Welcome to your Students Association magazine

Your Community. Your Voice.

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Summer 2017

Share your stories
Connect with other students
Join in

New societies for summer - we bring you stories from emerging and existing societies

The link between library usage and student success

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Charter Day observations
A student report on the day

The Big Summer One!
Student meet-ups nationwide
Could you host one of them?

Student ideas
Sign up
Have your say!

Graduate roles
Tips from the OU Careers team

Societies
New societies for summer - we bring you stories from emerging and existing societies

Two million resources
The link between library usage and student success
Welcome to our summer edition of your OU Students magazine! By the time you all receive this edition, some of you will have completed another academic year! So, here’s to your success!

This edition focuses on the successes of our students and the work of your Students Association. As some of you may be aware, we just had a successful by-election with 20 students standing for three positions, and over 1500 of you exercising your democratic right to vote for those students! Another example of success within the OU student community can be seen on page 10 where Caroline and Peter celebrate their successful OU journey by graduating together. Success in our OU student journeys doesn’t have to be the graduation ceremony at the end of it - success can be just putting words on paper, success can be just managing ten minutes of study whilst raising children and working, success is battling through a disability to complete a module (I know from my experience with Bipolar Disorder).

We’d love to hear about your successes, whether through a submission for the magazine, a tweet (@oustudents) or a Facebook post. Anyway, before I start gushing about how success is important to all of us and how OU students are known for their success in life, grab a drink, put your feet up and check out your OU Students magazine!

PS. If you want to talk to me or my other OU Students Association colleagues please visit our new forum ‘Talk To Your OU Students Association’ here.

Rachel Hughes
Vice President Communications
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On Thursday, 4 May the Open University held a Charter Day event to celebrate 48 years since the OU officially received its Charter. That made it the OU’s 48th Birthday and I was lucky enough to be invited along to share in the festivities.

It was a great day, a brilliant mix of staff, officials and students from the OU and the OU Students Association along with a mix of dignitaries and VIPs from around the country. The day started with a meet and greet with invited guests, officials and some Central Executive Committee members of the OU Students Association, hence my attendance. It was a great chance to get the ear of some of the invited guests. Everyone I spoke to on the day expressed their pride at being invited to attend the event in support of the OU and its achievements. We were then led into the Hub Lecture Theatre and watched on the big screen while a video outlining what the Charter was and how it was granted was shown. There was also a roundup of some graduation ceremonies and to see students being celebrated on their best day was a perfect representation of why we all do it. It really brought home what being an OU student is all about.

The formal part of the day kicked off at 11:30am, with an introduction to the day from Nicola Simpson, the Acting President of the Students Association. She was on fine form and shared with the packed room exactly what being an OU student has meant to her. She told the audience what it was like to study with an illness and how the OU and the OU Students Association helped her when she needed it the most. She summed up that through her own study journey she has come to realise that “what student success looks like is not the same for everyone”. She shared what her own degree journey meant to her and said that at times she didn’t appear to be a model student. Her own experiences have helped her in her role as Acting President to see the person behind the study. She has previously shared her story in the Spring 2017 OU Students magazine (page 9).

Martha Lane Fox, the Chancellor of the Open University then took the floor, to share with us her love of birthday parties. She took the time to share with us all the story of her mother doing an OU degree back in the 1970s and that the OU is a place that will always have value to her and was one of the reasons she was “honoured and privileged” to be asked to become Chancellor back in 2014. She spoke about the OU and digital technology and how it has made distance learning feel a little less distant. She talked about how the OU felt innovative and exciting all those years ago and still does today. She talked with pride about how the OU can “continue to be at the forefront of how we learn in the future”. She then rounded off by inviting the Vice Chancellor Peter Horrocks to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ as he had secretly revealed to her he would, to the great amusement of the audience.

Peter also had bigger things on his mind. He shared with us some of the challenges of
the last year. Leaving the EU, a new Prime Minister and another election all being unexpected issues that we have had to take into account that couldn’t have been predicted a year ago. He also talked about the need to look at the kind of university that the OU needs to become to continue to meet the needs of students. As ever, his focus was on students and celebrating student success. He left the stage without a song – this time...

Darren Harris was introduced by Martha as our first student speaker. Darren is both an Honorary Graduate and an alumnus of the OU. He is also a two-time Paralympian representing Great Britain in judo in Beijing and football in London. Darren shared with the audience how much exercise has been beneficial to his mental health and how depression can affect anyone. He talked about how losing his vision gradually, due to a childhood cancer, led him to periods of frustration and anger and how he managed to convert that energy into a positive force. He shared how sports helped him with that, and how the competitive environment helped him to find his inner motivation which in turn helped his mental wellbeing.

He shared with us his belief that improved performance boosts your wellbeing and develops character and that is why he tries to get his message out there to others during their struggles. He really did make a difference to how I will approach things in the future.

Next we heard from Zahra Alidina, who graduated from the OU with a Law degree at only 18. She shared how amazing it was for her that the OU accepted her for study when she was only 15 and how grateful she is to be continuing her education with a Masters in Law at Brunel this year, due to being able to complete her degree so early, and how she is looking forward to starting her barrister training in October. She shared how her journey would not have been possible without the OU taking a chance on her. We spent so long thinking that age is only a barrier at the top end of the scale, and then when people like Zahra come along and we realise students at the younger end are also potentially being disadvantaged. Luckily the OU came through for her when she needed it. Zahra is living proof that age is not a barrier to education.

Rohullah Yakobi then shared his story, and what a story. It is no exaggeration to say that there were discreet sniffles around the room. As a 12-year-old Rohullah fled his home, his community and his country due to the Taliban’s actions in Afghanistan. As a refuge he fled Afghanistan, crossed Pakistan alone and finally found himself in England, where he had to

Nicola Simpson, Acting President of the OU Students Association

Martha Lane Fox, Chancellor of the OU

Peter Horrocks, Vice Chancellor of the OU

Darren Harris, two-time Paralympian and honorary OU graduate

Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘TMAs are the most exquisite torture’
refuge he fled Afghanistan, crossed Pakistan alone and finally found himself in England, where he had to learn English. He changed his life to fit in with the culture of place he found himself in. He then made his life here, has settled and recently received his degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics last year. He is very appreciative of the support of his OU “family”.

Jenna Mittelmeier is an on-campus PhD student from America. She talked about the strangeness of Milton Keynes from an outsider's perspective and about “concrete cows and roundabouts”. She discussed her first impressions of the OU and talked about her diverse peer group, and how they help each other with their research topics and the PhD itself. She also told us about her plans for becoming a post-doctoral research fellow here at the OU, and how she was published in her second year.

We then watched a video presentation from Tamar Hughes, who is Learning and Development Manager at the Phoenix Group. She discussed the Partnership Programme that Phoenix and the OU are involved in. It looks at leadership, stakeholder impact and offers 90 day challenges which are really great for engaging staff. They look at developing the staff that take part, with them going on to promotion, secondment, or moving to other roles after completing the programme. Tamar explained how they take advantage of this programme to offer change and growth, and to ensure the best opportunities for staff.

Mark Brandon, one of the OU’s central academics then talked to us about the academic role in student success. Mark is a reader in Polar Oceanography. He looks at the polar sciences research area and he shared with us the cutting edge material that students within his faculty are currently working with. He was also looking at the future for students and how they can best exploit opportunities and technologies to ensure that the best use is made of scientific data access. He talked of his aim to bring the ‘wonders of the Arctic and Antarctic to our students’ and about widening access to this data to all students not just those in research and about bringing in live link-ups from Antarctica in the near future.

Jhumar Johnson, Director of Development at the OU, then came on stage to talk about the ‘Open University of the Future’. She was looking forward to the 50th year of the OU. She shared with us a video about how “Together we can open up the future.” She spoke of how she was proud to be involved with the OU and about the evolution of the Opening Up poster campaign which helps to build on the OU mission to
Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘Remember, it’s never too late to learn!’

help us succeed. The posters, for those who haven’t seen them yet, read ‘Opening up Opportunity’, ‘Opening up Minds’, ‘Opening up Thinking’ and ‘Opening Up Lives’. She also shared an inspirational letter that had all of us filling with pride.

The formalities were brought to a close by Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council Richard Gillingwater. He told us how he had been inspired by the student stories that had been shared and thanked all of the speakers for their input. He then went on to discuss the various events that were being held later to continue the celebrations, such as the Inaugural Lecture of Professor Simon Lee ‘Open and Shut Cases’ that was to be held later that day in the Berrill Theatre. He rounded off the day by talking about how it was time for cake, and seconded Martha’s original challenge to sing ‘Happy Birthday’, which Peter actually took up! Fair play to the Vice Chancellor, it really did create a cheer in the room. Students can see for themselves and watch a video of all of the speeches via Facebook.

