materials can be adapted for the visually or

hearing impaired but the assessors need to know in advance.

Added Ellen: "The fact that you feel like you are being taken back to your last exam experience should be a comfort rather than scaring you. These are scientifically developed tests and in order to give everyone an equal chance the idea is for everyone to have the same experience."

Personality tests

The good news is that personality analysis tests are impossible to fail. They are less about how well you will do the job than how your presence will benefit the company as a whole. Employers who use these are looking for candidates who will best complement their existing staff – and as it's likely you'll have no idea of the type of personality they're seeking, your best chance of landing the job is simply to tell the truth.

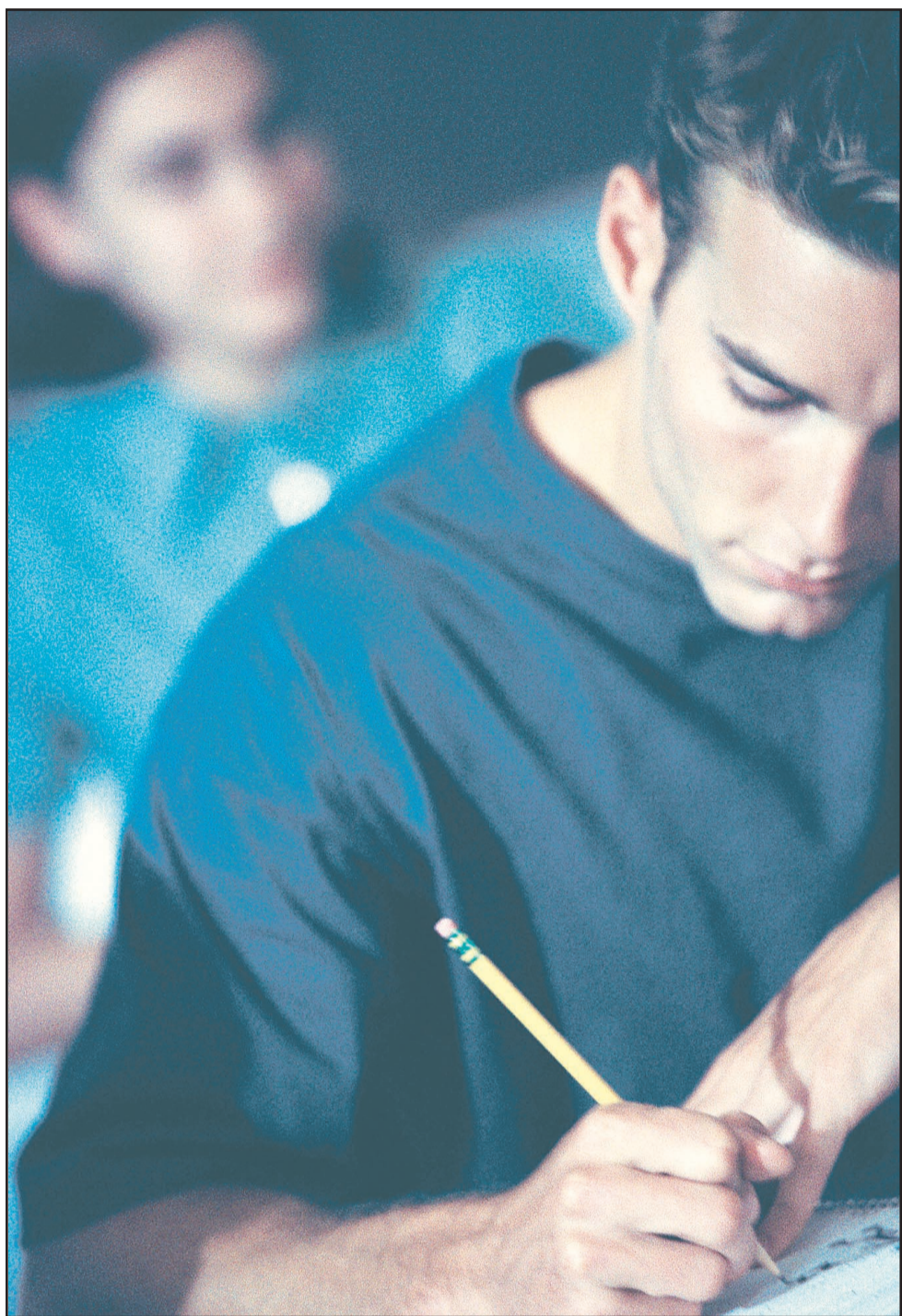
But although revision will not ensure you get the "right" answers, it can still be well worth practising such tests (<http://doctorjob.com> and click on the *testing zone*).

