UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE!
Have you got what it takes?

OU STUDENTS FRESHERS
Or, re-freshers! Find out what we’ve got planned...

UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE
Could this be the year that you take on Jeremy Paxman and represent the OU?

OU STUDENTS PODCAST
We look at the issue of isolation, speaking to students about how to overcome this feeling.

ASK A STUDENT
Real student questions and issues answered by the people in the know...OU students!
Welcome...

to your OU Students Association magazine, a place to share your stories, connect with others and find out more about your Association.

Firstly, a huge welcome to new students to the OU. Our online Freshers Week has lots of information for new students as well as those who are returning for the 2nd or nth time.

Feeling isolated is one of the major difficulties for many students at the OU and the latest Podcast has suggestions on different ways to overcome it. Joining a Society is one way to meet like-minded students and we have more than 20!

Reading about a degree ceremony brought back memories of the enjoyable days I’ve spent as a volunteer on the OU Students Association marketing stall. Definitely worth considering becoming a volunteer.

I was pleased to read about Professor Bassindale’s intention to make OU research more widely known through social media, as many students are unaware of how much research is done.

As usual it’s always interesting to read about how other students cope and there are some inspiring stories in this edition; however there is another document that we, as students, should read – the Student Charter. It has been reviewed and signed by our OU Students Association President and the (fairly) new Vice Chancellor.

Finally, our Editor and all-round great help, Anna Vickerson, is leaving us and moving onward and upward within the OU. A big thank you from me and all the best for the future.

But before I do anything else, I need to read the article on procrastinating.

Lorraine Adams
Vice President Communications

COMING UP...

23 - 24 September
Scottish Freshers Festival
OU students in Scotland are invited to join Mark and Sue at this year’s Scottish Freshers Festival at Glasgow’s SECC on 23 & 24 September - find out more at freshersfestival.com

28 September - 2 October
OU Students FRESHERS!
A virtual Freshers Fair for all new students to The Open University including a showcase of our student community, top tips on being an OU student, as well as how to get support from your Students Association.

2 - 9 October
OU Students Societies Week
Join us for Societies week, introducing all the fantastic activities you can get involved in.

1 October
OUstudents Radio!
Listen live to our very own OUstudents Radio. More details to follow.
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Getting the OU student voice heard

New student charter signed!

Developed jointly by the University and the OU Students Association, the Student Charter describes the way in which all the members of the OU, staff and students, should work together in partnership so that everyone can benefit.

The Student Charter sets out what our responsibilities are and what we can all expect of each other. Earlier this year its first annual review was conducted by a team of OU staff and Association students.

The review team consulted widely, and sought student views through the student consultative process using an online forum. As a result, changes made include more on the importance of good two-way communication and on closing feedback loops – communicating when and where feedback has been acted on, or where change is not possible, the reason why this has not happened.

But rather than make lots of changes to the wording of the charter, the review team concluded that, as stated by one forum member, ‘the important thing is to implement it rather than change it.’ In the light of this, the team proposed plans for communication and annual monitoring and review of the charter, which was approved by the University’s Senate in June and signed by Vice Chancellor Peter Horrocks and Students Association President Ruth Tudor.

Photo: Peter Horrocks, Vice Chancellor and Ruth Tudor, OU Students Association President are pictured above signing the updated Student Charter.

Ruth said:

‘This is a vital living document which underpins the student experience at the OU. It will continue to evolve as the world of education continues to change in the years to come.’

For more information on the Student Charter visit the website: www.open.ac.uk/students/charter.

If you have any ideas about its future development please contact the review team at: student-charter@open.ac.uk

OU students in the East of England

We’ve had a great summer here in the East of England, kicking off with the OU’s Degree Ceremony held in the spectacular Ely Cathedral. I personally volunteered as a Marketing Co-ordinator on the day, selling OU branded merchandise to new graduates and their families. The graduation T-shirts and the graduation ties all sold out and we all had a really great time.

Up next was the Student Consultation event where we discussed Group Tuition, Online Learning and Student Engagement in Curriculum Design. The event was well attended by OU students and we definitely got our views across.

We hope that there will be more face-to-face OU student social meetings in the East of England. This will either be at the end of September or the beginning of October. I hope that many of you will consider coming to these events.

You can also find us online on our regional forum: http://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/subpage/view.php?id=7904

We’re also on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/344084862324396

Wishing you all successful learning journeys and I’ll hopefully meet some of you soon.

Peter Canning

East of England Regional Assembly Executive (Finance Contact)
On the hotlines for Nightline

I’m one of the smallish number of OU students who have done this whole university thing before. The first time round, it’s fair to say, wasn’t a rousing success. I had depression and faced two problems: the first was that it took a long time to get diagnosed; the second was that I refused to accept it. It led to me dropping out, and taking an eight-year hiatus from studying.

