



Local & Global

The magazine for new debates and fresh ways of thinking. Staff and students within the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies (SSGS) share ideas on the world we live in, as well as teaching and research highlights.



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Welcome

What's happened in the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies since the last magazine and, looking ahead, what is coming up in the 2023/24 academic year?

Head of School Shonil Bhagwat brings us up to date, while Guest Editor Dan Taylor puts this year's issue into context.

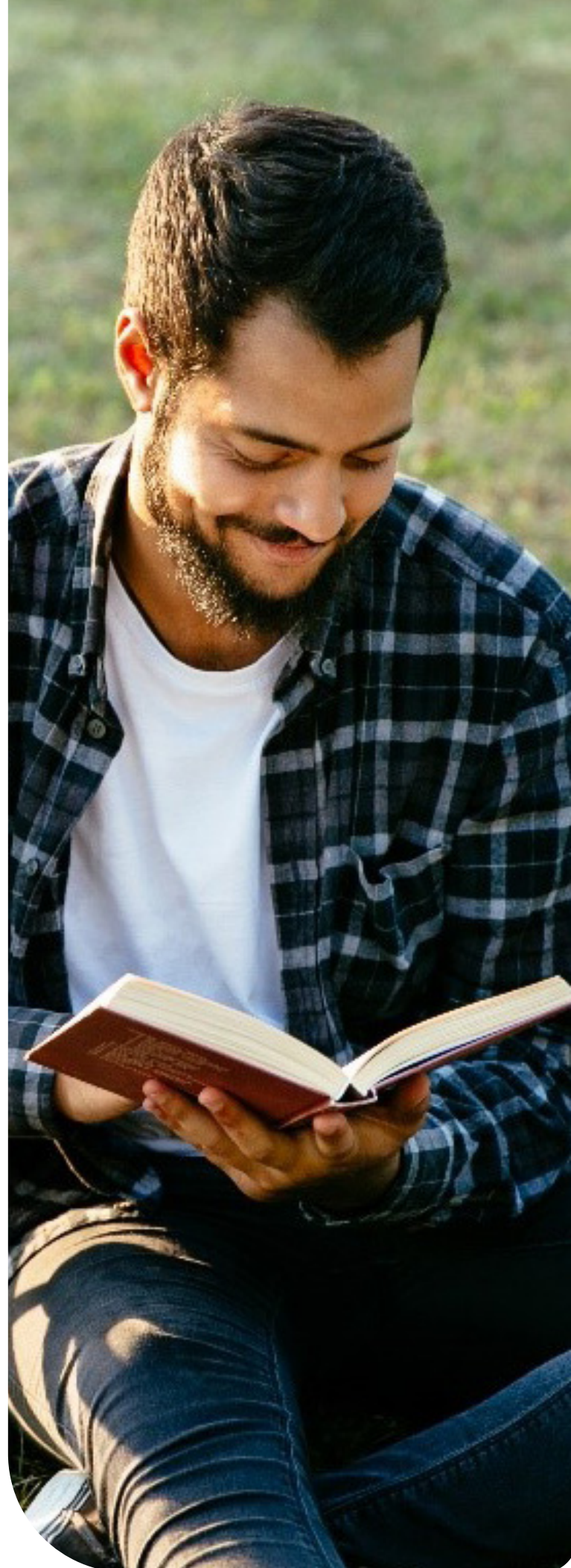


The 2023/24 academic year looks set to be defined as a year of change and that applies to our School as well as around the globe. At the time of writing, the University's Senate and Council has started the process of jointly appointing a new Executive Dean in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), in which the School of SSGS sits. It will see Prof Ian Fribbance hand over the role to his successor in late 2023. The Faculty has also appointed its new Director of Strategy, Planning and Resources – Dave Lewis – who joined us in May 2023. Meanwhile, Dr Martin Higginson, our Director of Student Support, has handed over the role to Joanna Robson. Thank you, Martin, and welcome, Joanna, in this important role for the School.

We also officially welcome all our new staff, who you can read about on page 5. The year ahead will see our Associate Lecturer colleagues become full members of the team too. The work they do is vital to the School and it is a pleasure to be working with them more closely than ever before. Elsewhere in teaching, generative artificial intelligence technology and tools are challenging how we assess students, and prompting us to rethink our assessment model to ensure it stays as robust as possible.

On the home front, we are now settling into our new accommodation in the Wilson and Perry buildings at the Milton Keynes campus. A significant change from our previous accommodation in Briggs and Gardiner, the combination of open-plan spaces and cellular offices provides opportunities for us as a School to develop and support collaborative ways of working. With Covid-19 restrictions now lifted, and with the pandemic behind us, this is a good opportunity for us to find a balance in hybrid ways of working. We need to make sure the lack of frequent in-person contact does not compromise the academic culture of the School, while committing to making the most of our face-to-face interactions.

There have also been a number of changes in how we organise our research. The new Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice has had a chance to find its feet during 2022/23 and is now ready to support research, scholarship and knowledge exchange in the School. The Centre has four 'streams': Development & Economics; Geography & Environmental Studies; Politics, Philosophy & Religious



Studies; and Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology. These streams correspond with the former clusters and collaborations that we used to have and also map onto the Units of Assessment for the Research Excellence Framework (REF). We will be supporting research activities in the School through these four streams.

As a School, we have been successful in bidding for the Open Societal Challenges (OSC) funding in the University. This is a new programme that supports challenge-led research projects. In this issue, you will find an article from Gaia Cantelli, who is Senior Manager of the programme. You will also find information about three projects led by academics within the School, which cover a wide range of challenges from urban food insecurity to religious tolerance and intolerance. The OSC programme is an excellent opportunity to do research that is genuinely interdisciplinary, bringing together colleagues from across the University to address a specific challenge, and as a School with its focus on challenge-led research, we are in an excellent position to capitalise on this programme.

As always, you will find a rich selection of content in the magazine including articles written by SSGS colleagues informed by their research or scholarship interests, latest projects, or indeed their own personal journeys in academia. It always fills me with joy to read how passionate and committed colleagues are to their role as 'public intellectuals' making sense, in their own unique way, of the changing world we live in.

Finally, my three-year term as Head of School would have ended in July 2023, but I have offered to stay on for two additional years to give the School stability in times of change. I am confident that as a School we are, as ever, ready to respond to change.



Prof Shonil Bhagwat
Professor of Environment and Development, and Head of SSGS

Shonil's work engages critically with a variety of global challenges including biodiversity loss, environmental change and food insecurity, to inform transformative change.

[View Shonil's profile](#)

Find out more about how our academics are committed to innovation, both in their teaching and research.



[Discover our School website](#)

This issue's Guest Editor

Returning as Guest Editor for a second time, Dr Dan Taylor from the discipline of Politics & International Studies (POLIS) sets the scene for this issue's themes and content.



End poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.

Back in 2015, the world's governments committed themselves to 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that would advance that idealistic agenda.

Deadline: 2030.

As we approach halfway, progress is poor. The number of people living in extreme poverty is higher than it was in 2019. From Ukraine to Taiwan, global cooperation has been replaced with suspicion. Much of the developing world is still struggling to recover after the Covid-19 pandemic. Closer to home, the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite as politicians flail from one crisis to another.

Where's a good social scientist when you need one, eh?

For me, it's a privilege to bring together just some of the leading research happening across the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies.

In this issue we look over highlights in research, teaching and BBC/OU co-productions. There are updates on new OpenLearn courses and qualifications, interviews, student contributions and even a guide to setting up your own podcast from someone who's been there and done it.

While the future is far from certain, it's clear we're going to need fresh thinking, approaches and perspectives.

Where better to start than here.



Dr Dan Taylor
Lecturer in Social and Political Thought

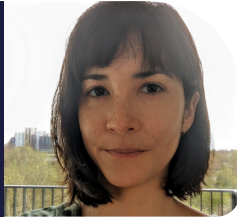
Dan's work explores how concepts and the imagination can be used to change politics. He is working on a book titled, *Where Are We Going?*

[View Dan's profile](#)

New staff in SSGS

It is a pleasure to welcome academic and professional services colleagues who joined the School in the 2022/23 academic year.

Dr Thais de Carvalho
Lecturer in Sustainable
Development
[View Thais's profile](#)



Ms Natasha Jimenez Sanchez
Project Admin Assistant
Development



Dr Lucy Baker
Senior Lecturer in
Environmental Geography
Geography & Environmental
Studies
[View Lucy's profile](#)



Dr Fella Lahmar
Research Fellow – DEPA
Geography & Environmental
Studies
[View Fella's profile](#)



Dr Jenny Hewitt
Post Doctoral Research
Associate
Politics & International Studies
[View Jenny's profile](#)



Dr Liudmila Nikanorova
Lecturer in Religious Studies
Religious Studies
[View Liudmila's profile](#)



Dr Katelin Teller
Research Associate
Religious Studies
[View Katelin's profile](#)



Miss Lucy Bryant
Lecturer in Criminology
Social Policy & Criminology
[View Lucy's profile](#)



Dr Ling Tang
Lecturer in Sociology
Sociology
[View Ling's profile](#)



Also joining us:

Dr David Moloney
Post Doctoral Research Associate
Politics & International Studies
[View David's profile](#)

Dr Charlotte Weatherill
Lecturer in Politics & International Studies
Politics & International Studies
[View Charlotte's profile](#)

Ms Christie Levein
Team Assistant (Scotland)

Learn more about our disciplines

- ▶ [Development](#)
- ▶ [Economics](#)
- ▶ [Geography & Environmental Studies](#)
- ▶ [Philosophy](#)
- ▶ [Politics & International Studies](#)
- ▶ [Religious Studies](#)
- ▶ [Social Policy & Criminology](#)
- ▶ [Sociology](#)

Open Societal Challenges

What issues do people face around the world today and what are the solutions? Learn more about the programme that's bringing researchers together to make a difference.

“A challenge is defined as an ambitious yet achievable programme of research with a long-term vision, aimed at addressing a specific societal issue.”

The OSC programme was developed as a research initiative that brings together researchers from across The Open University (the OU) and empowers them to develop ideas that address the most pressing societal challenges. It aims to create an environment where new interdisciplinary teams can emerge, and existing teams can achieve their long-term goals for research outcomes and impact.