And if you don't get the job, view the questionnaire as an opportunity for self-development. Careers writer David Williams suggests: "By asking for feedback you will unlock their value. You may find out that the job you always wanted does not suit who you are."

And finally

When used well, psychometric tests can be a relevant and effective way of selecting candidates. Unfortunately, not all companies apply the tests properly – some read the results wrong, and others use the same

The good news is that personality analysis tests are impossible to fail



Aptitude and personality tests are an increasingly popular means of selecting staff

Picture: Getty Images

assessment for all jobs, whether or not it's appropriate.

Says Ellen: "If you feel you have been wrongly eliminated from a selection process because of your performance in a test, you could try giving the company other evidence which shows you do have the skills for which you were being assessed. In addition it is always advisable to ask for feedback on your

performance – companies should provide this. It may be that you are waved away with a line about "company policy" and at that point you should ask yourself, would you want to work for that company anyway?"

More information: www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/careers, and also www.bps.org.uk which provides a comprehensive test takers guide online.

Site brings planning up close and personal

A HOLISTIC approach to planning your study, career and future is the aim of a new Personal Development Planning service from the university.

For the first time a wide range of tools, information and guidance have been brought together in a website – called Learning with the OU – designed to reach the parts other

services don't.

Beginning with a section on 'getting started', which covers everything from when and where to study to who to ask if you have a question, the site moves on to offer support, activities and resources in developing strategies for effective study.

But for those looking to integrate their OU study with their lives and work, there are also sections on planning your studies to meet your career or award objectives, moving on from the OU, and an extensive bank of personal and career development resources.

"If you're just starting your first course you'll find lots of useful information and practical study tips about organising your studies, managing your time, preparation, developing your study skills, assignment planning and improvement,"

said Patrick Kelly, project director.

"At the same time we are aiming to help all our students plan their learning and their career and personal development and to review their progress. It is a holistic approach."

The new site at www.open.ac.uk/learning is also a response to the growing number of students who tell the university they signed up partly or primarily for career development – more than 60 per cent.

A range of templates in the 'personal and career development' section of the site guide students through processes such as identifying and recording the skills they acquire on each course as well as career and personal profiles which can then be reshaped into job applications or a career portfolio.

Explained project co-ordinator Frauke Constable: "It is basically a repository where they can collect all

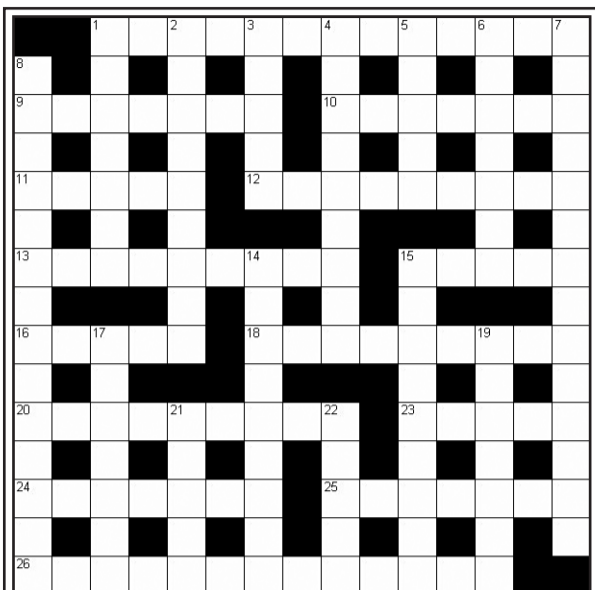
the things they have done and can then use them to create a sample CV, to generate action plans and so on.

"OU students in particular have a lot to offer employers so we are trying to help them present their skills and abilities in the best possible way

"Presenting it in this way gives students 24 hour access and they are also able to get further information and advice in the regions."

It goes live at a time when some students may still be making up their minds about next year's course and can use the section on planning studies to help them make the right choice.

The project team welcomes "feedback". We hope students will tell us how they used the resources and how they might be improved," said Frauke.



Compiled by Bob Gregory

Sesame Crossword Entry form

Send your entry with the completed coupon to:
Cullen Crosswords, 19 Cyncoed Place, Cardiff, CF23 6SG
Closing Date January 12, 2004. Only one entry per person.