At the time, the worst thing was that I felt completely isolated – there was nobody to talk to, especially in the dead of night, often the worst time for me. That’s why I was delighted when I got an email through from the Students Association telling me about Nightline, which supports students by providing a confidential listening, support and practical information service every night during term time.

The email said they were looking for volunteers. I always promised myself that if I went back to university, I’d give up some time to help people who might be going through what I’d gone through first time around, so I signed up.

I’ll be honest, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. I knew I’d be slightly older than many of the volunteers, and I worried that that might be an issue. I also wasn’t sure how much time it would take up, and how difficult it might be to fit it in to my everyday life.

It turns out my worries were unfounded. Nightline has been one of the best things I’ve ever done and I’d encourage any OU student who is in the London area to get involved. All you need to bring to it is a willingness to commit and a healthy sense of empathy. Your fellow volunteers come from a variety of universities and backgrounds, and everyone I’ve met has been incredibly friendly, supportive and enthusiastic.

Commitment-wise, you sign up to take part in some training sessions at the start of the year, followed by 12 overnight shifts during the year. The best thing is that nobody has any fixed shifts, you can sign up to them as your schedule allows, fitting them around your life (and moments when your TMA becomes your life).

I’ve had the chance to talk to a lot of students who needed a safe place to talk about their feelings and their worries and I very much hope I’ve been able to help the people I’ve spoken to. Providing that support to others is an incredibly rewarding feeling.

I’ve got so much out of it that I’m doing it all again this year. Come and join me and the rest of the Nightline crew. I promise, it’s more than worth it.

Applications are now welcome for Volunteers for 2015/16. If you’re interested in hearing more, please email: volunteering@nightline.org.uk or check out nightline.org.uk and go to the volunteering section!

OU student
Nightline Volunteer

OUstudents PODCAST:
Talking isolation

Distance learning has many advantages, but a disadvantage can be a feeling of isolation...

In the latest podcast episode, we spoke to OU students about the reasons for feeling isolated, what to do about it and the ways that students get involved with the OU student community. Here are their suggestions:

Talk to a Peer Supporter – if you need a friendly chat via email or forum posts, our confidential service might be just the thing to get you back on track with your studies. Our student volunteers are fantastically supportive and give great advice!*

Ring Nightline – If it all feels a bit too much and you need to talk to someone in the small hours, give Nightline a call for some non-judgemental chat.

Join a Society – OU Students Association affiliated societies are a great way to meet other students, online or at one of the many meet-ups and events throughout the year.

Start a blog – A blog is an online diary. You can share your thoughts and experiences of OU study (and everything else) and other students can comment on your posts.

At the Students Association we’re really invested in growing the #OUstudents community, so find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for an immediate connection to other students!

*For purely academic advice, please contact your Tutor or Student Support.

Listen here

Study getting you down?

Please contact Peer Support. Peer Support is manned by OU students and former students who understand the difficulties of studying alone. We understand how lonely and overwhelming it can be, trying to balance study with a busy life and/or coping with other problems such as disability. Anything you discuss with us is confidential and we may occasionally have to ask one of our team for advice, but nothing ever goes outside this small group.

We can answer a simple question or be there for one to one support for as long as you need us. We can’t help with academic issues - these should always be taken up with your tutors or Study Support Team - but anything that makes study difficult for you, is within our scope.

Don’t struggle on alone. Send us a message on the Peer Support Forum here: http://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/subpage/view.php?id=8581 and one of us will contact you within a few hours.

Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘My University is great. Where else would I be able to study in my pjs?’
A day in the life...

Alison Kingan, Vice President Student Support attended the OU’s ‘Breaking Down Barriers’ Disability Conference.

Anyone reading my recent blogs knows I attended the OU’s Disability 2 day Conference. One Blog has information about the Disabled Students Allowance, including how to find an OU Assessor for assessments, who appreciate the needs of OU students. Another Blog mentions the Moodswings charity and D/deaf Awareness sessions. The Conference’s theme was Breaking Down Barriers. I met various OU staff there who aim to remove barriers for students if they can. An OU speaker said nobody, including OU students, should be seen as nuisances if they ask for their needs to be met.

I don’t want to choose one speaker above others but it’s difficult to ignore Steve who spoke of his journey following the loss of his legs. One difficulty was the embarrassment he felt going upstairs when people queued behind him; they couldn’t pass him and he took a long time to reach the top. Whilst learning to walk again, he studied with the OU, who made all the adjustments he needed. The OU keeps making differences to people’s lives.

I attended a session about UDL, Universal Design for Learning. The concept is to design in accessibility at the start. It can relate to how a curriculum is presented or to buildings. This includes having doors wide enough for wheelchair users; flashing fire alarms; or a see-saw style drinks fountain that could be used at any height – it was practical, but also looked such fun. UDL often helps those without disabilities.

To end on a bit of light relief, the Scope adverts about ending the awkward were mentioned; they are available here, on YouTube.