The rest of the day went quickly too, the informal chatting and Student Bingo game meant that I had a lot of opportunities to speak to people. Many staff and guests mingled and discussed ways forward for the OU. There were stands with leaflets and information, and there were sandwiches and cake to keep us all sustained.

In short, it was a fantastic day to celebrate a worthy point in the OU’s journey. And it was an ideal time to take a breath and take stock of what the OU has achieved so far and how it will cement its place in the future. I am really excited about where the next steps will take us.

I look forward with anticipation to next year’s Charter Day, and thank everyone involved for the great event they put on this year. I really appreciate the opportunity to be involved.

Cin McGuigan
Area Association Representative for Northern Ireland

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Make your voice heard and join us in creating StudentIdeas

What is StudentIdeas?

StudentIdeas is a joint project between the OU and the OU Students Association that puts students at the centre of decision making and innovation. The project is based on an online crowdsourcing platform which provides students with the opportunity to share their ideas of how they think the university experience can be improved.

As well as suggesting your own ideas, you can comment and vote on other students’ innovative ideas. There will also be dedicated OU Students Association area for you to have an impact on the development of your Association. Feedback on what has happened as a result of the ideas you submit and updates on implementation will be shared with you regularly.

How can you help?

We are looking for 2,500 current students to pilot the crowdsourcing platform in order for us to receive feedback on the effectiveness of the platform and how it would run going forward. The pilot will run from July 2017 to December 2017 and you can dedicate as little or much time as you have available. To qualify you will need to be a current student at the OU and have access to the internet. During the pilot there will be bi-monthly campaigns that you can provide ideas about as well as a general campaign to suggest any improvements.

At the end of the pilot, we will be asking you to pass on your thoughts on the effectiveness of the StudentIdeas platform as part of an evaluation process. This is your chance to make a real difference to student experience at the OU.

Register your interest [here](#) before Friday 23rd June 2017.
I would like to start by thanking the chair and members for recognising the seriousness of the current decline in part time student numbers and for the invitation to speak today. The OU Students Association represents the interests of part time and distance learners in all parts of the UK, Europe and beyond. I would like to talk to you about who part time and distance learners are and what support they need.

You might know that the Open University was founded as the University of the Air, the second-chance university for students who found themselves unwilling or unable to continue with traditional full-time study after leaving school. Since its inception almost 50 years ago, The Open University has allowed diverse learners to achieve their goals outside of the usual 9 to 5.

Our students are those people, who, because of work, caring responsibilities, health problems and disabilities find the distance learning model is their preferred, or only, means to achieve their goals in higher education. Distance learners face the same challenges as any student at any university around the country – meeting deadlines, testing our intellectual capabilities and often pushing ourselves to the limits of our endurance.

“Distance learners face the same challenges as any student at any university around the country – meeting deadlines, testing our intellectual capabilities and often pushing ourselves to the limits of our endurance.”

It is difficult to generalise about the typical OU student. We are in work and out of it. We are parents, carers and cared for. We are juggling study with a combination of family responsibilities, employment, volunteering and our own health and wellbeing needs. Increasingly more of us are school leavers who recognise the value in studying alongside work. We travel extensively in our jobs in an increasingly global society, studying on trains and planes, hoping that we can get online to access our learning materials wherever we are in the world. We study for the love of our subject and to keep our minds healthy and active. Some of us might have left school with few or no qualifications but OU graduates prove that we can still succeed as long as there is a university prepared to welcome us. Others might already have a degree but need...
a change of direction or a new challenge to get on in our lives and progress in our careers.

As with school leavers going to traditional universities, many of us will be unsure just exactly where a university qualification might lead. We might like to dip a toe into the water and test the temperature with a short module, before diving in to a full degree. Others will have a clear vision of where we would like to be and what exactly we need to do, be it a module, undergraduate or postgraduate qualification.

The fact that the UK needs more graduates is well documented. So too are the barriers. The 2015 Report from Bright Blue ‘Going Part Time’ identifies “three main barriers for those thinking about higher education but ultimately not pursuing it”. Those are financial barriers, practical barriers and informational barriers.

Financial barriers fall into three categories; firstly that people simply cannot afford to study, secondly that people cannot access financial support from Government or employers and thirdly that people do not recognise the investment in higher education as good value for money even when the money is available to them. Other barriers include geographical barriers, juggling education with work and family and a lack of information about part time higher education and the financial support available to learners.

When an individual has recognised a need or a desire to undertake higher education study, who do we turn to for information, advice and guidance? Adults need this as much as school leavers do. Investing in ourselves can seem like a huge risk, particularly if we have previously had a difficult educational experience, when trying to navigate an ever-changing jobs market or are just about making ends meet. We need help to understand what our options are, where we can study and what impact it will have on our lives.

“Distance learning provides learners with the opportunity to develop our skills as and when we need and whatever mechanisms are in place to support distance learners need to recognise this fact.”

There are of course differences in higher education policy around the UK and in the type of support that students can access with different combinations of fee and maintenance support packages available. However, no matter where we are in the UK, once we have had the advice and guidance – or alternatively taken a leap in the dark – many students need financial support to take a first step.

Financial support for students studying on a module-by-module basis, those studying for an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ), and making maintenance loans available to distance learners would go some way towards addressing the decline in the part-time sector. However, for too many, university is still what you do when you leave school, not something you do all the way through the course of your life.

Education should not be something which ends at 18 or 21, degrees need not be completed in three years. Distance learning provides learners with the opportunity to develop our skills as and when we need and whatever mechanisms are in place to support distance learners need to recognise this fact.

As a society we need to fully embrace part time and distance students and recognise the potential of lifelong learning in a world in which we work for longer and in more jobs than we ever have before.

Nicola Simpson
Acting President

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Best overheard #OUniqueId: ‘The more I study, the more I love it!’
Study benefits in married life

When I started studying at the Open University in 1990 I never thought that I would end up in Croke Park, Ireland, graduating alongside my husband, both having completed a BA Hons Open Degree. I cannot thank Peter enough for the encouragement he gave me to complete my second degree especially after my father passed away two years ago and the endless cups of tea – when summoned – throughout my study. However, the encouragement and the nagging to complete TMA’s on time went both ways – me nagging him, just as often!

Peter thought that I was just finishing my first degree when he began studying with the OU in 2008. Little did he know how addictive the OU would be. Like me he soon got into the habit of leaving the TMA’s until the last minute. I would not say that we were competitive when it came to the TMA marks, however, there were raised eyebrows when I achieved a better mark than he did in our final modules although he was very pleased at how well I had done.

I would always try to get a couple of hours work done before Peter came home. You could guarantee that just as I was getting into my stride, he would arrive and then begin to bother me with all that had happened to him during his day. He would then go to cook the dinner and I would have to try my best to pick up the threads after that. Peter would get down to work in the study and I would work in the bedroom on my laptop.

However, I would occasionally get my own back by going to Peter and asking him, ‘what do you think of this?’ – and he would reply. ‘I have no idea what you are talking about.’ This is what happens when your partner is studying something entirely different.

We would both get the same jittery feelings while waiting for the results to come back, which brought us both closer together. I can happily say that during our period of studying together there were no conflicts. In fact, there was always encouragement and support on both sides.

Since Peter began studying with the OU he has become a changed person. The quiet man I married has now become outspoken and heavily involved in the Open University Students Association, first as a forum moderator then as a member of the Central Executive Committee and now the Vice President Administration. For my part I am a regular volunteer at the London Graduation Ceremonies working on the Association’s stall. It is good meeting all the students, together with their families celebrating their success. All the students I met felt the same way: the excitement of the course materials arriving – on opening the box, - that feeling of ‘what have I let myself in for’ – to the midnight frantic finishing of the TMA’s, then the wait for the marks to arrive and the final relief of passing the exam and knowing that they had finally achieved their goal – An OU qualification.

Finally we were both together on graduation day and able to finish together something we had both worked hard for alongside all our fellow students who experienced the same thoughts and feelings throughout the journey: Side by side with our long-suffering families, now enjoying the same pride and relief of attaining our goal.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in the Croke Park Graduation Ceremony for making it such a special day.

Caroline Cowan
In February we held OU student ‘meet-ups’ in over 20 locations. There was a strong turnout up and down the county. The ‘Big Feb Meet-up’ was a huge success and one thing was clear from the feedback - students want more meet-ups!