Name:
Address:
.....
.....
Postcode: Tel. No:

£100 cash and five Chambers Dictionaries to be won

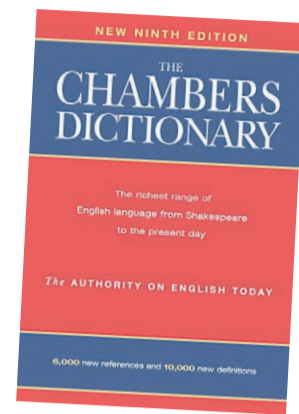
The *Sesame* Christmas crossword is back to challenge, entertain and hopefully bring a bit of light relief from those course books.

This year Chambers have generously donated five copies of their revised ninth edition Dictionary containing over 10,000 new words and meanings. The design and content have been updated to provide a clear and modern text for today's users, while the traditional Chambers virtues of

being informative, witty and authoritative have been retained.

The senders of the first five correct solutions drawn out of the hat on January 13, 2004 will receive a copy of the Dictionary. In addition the first one drawn will receive £100 cash courtesy of *Sesame*.

You have to be in it to win it, so put those course units aside and rise to the challenge.



Clues Across

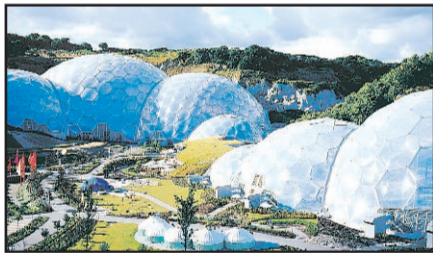
1. Hint dole distribution beats a depressed situation (2,3,8)
9. Aardvark detests losing face (3,4)
10. A cut above the rest? (7)
11. Muslim leader supports hair-style and a white robe (5)
12. An irritating habit (9)
13. No degrees at this University? (9)
15. Composer rejects Cockney's comment on the weather (5)
16. Sturdy as a dog? (5)
18. Makes a brilliant show but is far from happy at heart (4,1,4)
20. Before one gets minced meat and fish fingers depend on them (9)
23. Charming, but to some extent self-indulgent (5)
24. Silly of us, accepting dull painting technique (7)
25. Synthetic material used in cranial surgery? (7)
26. Secretly see to support of family with some French money (13)

Clues Down

1. American doctor's system of communication, when short of time (7)
2. The Sultanate's extremely cloudy divination (9)
3. Globe theatre reconstructed without wings (5)
4. Speak up, and cleverly defeat strike (3,4,2)
5. Fools with drugs? (5)
6. One is made if one does this! (7)
7. Last of all, tighten hinges, nuts and bolts (5,9)
8. Showing resolution when confronted with the score (6,3,5)
14. Become liable for debts without interest (9)
15. How most students progress to some extent (2,1,6)
17. Fruit an essential thing, as in a turnover (7)
19. Very satisfied in strange way (7)
21. With fish, many have a vegetable (5)
22. Air pollution reversing the ratio of rationality to nationality (5)

Sesame reader holidays

Cornwall 4 nights from £59pp



4 nights for the price of 3
Available autumn 2003 to spring 2004.

Price includes free entry to Eden Project and Lost Gardens of Heligan.

THIS value for money self-drive holiday in a superb central location staying at the Tregurrian Hotel or Apartments in Watergate Bay is offered to readers of *Sesame* by Travelsmith Holidays Ltd.

If gardens aren't your thing, there are many other activities on offer in the area such as golf, walking or just sitting in a pub garden enjoying the warmth of the Gulf Stream. This offer is a special discounted one to readers of *Sesame* and these special prices can only be made with Travelsmith Holidays on 0870748 1000 or 01621 784666 quoting reference code: **C170/OU**.

Bruges and Lille Christmas markets

3 days only £129 - Departing December 19

JUST across the Channel are the enchanting medieval cities of Lille and Bruges, hosts each year of two small but magical Christmas markets.

With two nights accommodation and continental breakfast in four star accommodation in the heart of Bruges, as well as two fantastic Christmas markets to visit, plus a trip to see the production of handmade chocolates, this weekend is a great opportunity to complete your Christmas shopping in the most wonderful of atmospheres!

For further details of this holiday contact: Diamond Holidays, Overstone House, Kettering Road, Market Harborough, Leics, LE16 8AW. Tel: 01858 467200 or fax 01858 434030, quoting reference code: **SE6778**.



Spotlight on Societies

Some time in the mid 1970s, shortly after the OU introduced the course TAD292 *Art and environment*, a number of likeminded students on the course got together, calling themselves 'Tadpoles'. The idea was to continue to develop their experiences on the course. The society became affiliated to OUSA and its members stayed in touch by circulating a handwritten news sheet, photocopied and sent out.