A challenge is defined as an ambitious yet achievable programme of research with a long-term vision, aimed at addressing a specific societal issue. Each challenge is then categorised under one of three collaborative themes, led by a dedicated OU academic:

Sustainability: Prof Neil Edwards, Professor of Earth System Science

Living Well: Prof Sarah Earle, Professor of Medical Sociology

Tackling Inequalities: Prof Jacqui Gabb, Professor of Sociology and Intimacy

There is also a fourth transversal theme, **International Development**, which is led by Prof Giles Mohan, SSGS Chair.

So far, more than 100 challenges have been received from all four of the OU's Faculties and across the themes. The OSC community offers a supportive environment to its challenges and provides individualised support to help everyone achieve their goals. Currently, there are 200+ members – with plenty of room for more.

Both financial and non-financial support is available as part of the programme. The OSC Value-Add Package offers targeted support through events and services designed to help researchers develop,



execute and demonstrate a pathway to impact, as well as identify external funding opportunities. OSC community events – which are open to the entire OU community (academics, staff and students) – focus on themes of common interest to multiple challenges. Upcoming events will centre around sustainability, disability and citizen science.

Existing challenge teams can also apply for financial support to pump-prime specific projects or achieve specific impacts. OSC financial support is strictly linked to a set of deliverables, which are reviewed regularly as part of the monitoring process.

OU academics, staff and students can each initiate a challenge in the programme, simply by using the OSC online platform – see the infographic on page 9 for details on how to get involved. Those with relevant skills, knowledge or connections are also welcome to reach out to established challenge teams to offer their expertise.

It's hoped the OSC programme will continue to grow over the next year and beyond, inspiring impactful research and supporting researchers in achieving their long-term goals. Read on to discover a handful of the many challenges being tackled, giving a taste of research already underway.



Gaia Cantelli
Senior Manager for the Open Societal Challenges programme

OSC: Religious Tolerance and Peace

“An aim of the Religious Tolerance and Peace (RETOPEA) project has been to tackle inequalities through engagement with histories of religious tolerance and intolerance.”

Over the last five years, a team from Religious Studies (John Maiden, Stefanie Sinclair and John Wolffe) has been developing a new methodology for engaging young people with issues of religious diversity, tolerance and peace. This approach involves young people making short, creative films ('docutubes') drawing on historical exemplars, the contemporary context and their own experiences. An aim of the Religious Tolerance and Peace (RETOPEA) project has been to tackle inequalities through engagement with histories of religious tolerance and intolerance. The results thus far have indicated the approach can enable young people to move beyond generalisations and stereotypes about religious diversity, to make constructive and critical connections between past, present and their own experiences, and to think 'outside the box' about religious tolerance and peace.

The project, which until recently was funded by the European Commission and included partners from eight European countries, has involved members of the OU's Religious Studies department running workshops in schools, youth groups and teacher training colleges. These workshops involve engaging with RETOPEA materials, planning the creative process of making a docutube, filming and editing their own films and then reflecting on their work through discussions and screenings. This [short video](#) introduces the project (Password: Tolerance).

The RETOPEA project has also already resulted in two substantial outputs: an [online collection](#) of more than 400 accessible sources aimed at young people, and an OpenLearn Badged course called [Young people and religion: creative learning with history](#), which

equips teachers and educators to engage young people with the docutube approach.

To date, the RETOPEA approach has been piloted in European contexts that are either majority non-religious or majority Christian (Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox). However, support from the OSC programme has allowed for expansion with Katelin Teller joining the team. The project's methodology has also moved in new directions, developing techniques and resources that allow the docutube approach to be expanded more broadly for use in different contexts. This new strand of work involves three Muslim-majority countries: Albania, Oman and Jordan. This allows comparison not only between these three contexts, but also with the existing body of research, including North Macedonia (which has a majority of Orthodox Christians and a minority of Sunni Muslims).

The central question of this project remains the extent to which creative engagement of young people with history can develop their critical-thinking skills, their cultural, historical and religious literacy, and enhance their ability to negotiate contemporary religious diversities. This and other questions will be discussed in an OU-led RETOPEA policy forum in early 2024 within the framework of Religious Education and History teaching and curriculums, education and peace building.

Ultimately, there is potential for other disciplines and fields of research to adapt the docutube methodology to engage young people with entirely different societal challenges, such as environmental stability.

Our School has more than 25,000 students studying across a diverse range of 34 modules.



[Learn more about our qualifications](#)



Dr John Maiden
Head of Religious Studies

[View John's profile](#)



Prof John Wolffe
Professor of Religious History

[View John's profile](#)



Dr Stefanie Sinclair
Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies and OU Academic Lead for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

[View Stefanie's profile](#)



Dr Katelin Teller
Research Associate in Religious Studies

[View Katelin's profile](#)

OSC: Food Insecurity in times of crisis

“Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, inequality in Britain has reached such a point that many people struggle to regularly access food.”

Crisis seems to be everywhere these days – from the cost of living and fragility of public services to political unrest and environmental breakdown. With economic instability likely to continue for some time, many regions and nations are witnessing high inflation, recession, job losses and more. Food insecurity is one area of rapidly growing concern, and the figures are troubling. Data suggests approximately five million people in the UK face some degree of food insecurity – including households with working adults, families with children as well as older or disabled adults, especially people from ethnically diverse communities. Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, inequality in Britain has reached such a point that many people now struggle to regularly access food. So far, institutional responses have been inadequate.

Tackling food insecurity in urban spaces is a collaborative project which aims to help address growing food insecurity in cities across the UK. At its heart is an insistence that making better policy requires meaningful dialogue between academia, community organisations and policymakers.



Dr Lorena Lombardozi
Senior Lecturer in Economics

[View Lorena's profile](#)



Dr Colin Lorne
Lecturer in Geography and
Director of the OpenSpace
Research Centre

[View Colin's profile](#)

By generating an inclusive platform which places access to food as a right rather than as a marketised commodity, this project seeks to empower third-sector organisations – working with local and national policymakers – to target issues of food insecurity. It will do so through providing awareness and support in negotiating the worlds of policymaking, fostering horizontal brainstorming in the search for solutions and generating a monitoring tool to help build evidence for campaigning.

A collective spirit drives this project, whereby we aim to amplify the grassroots organisations providing food outside the market who are at the forefront of addressing this societal challenge. We take an interdisciplinary approach: Lorena's background is in Economics, and she has run a series of research projects on the political economy of food systems, untangling the economic and political determinants of food insecurity across the Global North and Global South. Colin is a geographer, who works closely with local government and the NHS to research policymaking in times of crisis and the changing place of health in the current political moment.

Food justice is increasingly recognised as a fundamental right. Yet, structural inequalities around it are profoundly impacting social, economic and political life as well as our everyday. Our vision is to work with grassroots organisations struggling for food justice through enabling better access to food to improve health and well-being, and counter growing social and food inequalities. It's hoped that by providing organisations with knowledge of policy and governance of the food system and helping them build evidence for more effective campaigns, there will be more hopeful and just futures in these times of crisis.

PHOTO: A stall in Exeter, offering on-the-spot meals, November 2022.



OSC: Translocal connectors: exploring the contribution and impact of transnational migrants in global development

“There is little understanding of the role translocal migrants play and how this can be engaged to support the competitiveness of connected countries.”

Migration remains one of the key issues that creates much debate and discussion among policymakers and occupies the front pages of newspapers worldwide. Migration emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the [United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals](#), with Target 10.7 making a strong reference: “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” The subject is also referred to in other targets related to labour migration, international student mobility, remittances and more, highlighting its significance.

My research has explored the knowledge and skill transfer-related issues associated with return migration and global development, specifically focusing on low-income economies. A growing body of evidence suggests that so-called ‘returnees’ increasingly maintain an array of connections to what was their ‘host’ country and so pursue a resolutely transnational lifestyle. As part of this, the assumed permanency of ‘return’ often doesn’t apply to them; they move back and forth between their country of ancestral origin and their ‘host’ country in what can be seen as a form of circular migration, creating a phenomenon of translocal migration. Much of the migration and global development research, international agencies, along with government

policymakers, haven’t paid much attention to the potential of transnational migrants to promote entrepreneurship and shape global development.

Building on this theoretical and policy gap, the aim of this project is to understand the nature and outcomes of translocal migration and how it can contribute to improving economic competitiveness and entrepreneurship in connected countries. The project seeks to achieve this through a comparative analysis of translocal migrants among British-Indian, British-Kenyan and British-Nigerian professionals who not only represent three of the UK’s largest migrant-origin communities but are also linked to three of the fastest-growing Commonwealth economies. The proposal’s key objective is to inform policy and practice on the links between translocal connectors and entrepreneurship by focusing on three industries: Creative, Information Technology (IT) and Health-care Technology.

It’s argued translocal migrants improve economic competitiveness by transfer of skills, capital, identifying new business opportunities and building innovative transnational business models. Thus, the impact of immigration and translocal migrants on economic competitiveness is of immense policy relevance. However, while there is growing policy recognition, there is little understanding of the specific role translocal migrants play and how this can be engaged to support the competitiveness of connected countries. The project will inform and strengthen national and international policy responses, assist migrant entrepreneurs and promote more informed debate among the public. It will bring together policymakers, researchers and migrant businesses to better understand how these groups use knowledge around migration, while identifying gaps in knowledge that research could help fill. This will also help to identify beneficiaries and their knowledge needs that would underpin the impact strategy.



Prof Dinar Kale
Professor of Innovation
& Development

[View Dinar's profile](#)

Identified a challenge?



Read more about
the themes



Email any questions to the
team



Submit your application
using the **OSC platform***

*OU network connection required



Highlights from the 2022/23 academic year

From award-winning television to successful scholarship bids, there was much to celebrate across the School throughout the 2022/23 academic year.

***We Are Black and British* wins prestigious documentary award**

BBC Two show *We Are Black and British* – on which Economics Lecturer and Staff Tutor Dr Ayobami Ilori worked as the FASS Academic Consultant – won **Best Constructed Documentary Series at the Grierson Awards 2022**.

The two-part series delved into the lives of six Black Britons, shedding light on their rich tapestry of experiences and offering a forum for open dialogue and understanding.

The Grierson judges commented, “The thought-provoking questions and personal stories shared through the programme’s central device provided a valuable platform for debate about insufficiently explored issues – with surprising moments shining through.”

The programme was also shortlisted for a 2023 Broadcast Award, as well as for a 2023 BAFTA Television Award. Read more about Ayobami’s work on pages 26–27.