We're building on this success to hold a summer event ‘The BIG June Meet-up’ on 17 June. We're partnering with the Great Get Together launched by Jamie Oliver and the Duchess of Cornwall. Together with hundreds of other organisations inspired by Jo Cox we're hoping to hold the biggest nationwide get together since the Jubilee.

We'd love as many of you as possible to host a ‘meet-up’ on 17 June in the spirit of the Great Get Together. Any student can host a meet-up! You don’t need any experience just some time to spend with fellow OU students on 17 June.

We will support you throughout the process from helping you find a venue and setting up a Facebook page to providing a ‘goodie bag’ of OU Students Association freebies.

There is some more information on what a meet-up involves on our website here and if you’re interested in hosting a BIG June event, you can click here and register. We’ll get back to you with as much or as little support as you need to make your event a success. You’ll be part of a nationwide Get Together helping OU students in your area meet each other face-to-face. We need hosts like to you make it happen!

If you have any questions please contact Stephanie Stubbins, Vice President Community, at student-community@open.ac.uk
Two million library resources – a picture of student success

Is there a link between use of the Library and student achievement? Richard Nurse shares the facts.

If you have a vision of a university library in your mind, you are probably picturing a big building near the centre of the campus, books on shelves covering all the subjects you can imagine, lots of study spaces, rows of computers, maybe a café, with a group of helpful librarians, maybe with training sessions on how to get the best out of the library and busy, really busy with students studying, revising and working.

Now think about how to transpose that concept of a library to a distance-learning university, where students rarely if ever get the chance to visit a university campus or have the opportunity to step through the doors of a physical university library. You would be able to access a vast range of journals and databases online via the web, have access to hundreds of thousands of ebooks and have some form of online enquiry point with a telephone, email or chat service staffed by those helpful librarians. You’d expect to see training sessions on making the most of your library, maybe delivered as an online meeting or library tutorial, with help and support materials on a website linked from your study space. And although you might not be able to see your fellow students, they are there, searching for that vital article, reading up on a topic for their TMA, getting help with their referencing or tracking down that obscure citation. A library that might be delivered in a different way but includes much of the same content, information, support and skills that you’d get from a traditional campus-based library.

Perhaps you wouldn’t be surprised to hear that many studies are finding that students who used those traditional campus-based libraries achieved higher levels of academic success than students who did not. A recent report from university libraries in the United States (ACRL 2017) analysed studies from 50 universities and found benefits to students from several activities including library instruction, learning information literacy skills and from library use in general. These studies confirm similar findings from the last few years from research around the world, including closer to home in several UK universities including Huddersfield (Stone and Ramsden 2013). These studies covered the whole range of different services provided by campus libraries but importantly for the OU also included some examples where online library resource access (for example journal articles or ebooks) had been investigated and found to correlate with student success.

These types of studies are really important because they offer a way to understand the benefits that libraries can offer students. Correlation isn’t the same as causation, so in other words, the current studies don’t prove that using a library directly improves your grades. But they are demonstrating that students who are using the library are more likely to be doing well. So it follows that we consider then if students who aren’t using the library might be less likely to be getting on well with their course and might need more help? Analysing the data also helps to understand where the OU Library should prioritise effort to help students.

The findings from elsewhere raised a clear question for the Library at the OU, is there a
similar relationship between library use and student achievement at the OU to that found by campus-based libraries?

The answer seems to be that yes there is a similar relationship at the OU. Students who gain higher module results are accessing more library resources. Even though the OU has a different study approach, with students studying online, part-time and at a distance and with a different type of library experience, there is the same sort of relationship. Students who are doing well are generally the same students who take the most advantage of the content that their library can offer.

The study carried out in the OU Library looked at anonymised data from around 90,000 students starting modules in autumn 2015 and found that students who passed their module accessed (on average) double the number of library resources as those who didn’t pass. Students gaining a distinction accessed more library resources than students who passed. Between them those students accessed more than two million library resources. The study also found that not unexpectedly students were accessing more resources as they studied at higher levels, something that we’d presumed would be the case as students tend to be directed towards library resources much more at levels 2 and 3.

Further research has looked at library data for modules starting in early 2016 and finds the same pattern. There also seems to be a trend for students to be accessing more library resources year on year. The number of students who are not accessing data and analyse the picture at a more granular level. It also suggests that data on student engagement with the library might be helpful to the Library and to Faculties when combined with other data from the University in helping to improve the experience for students.

If you would like to know more about the OU Library go to www.open.ac.uk/library to explore further or watch our introductory video for undergraduates to find out about using the OU Library during your studies.

Richard Nurse
Digital Services Development & Innovation Manager, Library Services


I’m approaching the halfway point of my studies and reflecting on the journey so far. I’m 55 and this is my first degree, having messed up my A-levels fairly spectacularly back when I ‘should’ have gone to uni. In 1980 the plan was to study psychology and become an educational psychologist. Plan B was to take a job in the civil service ‘for now’ while I went to evening classes to brush up on my A-level subjects. Plan C prevailed: 31 years and a successful civil service career later, I gratefully took voluntary redundancy 5 years ago and was incredibly fortunate to be able to turn it into exceedingly early retirement.

Not having the mental energy necessary to work full time and study simultaneously, I had decided a few years before retirement that I would do my degree when I retired. After a gap year in which travelling and home improvements took precedence, I excitedly enrolled with the OU. I wanted to study literature and philosophy, with possibly some psychology thrown in. OU offered me the flexibility to do that, via the Open programme. I’ll never forget the thrill of that first set of books arriving, and of getting onto the course website for the first time!

That was in 2013, and that first course - AA100 The Arts Past and Present - was both a joy and an eye-opener. I loved the variety, and realised to my surprise that I was enjoying the history chapters the most, and art history - who knew I enjoyed that?! History somehow seems more important to me at the moment than other subjects. I’ve developed a keen desire to understand more about how the world got to the point we’re at, and so often the roots are long buried.

Life got in the way of my second level 1 course for a while, when I needed treatment for womb cancer in 2014, and deferred for a year. While others might choose to continue with their studies in this situation, particularly as I didn’t need chemotherapy, I preferred to focus purely on my health during the recovery from surgery and while I had radiotherapy. I found my tutor and Student Support helpful and sympathetic, and although it took me a while to understand the fee implications (i.e. that because I was deferring so early in the course I wouldn’t lose any money) I got there in the end.

Thankfully I got back on track in 2015, and that year confirmed for me that history was what I would study. And here I am almost 2 years on, finishing my first pure history module. Medieval to Modern (A200) was a shock to the system. It has been a huge step up from level 1, with mountains of reading and some complicated TMAs to unravel. It has opened my eyes to different ways of viewing and interpreting history, and to the difficulties of reaching a definitive account of any given period. Yet it has drawn me in, puzzling, enlightening and horrifying me in roughly equal measures, and I’m looking forward to continuing my historical journey in October.

Jill Tupper
Both on social media and in real life, a lot of discussion takes place as to whether distance learning is easier or harder than doing a degree on campus, with stereotypes flying in both directions. Yet, given the diversity of students today, not to mention differences between institutions across the country and beyond, this is not a question with an easy answer. Indeed, as somebody who has tried both options, I’d say there is no answer at all!

Since joining the University of Liverpool as a campus-based student in 2006, I’ve come across quite a few assumptions and misconceptions about both online and face-to-face study, a few of which I am sure will be familiar:

**Online studying is easier because there is no fixed schedule**

Well, flexibility is certainly a good thing, and mostly I would agree that distance learning courses are more flexible in terms of timing. But, they aren’t completely without schedules. OU tutorials are valuable to those writing TMAs and EMAs, with some students needing to rearrange work and childcare to travel long distances to attend. The other university with which I am studying by distance, Linköping Universitet in Sweden, has obligatory live online meetings and requires students to spend a week on campus three times per year; not always easy to achieve!

Then there is the small matter of time management; the discipline necessary to knuckle down without regular seminars to prepare for is high, and students who struggle with this when joining the OU face a steep, though luckily not unsupported, learning curve, especially when combining studies with employment, volunteering or caring responsibilities.

**Brick university is a stop-gap; the OU is for people with real lives**

On the other hand, campus students face scheduling issues too, and no, I do not mean about choosing classes that do not clash with certain television programmes! Working at Liverpool, I frequently had to run to make my shifts because professors assumed it would be ok to overrun, and there and later at Roehampton University, I managed to pass courses without attending any lectures due to employment commitments, my grades naturally being a disappointment. Parents and workers alike were left to struggle, fuelling the stereotype that anybody not attending university as a non-working school-leaver is outside of the catered-for norm.