The exact date of the first TADPOST is not known and unfortunately the first five editions can no longer be found. However, the 100th TADPOST was put together at the unofficial Tad summer school in Durham in August. To recognise the occasion the target was to create an edition with 100 pages.

At the same time another group of Tadpoles were walking the West Highland Way from Glasgow to the top of Ben Nevis - a distance

of around 100 miles. Their celebration featured a bottle of champagne and strawberries at the summit, nicely chilled by the sub zero temperature in the cloud.

The choice of the West Highland Way was a little obscure: it can be put down to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth who, we believe from their writings, were Tads 200 years ago.

Champagne and strawberries at the top of Ben Nevis to celebrate a news sheet from a course which closed 18 years ago, and a summer school, that still goes on each year, seemed appropriate to us. We think Simon Nicholson, who developed the TAD292 idea, would have appreciated it.

The Tadpole Society is still affiliated to OUSA and open to all OU students: call the OUSA office for details of how to contact us.

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

Life and death for Alison in Africa

Imagine a village in rural Africa. There's only intermittent electricity, there's no running water and the children have to trudge seven miles to the nearest school. And when they arrive, they sit and focus their attention on a teacher who addresses them in the ancient language of Xhosa. About imagery in the poems of Dylan Thomas.

This was, admits OU student Alison Rudd-Clarke, one of the more surreal moments of her recent trip to Qumbu, a community in the Mhlonto District of South Africa's Eastern Cape.

"The level of spoken English was much lower than I had expected," said the educational management student. "Yet the children are required to master complex poems such as *Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night* and Donne's *Death Be Not Proud*."

The pupils are studying the classic works as part of their English Literature Matriculation Certificate, but Alison was also able to bring more immediate practical help from Britain when she worked at the school for five weeks this summer.



It was like an Aladdin's cave. Among the dust and rotting books were little gems such as Jane Eyre

The head of modern languages at Acton Burnell's Concord College in Shropshire was one of 35 "global teachers" chosen by registered charity Link Community Development to help set up projects in schools across South Africa and Uganda. Over the coming year they will visit UK schools to share their experiences with British pupils and teachers.

Alison, who took a break from her MBA studies to make the trip, stayed with a family near the school, St Bartholomew's – and admitted she was initially uncertain how she could help it to develop.

"My teaching subject is Spanish and I was sure there would be no demand for that," she said. "However, as a chartered librarian with experience of teaching English as a foreign language, and half way through an OU management course, I hoped I would have some relevant skills that could be put to good use."

She did – as the principal asked her to help develop a library. "That was one of my great pleasures," she said. "Sometime in the past there had been a library but now the room was being used as a storeroom, for textbooks, enormous water tanks and building materials for a project that never took place.

"It was like Aladdin's cave. Among the dust and rotting books were little gems such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Moonstone*, some *Sherlock Holmes* stories and books on bird watching and chess – but nothing from the past 20 years.

"I had a very useful VSO book on setting up and running school libraries, and had also brought some books with me to create a small reference section of dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and a shelf of South African fiction. By the end of my time over 300 books had been catalogued."

But Alison, whose adventure was jointly funded by Link, the Millennium Commission and the Department for International Development, was also given another responsibility.

"Equally important was training the staff – the project had to function after my departure," she said. "There were two enthusiastic teachers with some library training and I instructed them how to manage library routines and discussed with them policies for borrowing and returning books.

"I also did a fair amount of English teaching. A primary school near my home had written letters and with two classes at St. Bartholomew's we practised letter writing skills, so on my return each English child will receive a letter from an African child."

But for all her academic experience, time may well prove the most significant contribution Alison made was in distributing literature designed to slow South Africa's shockingly rapid spread of AIDS and HIV.

"The South African Government gave all the global teachers posters and other materials to use in schools, and the local staff were very enthusiastic about them," she said. "It's predicted that by 2015 South Africa's labour force will have decreased by 21 per cent. Even during my stay there were memorial services in the area for two young teachers."

Tony coasts through his OU course

FROM coast to coast, 70-year-old Tony Corker's travels would not have been complete without his OU course units.

Tony (right), from Matlock, took two and a half weeks to walk Wainwright's famous 190-mile route from St Bees on the Cumbrian coast to Robin Hood's Bay in North Yorkshire, with his wife Maureen.