Scholarships empower Uganda’s future development practitioners

The Development, Policy and Practice discipline **successfully secured an award** of nine Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships, worth a total of £162,000. The scholarship bid was led by Dr Frangton Chiyemura, Lecturer in International Development, who said at the time, “These scholarships will ensure we continue to support development policy and practice in the region through our teaching.”

Thanks to the generous support of the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office, in partnership with the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, these scholarships will enable Ugandan development practitioners to pursue an MSc degree in Global Development, empowering them to make a lasting impact on their communities and beyond. Read more about Frangton’s own research on page 14.

SSGS academic named as BBC New Generation Thinker

In April 2023, Dr Dan Taylor, Lecturer in Social and Political Thought and this issue’s Guest Editor, **was one of 10 academics chosen by the BBC as a New Generation Thinker**. The role is part of an exciting broadcast project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and BBC Radio 3, aiming to bring fresh thinking to a range of topics on the world around us.

Competition was fierce with hundreds of early career researchers vying for a place. Upon hearing the news, Dan said, “It’s an honour to be chosen. I’m really excited about developing a programme around East London, where I live and was once a community worker. There are some brilliant stories, intriguing histories and big developments happening under the radar that can tell us a lot about the contested futures of our society.”

Prof Christopher Smith, Executive Chair of the AHRC, added, “These 10 brilliant, original thinkers demonstrate the potential for the arts and humanities to help us to better understand ourselves, our past, our present and our future.”

POLIS academics influence change within the Ministry of Defence

Prof Jamie Gaskarth and Dr Georgina Holmes have been actively involved in the UK Government’s defence strategy discussions. Jamie, an expert in Foreign Policy and International Relations, along with Georgina, who specialises in Politics and International Relations, each played a significant role in shaping the upcoming UK Defence Command Paper (DCP), outlining the future requirements and deployment strategies for the armed forces.

Georgina commented, “I have worked closely with the British Army and Ministry of Defence for several years to help implement the UK’s Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) and offered insights into how the UK’s new **Action Plan (2023–2027)** could inform and support delivery of UK defence priorities.”

Beyond the DCP, Jamie also spoke at the esteemed **First Sea Lord’s Sea Power Conference 2023**, focusing on British identity and its connection to the sea. Amid the controversy surrounding Manchester United and Manchester City football kit emblems, Jamie suggested the Royal Navy needed to pre-empt criticism:

“My key proposals were for the navy to embrace recent revelations about the ethnic diversity of the Tudor navy to promote inclusion. It also needs to emphasise its relevance to people’s everyday lives, as in the role it plays in protecting shipping lanes and undersea cables.”

Both Jamie and Georgina remain dedicated to advising various government departments on security and defence matters, ensuring their expertise shapes development into the future.

Director of Research report

Prof Jamie Gaskarth looks back on his inaugural year as the School's new Director of Research, as well as the eclectic work he has seen started or completed.

The 2022/23 academic year was my first as Director of Research for SSGS, taking over from Prof Agnes Czajka. It was a daunting task as there was, and continues to be, so much brilliant research going on within the School. This includes work on global governance and politics in a range of fields, from Dr Alessandra Marino's space governance research and Dr Ece Kocabiçak's work on patriarchy in the Global South, to Dr Edward Wastnidge's explorations of identity and geopolitics in the Middle East, and Dr Emilie Rutledge's work on China's influence in the Gulf.

Our researchers engaged with some of the most pressing debates of our time, including universal basic income (Joanna Mack), food and farming for global sustainability (Prof Shonil Bhagwat), safety, fairness and inclusion in sport (Dr Jon Pike) and Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories (Dr Precious Chatterje-Doody). There were also various studies about the ongoing impacts of Covid-19, through Alan Shipman's discussion of what happened when cultural events went online, Dr Les Levidow's analysis of local food-growing initiatives and Prof Nicola Yeates's exploration of risks to migrant health-care workers. Meanwhile, SSGS researchers continued to address big ideas from Dr Paul-François Tremlett's work on atheism to Prof Sophie Grace Chappell's on epiphanies.

SSGS staff attracted lauded research accolades in 2022/23. Dr Dan Taylor was announced as a New Generation Thinker by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and BBC Radio 3 (read more on page 10). Elsewhere, Prof Simon Usherwood was awarded a Senior Research Fellowship with the [UK in a Changing Europe](#) initiative, to explore EU-UK relations in the post-withdrawal period after Brexit.

The [Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice \(GCSJ\)](#) saw some changes and really hit the ground running. Four streams were selected to coordinate research collaboration within the School, namely: Development & Economics; Politics, Philosophy & Religious Studies; Geography & Environmental Studies; and Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology. These continue to be closely aligned with future Research Excellence Framework (REF) units. We also approved a School Research Plan to maximise our public profile and prioritise excellent research. Finally, the centre ran a successful Knowledge Exchange and Impact workshop in April 2023, as well as running a seven-day Festival of Research in June, with a keynote speech from award-winning author, journalist and broadcaster Gary Younge.

As detailed at the beginning of the magazine, SSGS researchers enjoyed remarkable success with the initial call for bids for the Open Societal Challenges



PHOTO: One of the talks at the UK in a Changing Europe Conference, June 2023.

programme. Whether it's questioning battery supply chains or considering Global China, these promise exciting analyses to address vital societal challenges.

SSGS postgraduate researchers also took part in various in-person conferences during the academic year. We're very keen to foster a sense of community among staff and students and are continuing these activities throughout 2023/24.

Overall, I'm optimistic we can put the damaging impacts of Covid-19 behind us, while taking forward the lessons we've learnt. We have since adjusted to working remotely, which allows us to forge intellectual partnerships differently. Our ultimate goal still stands: to pursue research that makes a difference.



Prof Jamie Gaskarth
SSGS Director of Research and
Professor of Foreign Policy and
International Relations

Jamie writes on British foreign policy, security and defence policy, as well as international society.

[View Jamie's profile](#)

Our research strives to spark debate, present new ideas and find positive solutions.



Discover more about our research

The pursuit of happiness in an economy

From grow-your-own gardens to energy projects, many community groups are coping creatively with the cost-of-living crisis. But, asks Economics Staff Tutor Janet Cole, do these projects bring emotional rewards as well?

As a proponent of happiness since childhood it may seem odd that I chose the 'dismal science' for my career. However, economics is no stranger to the pursuit of happiness. Economist and Philosopher Adam Smith's seminal 18th century works mention happiness no less than 220 times. Smith notes ancient philosophers investigated "the happiness... of a man, considered not only as an individual, but as the member of a family, of a state, and of the great society of mankind". Arguably, from Smith's work, he did not find these investigations misplaced.

It struck me there are three collectives to one individualism in Smith's observation, yet mainstream neo-liberal economics – which takes Smith as its market champion – places individualism centrally and material increase rather than happiness as 'the' objective. I found myself considering two questions: does being part of a collective help achieve happiness, and can happiness form a desirable economic objective? With Scotland being a founding member of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) group, now seems a good time to be asking.

After consideration, I decided to focus on Scottish community projects of two types: renewable energy and gardens, both having environmental connections, but being quite different regarding market output. I was surprised at how many of both types existed.

I want to give you a flavour of just two of the energy projects. The first is [Apple Juice](#) – a rather happy name. This hydro scheme utilises the Allt Breugach burn, which flows into Applecross Bay. Surplus income from the scheme is being used for community projects, decided through community consultation. The second scheme is the [Fintry Wind](#) project, part of the [Fintry Development Trust](#) and a community partnership with a commercial wind farm company. Of the 500 adult residents of Fintry, at least 200 are members of the Trust. Again, income from electricity generation is used for community projects, such as home insulation and a sustainable woodland learning and play area.

With respect to community gardens, there are at least 60 community gardens and run-wild spaces in Glasgow alone, with more being sought as part of the [Demand for Land](#) campaign.



Community garden websites and social media pages stress the community, volunteering and welcoming nature of the projects, with one participant of [Shields Health Centre Community Garden](#) actually acknowledging its collective contribution to their happiness.

Shining through their websites and literature is a clear sense of pride, satisfaction, teamwork, community involvement, and achievement in the projects mentioned here. These senses are echoed in desk research regarding many other projects, but disappointingly a happiness factor was only very occasionally expressly recognised – perhaps it does not fully exist.

Nevertheless, this opens a niche for me to take forward my research. My intention is to conduct detailed qualitative case studies of a sample of community energy and garden projects, utilising primary research methods. This will help to ascertain if there is, or is not, evidence to support a theory that community projects increase happiness, which in turn is a desirable economic objective.

Scottish community-owned energy schemes, 2021

Ownership category	No. of installations	Absolute change from Dec 2020	Percentage change from Dec 2020
Community	600	30	5%

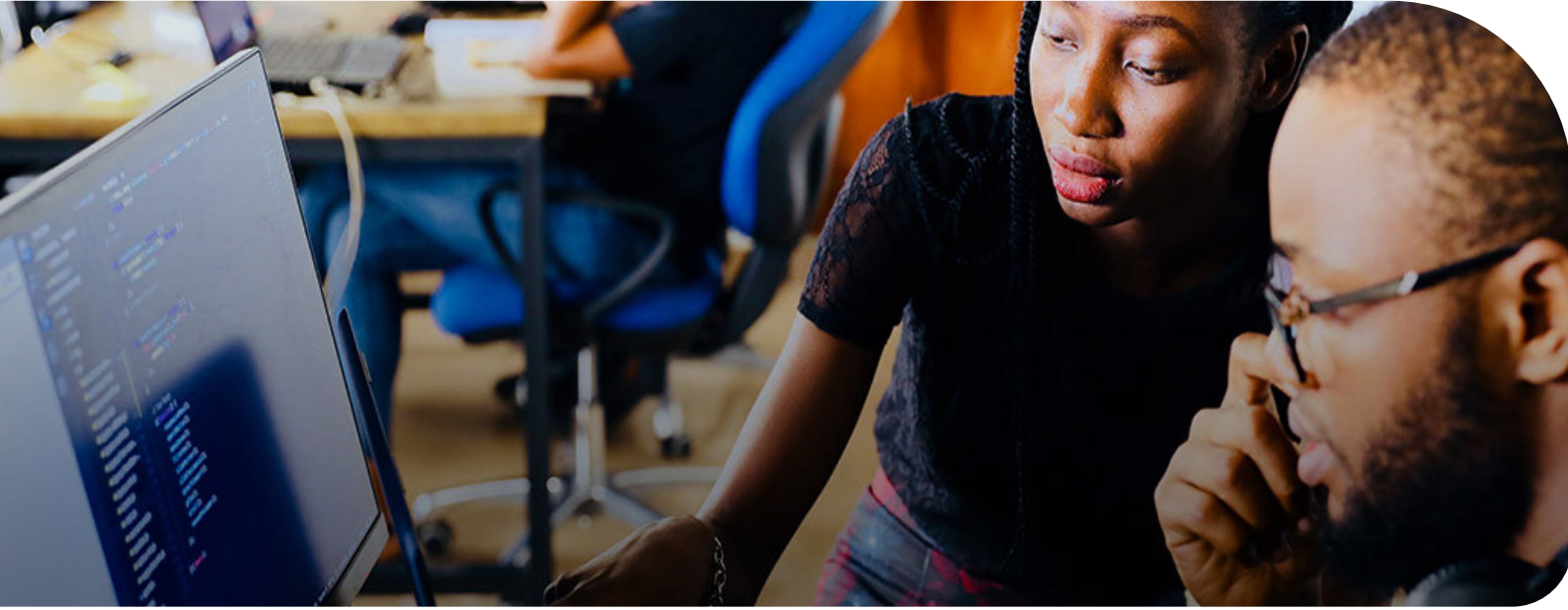
Source: [Energy Saving Trust](#)



Janet Cole
Staff Tutor and Associate Lecturer in Economics

Janet approaches Economics as a social science and, as such, has always been interested in the people and society aspects of the subject, which includes happiness.