By contrast, although I cannot vouch for other UK distance programmes, the OU’s offerings of short modules, part-time options and assessment banking, help people in all phases of life progress with their studies. Whilst if the posts on student forum, ‘The Student Room,’ are anything to go by, school leavers have felt unwelcome and out of place. Hopefully, this will change, with increased awareness of the Young Students Group (or better yet - integration into all groups), representation (the current Association Officers range in age from their 20s to 60s), and possibly even the rising tuition fees. Distance studies allow school leavers to combine earning and learning whilst saving on living costs, potentially making the OU more popular with younger students, whilst the seriousness of expenses may help to bust the myth that brick university is simply a party-filled stop-gap before entering the, ‘real world.’

**A self-taught degree is worthless compared to a qualification taught by**
This is one of the arguments I hear most often, and I often end up banging my head against the wall when trying to counter it! Distance learning is not self-taught, as not only are the materials prepared by those highly qualified in their fields, but several tutors are professors too. No, not all are, but not all are at brick institutions either. I had more than one undergraduate course taught by a PhD student, and not all professors, however knowledgeable, necessarily have good teaching skills, nor the time to build up a personal relationship with each student. One former professor of mine simply read their typo-filled slides out loud to the class and cannot hold a candle to the OU tutor who offered to phone me internationally when they realised how much I was struggling with my first 60 credit module! Whilst I tend not to make too much contact with my tutors, I know other students who have very close contact either by email or phone, and are satisfied with the help they receive, whereas queuing during a once-a-week office hour to meet a teacher can prove fruitless. Naturally, what works best highly depends on the students’, professors’ or tutors’ preferences and skill sets, as well as each institution’s policies.

Stigma about the standard of distance learning degrees is widespread, not only socially, but amongst employers too. But whilst there is unfortunately no miracle cure for skeptical friends and relatives, OU students can defend their hard work with the knowledge that the university’s qualifications are accepted for accreditation into a wide number of professional bodies, and are, unfortunately not yet universally, but widely recognised by other universities in the form of transferable ECTS credits. Furthermore, would the OU have become and remained the UK’s largest university if its degrees were worthless? There are exceptions to all of these points; some careers naturally require more laboratory-based work than distance learning can enable, but overall, perhaps there is an answer to the question of campus versus online study after all: “It depends.” Personalities, skills, locations, finances, and future plans are only some of the factors which play a large role, and it is important that students find out what works best for them. Each and every degree is an incredible achievement, and all students deserve to be proud!

Amelia Gackowska
Area Association Representative for Continental Europe

OU student life can be tough and if it all gets a bit too much, don’t forget Nightline is there for all OU students wherever they are. Student volunteers are on the hotlines from 6pm each evening waiting to take calls. No topic is off bounds and they’ll listen as long as you need.

It could really help to talk your problems through, whatever they’re about and however difficult they feel right now. Hundreds of OU students have already made that call so you’ll be in good company.

Call: 020 7631 0101
Instant message (Skype): chat.nightline
Skype Phone: londonnightline
Text: 07717 989 900
You can email the team at any time on: listening@nightline.org.uk
Exploring Graduate Roles

The graduate recruitment calendar can be a bit of a minefield with graduate schemes, internships, graduate jobs, work placements, vacation schemes and training contracts to consider. For those of you thinking about a new career or embarking on a job hunt for your first graduate role; we thought that it might be helpful to set out a general guide to what may be on offer and when you need to apply.

Graduate Schemes
Graduate schemes are generally advertised a year in advance of their start date and September to January are the key dates in which the majority of schemes open. If you’re looking for a place on a graduate scheme, it is important that you don’t miss out on the application window or you may not get another opportunity for another twelve months! With their combination of training and work experience, graduate schemes are great opportunities to start building your career.

Every scheme is different and will require a different approach to the application process. Securing a place on a graduate scheme can be competitive and it is important that you are well-prepared before starting the application process. In the next edition, we’ll cover some of the most important factors for you to consider when preparing for your application but, if you are considering this route, we’d recommend that you start your research early and most importantly get your application in as soon as you can (some schemes will have an open-ended close date and close once they’ve received sufficient applications).

Internships
An internship is an opportunity offered by an employer to potential employees, called ‘interns’, to work for a fixed, limited period of time. Internships can vary in length from anywhere between one week and 12 months. If you are considering a particular area of work or have an organisation in mind that you would like to work for, this is a great opportunity to see if the particular career field in the right one for you.

It is also an excellent way to gain experience, get a good reference and could potentially lead to a job offer or place on the organisation’s graduate scheme. Summer internship applications season usually begins in autumn of the year prior and runs all the way up to late May with the heaviest volume of applications generally received between late February and early April. It is also worth noting that whilst the Open University has a policy of only advertising paid internships, some internships are unpaid and you would need to consider the value of the learning experience if applying for an unpaid role.

Placements
Placements are generally undertaken by university students studying full-time courses between their penultimate and final year. Many placements opportunities are also open to part-time students but we would encourage you to check with the employer before applying. Placements are usually paid and can provide an opportunity to spend up to a year gaining valuable work experience.

Law Vacation Placements and Training contracts
Law firms rely on summer, winter and spring vacation schemes as part of the wider recruitment process for training contracts. Vacation placements are formal periods of paid work experience lasting between one and three weeks. Most firms offer vacation placements to second-year law students (OU students on level 2 courses) and final year (OU level 3) non-law students.

A vacation scheme is a valuable insight into the day-to-day life of a trainee solicitor and a great opportunity to find out what a training contract might be like at a particular firm. If you’re considering a career in Law, many firms see the vacation scheme as a way to get to know you, test your ability and potential and gain an understanding of how you might fit into their firm. So, impress on your vacation scheme and your chances of securing a training contract are greatly increased. You
will need to research which firms offer vacation schemes and when they run as application deadlines will vary. Training contracts are a period of recognised training and the final stage to qualifying as a solicitor. The contract is usually a two-year period spent working at a law firm. If you are considering applying for a training contract, you need to find out which firms offer contracts and keep track of approaching deadlines. With places on training contracts becoming increasingly competitive, we would encourage you to start your research and consult a careers adviser well in advance of the application period.

**Graduate Jobs**

We’ve already discussed the option of entering your chosen profession via a formal graduate scheme but these jobs aren’t for everyone – partly because there is a lot of competition, and partly because peoples’ aspirations and personalities are different.

You may be interested to learn that 50% of graduates go on to work with companies with less than 200 employees and 41% for organisations with less than 100 employees. So, for those of you considering an entry level position that requires a degree, the good news is, there are many more of these. Working for a smaller organisation can provide a good first step on the career ladder; particularly if you are the sort of person who likes to take the initiative in developing your skills and talents. As many OU graduates already have life and work experience, the transferable skills you will have already developed, are likely to be attractive attributes to a smaller organisation who may require a new recruit to ‘hit the ground running’.

The Employer Engagement team here at the OU are busy connecting with employers on a daily basis, sourcing opportunities and promoting the diversity and talent amongst our students. If you haven’t already done so, we’d strongly recommend that you register for our on-line vacancy service ‘Jobzone’ where you can sign up to receive vacancy alerts. Finally, if you’re still uncertain about the best way forward please don’t forget that you our careers website has a wealth of information available and you can contact us from the website to request a careers consultation or interview.

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**Spotlight Sunday!**

Do you know of an OU Students Association volunteer who goes that extra mile?

Please nominate them using our form here.

If you fancy trying volunteering, you can browse our many volunteering roles on our website.
Volunteering stories...

Some lovely volunteers share how volunteering has changed their lives...

Thenji (OU Student and volunteer for Shika Tamaa Support Services)

I volunteer for a local charity called STaSS; An organisation that raises awareness on HIV prevention and safe sex. They have some funding from the local council and work with the hospital testing for HIV and some other sexual transmitted infections. I have been involved in outreach projects, handing out flyers and doing HIV instant test (early detection means that treatment can suppress the virus soon enough to stop it from becoming AIDS).

Volunteering with STaSS has made me more determined to help anyone living with HIV or any chronic conditions that may suffer stigma, to live a positive, active life focusing on fitness and healthy eating. This has led to me studying a sports degree with the Open University.

Sam (Students Association staff and volunteer speaker on behalf of care leavers)

I have been a volunteer guest speaker, speaking for a range of audiences at events. These have been based around my journey through further education and higher education as a Care Leaver, and I love having the opportunity to be able to inspire young people who have faced similar obstacles and challenges throughout their lives. Only 6% of Care Leavers in England and 2% in Scotland are in Higher Education, compared to approximately 40% of the general population – it’s a statistic that continues to amaze me. Anything I can do to help, even if it’s making a different to just one person is time well spent!