Going the extra mile: OU Teaching Awards

Is there something very special about your OU Tutor? Does she/he go above and beyond the call of duty in their support of you? Would you describe them as excellent in all their teaching?

If ‘definitely’ is the answer to all of these questions, then you might want to nominate them for the OU Students Association Award for Learning and Teaching.

This award is new this year as one of the University-wide OU Teaching Awards and the winner receives a sum of money to spend on their own professional development.

So, if you’ve got a tutor in mind who you think would make a worthy winner complete the nomination form and send it over to: Leanne.Quainton@open.ac.uk before the closing date on the 4th September.

The winner will be chosen by a panel of OU students. You can find more information on the criteria here.

OU Research: Shaping the Future

Professor Alan Bassindale reflects on some key OU research successes and highlights even more opportunities ahead.

I presented our new research plan (see below) to Senate and at a Senate pre-meeting attended by many of your student representatives. It was wonderful to see the enthusiastic response from students on hearing what we do in research. But it was clear that we do not make enough effort to keep you informed and involve you. This very brief article sets the scene and in the next few months we will keep you informed using social media and this magazine to let you know what we will be doing and what the opportunities for you will be.

It has been a great year for OU Research. One such example involved receiving a massive amount of public interest due to our integral part in the team that put the Philae lander on a comet. We are now receiving fantastic data back to earth.

This year also saw the announcement of the results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014. This national exercise assessed UK universities’ research on the quality of its research outputs, its economic and societal impact and their research environment. The OU maintained its position in the top third of UK universities for research. We also demonstrated significant success, with 72% of the OU research submitted assessed as world-leading or internationally excellent. We achieved an outstanding result in Education research where we were ranked 2nd in the UK for quality and quantity using the Times Higher Education REF 2014 Power Score.

It is therefore timely to launch a new OU research plan, ‘Research Shaping the Future’. Our overarching vision is to transform lives by meeting the challenges of the 21st Century and promoting social justice. Our research will continue to inform our curriculum and underpin an outstanding learning experience for all our students.

As part of this we will be supporting major ‘signature’ research areas to complement our broad research base. These are areas where the OU has a unique research contribution to make and which align with our mission:

- Citizenship and Governance
- International Development
- Space Science
- Technology Enhanced Learning

You can find out more information on our signature research areas on our Research at the OU website. We will develop these areas over the next five years and engage actively with all our students on new findings and insights.
The OU, Bipolar and me.

Rachel refused to be defined by her Bipolar and set about proving the world wrong...

Mental health, it's not just an illness. An illness is something you can recover from. Mental health is something you have to learn to live with and manage.

I was diagnosed in 2010 with Bipolar disorder and in June 2013 I decided enough was enough. The media portrayed mental health as a disability, as did others, and I didn’t want to be known as the single mum with bipolar and nothing else. I wanted to be recognised for my achievements.

Due to the anxiety behind my bipolar I can’t attend a brick uni or go to tutorials, so the only way to get a qualification was distance based learning with the OU. I started Q62 in October 2013 and nothing was going to stop me. I was told by friends, and medical professionals that I wouldn’t be able to complete my degree because of how bad my bipolar was. I was determined to prove them wrong.

I have cycles of mania with my bipolar meaning I could spend weeks in a low or days on a high. This meant that I had to really plan my time for studying; sometimes this meant that on the lows I had to drag myself out of bed and do what I could for my study, but on a high I was able to do two or three weeks work or fire out a TMA in a day or two. I had one objective - staying ahead of the planner. I knew that if I didn’t I would fall too far behind and cause further anxiety and panic which I did not need.

I joined my module Facebook group, and met other students in the same situations or with similar experiences of life. I realised I was not alone. I didn’t have to hide my illness from anyone. I made friends in the group and shared my experience of raising kids, working, doing this degree and having bipolar. I was given the nickname Supermum because even when it was a bad day I got on with it.

I am now 180 credits away from my degree and starting another 120 credits from October and I am doing it with support from module friends, tutors and student support.

It can be hard to fight the urge to just give up when it gets too tough even without a mental health issue but if it wasn’t for the OU and wanting to obtain my degree, bipolar would have won.

Rachel Hughes
OU student

My advice - read plenty!

I am now two thirds into my English Language and Literature BA (Hons). And what a journey it has been so far. Fought through fibromyalgia, family death, personal tragedies; and came through.

The E301 started off as a challenging module, but it somehow grew on me. My tutor has been very supportive. He guided me through the Linguistic challenges of the module to help me achieve some very good grades. In September, I shall be embarking on the next part of my degree. Creative Writing.

The exciting part of reading is the personal translation of the texts based on the perception of each reader. Perhaps this is the responsibility of the writer. To write in such way that the reader is given the freedom to fly through the literary experience on the wings of creativity. Planning for structural tropes and linguistic deviations, in a way that create a refreshing and hopefully enjoyable experience for the audience of the story, is a skill that every experienced and aspiring author ought to be aiming for.