[View Janet's profile](#)



Democracy and citizenship

Dr Donna Smith, one of our regular contributors, returns to give the inside track on her work with The Open University in Wales – a collaboration that has proven to be very fruitful.

Over the last few years I've been collaborating with the fantastic team at The Open University in Wales. It aims to help students and the wider public think critically about society and politics in Wales, and to help people to use their voices as citizens.

You may have read in [issue three of this magazine](#) about my Changemakers project, which developed from a social media public-engagement project to a student-informed [guide to making political and social change](#). Since then, we've also created an OpenLearn course: [Introduction to making political and social change](#). Written in a moment of multiple challenges – economic, environmental, political – the course gives people a grounding in the key citizenship skills and political knowledge they need to intervene in the world as it changes around them. I worked with The Open University in Wales to produce a Wales/Welsh Parliament section, as well as a Welsh language version of the entire course. Some of the course also features in D113: *Global challenges: social science in action* (and vice versa).

I'm now expanding Changemakers through the Open Societal Challenges programme, working with colleagues in POLIS and other OU Faculties as well as The Open University in Wales. The funding I've received will generate robust educational resources that enable young people to become active citizens by improving their understanding of how to make political change in Wales/the wider UK. To do this, we're teaming up with Welsh youth organisations to reach young people as well as to publicise the final educational resources, building on The Open University in Wales's contacts and current partners. We don't yet know what these resources will be: we'll

have to wait to hear what the young people say!

Another joint project I'm doing with The Open University in Wales is [Citizens' voices, people's news: making the media work for Wales](#). Also produced alongside the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA), this explores how the access to, and understanding of, the media, news and information in Wales might be improved for Welsh citizens, especially in an era of 'fake news'. The project team worked closely with citizens via a panel, making recommendations to influence the Welsh Government and Parliament in the areas of broadcasting and media regulation, educational provision, and the strengthening of the Welsh language and culture.

The premise behind all recommendations was that reliable sources of news and information are vital for a flourishing democracy, allowing people to make informed choices about issues that matter to them. As well as involving participants as active citizens in the research, we hope the project findings will help people in Wales become better informed about how they can make change. The project report has since been developed into a book chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Fake News Discourse*.

Working with The Open University in Wales has enabled me to develop research in an exciting and supported way. We already have plans for building on this work across the four nations, using the Welsh resources as a 'proof of concept'. I certainly recommend working with The Open University in Wales team.



Dr Donna Smith
Senior Lecturer in Politics

Donna is FASS Deputy Assistant Director Teaching and Students, Director of The Open University Tuition Programme and also holds a Jennie Lee Prize for Outstanding Teaching.

[View Donna's profile](#)

On China and Africa relations

Western criticism has been fierce about China's ongoing interests in Africa. Here, Dr Frangton Chiyemura explores the concerns and offers a more nuanced view.

Q. Why is China interested in Africa today?

The relationship is more complex than often captured in the media, government institutions and orthodox academic outlets. It's not just what China wants from Africa, but also what Africa wants from China.

Modern relationships between the Chinese and Africans date back to the 1950s when the government of China supported a number of African liberation movements during the wars of liberation against colonialism. The relationship has expanded to include economic, political, diplomatic and people-to-people relations.

Since the 'opening up' of China's economy in the early 1990s, Africa has been identified as a source of raw materials needed to drive economic development, and increasingly a market for Chinese goods, services and construction companies. Simultaneously, given the decline of finance from traditional development partners in the Global North, Africa has looked to China for investments and loans for much-needed infrastructure development, trade facilitation and socio-economic development.

Between 2000 and 2020, data suggests Chinese financiers committed around \$160 billion (£129 billion) to Africa. By the end of 2020, China was Africa's largest bilateral creditor.

Q. Is the relationship equal?

This is remarkably interesting because most commentaries demonise China's actions, regardless of their intent or outcome. It's important to acknowledge, like any relationship, there are issues of concern. The balance of trade is one.

Data shows that by the end of 2022, trade between China and Africa reached \$282 billion (£227 billion). Of this, Chinese exports to Africa totalled \$164 billion (£133 billion) and African exports to China, \$117 billion (£93 billion). This is because Chinese companies are exporting more to and importing less from African countries, creating unequal trade relations.

PHOTO: Opened in 2017, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway was made possible by Chinese funding.



Furthermore, most of the commodities imported from African countries are raw materials with little or limited added value and beneficiation. This fails to promote local development in Africa, and perpetuates Chinese economic domination and a deepening dependency.

Q. Looking at one country in particular, what challenges/opportunities has Ethiopia experienced in its infrastructure projects with China?

China has been pivotal in Ethiopia's infrastructure development since the two established diplomatic relations in the 1970s. Data from the [Chinese Loans to Africa Database](#) shows China committed more than \$13 billion (£10 billion) of loans to Ethiopia between 2001 and 2018, the majority being spent on transport, energy and ICT sectors.

China continues to be Ethiopia's largest source of development finance and is, in most cases, favoured by the Ethiopian Government. This is because China's funding is not attached to the good governance conditionalities, such as observance of rule of law, efficiency, transparency and accountability, often associated with Global North partners.

However, given China's dominance over Ethiopia's development landscape, there are concerns about how much autonomy Ethiopians will have over independently designing and owning their development priorities.

Q. China has been accused of 'neo-colonialism' and predatory exploitation in Africa, similar to European empires decades ago. Would you agree?

The relationship has certainly generated much interest and anxiety within and outside Africa, with some regarding China as Africa's unique development partner, and others as a neo-coloniser.

However, the key attributes of neo-colonialism are dominion and coercion. Are Africans being coerced to engage with China? I doubt it. That doesn't mean there aren't any issues, but to regard everything as neo-colonialism misses the point.

It's important to pay attention to context when looking at China and Africa relations – each country, sector and project is different. We must take a nuanced view when considering this unique relationship. One must move away from 'methodological nationalism' – a generalised approach which sees Africa as a country, and every Chinese-African relationship within it being similar.



Dr Frangton Chiyemura
Lecturer in International Development

Frangton joined the OU in 2020. He is Director of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission Distance Learning MSc in Global Development.

[View Frangton's profile](#)

My career so far

Dr William Sheehan reflects on his career – from an ‘average’ start in school to realising a childhood dream.

School days

There were two schools in my town: one preparing you for an apprenticeship and one for university. I went to the latter as my parents – a nurse and an electrician – wanted me to have a better-paying career. I was an average student, indifferent really. I still managed to do reasonably okay and went off to University College Cork. When I finished, I still didn’t know what career to follow. Everyone said, “You’ll teach” but I’d had enough of school.

Starting out

My first job was as a hospital porter. Seeing people die in A&E from car crashes was intense and a real shock to the system. From there, I took an administrative role at the Southern Health Board. I did well, getting big promotions, but the stagnant culture was frustrating, and I clashed with senior management. I decided to take a leave of absence – a crazy decision to some, especially as no one at my grade had ever done so.

The turning point

While at the Health Board, I’d completed an MA in History with the OU, purely for stimulation. Now that I was on a leave of absence, doing a History PhD seemed an obvious next step. My research subject was the British Army’s experience in Cork during the Irish War of Independence, an area largely untapped as the focus had always been on Irish experiences. In order to get a deeper understanding of military culture, I signed up for the Army Reserve despite being the oldest recruit by far. It was a sort of method learning, if you like. [My PhD went on to be published](#), and I began teaching full time.

Joining the OU

In 2009, I became an Associate Lecturer on A326: *Empire*, and afterwards the History programme. It fascinated students that not only had I done the same MA course as them, I was teaching it. I then moved to Nottingham to take a Senior Arts Faculty Manager post. That lasted two years, until my then-partner called me back to Ireland – which meant quitting my second pensionable job! My current role opened up after the Covid-19 pandemic, and although it reflected my research, I didn’t expect to get it. But I’ll never rule myself out. That’s up to other people.

My highlights

Leaving the health sector’s clear pathway has given me a bouncy but more interesting trajectory in life. I’ve consulted on TV and radio shows, including the *Who Do You Think You Are?* Brendan O’Carroll episode, and

been cited by US political commentator Max Boot. During the pandemic, a former student asked me to be an extra on Jim Sheridan’s *Murder at the Cottage* series for Sky. None of these would have happened if I’d not done the MA in History.

Tough lessons

I’ve stayed in places too long, and lost years of my life because of it. Mistakes, though, are unavoidable. Besides, failing is how we evolve. I’ve also learnt success isn’t always linear. You should plan, and have goals, while also being open to opportunity. It’s about adopting an agile approach.

The next five years

I probably won’t resign from a third pensionable job! I’m doing an MA in Creative Writing and want to finish that. I’d also love to publish something with Allen Lane because I read so many of their books. Travel is another goal: you can read about history, but need to physically see the settings. My grandfather lived until 102 and only left the country once. He would have loved to see the world so I’m doing it for us both.

In another life I’d have been...