It was great to find that there was a ‘Guide to HE’ made by the ‘Who Cares Trust’. I noticed that there was no such guide for Further Education so I worked with the Virtual Learning school to create a guide for school leavers: informing young people in care about their study options, bursaries and the kind of support that they can expect as a young person making that transition from ‘In Care’ to ‘Care Leaver’.

Through volunteering I had the chance to attend events in my role as a Learner Engagement Coordinator to network with providers and support organisations. These sorts of opportunities are really transferable both professionally and personally.

I like to volunteer ad hoc, because I like to make a difference in small ways when I can – I won a Kids in Care Award in 2013 and had the opportunity to meet a huge range of inspirational young people and learn about projects and trusts that benefited children in care. I have met some amazing individuals though volunteering ‘Festival Welfare Services’, and get to spend my summers at music and arts events as well as contributing to the safety of the festival goers. Volunteering has opened up opportunities to meet likeminded people, and make new long-lasting friendships. I’m a big advocate of getting out there and trying new things, even if they seem a bit scary or nerve wracking.
Paul (Students Association staff and volunteer at BucksVision and others!)

My main volunteering role is with BucksVision. A local charity which supports people with sight loss in Buckinghamshire. I am a volunteer driver and guide for a walking group, of which I am also the treasurer. Many of the members of my group are elderly and the walks give them the opportunity to stay active, and meet other people during the walks and refreshments afterwards.

Volunteering has had an impact on my career as being part of the committee has helped my decision-making, negotiation, report-writing and presentation skills. My experience with community activities and help those with disabilities has helped in job interviews. I have been able to present myself as a more rounded person, with skills that are over and above the core requirements of the role. This was important during my job interview with the Students Association and in fact one of my referees was chair of the Walking Group.

Volunteering with BucksVision has also given me the confidence to get involved with other community activities – including the Rugby World Cup, the Parks Trust events and the Milton Keynes International Festival. This has given me an insight into other organisations and event management. Early on I saw that volunteers get so much out of what they do, it is great to meet new people and involvement in activities out of work helps you to keep a healthy work-life balance.

Through the Walking Group, I have discovered a number of parks and interesting walks I’ve taken friends and family on – seeing a side to the local area I may have missed. Seeing the people you are helping enjoying themselves is the most rewarding part, and there’s nothing better than feeling you are helping to make their lives better and making a difference.

Rob (Students Association staff, volunteer Trustee among many other roles!)

I’ve volunteered in a range of roles over time, but to give a few examples; as a student my love of music lead me to be involved in their radio station, firstly as a host/DJ and later I volunteered to run the music outputs side of the station. This involved working with record labels to get newly-released music and to complete interviews with new acts. I was also on the station’s committee the first year we switched over from being a part-time FM broadcast to being an online broadcast.

Studying Psychology and Criminology lead me to be part of referral order panels, dealing with youth offending with restorative justice and trying to understand the reasons for offending rather than simply dealing with the symptom. This gave me an insight into the workings of youth justice and the issues in the system which proved valuable later on when I worked in crime and disorder reduction.

I then became a mentor for young teenagers displaying behavioural issues and potentially on the cusp of offending or exclusion through a local youth project. This was a really challenging but rewarding experience and I was able to relate to many of their situations.

I have previously been a Trustee and am currently a Trustee for Collections Trust and volunteer as a ‘Supporter’ with the Small Charities Coalition to support peers in small charities. I’m also a part of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)’s Members Assembly.

My early experience of being a Trustee had an impact in helping me to understand and appreciate charity governance and the challenges of the role of Trustees. We went through some very difficult and challenging times for the charity and this has sharpened my understanding. My early volunteering experiences as a student helped narrow down my focus on what I first wanted to do following graduation (work to tackle and prevent crime and disorder) and later the type of role...
I wanted to move on into (charity governance).

However, these benefits are ones I have come to appreciate in retrospect, they were not the reasons I initially did any volunteering at all. For me, it's always been about doing things that I am interested in, giving something back to others and not seeking a personal benefit. The things you gain from volunteering are; how it changes your outlook, the experiences you gain that you hadn’t envisaged and the people you might positively effect on the way. The help that volunteering has given my career is a bonus, but the principle reason I volunteer is my interest and desire to be involved and help causes that I’m passionate about.

**Fran (OU Student, volunteering with Guides and at festivals!)**

In my late teens and early twenties I volunteered with various Quaker groups. I helped at Christmas homeless events and went on residential camps which carried out physical or social tasks like renovating a community centre or running a play scheme. These were brilliant ways to gain independence and make friends. I once travelled to Hungary, expecting a general renovation type task and found myself on an archaeological dig! After that I was a Brownie, Guide and later a Ranger, coming from parents who met through Scouting, this was an obvious move. I am now a leader in the Girl guides and have recently volunteered as an Oxfam festival steward and in a local Oxfam shop. Although volunteering didn’t directly have an effect on my career I have seen it benefit others and it can be a good way to decide to change careers. Now that I am semi-retired I’ve been able to broaden my horizons instead of watching them shrink. I suppose that has been my recent motivation and I have met new friends, learned new skills and had so much fun! In my role as a Girl Guide leader, there’s a common joke that ‘it’s only one and a half hours a week’ but that time is really important. We provide a safe space where the girls can just be themselves. We aim to improve self-esteem and body confidence as well as teaching skills they often don’t learn at school. We provide them with a voice too as the organisation is actively involved in campaigning. The volunteers I have met through all my roles are friendly and welcoming, and the leaders’ tent at Girl Guide camps are always full of laughter.

Anyone thinking about volunteering should try to find the time and go for it. Choose something that suits you and have fun. There is so much happiness to be given and gained, why wouldn’t you volunteer if you have the time?

**Beth (Students Association staff volunteering with young people and for local sport team)**

As Head of Student Volunteering, it’s pretty cliché for me to talk about the benefits of volunteering, but they speak for themselves, so I will talk about my own journey!

From a young age I have been involved in a range of volunteering positions. Starting as a St John Ambulance Cadet, providing first aid cover to concerts and sporting events, I gained a range of first aid qualifications and attended events where I met people from all walks of life. As someone who moved out of home very young, volunteering was a way to keep busy and meet new people, it also helped me gain skills and make decisions about my future which as a school leaver I may not have considered if I had not met
people from outside my social circle.

I soon became involved in youth mentoring schemes and volunteered at Young Carers, supporting young people who found themselves in difficult situations and caring for another person from a young age. This led me to a career in social services which I found greatly satisfying for many years. After a spell of ill health, volunteering went on hold and I missed being part of something bigger than myself. As I recovered and found ways to handle my illness, I took on full time work and travelled abroad to volunteer with several projects both in Thailand and Morocco, supporting street kid projects. Every role I have had, has offered me new and exciting opportunities, from speaking in front of crowds, to planning large events. I have gained skills which I can add to my CV but the main thing I have gained is the feeling that I have helped others and the friends I’ve made along the way!

Ken (OU Student, Volunteering as a School Governor and Companion)

I first got involved in volunteering as I decided I wanted to do something to support people in the local community and when I saw ‘Daft as a Brush’ I thought, ‘that’s for me’, as I enjoy interacting with people. My role as a companion is to look after people when they are on the minibus to receive treatment for various forms of cancer. I find it very humbling and it’s an honour to assist people on their journey to recovery. I have been a School Governor for about six months and that involves meeting with senior management team once a month after school. By role is to help and assist the school look at their healthy eating strategy, and how this can assist the school being proactive in being able to plan effectively and set targets. In terms of my career I have recently started a new post as a Customer Service Representative with United Kingdom Visa and Immigration Service, This has impacted the amount of volunteering I have been able to do but the experiences I gained have been great. Through volunteering I have been able to write articles and been published, something I would not have thought of doing some years ago. I have also written a short article for Read and Write Gold an assistive software company on how I used their product. It can also be a good conversation opener at interviews when you get asked what you have done with your time while you haven’t been working! It’s also given me the opportunity to be involved in helping organise events.

Tanya (OU Student, Volunteering for Association of Young People with M.E)

I have been volunteering for the charity; Association of Young People with Myalgic encephalomyelitis (AYME). I began there as a local contact coordinator for Cornwall, and then moved on their graduates when I reached the grand old age of 26. At Grads I was the editor and writer for their magazine, Stepping Stones, and was the coordinator of Grads.