Understanding the theory behind creativity and literariness is certainly a good basis upon which to build the craft of my penmanship. The OU’s E301 module has helped me develop my understanding of what lies behind the bricolage of language. Beyond this comprehension, it has enabled me to delve deep into the intricacies of the grammar, lexical analysis, and sentence structure in some detail. It has empowered me to marry words into the text in a way that carry its soul and echo the sounds that speak its message.

With guided and persistent practice these skills develop. The important thing in my opinion is consistent effort. It is also paramount to read avocariously and widely. Read to understand how writing is made. Read to analyse how writers write. Read for pleasure. But above all -

Read plenty...

I look forward to the Creative Writing module with excitement and high expectations; of myself. The work may have been hard so far, but now I shall be studying the topic I have always loved. My passion will be my everyday University work. The Linguistic skills of my degree have built my Language muscles. It is now up to me to flex them.

May I end this part of my BA (Hons) journey with a big thanks to my tutor, and to my fellow students for their support. And of course the E301 Admin for surviving my antics in our Facebook group. Remember the rugby saying: What goes on in the front row, stays in the front row...

Conn Bardi
OU student

http://www.connbardi.com/p/open-university.html

Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘I’ve totally changed since I started my degree’
OU Students FRESHERS online

A big welcome to your OU Students Association...

We know that starting a course or qualification can be a very daunting time, we’ve been there. Here at the OU Students Association, we want to support you to make it a little bit easier by welcoming you to our virtual OU students Freshers Fair!

There’s lots of great resources, live events, videos and information on what life is like as an OU student.

Say hello on:
- www.open.ac.uk/ousa/community
- @OUstudents
- fb.com/OUstudents
- instagram.com/oustudents

http://www.open.ac.uk/ousa/freshers

#New2OU? You’re in great company!

@YoungOUStudent blogger, Luke, shares some experiences and top tips to thrive as an OU student and still have an active social life!

Nearly everyday for 5 years I would come home from work and sit down to do 2 hours of studying, and it was completely worth it!!

I came to the end of my A-Levels but unlike the other students at my college I didn’t want to go to University; I wanted to get out in the world, start earning some money and begin my career. In the back of my mind however was an urge to get a degree so I began looking at different universities to see if they did part time degrees. Then I came across the OU, the courses looked really interesting, the only concern was if I would have the time needed to complete the courses.

After much deliberation I decided to go for it and boy was I in for a few surprises. firstly I couldn’t believe the support and help available from tutors and the OU in general, (Tip 1: If you can always attend your tutorials, they really can help explain the format and specific learning points throughout the course).

The second surprise was the quality of the study materials, with all the modules you get OU study material which you work through, but on some courses you also get published books that relate. (Tip 2: I would recommend reading through as much of the study material as possible, if you are doing a subject you are interested in then this will be a breeze as the material is easy to read and really interesting).

As well as the positives of studying with the OU there are some downsides. I’m not going to lie, at times it does get hard, personally I found it hardest during the summer, when your friends and family are out and you have got to study. What kept me motivated during these times was the feeling you get at the end of a module, when the result comes through that you’ve passed.

What I also did was plan my week in advance, so if I thought it was going to be sunny one day and that I wanted to go out I would do extra work beforehand to make up for the day off. (Tip 3: Always follow the week schedules that you get with each course, plan your week around them if that means doing some study at weekends then do it! Try not to get behind).

The time element was the hardest part about studying with the OU, the studying itself was enjoyable as the courses were relevant and up to date so I always learnt about topics which were current and that interested me. However trying to organise your life around it was hard, I always had to plan holidays and days out around my TMA’s or exams which sometimes was a nightmare.

For now my time with the OU is coming to an end, I am currently waiting for my final results which if I pass I will get a 2:1 Business Studies Degree. I am going to concentrate on using my degree to apply for new jobs and progress my career.

Hopefully reading about my experiences has shown that studying with the OU, whilst working and trying to fit in a social life is hard, but it can be done and the satisfaction you get from knowing that you can do it is a great feeling!!

Luke
OU student
OUstudents Hall of Fame!

Celebrating all things OU students....

As OU students we are, quite frankly, amazing! So, we decided to celebrate all things OU students with a ‘Hall of Fame’ feature.

If you have something you want to shout about, anything that you’re proud and want to share, let us know. It doesn’t need to be OU study related you just need to be an OU student!

Email the Association’s Communications Team: ousa-comms@open.ac.uk

Correction

In the last issue of OUstudents Hall of Fame we celebrated an OU graduate and his fantastic writing success, unfortunately we miss-spelt his name.

Sorry, Ewan Lawrie.

Crufts Winner!

I take part in agility with my dogs and last year my youngest dog qualified for Crufts 2015.

We went in March and amazingly we won our class! Neither of us had ever been there before so it was quite an achievement for us. Here we are on the left.