A firefighter. I’m sort of fulfilling that childhood ambition now as I’ve joined the [Civil Defence](#). It’s a different world, with the chance to develop new skills, especially driving a fire engine.



Dr William Sheehan
Staff Tutor in Social Policy & Criminology

William is a historian who researches violent state control, particularly counterterrorism and colonial warfare. He has published several books, including *A Hard Local War*.

[View William’s profile](#)

Our School has more than 25,000 students studying across a diverse range of 34 modules.



[Learn more about our qualifications](#)



Introducing PolicyWISE

Heard of PolicyWISE but hazy on the details? Here's all you need to know about the OU initiative.

PolicyWISE, which stands for policy in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England, is the first academic initiative to lead comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across the four nations. Its aim is to tackle some of the biggest issues facing societies today, working alongside public-policy professionals to analyse and develop policies that make a real difference to people's lives.

Why PolicyWISE is needed

Interest is increasing about who holds power in each nation, why certain decisions are made and the role of research in informing the debates. Although the UK has a strong tradition of public-policy research, there is relatively little published work that considers comparative research across the nations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, each nation was responsible for its own health policy in relation to public health matters. This meant that regulations surrounding lockdown, which was imposed through public health legislation, varied greatly across the UK, Scottish and Welsh parliaments, and the Northern Ireland Assembly, impacting individuals in different ways.

In today's interconnected world, it is crucial to understand what happens in each of the nations and how policies and practices in the different jurisdictions can have significant implications for other countries and regions. Government decision-makers are keen to learn from one another about what works, and as the only University operating across all four nations of the UK, the OU is uniquely placed to facilitate this.

PolicyWISE's methods and approach

By undertaking comparative policy analysis, PolicyWISE can gain insights into how policies are formulated, implemented and evaluated. Using these insights, the team can identify best practices, policy innovations and areas for collaboration and learning.

PolicyWISE is fortunate to work with external stakeholders comprising academic staff, users of research and wider groups, who contribute ideas, evidence and expertise. Key societal challenges are addressed through a three-tiered approach, which creates the **space, shares** ideas and insight and also helps governments focus on evidence-informed policy **solutions**:

Space: Build and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academic communities to develop relationships, respect and knowledge.

Share: Create and support knowledge exchange and encourage people to work together in a comparative and collaborative way.

Solutions: Help policymakers focus on evidence-informed solutions for citizens and communities, informed by cutting-edge research and emerging ideas.



I'm confident PolicyWISE will play an essential role in meeting public-policy challenges around shared citizenship, well-being and prosperity.

Dewi Knight
PolicyWISE Director



Meet the team

PolicyWISE comprises of a small team based in The Open University in Wales's Cardiff office. Director Dewi Knight is a former Welsh Government specialist adviser, and during his tenure, he helped drive the biggest post-war education reforms anywhere in the UK. Prior to that, he held other senior policy advisory roles, including with the British Council in China and the University of Bedfordshire.

The team also consists of Carla Williams, Senior Business Manager; Catherine Miller, Support Officer; and Catherine May, External Affairs and Communications Manager. Each brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise from varying backgrounds, including voluntary and education sectors, as well as the non-departmental public body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

An External Advisory Group joins the team, made up of leaders from across public policy including civil servants, data analysts and parliamentary researchers. Collaborators also include Cardiff University, Trinity College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast, The University of Edinburgh and University College London.

What's next for PolicyWISE?

Thanks to a £1 million grant from **Dangoor Education**, development will take place across the next four years. On receiving the funding, Louise Casella, former Director of The Open University in Wales and who led the development of PolicyWISE, said she was "delighted" and that it will be used to "help create better public policy that really makes a difference to the lives of people and to communities".

One of the first projects builds upon a seminar series carried out during the initial phases of establishing PolicyWISE. For this, the OU engaged with policy professionals and University partners with leading policy research in each nation, to explore topics as diverse as online violence against women and girls, post-Covid educational inequalities and net zero.

A strategy is now being developed that describes how PolicyWISE supports policymakers and researchers to advance collaborative work and fill gaps in evidence. It will share insight, ideas and innovation wherever there is a lack of existing knowledge and where cross-nation collaboration or comparison aids

decision-making. It will initiate and deliver programmes of work to address knowledge gaps and evaluate the application of new knowledge to policy challenges.

The team will also produce regular briefings on the key topics in each nation, and showcase new research from the OU.

Finally, gaining strength from the OU's uniqueness as the only UK and Ireland comparative policy research initiative, PolicyWISE will support researchers and policymakers to develop genuine four nations respect, relationships and knowledge.

Want to get in touch?

Contact the **PolicyWISE team** for help with:



Building collaboration between University academics and policy professionals across the nations.

Working collaboratively to understand evidence and data gaps, plus research needs.



Ensuring that events benefit from comparative policy research and insight.

Initiating and delivering programmes of work aimed at addressing knowledge gaps and evaluating the application of new knowledge to policy challenges.



Creating the space for comparative policy discussions.

Sourcing or producing comparative policy briefings.



Dewi Knight
PolicyWISE Director



Catherine Miller
Support Officer



Carla Williams
Senior Business Manager



Catherine May
External Affairs and
Communications Manager



A unique partnership with the BBC

The Open University and the BBC have been in partnership for more than 50 years, co-producing inspirational content and bringing learning to life for millions of people.

A message from the Media Fellows

Did you know the partnership between the OU and the BBC is truly one of a kind? Every year, we team up to create a range of co-productions that tackle societal issues, delve into monumental periods in history and explore environmental challenges, to name a few.

What's even more exciting is that this partnership offers a unique opportunity for academics from different disciplines to come together and share their ideas and expertise.

As the co-productions take shape, our academics guide the process with their vast knowledge and experience, ensuring that content is accurate, well-balanced and highlights new and emerging ideas in their respective fields. They consult across a variety of mediums and platforms, including TV, radio, podcasts and digital content, all of which can be used for teaching and learning.

With each project, our academics have the chance to showcase their cutting-edge research, raise their profiles and present their ideas in an engaging and accessible way that the public can enjoy.

Thanks to the BBC's unparalleled reputation as the world's oldest national broadcaster, the OU's mission can reach audiences far and wide.

Recent OU/BBC co-productions

Brickies on BBC Three
(Academic Consultant: Dr Rajiv Prabhakar)

The brickies return for a second summer of building houses and chasing dreams. Life on the trowel is hard, and emotions run high on sites full of fun, friendships and fallouts.

Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Dr Philip O'Sullivan)

This series tells the story of the Troubles as experienced by the men, women and children who were drawn – willingly and unwillingly – into a violent political struggle that spanned three decades across Northern Ireland, Ireland and England.

Windrush: Portraits of a Generation on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Dr Lystra Hagley-Dickinson)

To celebrate 75 years since the arrival of Empire Windrush, the first Caribbean emigrant ship, this film

BRICKIES



ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTHERN IRELAND



WINDRUSH PORTRAITS OF A GENERATION



PHOTO: From the top: Don't Panic: The Truth About Net Zero; Brickies; Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland; Springwatch; and Windrush: Portraits of a Generation.

follows ten members of the pioneering generation as they are immortalised in portraits that will become part of the Royal Collection.

Springwatch on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Liz Wright)

Featuring another star-studded wildlife cast, Chris Packham and Michaela Strachan are based at RSPB Arne in Dorset for the 2023 edition of this hugely popular series. Spring is in full swing and the nest cameras are rigged, ready to capture all the drama of the season.

New for this academic year

Don't Panic: The Truth About Net Zero on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Prof David Humphreys)

Presenter Justin Rowlett investigates what net zero means for ordinary people and the chances of it actually working. Episode one explores the world of electric cars, while episode two focuses on the challenges at home, replacing gas with electric heating, hot water and cooking or, even more radically, a system of hydrogen boilers and heaters.

The Property Trap on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Dr Martin Higginson)

So many people are lured into 'the property trap' so this series asks how we can get out of it. Across two episodes, it unpacks the housing market crisis and tells the story from the peak of home ownership in 2003 to the present day. It examines how everyone from first-time buyers to buy-to-let landlords are part of the trap.

The Big Payback on BBC Two
(Academic Consultant: Dr Julia Chukwuma)

An exposé into the dark truth behind the record industry, this series travels back and forth in time to reveal the decades of adversities Black musicians have faced. The stakes could not be higher: the record industry says it wants to change, but is it ready for real reparations, for the genuine big payback?

Engaging new audiences in innovative ways

The OU's partnership with the BBC goes beyond content production. Due to the OU's continued mission to promote life-long learning, it's key we find innovative ways to share knowledge and get audiences involved. The OU Connect website is packed with learning resources to help people engage with OU/BBC content, produced in

collaboration with Academic Consultants. Now, millions of people across the UK and beyond can learn about some of the most complex and powerful subjects of our time.

Looking ahead, the aim is to prioritise community and outreach work in order to engage with people on a personal level. The OU is exploring public engagement at scale, and is interested in the ways emerging technologies can be used to make that happen. Every OU/BBC co-production supports Faculty curriculum priorities and helps sustain the OU's social mission to motivate, inspire and encourage audiences to explore their interests further. Not only is this partnership unique and exciting, but it is also a crucial part of ensuring the OU's continued success.

Watch all FASS-related OU/BBC programmes on [BBC iPlayer](#) after transmission, and find exclusive supporting content on the OU's BBC partnership site, [OU Connect](#).

Recent awards



Grierson Awards, 2022

We Are Black and British

Winner, Best Constructed Documentary Series

BAFTA Television Awards, 2023

We Are Black and British

Shortlisted, Reality and Constructed Factual Series

Broadcast Awards, 2023

We Are Black and British

Shortlisted, Best Documentary Series

The Webby Awards, 2023

OU Connect website

Honouree, Website and Mobile Sites (Education)

Anthem Awards, 2023

BBC Ideas OU Playlist

Winner, Partnership & Collaboration



Dr Alison Penn
Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor
in Policy & Criminology

Alison's research focuses on the social history of voluntary action. She is a FASS Media Fellow seconded into Broadcast & Partnerships.

[See Alison's profile](#)



Dr Jo Paul
Senior Lecturer in Classical
Studies

Jo's research explores how the modern world engages with the classical past. Jo is a FASS Media Fellow seconded into Broadcast & Partnerships.

[See Jo's profile](#)

Learning about sensitive subjects

As part of their work with the OU's **Positive Digital Practices** team, Dr Leigh Downes partnered with students and tutors to explore the best approach for learning about sensitive subjects. Now, Leigh shares the recommendations.