Due to my illness I have yet to enter the job market but I am hoping that the varied work I have done will help in my pursuit of a job in the near future. I have been asked to appear on telly or in articles before because of my volunteering and have attended M.E groups where instead of myself listening to what others had to say I ended up answering their questions!
JOINING OR STARTING A SOCIETY IS A GREAT WAY TO MEET OTHER OU STUDENTS, HAVE FUN AND ENRICH YOUR OU STUDY. WE HAVE SO MANY DIVERSE SOCIETIES THAT YOU’LL WANT TO JOIN A FEW! AND, IF YOU CAN’T FIND ONE THAT INTERESTS YOU, MAYBE YOU COULD SET UP A NEW ONE?

Some societies are linked to specific OU courses and some are based on a specific interest or hobby. All were started by small groups of enthusiasts wanting to share their passion with others. The majority of societies offer membership not just to students but also to friends and families ensuring a real cross section of members.

Some of the larger, more established societies organise regular meetings, revision weekends, conferences, outings and events; others might have modest numbers relying on newsletters in order to thrive. All societies need support from their fellow OU students.

We asked the societies themselves to let us know what they get up to and what they have planned for future events, there’s a lot going on! If you would like to join or form a society or for further information please get in touch by emailing ousa-societies@open.ac.uk

Our wonderful Groups, the Disabled Students Group and PLEXUS, provide help, support and a safe community for students who identify as disabled or LGBT+ respectively.

www.open.ac.uk/ousa/societies

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**Open University Music Society**

The 2017 Annual Music Day, to include the Annual General Meeting, will take place at 13.15 on Saturday 16th September 2017. As in previous years the format of the day will be mainly an informal one with the AGM serving as the more official part of the proceedings. Nominations will be welcome for Officer Posts in advance of the AGM, or on the day, if more appropriate, and also for the Society’s Representative to the Societies Committee, which meets at Milton Keynes three times per annum.

It has been agreed that the day be held in the South Region once again and we are proposing to return to Winchester after an absence of five years. There will be time and an opportunity to visit the Cathedral and museums of interest on the day.

As the Annual Music Day is the only day in the year for as many of us as possible to meet up, if you have not been before please do come along on this date and get to know some of your fellow members. You will be most welcome to join in the informal exchange of musical news and views. Further details and a time-table for the day will be available nearer the date.

Linda Brown, Secretary

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**OUDES launches equipment lending library!**

**Resource sharing to support OU students...**

OUDES - The Open University Development and Environment society has set up a peer-to-peer, equipment lending library for its members. The library includes a drone, electron microscope and computing and programming components, available for use, free of charge, for activities such a university or work projects which relate to development or the environment.

The scheme aims to enable resource sharing, to support Open University students, academics and alumni to do more exceptional work in these fields.

Access to the equipment library is included in the OUDES membership of £5 /Year. For more information, visit oudes.org

**Bloggers wanted!**

Engineering for Humanity is seeking creative students with an interest in engineering and development to contribute blogs and other content to the website and newsletter. If you enjoy writing and would like the opportunity to be heard by your peers, please contact shane.kelly@treethinker.org

**Good news for OU students interested in computing!**

The name comes from the late Dr Alan Turing OBE FRS 1912-1954 who worked for the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.

Plans for the society include the offer of trips to places of historical computer interest. The society will also have exclusive interviews with computer professionals from companies and universities.

Everyone is welcome to join!

For further details please contact the society hello@drturingsociety.org.uk or join their Facebook Group.

**Website**

**Facebook**
The Write Club society hit a huge milestone this month. Congratulations on hitting 1000 members Write Club, here’s to many more!
Write Club, the OU Creative Writing Society for all past and present OU students and staff is this month celebrating hitting 1000 members. And because of this amazing milestone we are asking our members to tell us what they would like to do to celebrate. We want to know what you think we do well, what we get wrong and what we could do to engage you more.

We at Write Club are currently looking for submissions for the next issue of the magazine that goes out to all fully registered members. We have guidelines of 1500 words for prose and 40 lines for poetry, but we have been known to be flexible for longer pieces. Full submissions guidance and themes can be found in the Facebook group or in the Write Club forums.

We will be running weekly activities in the forums as usual to keep us busy over the summer study break. So if you are lucky enough to have a bit of time to yourself over the holiday period, join us in the forums for some things to fill your time. This year we will be looking at having world building activities and poetry exercises, and we will be re-running the ever popular regular activities ‘Character Lab’ and ‘Cluster Club’.

We want to look into the possibility of arranging some face-to-face meet-ups across the country, so will be looking for volunteers to help us take that idea forward. We are discussing a meet-up in Edinburgh as part of a Fresher’s Event happening there and there are plans for a Northern Ireland get together too. If anyone has any suggestions or wants to help out, please contact us, we always welcome input.

And finally we are looking at the possibility of expanding the current committee team, so if any of you want to get more involved in the running of Write Club, please let us know, either in our group or forums or by email to WriteClub@gmx.co.uk.

Lastly, as always, we want to wish each and every one of our members our undying thanks for being the core part of what makes us so great, Write Club is all about the members, and without your engagement we would never have gotten off the ground.

Thank you all for being part of this.

The Write Club Committee

At the end of 2016, we saw the resurrection of the Post Graduate Student Society (PGSS) by new research students Jay Nugent and Zana Saunders.

Whilst still in its developing stages, the PGSS has already hosted some events including a pub quiz, Bingo night and trip to Bletchley Park.

The society aims to host regular monthly events for post grad students, as well as run a facebook group to support all OU students who are undertaking post-graduate studies, wherever they are.

The society is keen to hear from all students with ideas for future events and welcome anyone who would like to get more involved. We are a friendly, supportive society which hopefully will grow and become a real presence both on and off campus.

Zana.Saunders@open.ac.uk
Open University Students for Ethical Science

You may have concerns about the suffering of animals resulting from their use in education and research. If you are interested in studying Life Sciences, but worried about causing harm to animals through your studies, please do not be put off. You can study for Life Sciences qualifications at the Open University without causing harm to animals. However, the OU still uses many animals in its research projects every year.

As an Open University student society affiliated to the OU Students Association, Students for Ethical Science aims to persuade the Open University peacefully to replace its harmful use of animals in Life Sciences with academically equivalent or superior non-harmful alternatives. We have been instrumental in bringing about Association policy to support this aim, promote transparency in the university’s animal use and enable students to opt-out of harmful animal experiments without compromising their academic progress.

Members can contact each other via our members’ online forum, accessible from our website. We exchange information with organisations campaigning for humane science, such as the Dr Hadwen Trust, BUAV, InterNICHE and political parties.

We also provide information and support to students who wish to study Life Sciences without harming animals or who are interested in learning more about animal ethics issues. Please see the course choice information and advice on our website at www.ouses.org.uk.

Sadly, the Open University reducing its residential school science modules is reducing the opportunity for hands-on practical work for undergraduate science students. But the good news is that students studying towards the new qualifications are able to study Life Sciences without their participation directly harming animals.

As a society we are constantly looking for support and appreciate active contributions such as writing articles for newsletters or our website or researching information about the science and ethics of using animals. If you’re interested in doing something, whether you’re already a member or not, or if you just want to show your views by joining as a member (the more members, the stronger our voice), then please get in touch.

To find out more and how to join us please visit:
• the OU Students Association Ethical Science forum on the Virtual Learning Environment
• www.ouses.org.uk

Contact details: ses.membership@blueyonder.co.uk
Reporting back...

The Central Executive Committee have been busy!

It's been a busy few months for our student leadership team! In this edition we're checking in with the Officers and our Student Council member. In addition to what we cover below, the team took part in many workshops, working groups and projects.

You can read the reports in full here.

You can also read the reports of our AARs and FARs.

Acting President...
Nicola Simpson was invited to speak at the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students focusing on the decline in the number of part time and mature students. You can read her full address on page 8. As Acting President she attended meetings of the Senate, Council and Education Committee. Student members of these committees are a formal opportunity to share what matters to OU Students with those who make decisions at the University. Also, since her last report Consultation meetings have taken place around the UK and Ireland, with an online equivalent for students in Europe. The two main discussion topics were building the student community and educational and pastoral support. You can find out more about the face to face events in Nicola's blog post here.

As Acting President Nicola has attended a number of meetings with members of the Open University Senior Team. These have ranged from workshop style events on a wide range of strategic issues to more focused one to one meetings on a specific issue or student concern. These meetings allow the Student Association to raise concerns with members of the senior team directly and seek clarity about an issue and when necessary a timely resolution for students. She has also taken part in multiple Association and OU lead projects and working groups.

VP Administration...
It was with great pleasure that, earlier this year, Peter Cowan officially confirmed PLEXUS, the LGBT+ group, as an official group of the Association and to ratify the affiliation of the Dr Turing Society. As a member of the Boards of Trustees for both the Association and the Open University Students Educational Trust, he attended board meetings. Further details can be found on our website.