Julie Ashton
OU student

Women Who Write With Elves...

More years ago than I care to remember, I completed the OU’s Diploma in Creative Writing. Subsequently, a number of fellow OU scribblers and I formed an online writer’s group - Women Who Write With Elves - who once a year meet for a self-run writers’ retreat.

In 2013 we decided to put together an anthology. Two of us were already published novelists: others had success in national and local competitions, and in national magazines. We didn’t really need to publish our own anthology, but it would be a binding, collective effort cementing our geographically challenged togetherness.

The idea was greeted with enthusiasm and, initially at least, complete inactivity. Probably we were all focusing on getting work published in other ways. One of us was certainly in Switzerland being highly productive with novels for her American publisher. Another was on a boat in the Med somewhere, writing book number two.

Eventually, at our annual writing retreat - three or four days of hard writing in a big and, ideally, cheap house - our leader made us get down to it in the way that only ex-teachers can.

We have a natural administrator who took on the job of researching Kindle formatting, and e-publishing in general. We all submitted work, he put it together into one volume, and proofreading and tweaking began.

How can so few people argue for so long over hyphenation? the placement of commas? the capitalisation of family members? not to mention the formatting of ellipses […] (very important in e-publishing, apparently). In retrospect it was our group’s belated ‘storming’ stage. Although painful at the time, we came through and after 11 versions, the anthology was done. Women Who Write With Elves went public.

We are currently writing our second anthology. We are clearer about things which writers who want to be published should know in the first place and we have rules set out in black and white on the forum. I personally have learned that there are em-dashes and en-dashes: after a certain amount of rotating the display on my PC through 90°, I can even insert them!

Women Who Write With Elves is available on Kindle (£1.99) including Kindle Unlimited, and in paperback for £7.99.

I started a series of books...

Just a note to say the magazine is wonderful. Very good. I’m currently in the third year of my BSc in Psychology and hope to take a Masters at some point.

I’m a novelist and broadcaster and journalist and took up my degree the same year I started training as a yoga teacher.

As a result of studying and the combination (I’m also a travel journalist) I started a series of books called THE A TO ZEN OF…series. With fifteen in total, my study at the OU has been invaluable. The next one is THE A TO ZEN OF HOW TO BE FAITHFUL out at the end of this year.

I’m a single mum, with a child who is currently studying for his GCSEs and its been good for me to study at the same time - knowing what he is going through.

Sarah Tucker
OU student

Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘Put any bad mark behind you and plough on’
Ask a student

Need advice? Who better to ask than your fellow OU students!

Josie's problem: Feeling disheartened

I'm feeling disheartened at the moment and seriously struggling to motivate myself to register for my next module. For my last module, I was getting what I thought were good marks for the TMAs, then for the EMA I scraped a pass which brought my overall score right down. The EMA feedback was not good and completely opposite to any feedback I've had before. Have others felt this disappointment and how have you carried on?

- I know it's hard to get motivated but please Josie, soldier on, don't lose heart! - Cylia
- I know exactly how you feel because the same thing used to happen to me. I'd do really well with my TMAs and then the exam result would bring down the overall result. Yes, I was disappointed but then I thought a pass is a pass even if it's not top marks. I soldiered on and this year I graduated with a BA (Hons). I still can't believe it - I have to keep looking at the photo to remind myself and I am still so excited by it all. Just keep thinking of the end (I actually failed one module but did another in its place) and you will get there and when you do the feeling is just amazing! Take care and keep going. - Ruth
- Don't get downhearted Josie, especially when you are so far through your studies. I was the same with my last module and I was really disappointed with the grade of pass. Just put it behind you, it's always bad after a couple of months off to think about the next module and all of the stress and worry. - Judith
- Try not to worry too much, I myself was getting good marks in the TMAs but got slightly lower mark for the EMA, you are not on your own with this one just try to keep positive. - Christine

Important DSA update for OU students

The University have asked us to pass on some important information for OU students applying for Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) for the first time this year (2015/2016).

You may already know that students claiming DSA are being asked to contribute £200 towards a PC or Laptop on which to run their assistive software from this year.

Well, there's some good news! The Open University have set up a new scheme to help OU students who find themselves in financial hardship with their contribution.

The scheme will run alongside the University's existing study related costs schemes.

A couple of key points to remember about the new scheme to help with the £200 contribution:

• It is means tested.
• Equipment must be bought from an approved supplier.

You can find out more about the scheme, including how to apply and more about the approved suppliers in this document. If you have any questions, please contact studentfees@open.ac.uk.

To find out more about Disabled Students' Allowance more generally, click here. Please note that DSA itself is not means tested.
Just the nudge I needed...

My life needed to change. I couldn’t continue to do the same thing over and over and expect a different outcome. Something had to give. The pain of staying as I was became greater than the uncomfortableness of changing.