Many SSGS topics cover violence, injustice and oppression that our University community may directly experience and be affected by. Personal connection with sensitive subjects can be a valuable source of motivation, challenge and curiosity, but there are obvious considerations around student mental health and well-being. This is of particular concern to our School, which has a higher proportion of students with declared disabilities.

Predicting what constitutes a sensitive topic is notoriously difficult because it differs for everyone. While we understandably worry about negative emotional responses, distance students report a range of emotional responses during their study. Alongside sadness, anger and discomfort, positive reactions are also possible including empathy, empowerment and acceptance. Yet it's perhaps most important to acknowledge that students who've had traumatic life experiences are at risk of re-traumatisation.

Learning material images, words and sounds that are reminiscent of a traumatic life event can lead to re-traumatisation including panic attacks, flashbacks and disassociation. Students without lived experience are also at risk of secondary traumatisation. This can seriously impact students and be reflected in lower results or withdrawal from studies.

The strengths, capacities and lived experiences of distance students can, with support, be successfully applied to the learning of sensitive topics. Emotional resilience is a universally relevant skill set and is an approach that can contribute to reducing and mitigating barriers to learning for all.



Dr Leigh Downes
Senior Lecturer in Criminology

Leigh is a violence and abuse researcher who collaborates with others to imagine possibilities for trauma-informed and social justice approaches in teaching, learning and research.

[View Leigh's profile](#)

Key starting points for teachers

Regularly acknowledge the breadth of emotional responses

Find ways to acknowledge that emotional responses are an expected and normal part of learning. You could include a student-facing guide to normalise emotional responses in learning and impacts on well-being. This is a great way to provide tips and resources to help students navigate emotional responses, and start a conversation. Regular check-ins (at the start/end of tutorials, emails or a quick 'How are you feeling?' poll) also develop trust and emotional acceptance.

Affirm and extend existing emotional-resilience skills

Design learning opportunities so students can identify, practise and share strategies for dealing with emotional aspects of learning throughout a module. This could include a dedicated emotional-resilience study skills tutorial, multimedia learning activities to prompt individual reflection, small group discussion or anonymous methods to get feedback and have discussions.

Embed tools to activate emotional-resilience skills

Students have told us that content warnings are crucial in helping them engage with (rather than avoid) sensitive content. Content notes or previews can remove learning barriers while also protecting student well-being. This is a win-win, and is well worth considering using for anyone not already doing so.

Promote help-seeking by clearly signposting to support services and resources inside and outside the OU

Students told us they want more accessible information, including clear signposting to support services. Think about how you could effectively and regularly communicate help and support in emails, learning materials, tutorials and forums. Tailored OU resources – including student-facing and educator guides, videos and more – can be found on the [Teaching and learning emotionally challenging and sensitive content webpage](#).

Taking these steps helps create a safe, open learning environment, where students can achieve better outcomes both academically and emotionally.

Can self-management revolutionise local government?

Workplaces without managers may sound utopian, but could it be a solution for fixing the UK's broken councils? POLIS student Kieran Birse thinks so...

After more than a decade of budget cuts, local councils have been hit by high debt, low productivity and even lower morale. A [study by the Centre for Progressive Policy \(CPP\)](#) found that 131 of the 151 upper-tier councils in England are in a deficit with no clear funding plan. And in some cases, as with Spelthorne in Surrey, councils are spending more on debt than on other services.

It may be time for a different approach, by reorganising local councils into self-managing teams. A [report from the Chartered Management Institute \(CMI\)](#) found that 49% of UK workers dislike their manager and would even take a pay cut to work with someone better. The CMI also found that almost four out of five managers are accidental, having simply fallen into it. This dangerous combination shows UK institutions are lacking the basics of leadership and support for front-line workers. Converting to a self-management system could produce a support structure by giving front-line workers the trust to get the job done.

This isn't a radical or new idea, but one already used globally. US [video game producer Valve](#) has been manager-free since it started in 1996. Its employee handbook states, "Hierarchy is great for maintaining predictability and repeatability", which is arguably essential for organisations like the army, to control large groups of people. Local government needs freedom to allow for the innovation and creativity that Valve has apparently perfected.

Success is even possible without a 'Chief'. [Mayden](#), a health-tech company, switched to a structure where "everyone would have an equal say in the life and direction of the company". Incorporated in 2000, Mayden is at the forefront of innovation in data analytics, with no CEO and decisions made democratically.

This system also works in old-school warehouse settings. The [Morning Star Company](#) is responsible for the majority of California's tomatoes and tomato-based products and is worth around \$700 million (£600 million). Founded in the 1950s, it boasts a no-management structure, citing "empowerment of the workers" and "making the mission the boss" as the recipe for success. In other words, the self-managing system works.

Local authorities would, of course, need to tailor their own systems. Public infrastructure maintenance, social housing and waste management could all be streamlined and future-proofed by ridding them of stagnant leadership. This could lead to a vast reduction in wasted capital and innovation to secure services for the future.

One of the most painful issues councils face is social care. A 2019 study by the Royal Society for Arts (RSA) found that funding is only part of the problem – "the inability of bureaucratic, hierarchical organisational models to respond to complex needs" is also cited. The RSA references Frederic Laloux's pioneering theory of self-managing teams and [Buurtzorg](#) – a care organisation implementing it. Buurtzorg reports multiple benefits including flexibility of service provisions, increasing quality of work life and less absenteeism with reduced employee turnover. Such benefits highlight everything the UK care sector is woefully lacking.

My wife was a social-care worker throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and left the profession soon after. The physical demands, toxic workplace culture and a lack of support or supply of the correct tools to care for clients took its toll, and she was unable to continue.

Innovation is the key to survival in most modern societies, helping to stay ahead of the competition and prepare against disaster. Public opinion is what drives fundamental change in democracy and [current levels of satisfaction with the care sector are at an all-time low](#).

Change is coming. The proposal isn't to sack every line manager in local council operations, but to look objectively at these roles. If managers retire or leave, should they be replaced? Would their services be better used elsewhere?

Not all aspects of local authority may thrive without a single point of leadership – more research is needed. However, it's clear the state of the country is evolving, and we need to evolve alongside it.



Kieran Birse
POLIS undergraduate student

Currently studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics, Kieran has worked in the animal health-care industry for more than a decade. He is from Dumfries.





New qualifications

Matt Staples, Director of Teaching, introduces two exciting new qualifications, with a deeper dive from two of the people involved – Dr Ece Kocabiçak and Dr Edward Wastnidge.

Our School is continually developing its curriculum offer and we now have the largest number of modules and qualifications of any School across The Open University, and the third highest number of students. The themes we explore and the questions we ask about the world are some of the most important as we seek to critically engage with 21st century society, both in the UK and globally.

As the world is changing so fast, so is our curriculum and module development, and we are continually exploring new offerings, as well as ensuring that our existing qualifications and modules are up to date, offering both the latest intellectual content and supporting students in their vocational aspirations.

Key to exploring some of the big questions about the world are the disciplines of Sociology, and Politics & International Studies. This is why two new degrees were launched in 2023: BA (Honours) Sociology and MA in International Relations.

BA (Honours) Sociology – R57

Q. Ece, what is the purpose of the degree?

It's predominantly designed to teach students how to analyse information critically, understand sociological problems and think like sociologists. They will learn to examine social themes – such as construction of identities, unequal power relations and ethnicity-based disparities – as well as how intersecting inequalities affect people's lives, as seen in the insecurity of those with precarious jobs.

Q. What can students expect?

Students will explore how digital technologies impact societies from three perspectives. The first examines how digital technology connects individuals to society; the second focuses on the relationship between people and the digital devices they use every day; and the final perspective investigates inequalities in digital societies. Students will also study how digital technologies influence various aspects of everyday life, such as the use of artificial intelligence and robots in the workplace and digital objects to improve health, cybersecurity, disinformation, social media, and mental health.

Q. How does the degree offer students a different perspective?

It adopts an intersectional approach towards key sociological questions, exploring how social class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality shape our lives and social inequalities. For example, sociological thinking reveals that work happens not only in offices and factories but also in the home, where women often carry out domestic or care work for little or no pay. These jobs are undervalued, seen as less important and requiring little skill, and are over-represented by migrants, women and people of colour. Sociology examines how these inequalities intersect and shape labour markets.

Q. What are the benefits of taking this qualification?

The degree will teach students how to investigate sociological questions, critically evaluate evidence and effectively communicate findings. Students will also learn time-management, self-reflection and self-motivation skills.

Social theory helps identify the regular patterns and social structures of inequality. Therefore, students will not only have a well-developed understanding of controversial issues affecting society today but will also be in a position to make a positive difference.



Q. What doors may be opened after qualifying?

A Sociology degree can lead to various careers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Employers value the skills that Sociology graduates provide, and this degree may enhance students' prospects for career progression. Relevant job titles include social researcher, criminal justice worker, community development worker, journalist and more.

MA in International Relations – F94

Q. Edward, how did the MA come about?

The University realised there was a growing interest in International Relations (IR). As a vibrant department, strong on research and teaching with a well-established International Studies programme, we were keen to expand our provision in this dynamic and exciting field.

Q. Who is it designed for?

It's for anyone with an undergraduate degree that's interested in IR. We say students should 'ideally' have a degree in IR or a cognate discipline, but it's certainly not a prerequisite. Crossover subjects include History and other social sciences such as Geography and Sociology. There's a strong research methods element and emphasis on independent study in the degree, which is ideal for those looking to enhance their careers, and also serves as great preparation for students looking to go on to further postgraduate research (i.e. a PhD).

Q. What can students expect?

It will equip them with the tools to understand and analyse a range of contemporary global issues. Part one is based around a series of real-world issues, such as threats to security, rising powers and the 'democratic crisis'. This content is complemented by a deep engagement with the conceptual and

theoretical tools of IR enquiry. It teaches both mainstream and critical approaches simultaneously and covers a range of cases and perspectives from around the world.

Part two is largely focused on the postgraduate dissertation, where students will get the chance to design their own independent research project. Students are taught a suite of research and project-management skills via innovative masterclasses with leading experts, culminating in a dissertation that will showcase their own research.

Q. What are the benefits of taking this qualification?

The first benefit is gaining insight into some of the world's most pressing issues. Developing an advanced understanding of the discipline of IR is another benefit, as well as learning how to apply a number of skills and research methods to help explain complex international issues. And a major benefit is developing independent research skills that can be applied across a range of sectors.