Peter attended two of the five English Student Consultation meetings – in London and Newcastle – where he heard the views of students first hand, both regarding the consultation topics and other matters that they consider important.

This year London Nightline turned 45 – Peter represented the Association at their anniversary event. It was a great opportunity to meet with the Trustees of the organisation and to also talk to some of the volunteers who operate the phone lines through the night. From both the speeches and the conversation it was clear how much they valued the affiliation of the Association with Nightline and their understanding of the challenges of part time distance learning.

VP Communications...
Over the past few months, Rachel Hughes has been working closely with the editorial team to continuously improve the magazine, both in design and content. She has also been attending regular meetings with senior members of the OU Communications department, strengthening the relationship between the Association and OU teams.
Rachel is currently working on several projects that look to vastly improve several aspects of our online platforms, including the website and forums. Last month she lead on the closure of the ‘OUSA Matters’ forum and the opening of the new ‘Talk to your Students Association’ forum. This new forum is designed to be a place that members of the Association can ask questions of their elected representatives and discuss student related news. You can find the new forum here.

Rachel continues to be committed to improving awareness of the Association and our work and support for OU students.

**VP Community...**

Recently a new OU Students Association Community Facebook group was launched. It’s a friendly environment for students to find out more about the Association and for volunteers to share their experiences and get to know each other. Also, Stephanie Stubbs starred in the Association’s first ever Facebook Live stream alongside the Chair of PLEXUS, Graham Rimmer.

During the January Freshers week, Stephanie appeared as a host of STUDIO, our student radio show. She also helped to arrange and host evening events on social media, welcoming back students both new and experienced to the Association.

Stephanie was pleased with the number of students participating in our ‘Big Feb Meet-up’ – there was 20 face to face events around the UK and three online sessions. She received some great feedback from students who took part, and is looking forward to the next one in June! See page 11 for more information. Stephanie also attended meetings about other events where the Association have a presence: Residential Schools and Degree Ceremonies.

**VP Education...**

There have been changes made recently in OUstudents HQ, with more staff and new roles.

VP Education and VP Representation are now part of the Student Voice team and are taking a fresh look at the roles of Central Representatives and Learning Experience Reporters. This is so that we can improve the way that we get the student voice heard by the OU.

Lorraine has also been involved with is the OU’s Academic strategy which goes to Senate for final approval, after several drafts to previous Senate meetings. The Association has had the chance to have quite a lot of input and she is pleased that the final strategy is a great improvement on the original draft and that many of the points we made have been taken into account and influenced the wording of the strategy.

**VP Equal Opporunities...**

Cherry Day was invited to speak at an OU Legacy and Supporter event in London. She spoke about her journey with the OU, and mentioned how the Disabled Students Group is a great example of the effectiveness of Association affiliated groups.

She has also had several busy days on campus in Milton Keynes, attending meetings and workshops with both Association and OU staff, focusing on protected characteristic and accessibility issues that affect students.

Cherry also starred as one of our STUDIO hosts, attended a Student Consultative meeting and a monthly local coffee and chat with OU students in her area.

**VP Representation and Research...**

A survey was sent to students in January asking for feedback on our elections and also included open questions to allow for insights into how student engagement with them could be strengthened. Working group meetings have taken place since the survey was sent, during which the evaluation of quantifiable data and the evaluation of open comments carried out by the Research and Information Officer were discussed.

Caroline Poppenga is a student member of
the Survey Management Group, which works on the redevelopment of the SEaM (Student Experience on a Module) survey. A student consultation was carried out to gather views on what is asked in the survey, how it is asked, how the OU responds to the answers students give, the current student feedback mechanisms and current student feedback priorities. There was also a 26 “SEaM Survey Focus Group” workshop held on 16 March as part of Student Voice Week, which students visiting campus could attend.

**VP Student Support...**

Alison Kingan oversees our Peer Support Service, which supports students by answering one off queries or offering longer one to one support. It’s great to welcome two new Supporters to the wonderful team, and she hopes you’ll have a fulfilling and enjoyable time.

At the Service Review meeting, Alison, OU and Association staff and other Officers discussed contact preferences, tutorial waiting list concerns and student profile information for tutorials amongst other topics.

Alison also attended the Carers Trust in Scotland Conference. The Conference focused on students who had been young carers and difficulties faced when transitioning into adult student carers. Their definition of being a carer is – “anyone who cares, unpaid, for a family member or friend who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support.” Young carers can experience bullying and some acquire poor or no qualifications. Two speakers had an OU connection, including a staff member from the OU in Scotland and a past OU student.

**VP Student Council Member...**

The March meeting of Council took place in the offices of the OU in Wales in Cardiff where Barbara Tarling received a very warm welcome and enjoyed some excellent Welsh hospitality. Before the meeting began there was a presentation from the Director on the trends in Welsh higher education and the achievements of, and challenges for, the OU in Wales. The agenda included a number of policy and strategy papers. Amongst the items for formal report was the annual review of the OU-OU Students Association Relationship Agreement which was introduced by the Acting President.

As part of her role, Barbara reads all the consultations that take place in the main Student Consultation Forum and contributes to some of them. It’s been very encouraging to see such a wide range of student voices in the forums this year. The consultation on End-of-Module surveys which took place during Student Voice Week was particularly lively. Barbara was also very pleased to be asked to take part in the recruitment process for a Head of School for the school of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care. Student involvement in the appointment of senior OU staff is a positive step forward for the Association.

**A warm welcome to our new members!**

Tanya Malone, Pádraic Ivers and Claire Davey joined our student leadership team in our April by-elections...

Hi everyone I’m Tanya and I just want to thank you all for voting for me, I am extremely grateful and cannot wait to meet the team and help us students get the most out of the Open University. I live in Cornwall with my fiancé, Gary and his little boy Alfie so my days are mainly full of playing Lego, PlayStation or at the moment making paper planes in between revising for my exam.

Best wishes,

Tanya
Hi, my name is Pádraic Ivers. First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for being elected as AAR for Republic of Ireland. I am really excited about my new role and can’t wait to get stuck in. I am originally from Mayo but now living in Dublin. I am currently revising for exams for the third module of my BA in International Studies. This year I have been studying International Development: making sense of a changing world, which is a fascinating subject, especially considering what has recently been going on in the political world. I hope this module and previous ones will help me in my role to represent the students of ROI as best I can.

Finally, I would like to wish everyone the very best of luck in your end of module exams and future studies. I hope to be in touch with Irish students directly soon, but in the meantime, should any of you require anything or wish to offer some ideas or advise, please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Want to achieve international recognition for your undergraduate work?**

You might recently have received an email inviting you to consider submitting a piece of work to the prestigious Undergraduate Awards for an opportunity to achieve international recognition, to raise your profile and to further your career path.

The Undergraduate Awards (UA) is the world’s largest academic awards programme. Uniquely pan-discipline, with 25 different categories, UA aims to celebrate undergraduate students by recognising creativity, excellence and innovative thinking within coursework and projects.

Submitting is quick, easy and free. You don’t even have to produce a new piece of work; you submit coursework or project work you have already done.

**Who is eligible?** To be eligible you must have completed at least 240 credits towards your undergraduate degree or have graduated in 2016.

**What can you submit?** Any piece of individual undergraduate coursework which received a 2.1 or higher (Distinction or higher, A-grade equivalent) can be submitted. For OU students – this is a mark of 70 or higher.

You can submit up to three pieces of work across any of the subject categories. For most categories, the word count must be between 1,750 and 5,000 words, but some categories can be up to 12,000 words long. Find out more about the submission rules at http://www.undergraduateawards.com/submission-2/

Over 100 OU students have already submitted their work for consideration and many others have been getting in touch to find out more details. There’s so much interest amongst OU students – that a helpful set of FAQs has been specially compiled and you’ll find those printed here to save you some time.

**Submission deadline** Submit your work by 13 June 2017.

**The prize** Global winners are published in an annual academic journal and are invited to attend a four-day, all-expenses-paid Global Summit in Dublin for a series of inspirational lectures, workshops and discussions. Winners and Highly Commended Entrants also gain access to the Undergraduate Awards Alumni Network.

**For more information and to submit visit** www.undergraduateawards.com/

**Don’t Delay – Submit Today!**
Student observers get a special insight

The Students Association’s elected Central Executive Committee meets four times a year and often invites student observers to participate to ensure it is open and transparent.