A decade after my medical retirement from work, I found myself taking stock of my life. An unsatisfying education, a string of unfulfilling jobs and a completely depleted mind and body was my legacy. Don’t get me wrong, there were wondrous highlights, not least, meeting and marrying a wonderful man who is a great source of strength, but I knew there should have been more.

I cursed the medical condition that left a trail of destruction in its wake, crushing any remaining self-esteem I had. However, when I look back now, it was exactly the ‘Nudge’ that I needed to get the ‘real me’ out into the world.

I became unrecognisable to myself and was beginning to throw in the towel and accept the cards that I had been dealt, when my sister told me about an OU ‘openings course’.

Well, I coped well with the openings course and my tutor suggested that I explore the OU website for support with my condition. So, I did look and there it was, the Disabled Students Allowance (although I must admit, I would not have noticed this before, as I do not consider myself to be disabled – rather, living with a chronic health condition).

I didn't just need to brush up on my study skills, I needed support to build the resilience to overcome my physical and mental challenges and to become an effective self-motivated life-long learner. I asked around and was directed to a life coach.

Having never heard of a life coach, I was expecting some self-styled American Guru to show up and perform healing on me, but that’s not how it went down. I was introduced to an approach to mentoring that changed my entire perspective on not only study, but life in general. Through peer guidance and supported self-exploration, I have begun to realise my values, strengths and unique slant on life, which has empowered me to face what I thought were my weaknesses and to see challenges as affirmations of growth.

You’re probably wondering what this has to do with writing assignments. Everything!

When you know what you are good at and where you are likely to struggle and you are not afraid to ask for help, you have power. I have been so impressed by this experience that I decided to train as a life coach alongside my part-time degree, in order that I can use my inside knowledge to help others. I now volunteer with pupils in a local school.

My plan now is to re-ignite the flames of my passion for life, to study further, begin a new career and to live without limitation.

Christine Edgar
OU student

I beat the box, you can too!

Hi, I’m Sarah Phillips and at the age of 33 I have been a student for many years and have never really stopped studying since the day I started school.

For me the choice to study from home was an easy one, I had a family, a job and wanted to gain a degree on top. I decided that the OU was my best option and working towards a Bachelor of Science Open Degree.

The path you take can be bumpy and varied often taking a different direction to the one you started out on. It can also be a lonely one at times; it is just you, your books, a laptop and a large cup of coffee...Oh and your tutor who is just at the end of the phone!

To study I had to self discipline myself to focus and strive for my goals without being pushed from friends, which you will have if you study at College or University. Although, there is brilliant online support, online tutorials and a chance to chat to other people online via a tutor group forum.

Studying from home allowed me to think outside the box, fitting study around my life work rather than being told to be somewhere at a certain time for a lecture.

By Sarah Phillips
OU student
My future - the start

Helen started her undergraduate degree in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2013. Half way through her studies she shares her journey with us...

It’s been an amazing journey so far and a complete change of direction in my life.

I wanted to share my story because I’m totally dedicated to study and the whole academia life. As a young girl I was forced to leave school at sixteen and work to help our large family survive after the tragic early death of my Father.

I’ve raised three of my own children and lost two husbands to premature deaths but I’ve always stayed optimistic that I would fulfill my dream one day.

I managed to go through life with different kinds of jobs and fondly remember my first job after my children had flown the nest, I managed to get a senior role as a contract cleaning manager, after about four years I decided to start my own contract cleaning business with the gradual increase in clients building month by month the company enjoyed an enviable reputation by the Manchester Chamber of commerce, to my horror I was asked on several occasions to make appearances and speak to new and up and coming businesses.

I sold the business at its height and never looked back, I knew that if I could do that then I could do anything, well, maybe not everything. My heart still wasn’t fulfilled and I was thirsty for knowledge so I did several online courses in creative writing and other things until one day I found I could possibly do an online degree with the Open University.

The moment I joined and started my first year I knew I had found what I was looking for and have loved every minute.

I know I will continue to postgraduate level because I'm so passionate about learning, I even helped a few friends of friends to join the OU and fulfill their passions and dreams of a better future. I want to help others who have been in similar unfortunate life circumstances to realize it only takes a few small steps to make your dreams come true.

I’ve been writing since I was small and always loved the smell and feel of a book, well, I do share a familiar trait with Charlotte Bronte in that we were born in Haworth to Irish Clergymen and I have a deep love of books and novels particularly of the 17th and 18th century. Coincidentally the house I was born in Haworth is now a book shop! Spooky!?! I want to write a novel and a nonfiction self-help book so both are in the pipeline, ask me in a few years’ time to see were I’m up to and I hope I’ll be able to deliver some wonderful news.

Helen Hewitt
OU student

Thank you!

After obtaining my A-levels I married and had my six children, however I never forgot my dream to carry on with my studies, and my primary occupation was, to start with, the education of my own children.

When I moved to the UK with my kids, I discovered with enormous happiness that the Education System in the UK seemed to provide equal opportunities for everyone, including mature students like me.