But it wasn't until they reached the second shoreline that his family realised Tony – in his fourth

year with the OU – had made the challenge extra tough on himself.

Recalled his daughter Kim Silver, who is an AL on W200 *Understanding law*: "As he fished in his backpack for the pebble from the Irish Sea to be thrown, as tradition demands, into the North Sea, the study guide for his current OU course tumbled out. He admitted that he had indeed carried it for the entire trek so that he could continue to study."



Scrapheap design

STUDYING with the OU can open up all sorts of opportunities – as soldier Paul Ramsey discovered when he was chosen to advise contestants on a television game show.

Producers of *Scrapheap Challenge* were so impressed with the skills he'd learned studying T204 *Design principles* that they asked him to help one of the teams to build a tank.

"It was great fun," said Paul, who was one of three engineers chosen from his REME corps to help the producers plan the show, which challenges contestants to construct a machine from junk found in a scrapyard.

"The programme makers asked me to provide drawings and solutions to problems they wanted to pose the teams," he added. "I used exactly the kit I'd used for T204 to work out what people would need to build a tank and they said they would make sure their 'scrapyard' had the components in it somewhere."

Paul, who has served in the Army for 19 years and is based at Arborfield, is now working towards his BSc Hons in Technology.

Dirty dusting

AN Open University graduate who turned his hand to writing for the stage last year has hit the big time with his second play.

Trevor Wood, 44, from Newcastle, has seen his new comedy play *Dirty Dusting* break box-office records at two top North-East theatres.

An outrageous romp that follows the adventures of three elderly cleaning ladies who set up a sex chat phoneline at work, the play sold out for its first production at the Customs House in South Shields and was booked for a re-run in August.

Meanwhile, down the road at the prestigious Theatre Royal in Newcastle, tickets for the September run sold faster than everything else except *Swan Lake*.

Wartime memories

OPEN University alumni in R08 took part in an initiative to enable people in Manchester to talk about their wartime experiences. On October 25 – Make a Difference Day – they joined other volunteers and Manchester Libraries' home visit service to offer the city's residents the opportunity to record stories in their own homes.

Student support?

THIS innovative portable chair could be the solution for anyone who is studying on the move, says OU student Elizabeth Wilson.

Elizabeth and her partner Jon Goldsmith run London-based Ergolife UK, which imports a range of stress-reducing products from a parent company in Sweden.

The Stol chair gives you back support even when you're sitting on the ground. Says Jon: "It's ideal for OU students, who tend to take their books everywhere with them. This can make studying comfortable anywhere."

Other products for students on the move include a cushioned lap table.

The chairs cost £29.99 and can be ordered on 0870 727 4136 – and by quoting "Open University" you can save the £6 postage and packaging. Find out more by visiting www.ergolife.co.uk or by emailing info@ergolife.co.uk

Once a student...

THE Open University Alumni Association is here to provide a lifelong link to the Open University for free, writes **Diana Slevin**, Deputy Director of Alumni Relations.

The Association has a very broad membership. Alumni range from graduates at Doctor, Masters and Bachelor levels, through to diplomats 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 to the OU Alumni Community.

Keep in touch with us through *Open Eye*, the university's unique alumni bulletin which appears in *The Independent* on the first Tuesday monthly, and our website www.openlink.org. Or contact Diana Slevin, Deputy Director of Alumni Relations, the Open University, Walton Hall Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK. Phone +44 (0) 1908 653815. Email the Association with your email address and PI and we will send you our monthly e-newsletter. Email: alum@open.ac.uk

Remember that your FirstClass registration is only guaranteed to last for a year after you cease to study – on a date pre-set by your course team. We have been able to negotiate continued access for some specialist alumni groups as well as the MBAs, however ALL are welcome to join in discussions on the alumni website at www.openlink.org

The Christmas envelope

By Andrew Guy

I don't know what your house is like at Christmas but ours seems to follow a mixture of family traditions with bits gleaned from my childhood and some from my wife's. As the 25th draws nearer the tension mounts. Will Auntie Ethel want to come? Should we go to the grandparents? Have I got room for even more socks? But the part of Christmas which causes the most fear, the most eggshell treading, is the event which dare not speak its name.

Has mum passed this year's OU exam?

We are all quietly confident. She is just quiet.

We are ready to crack open the champagne. She is just ready to crack.

As H Day draws near (H for Hide Somewhere) storm clouds appear over our house and the barometer falls as we develop our own climate. Michael Fish treats us as an extra region in the nightly forecast and that nice fishing lady on *Radio Four* adds Number 27 Hill Street to Dogger, Fisher and Ronaldsway in the mornings.