Q. What doors may be opened after qualifying?

The MA in International Relations will be useful for those looking to enhance their career prospects in a number of areas. These include careers in government and the civil service, non-governmental organisations and charity sectors, international organisations, international risk management, as well as other opportunities that involve the independent research skills that this degree provides.

This course is also ideal preparation for anyone wanting to pursue further studies, including at doctoral level.



Matt Staples
Director of Teaching for the School of SSGS

As well as being Director of Teaching for the School of SSGS, Matt is also a Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in POLIS.

[View Matt's profile](#)



Dr Ece Kocabiçak
Lecturer in Sociology

Ece's research engages with comparative Sociology, feminist political economy and International Development.

[View Ece's profile](#)



Dr Edward Wastnidge
Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies

Edward has taught across all levels at the OU, chairing part one of the new MA. He researches the international relations of the Middle East.

[View Edward's profile](#)

Uncovering the role of women in Scottish workplace struggles

Prof Gerry Mooney discusses two collections he helped produce for OpenLearn, which record worker experiences that, until now, have largely gone unheard.

Arguably one of the least-acknowledged aspects of the recent wave of strikes in Scotland relates to the large number of women workers who are involved. Working alongside a group of FASS colleagues, we've been busy over the past two years supporting 35 women workers in recording their own histories of workplace struggles.

Building on existing relations with the trade union movement in Scotland, we've been supporting workers from across the country to research and record different dimensions of women's role in workplace struggles, strikes and disputes over the past century. In partnership with Scottish Union Learning and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) in Scotland, two collections of short and accessible articles have been collated. Together these offer rich insights on workplace struggles in general and how women workers have often been to the fore, a fact that has often been overlooked in the past.

The two collections, *Women and Workplace Struggles: Scotland 1900-2022* and *Women and Scottish Railway History*, offer a diverse assortment of learning materials and collectively include, in addition to text and historically researched pieces, interviews, audio and video material. Poetry and song are richly illustrated with images and photographs.

The overall project had several aims: to further strengthen relations between the OU in Scotland and the Scottish Labour Movement, to help close some of the gaps in the awareness of women's role in trade unions and in workplace disputes, and to provide opportunities for activists and union members to author materials that would be of interest to a wider trade union and public audience. The project hopes to build the confidence of learners and encourage them and others to think about embarking on further studies with the OU.

The *Women and Scottish Railway History* collection was largely funded by Scottish Union Learning, part of the Scottish Trade Union Congress. In partnership with the RMT Union in Scotland, a group of women activists from the RMT attended a course of sessions run by



PHOTO: Female council workers striking for fair pay. Glasgow, 2018.

OU tutors on different aspects of research as well as research ethics, recording and writing-up materials, and editing techniques. The women developed a range of learning skills including approaches to interviewing, historical research techniques and writing for online audiences. This has featured in the UK-wide RMT members magazine, *RMT News*.

Taken together, the two collections contain almost 40 different pieces. The project was launched just before the Covid-19 pandemic, which obviously delayed the production of materials. However, this also provided an opportunity for some materials to be generated on the ways in which Covid-19 impacted on different workplaces, and how this had particular consequences for many women workers.

A further delay in the completion of the project was caused, ironically, by the new wave of workplace disputes and strikes that have gripped the UK during 2022-2023, with picket-line duty, marches and campaigning coming ahead of authoring and editing.

While many women workers continue to struggle for greater equality in the workplace and equal pay and conditions, the stories recounted across the two collections reflect momentous victories as well as continuing fights. The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that little is gained without struggle – and that is as true today as it has been throughout the periods covered by the two collections.



Prof Gerry Mooney
Professor of Scottish Society and Social Welfare

Now retired, Gerry worked for the OU for almost four decades. He has written widely on issues such as social policy, class, poverty and Scottish independence.

Our research strives to spark debate, present new ideas and find positive solutions.



Explore our research

Who's responsible for international students?

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed how heavily the UK's higher-education institutions (HEIs) rely on international student fees. Dr Gunjan Sondhi explores how those students can pay more than just a financial cost to study here.

International students support the UK's higher education (HE) system through the fees they pay and associated spending they incur. According to a [2023 report](#), international students contributed £41.9 billion to the UK economy in 2021-2022. In the preceding year (2020/2021) international student fees made up [17% of universities' total income \(2021/22\)](#). One might expect universities and governments to roll out the red carpet for international students, but it's quite the opposite. The migration and education structure failures exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic still negatively impact students today, with no plans from universities or governments to produce programmes and policies as a response.

During the pandemic, international students were among the first migrant group to become visible as their mobility was [delayed, disrupted or disabled](#). As a result, international students in the UK and globally appeared to be abandoned, and their host institutions and governments dismissed their concerns. But as physical numbers of international students dropped in 2020, with 20% fewer visas issued to international students in 2019, the co-constitutive relationship between migration, the UK's HEIs and the economy was revealed. The revenue drop and dependency on international student fees became so evident that in 2021 the UK Government renewed its [commitment to a strategy to attract more international students](#). It aims to generate £35 billion in trade in education services and attract 600,000 international students by 2030. The graduate route forms part of this strategy, offering international students career pathways after graduation.

The impact of these policies, combined with Covid-19 restrictions easing, has generated substantial growth. According to [HESA data](#), in 2022 there was a 37% increase in international student enrolment, which resulted in [revenue from non-EU student fees](#) increasing by 30% between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022. By contrast, in 2022, UK student enrolment figures rose by 10% – only a 6.5% increase in revenue.

This increase continues to reproduce dependencies now crucial to the HE sector being able to function and consequently cross-subsidise access to higher education for UK students. But despite the importance

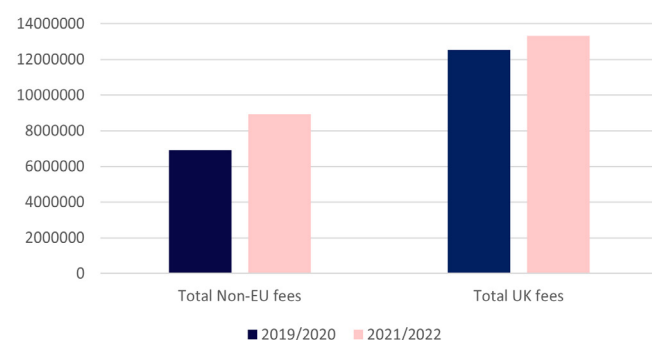


of international students, they are often seen only as a source of revenue, with no reciprocity towards their well-being.

Historically, there's been an assumption that international students are from affluent backgrounds – thus the absence of responsibility for their well-being and education has raised little concern. However, as the pandemic showed, this is a fallacy. International student experiences in the UK during the pandemic revealed they faced similar challenges to UK students. Still, [as our study showed \(2019/20\)](#), their situation was exacerbated by the absence of a social network to draw upon for support. Furthermore, their precarious status as migrants caused intense stress because of the lack of clarity and information from the UK Government about migration governance structures. Both universities and the UK Government failed to recognise their duty of care to international students.

These problems remain. Universities continue to recruit more international students while cutting staff who undertake teaching and research. The UK Government continues its campaign against migrants, while still pursuing its 2021 strategy – which it is already on track to achieve. Sustained indifference is irresponsible and unethical. Until significant changes are made, international students will pay the price.

UK tuition fees 2019/20 vs 2021/22



Source: HESA DT031 Table 6



Dr Gunjan Sondhi
Lecturer in Geography

Gunjan's work explores the interplay between gender, work, education and international migration. This stretches across South/South East Asia, North America and the UK/EU.

[View Gunjan's profile](#)



World economies post-Covid

How does a country begin to manage and recover its public finance and welfare following a global pandemic? Dr Ayobami Ilori considers the impact on a global, national and human level...



“There is a wide income and wealth divide in the UK and the pandemic only worsened that gap.”

Following turbulent periods in history, such as the Spanish flu, the two World Wars and the 2007–2008 financial crisis, we’ve seen a very sharp rise in government support and public debt. In the aftermath of a financial or global health crisis, governments often try to bail out the private sector by targeting private businesses. But large-scale government intervention like the kind we’ve seen in recent years – such as the furlough and energy price guarantee schemes – is rare.

It is estimated the UK Government spent about **£310 to £410 billion** on the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic alone, and another **£69 billion** on energy subsidies to protect households and businesses between October 2022 and March 2023. While the Covid-19 vaccine was a success in many areas, we also saw innovative but incoherent pandemic responses which contributed to fiscal wastage and a huge amount of unnecessary overspending.

The amount of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that was imported during the pandemic was staggering, yet the standard itself was very poor. We are not used to this kind of wastage, especially in developed countries such as the UK. Yet, the global effect of the pandemic lingers on, both in financial and health terms, and its long-term effect on the world economy is uncertain.

There is a wide income and wealth divide in the UK and the pandemic only worsened that gap. Those who lost their jobs during the pandemic were largely low and middle-income earners. Some of those workers were furloughed and, as a result, lost about 20–25% of their income.

Women were among those most negatively affected; they are over-represented in some of the worst-hit sectors, including retail, accommodation and food services, and do a greater share of unpaid care. We know that overall, more women than men were furloughed throughout the UK, largely because most of the jobs that continued to operate were physically intensive with a predominantly male workforce – such as in construction.

Black and other minority ethnic groups began the pandemic with one of the lowest rates of employment in the UK compared to the previous 15 years. However, at the peak of the pandemic in 2020, Black unemployment rose sharply compared to any other group to 11%, and then slowed down to 9% in 2021. Unemployment rates among Black women remained rigidly high at 11%, compared to 4% among white women, by the end of 2021. There were – and still are – inequalities among the employed too. In 2021, the **Nuffield Trust** reported “a considerable variation in pay gaps between ethnic groups across all NHS staff,” and found Black British men earned less than any other group in the NHS. I explored how economic systems can disadvantage certain ethnic groups in *We Are Black and British* (BBC Two), which I was proud to work on alongside fellow OU academics Dr Anthony Gunter and Dr Naomi Watson.

The long-term impacts of Covid-19 on individuals should not be ignored. The lifetime income of younger generations is at risk as they struggle to enter the labour market and earn decent pay. Many of these individuals



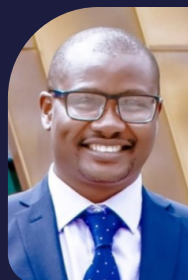
PHOTO: The UK Government spent an unprecedented amount in response to Covid-19, with varying levels of success.

were studying or furloughed during the pandemic and may never own properties of their own. There’s an unprecedented level of global debt compared to pre-pandemic levels.