I first registered for ESOL classes, and the following year I completed my Level 2 Teaching Assistant course. Then, I started my journey at the OU and in the meantime I became a Certified Translator.

Finally, today I am a graduate.

From August I will work as a Librarian in a local Primary School. I am the first in my family who studied at University and I hope to be a role model for my kids; I hope they will learn to never give up!

May I wish all the tutors, staff and all the students of the OU every future happiness.

Aisha Farina & children

Instagram.com/oustudentslive

We ❤️ Instagram!

Here’s just a few of our favourite images taken from our OUstudentslive Instagram account.

Remember to share your pics with us by using #OUStudents in the caption and take a look at all our images so far (they’re fab).
Carys Bray is the author of A Song for Issy Bradley – it was shortlisted for the Costa Prize, and the Desmond Elliot prize and won the Authors Club Best First Novel Award. It was also selected for the 2015 Richard and Judy Summer Book Club. www.carysbray.co.uk

‘As a novelist I think it’s vital for me to be self-motivated and to manage my time effectively. Studying with the OU was great preparation. I had to make time to read, time to write and perhaps most importantly I had to make sure I allowed time to edit my work in advance of deadlines.’

Jacqueline Grima’s unpublished novel, Coming Second was shortlisted for the Luke Bitmead Bursury Prize. She works as a commissioned writer for an online student magazine, Humanity Hallows, as well as being on the editorial team for The Literary Commune magazine. www.grimajgrima.blogspot.co.uk

‘When I began my first Creative Writing module with the OU I thought I knew about writing. By the time I’d completed the OU’s Start Writing Fiction, Creative Writing and Advanced Creative Writing, courses my knowledge of the writing process hadn’t just doubled but tripled, quadrupled. So when I eventually completed my degree I had the courage and confidence to apply to do a Creative Writing MA, something I would never had achieved without the OU.’

Amanda Saint is a freelance features journalist and fiction writer. Her debut novel ‘If I Were a River’ will be published by Urbane Publications in Spring 2016. She founded ‘Retreat West’ (http://retreatwest.co.uk), which provides creative writing events and classes. http://amandasaint-writer.com/

I completed the Creative Writing and Reading and Writing Literature modules with the OU and they were both instrumental in my development as a fiction writer. The two combined to help me improve my writing and get my first stories published and get a publisher for my first novel, If I Were a River.’

Janet O’Kane is a crime fiction writer from the Scottish Borders. She is the author of No Stranger to Death, her debut novel. http://www.janetokane.blogspot.co.uk/

‘Studying for an OU degree has contributed to my own writing in many ways. I read widely and critically, especially in texts out of my comfort zone of genre fiction, expanding my knowledge and use of language. Several years’ home-study developed the same determination and self discipline I needed to complete my first novel.’

Nick Quantrill is a crime-fiction writer. He is the author of the Joe Geraghty Trilogy and the novella, Bang, Bang you’re Dead. His latest novel is The Crooked Beat. In 2011 he was appointed the first ‘writer in residence’ at Hull Kingston Rovers. http://www.nickquantrill.co.uk/

‘I started my degree with little more than an urge to change my life for the better. Always a reader, the issues crime writers like Ian Rankin were grappling with in fiction were being underpinned by what I was learning in my textbooks. The OU taught me motivation, time management, and determination. The way studying changed my life was totally unexpected and as thankful as I am for the opportunities writing has given me, it’s my degree I look on with the most pride.’

Louise Walters is the author of Mrs Sinclair’s Suitcase, which is her debut novel. http://www.janetokane.blogspot.co.uk/

‘Studying for an OU degree has contributed to my own writing in many ways. I read widely and critically, especially in texts out of my comfort zone of genre fiction, expanding my knowledge and use of language. Several years’ home-study developed the same determination and self discipline I needed to complete my first novel.’

Ruth F Hunt is the author of The Single Feather (Pilrig Press) http://www.rhunt4.com and is currently studying for English Literature and Creative Writing B.A. with the OU.

It could be you...

The search has begun to find the Open University’s brightest students to be part of 2016’s Team Open. If you think you’ve got what it takes, why not give it a go?

All you need to do for now is fill out this quick form and we’ll be in touch with details of the next stage in October.
Hello lovely fellow OU students! My name is Alicia and I’m here to propose a new Ballet and Opera society, affiliated to the Open University Students Association.

I’ve been a student with the OU for nearly four years now and this year I have been lucky enough to be able to represent the University as a Student Ambassador at the Royal Opera House.

I think that their student scheme is amazing, along with the wonderful productions that are produced and performed there. With this in mind, I would really like to set up a society for people who appreciate and enjoy Ballet and Opera, or those who want to dip their toes into something new.

There are many methods of accessing productions around the country/world, both online, in the cinema or in their original locations, so it’s perfect for us as distance learners.