I know this because I'm often awake listening to my spouse explain what she should have written in the exams two months earlier.

Then it arrives. It lands on the hall rug in a total silence louder than Pliny's Vesuvius. I collect the mail and nonchalantly put it on the kitchen table.

"Post Dear," I squeak. She looks up, sees The Envelope and says "Oh I'm busy, I'll open it later."

Two days later The Envelope has assumed a presence greater than a corpse in a front parlour. It hovers in the kitchen like Banquo's ghost and whole swathes of the dictionary have been cut from family conversation.



Picture: Maxine France

"Give me the salt." We don't say 'pass'.

"Get the door." We don't say 'open'.

Then one day I come home from work and The Envelope is gone. Mum is silent and the children have been behind the sofa since 11am when I saw her with the paper knife in her hand.

"H-h-how did you do?" I venture.

"Mmmm," she asks distractedly.

"The er erm EnvelopeOUthingie?", I mumble, pointing shakily at the void on the kitchen table.

"Oh that... yes... I passed... 78 per cent." And she walks out past me, with a new-found serenity that makes Mona Lisa look manic.

I hear the children breathe out.

I reach for the whisky as the gentle sound of her singing wafts along the hall.

TV

Switches to OU broadcasts

THE OU is to cut the number of hours it broadcasts on BBC2's Learning Zone from the beginning of next year.

The move, which will reduce the amount of weekly airtime from ten hours to eight, is part of the university's plan to phase out all course-related programmes by the end of 2006.

"From January 2004, course programmes will transmit from 2am to 6am on Saturday and Sunday nights," said the Open Broadcasting Unit's transmission supervisor Jennifer Kropelnicki. "Course material will continue to be delivered to students via a variety of media."

The university stopped making course-related programmes at the end of last year, but some courses will continue to be aired while they remain current.

The OU will, however, continue its long-standing partnership with the BBC for the foreseeable future. The partners will concentrate on broader appeal programmes shown across all BBC channels, both terrestrial and digital, aimed at encouraging people to take up learning, such as the hugely successful *Science Shack* and *Landscape Mysteries*.

BBC1's *Human Mind*, on which the OU was academic consultant, achieved the university's highest ever viewing figures, an average across the three programmes of 4.1 million viewers, added Jennifer.

● *Human Mind* presenter Robert Winston is returning to screens in another OU/BBC co-production due for broadcast early in 2004. *Child of our time* will, like its forerunner, feature three 60 minute programmes at peaktime on BBC1.

And also returning is the *Rough Science* team for a fourth series of hands-on science with a survival twist. The BBC2 series will be accompanied by support material for schools.

Latest information on these and other OU/BBC productions will appear on the dedicated website www.open2.net, which is worth checking out regularly for a host of other imaginative online activities and offers, most recently a calendar featuring literary giants to accompany the BBC's *Big Read* project.

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

No tutorial timewasters

pleads

Mary Tappenden



Approaching my last course for a BA (Hons) (Humanities with Music) degree I feel 'qualified' to speak on a delicate issue I know affects many fellow students as well as some tutors.

Without fail, on each course I have studied, there has been one student who leeches away large chunks of the tutor's valuable time. Either by going off at a complete tangent on an issue that only affects them personally, or seeming hell-bent on ensuring everyone else in the room is aware of his or her personal prowess in the subject.

I am always left feeling sympathy for the tutor who is obviously trying to deal with all relevant questions thoroughly, but has difficulty in stemming the irrelevant babble the timewaster emits, without looking rude.

I feel frustrated and angry that precious time and relevant points are so easily lost when time runs out, as the tutor's planned lecture often then needs to be curtailed. From post-tutorial comments from colleagues, I am definitely not alone!

I am the first to welcome relevant intelligent queries, as the answers often assist us all. But I wish many tutors had the courage to say "that's an interesting point, of personal interest to you, which I'd be pleased to discuss at a non-tutorial time by telephone or email."

Some tutors are doubtless better equipped than others to be this assertive, but it is often obvious how uncomfortable they feel in these situations. The offending students are not deliberately out to create problems, I am sure. In fact they doubtless feel their prestige is enhanced in some way, especially the egotists who expound their 'personal' experiences. But if any of you are reading this, let me assure you the rest of us remain uncomfortably unimpressed, as I know do the tutors!

Mary Tappenden is in her final year of a BA (Hons) degree having found every course 'interesting, absorbing and rewarding'.