In this article, we asked two observers from the April meeting to give us their reflections. Natalie Pope is a Psychology and Counselling student from the East of England and is Secretary of the Disabled Students Group. Shara McDonald is also studying Psychology and Counselling and travelled from the East Midlands. She is also an Assembly Executive for the East Midlands, a Central Representative, a forum moderator and the Public Relations and Communications officer for the Disabled Students Group.

What did you know about our Central Executive Committee before the weekend?

Natalie: I had previous knowledge of the Committee through friends, although I was not really aware of what they did. What I learnt is they work very hard to make sure all students get a good experience from their studies.

Shara: I tried to learn as much as I could by reading past papers and minutes which are located on the Association website. This helped me further once I had read the current papers as often the information was linked to the last meeting. If I had questions or wanted more information I spoke to current Central Executive Committee members or the Association staff. They were very supportive before and during the meeting.

Which papers and discussions interested you?

Natalie: I found the papers and discussions on the online forums most interesting. Accessibility within these forums is very high on the list for disabled students, although I know the Association works hard to try and improve this area to ensure that all students can access them.

Shara: The Committee’s role is to focus on improving services to students due to transitions or changes that are going to take place now and in the future. Examples include the forum restructure and redevelopment of the Association website – looking at how these improve student experience. Many of the decisions or changes taking place take a lot of research and submitting of papers, which are reviewed and then implemented if appropriate.

Natalie: I was also pleased to see the ideas for volunteer training, networking and recognition. A lot of people work tirelessly for our student community and are passionate about it and it can sometimes feel like an uphill struggle. So a chance to mix with other likeminded people and share ideas in a social setting is a good one.

Which projects excited you?

Shara: I was interested in the Grassroots project as I am currently volunteering on a local level I knew this would impact on my role as Assembly Executive directly. I was able to share my views within the meeting, as I felt it was important for the members of the Committee to understand how important it is to have Grassroots volunteers. I was very pleased that the newly created roles have been approved by Committee. Hopefully we will see these implemented in the future and I hope that this will allow more students to get involved with the Association.

Natalie: I also think the Grassroots project looks interesting. This project is considering what structure should be in place for the Association at grassroots level for each of the Nations, Republic of Ireland and Continental Europe. For some students the Central Executive Committee may feel ‘out of reach’, so giving the students a chance to ‘meet and greet’...
someone from the Committee is a good idea. It bridges a gap that can make more students aware of who they are and what they do.

**Shara:** I really enjoyed the whole experience. Thank you to all the members who answered my questions and were so supportive. It has helped me decide that the future I may like to stand for a role to be part of the Central Executive Committee.

The Committee members are current students. Many have disabilities and all have a passion for supporting students, improving services and looking ahead to ensure the Association’s services are kept modern and current with all the changes.

### Area Association Representative, Anca Seaton, shares her thoughts on a busy weekend...

The end of April was another busy period for #teamOUstudents. On 21-23 April, the Central Executive Committee met in sunny Milton Keynes for a weekend full of meetings, presentations, training, workshops and, of course, socialising.

The agenda was full, as usual, and we also had observers from the nations, societies, the Disabled Students Group and trustees.

The serious business kicked off in style, at 9am on Saturday morning, although I have to admit I was not ready to discuss official Students Association business that early in the morning! But eventually the caffeine started to work and we ploughed through the papers. I don’t know if you noticed, but the papers presented at the Committee can be split into two categories: to note and to discuss/approve. The reports from all Committee members, the Board of Trustees, our affiliated societies and so on are in the “to note” category, together with any updates of ongoing project or working groups. Some of the other papers were updates, but they required discussion and a decision made on the recommendations.

The item on the agenda that was of particular interest to me and, I would like to think, all our members, was the update from the Grassroots project. This project was a working group tasked to find a viable regional structure of the Association, and it was created after the last Central Executive Committee meeting in October. I am a member of this group and I enjoyed the discussions – which were very detailed. All members of the working group are passionate about the Association and its future, so we did our best to try and come up with a workable regional and national structure. During the Committee debate, I was expecting strong opinions, to be honest, but the impression I got was that the working group came up with a good plan for the immediate future and the consensus was that we should put it in practice as soon as possible, while keeping an eye on it and tweaking and changing it on the fly. The item was approved. Phew!

Another item on the agenda that stood out for me was the workshop on OU Students Association Strategy. There was a strict table plan, with each table having a mix of Central Executive Committee members, observers and Association staff. We had a look at our vision, mission, values and objectives. This was just the start of the ongoing process of making sure these are up to date and reflect what we, OU students, want from our OU study journeys and the Association.

I can’t finish this report from the weekend without mentioning the socialising part of it. In the evenings, Committee members and observers met at the bar (we are students, after all!) and got to know each other, discussed studies, Association business, talked about everything else under the sun. It was also a great opportunity for the observers to ask questions without feeling ‘under the spotlight’.
Overcoming challenges: Career stories

The OU Careers team share two inspiring stories from OU graduates who went on to overcome challenges arising from disability or health issues...

Around 18% of students who contact the OU careers and employability service are disabled. Although not everyone in this position encounters barriers to their career plans, we know that many experience challenges of one sort or another.

As a careers service we’re constantly looking to add specialist resources and links on our website to help – and our careers advisers are ready to provide one to one telephone or e-mail support where necessary. We know that everyone’s individual circumstances are different and sometimes personal guidance is the best way forward.

We’re also keen to highlight positive stories from OU students who’ve overcome challenges arising from disability or health issues. For example, Alexandra, a recent OU Computing and IT graduate told us how she secured a graduate job with KPMG despite significant mobility and concentration difficulties. With the help of Access to work support and flexible working hours provided by her employer, Alexandra has been able to fulfil the potential that KPMG saw in her application and is now involved with developing inclusive recruitment policies within the company.

Craig is another OU student who applied for a Change 100 internship for people with disabilities. Although initially practicalities meant this wasn’t feasible for him, the internship organisers, Koreo (a social mobility consultancy), offered Craig an internship for three months which then became a permanent role. He negotiated flexible hours and working from home, which has also proved to be advantageous to Koreo, as Craig is easily able to visit University stakeholders in the North.

If you too have a disability/health condition and have had a positive experience in finding and/or keeping work, then we’d like to hear from you. What kind of support have you found most helpful? What sort of challenges have you overcome?

Hearing about real life experiences is enormously motivating for fellow students. It also gives us powerful examples for employers, to encourage greater diversity in recruitment and the provision of appropriate support in the workplace.

So please let the careers team know if you have a positive story to tell, your example could open new opportunities for other OU students.

Thank you for your help, it really is appreciated, just email your story to: SS-CAS-Careers@openmail.open.ac.uk
Connecting with other students

Acting President Nicola shares how students can find support in our community...

Feeling part of the OU student community can make all the difference between staying on track and withdrawing from study. At this time of year, with exams and assessments looming it is incredible to see the support students provide for each other. OU students are helping each other over the hurdles of University study with people they may never meet face to face. When the exams are finished the conversation will change from supporting each other to prepare for exams and assessments to celebrating (or commiserating) over our results and discussions about which module to register for next.

How can I connect with OU students?

If you aren’t there already follow our social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and join the conversation in our forums. If you would like to meet OU Students in your own area you will have the perfect opportunity at the BIG June Meet-up. Have a look on our website to find out what meet-ups have been planned and if there isn’t one near you, why not become a host? Meet-ups happen all year round and they only take place because OU students make them happen!

What’s going on at the Students Association?

Over the last few months your representatives have worked to ensure student voice is at the heart of decision making at the Open University. We have been involved in putting student success at the heart of the OU Charter Day and supported the student consultations that took place online and face to face around the country. You can find out more about the work of the Central Executive Committee online. All of the published papers can be found here and you can chat to representatives about the work we do here.

We are always thinking of ways to evolve and to meet the needs of our students. Your student representatives are currently making sure our strategy continues to meet the needs of students and you can expect to see a refreshed strategy presented to our next Central Executive Committee. In the coming months you will also see the launch of our redeveloped website and online forum spaces. We will be launching new ways to get involved as we implement the Grassroots Project and create new volunteer opportunities with our charity, the OU Students Educational Trust.

Look out for information about STUDIO – our newly recruited team of radio hosts will be presenting their first show soon.

If you would like to receive news and updates about what we are doing direct to your inbox you can register for our mailing list here.

Nicola Simpson
Acting President of the OU Students Association

Want to write for OUstudents Magazine?

If you would like to share your story, we’d love to hear from you!
Get in touch by emailing:

oustudents-magazine

Sign-up to our mailing list

To receive information about the Students Association, be the first to hear about up and coming events, chances to come to campus and to get your opinions heard, just click here.