Please get in contact if you would be interested in joining this proposed society or if you fancy getting even more involved and being on the committee.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Email: ousa-societies@open.ac.uk (link for the student scheme - http://www.roh.org.uk/for/rohstudents)

Photo credit: Royal Opera House, Johan Persson
Hi, I’m Betty. I have just finished A363 Advanced creative writing. Through the course I met a group of friends who all wanted to become writers. We set up a private sharing forum, gave each other feedback on our work and enjoyed the benefits of peer critique. Subsequently, I started a society called ‘Write Club’ so that we’d continue this practice. It is now an OU affiliated society with 158 members (and growing!)

Write Club is brand new and bursting with potential. We have just launched our ‘Novel Support Programme’ which allows participants to write to deadlines, upload work for constructive criticism at intervals and have a 70,000 word manuscript by November. We’d like this to be an annual thing. Personally - I think that's an awesome programme.

I want to branch out Write Club to practice screen writing so that all mediums are celebrated. For me, screenwriting is my bread and butter, literally. Let me explain:

Before Write Club and A363 I was a single mother on benefits, struggling to get by. The OU has given me a chance to really go for it. For example: I have self-published a short story on Kindle, sent submissions to a range of publishing sites, and applied for all manner of internships and work.

Two things came of this. One; I got a rejection email from The New Yorker magazine saying they 'admire my writing' and two; I got a call back for a resident screen writing job. The latter was a phone interview; I then went for a second formal interview. I compiled three files of work: fiction, screenplays, and education and achievements. I even asked my tutor for a reference and he wrote a glowing report of my skills and commitment - it was a page long and truly an honour to read. Armed with this - and a few screenplays as requested by the company - I went to the interview.

Now, two months on, I am no longer a single mother on benefits struggling to get by, I am a screenwriter. A paid, employed writer. Such a rarity amongst writers more qualified than me, and a position most writers could only dream of.

In the past two months I have copy edited scripts, used professional screenwriting software, sat in a writers board meeting and experienced being part of a creative team.... for a living!! I also worked on production: 5:00am starts, driving an hour to location, building sets, gathering props, interfacing with actors, directors, and extras. I was a runner, assistant producer and writer. I am an asset to the company and am being trusted to conceive and write the story lines for our next film. Such an honour and most importantly; I’ll be a produced writer. Something I cannot get my head around.

For anyone interested in the creative writing process, join us at: www.ouwritingsociety.wordpress.com

(Work is shared and critiqued on a private forum).

Betty
OU student

Best overheard #OUstudent comment: ‘Mug of tea, current favourite pencil, lined pad. Let the study commence!’
Degree Ceremony Volunteers

There are so many ways you can get involved with your OU Students Association! Ken shares his experience volunteering at the Gateshead Degree Ceremony.

I had the pleasure of representing the Students Association at the Gateshead Degree Ceremony in June, together with a great team of volunteers (Shelby, Nick, Carl and staff member Mandy). Our volunteer role, as Marketing Representatives, meant we were there at the start of the day to help set-up the merchandise stall, getting all the items out of the boxes, displaying them, and getting the card machines booted-up and ready for action.

It was a fantastic day! We did have a slight panic in the morning as we thought the clothing hadn’t arrived but we soon realised that it was upstairs and we were on the mezzanine level (phew)!

We met so many graduates not only from across the UK but from France and the Republic of Ireland.

The whole day was a fantastic tribute to all of the hard work that the Graduates had put in whilst studying.

It was a great day, and I am looking forward to my Degree Ceremony in September!

By Ken Oliver
OU student

Sound fun?

By becoming a Marketing Representative Volunteer you’ll play an important role, providing a service that is greatly valued by students and the University alike. You’ll work as part of a small team (led by a Marketing Co-ordinator) on the OU Students Association merchandise stall promoting and selling OU branded merchandise to graduates and their families.

Contact the OUSA Office at: ousa-services@open.ac.uk

If you are new to OU study you might find it quite hard sitting at home studying, not seeing anyone so I would encourage you to join the OU student community. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and through the forum links on the left hand side of your student homepage.

If you are really feeling the pressure of isolation and study struggles then we have a connection with Nightline which is a charity which provides a listening service from students for students.

There is also a service called Peer Support which is provided by the Association and is completely anonymous, even I don’t know who the volunteers are! However they can provide support if you are struggling and our volunteers are experienced OU students and have probably felt all the up and downs that we all feel at some point in our studies.

However, studying with the OU is hugely rewarding. You achieve so much, learn many new and transferrable skills, meet new people and make new friends. You might be changing career, improving your employment potential or returning to employment after a break – whichever it is the OU gives you that opportunity.

Here at your Students Association we want to talk to you, hear your stories and build a community for you so you can support your fellow students and learn from each other as much as from your study materials.

Happy reading!

Ruth Tudor
President of the OU Students Association

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For a rewarding and different OU student experience – Volunteer!