With rising world prices, weak global growth and declining population trends around the world, the post-pandemic global recovery may be stifled, and global debt may take longer than previously expected to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Despite these concerns, I remain hopeful. China, India, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia are among the countries to recover faster and better than others. There are several factors that will enable a full fiscal recovery and one of those is productivity. After World War II, productivity was at an all-time high which helped the UK, and indeed the world, recover.

Only through deploying productivity in a fair and just way, can we start to rebuild our futures and recover from the residual debt left behind in the wake of the pandemic.



Dr Ayobami Ilori
Lecturer/Staff Tutor in Economics

Ayobami is a macroeconomist whose research focuses on understanding the effects of fiscal and monetary policy on the domestic and global economy.

[View Ayobami's profile](#)



Creating a podcast

Although hugely popular now, podcasts were just taking off in 2011 when then-students Dr Chris Cotter and Dr David Robertson co-founded theirs. Chris reveals what it was like to set up *The Religious Studies Project*.

It all started in the University of Edinburgh student union. David and I had been introduced by our lecturer at the time, Prof Carole Cusack. We realised while chatting that we both listened to a lot of podcasts but there wasn't anything out there covering religious studies. We thought, "That'd be fun to do. Surely it can't be too difficult?"

Our ambitions were no greater than interviewing ten guest speakers, who were part of a seminar series. We were then going to our first conference – held by the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) – and thought we'd try to record some interviews there. People were very enthused at the idea and willing to chat. We left with five podcasts in the bag and the podcast name, which we'd thought of in the pub!

The BASR backed us from the beginning. They couldn't provide any funding but offered their name for legitimacy. David and I both put in £100 for a Zoom H2 Handy Recorder and the rest went on a web domain and website. A year later, the BASR gave us £500, and have done so every year since. Then the North American Association pitched in. Then the Australian, European and International Associations.

Accessible content remains our editorial manifesto. We wanted an easy way to stay up to date, so episodes are short (30 minutes) and follow the same format. It's also about providing a sense of community. To that end, we take audience feedback seriously and have used criticism positively, such as tightening our vetting procedure after it transpired that a contributor's work was considered controversial elsewhere in the world.

There are now 400 episodes and counting, with more than a million downloads overall. Our podcasts are Creative Commons license. People can use them and chop and change them as long as they give credit.

We can never really predict which ones will be picked up, for example the [Church Times reviewed us during the Covid-19 pandemic](#).

My main advice for anyone starting out is to establish the podcast's purpose. Be enthusiastic about your subject. Have a regular output to help build an audience: Trello can help when planning content. Quality sound is a must – Zencastr is great as it captures the audio at each end. Oh, and don't publish anything before googling how to make sure Spotify and iTunes can find your podcasts.

Know when to step back is my other tip. David and I stood down from the day-to-day in 2019, staying on as editors-in-chief. The podcast was started with the enthusiasm of youth, and we've since gone on to assume more work and life responsibilities. We've now had two cycles of managing editors – David McConeghy and Breann Fallon being our first, and Andie Alexander (an OU doctoral student) our current – all of whom bring incredible energy and talent.

The podcast may have been started by two people, but there's a whole cast involved. I owe a lot of my career success to the podcast, but it wouldn't have been possible without our [contributors](#) and sponsors, as well as the [editorial teams past and present](#). We are also indebted to *The Religious Studies Project Association*, which is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

There are ambitions for growth. The magazine style of *This American Life* has always been an inspiration. The other goal is multilingualism. The podcast is currently English-language only, but we'd be happy to collaborate with others, perhaps even making *The Religious Studies Project* a franchise of sorts.



Dr Chris Cotter
Staff Tutor in Sociology and Religious Studies

Chris joined the OU in 2022, and specialises in 'non-religious' stuff, method and theory, qualitative research, discourse analysis and religion in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

[View Chris's profile](#)

Studying with SSGS

Our students come from all over the world and a variety of backgrounds. Some are parents with childcare to juggle alongside their studies, others are in part or full-time employment. They are all united by their curiosity and fundamental passion for learning. Here are some of our current students.



"My confidence has greatly improved since studying at the OU. My tutor is always happy to guide and reassure me, offering steps on how to better my understanding of the material."

Victoria Sanderson
Environmental Studies



"I love that the OU recognises your pre and post-PhD journey: validating your prior work as important knowledge and helping you gain skills for life after a PhD."

James Sharrock
Development Policy & Practice



"When you've completed an assignment and see the email arrive in your inbox to say your results are in, feeling sick with nerves, it's the best feeling ever... it motivates you to get those assignments done when you find modules you like."

Izzy James
Criminology



"Studying with the OU has been a great experience for me. The University provides an excellent environment that supports your personal and professional development as a researcher."

Haggai Kanenga
International Development



"One thing that will stay with me about doing a PhD at the OU is the opportunity to develop as a researcher, and the massive support from my supervision team."

Abiola George
Development Policy & Practice



"The supportive environment within the OU is brilliant – feeling like someone is always there to help when you're struggling makes the difficult task of doing a PhD manageable."

Jana Macfarlane-Horn
Social Policy & Criminology

The Open Futures Fund: scholarships at the OU

The Open Futures Fund provides scholarships and bursaries to help disadvantaged students realise their ambitions.

Support is available for disabled veterans, refugees, asylum seekers, Black students, carers and care-experienced students.



[See funding options](#)



Reframing Renaissance intarsia

Many will be unfamiliar with Renaissance intarsia – in part because it's been dismissed as a 'craft'. It's something PhD Philosophy student Claudia Giupponi wants to change...



Q. Claudia, tell us about your time with the OU.

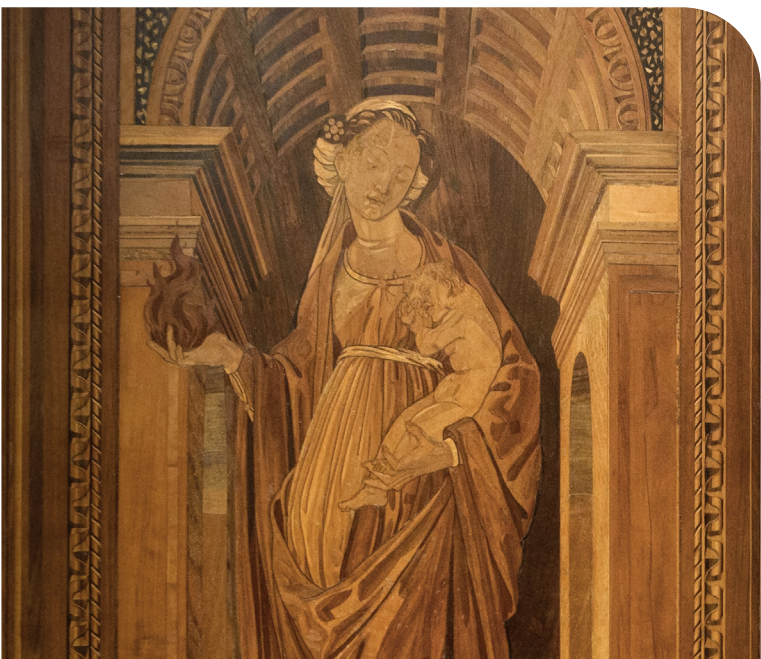
I've been here since 2010, completing a BA and MA in Art History while working full time in customer service. I self-funded the first two years of my PhD, but was lucky enough to win a bursary in 2022, allowing me to study full time. The OU has made the impossible possible. It's given me a second chance to turn my dreams into reality.

Q. What is intarsia?

Intarsias are like jigsaw puzzles made of small pieces of wood. These are cut to shape and assembled to create monochromatic images. Cycles of intarsia decorate altars and sacristies in churches and study rooms in palaces across Italy. Intarsia was very popular in the Renaissance, but also very short-lived. It emerged, evolved and was abandoned between the 15th and 16th centuries.

Because of its fragility, only a few examples have survived. Unfortunately, they've been somewhat neglected by scholars and philosophers.

PHOTO: Intarsia seen in Federico da Montefeltro's study rooms.



When it has been mentioned in academic work, intarsia has been presented as a craft or, at best, as a sub-genre of painting.

Q. Philosophically, how do societies distinguish between 'art' and 'craft'?

Nowadays, the terms 'art' and 'craft' are often used together, while identifying specific activities. 'Art' relates to paintings, sculpture, music and poetry while 'craft' relates to ceramics, embroidery, woodwork and metalwork. British philosopher R. G. Collingwood made the distinction that by lacking a prior plan, art has the capacity of expression. Meanwhile, craft is unable to express the maker's thoughts and emotions because it requires planning and execution.

Q. How does categorisation affect perception and value?

Categorisations can be helpful, but the problem with how we identify 'art' is that the term conceals positive and evaluative connotations, which the term 'craft' lacks. Some philosophers claim this reflects elitist values (art is mainly made by white men; crafts by women). While it may be important to expand the canon of art to include the works of neglected groups, it remains significant to investigate the values and categories we use to justify these distinctions and classifications.

Q. Which recent discoveries about intarsia are changing opinions?

Art historians have made an excellent case that intarsia was not a marginal activity in the Renaissance, but that it had a more central role within the artistic world. Intarsia combined three disciplines: artists (who designed the images), specialised carpenters called intarsiatori (who made the objects), and architects (who designed the space where works of intarsia featured). It's recently been claimed artists such as Lorenzo Lotto, Sandro Botticelli and Antonio del Pollaiuolo helped produce several works of intarsia.

Q. What most likely led to intarsia being classified as a craft?

A misunderstanding. It was thought the passage between planning and executing was a purely mechanical act of copying the outline as defined in the preparatory drawing. This meant the intarsiatore was seen as a skilled craftsperson rather than an artist. However, it's been argued the intarsiatore had to convey the representations in a completely different material (wood). This required high levels of interpretation and creativity, which are considered features of an artist.

Q. Can perceptions about intarsia be traced back to particular individuals?

Possibly the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari. He thought intarsia was less interesting than painting, which hugely influenced later scholars. However, one of his points – that intarsia would ultimately be destroyed by fire and woodworm – was sadly right. The most famous pieces to survive are Federico da Montefeltro's study rooms; one now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York, the other still in its original location in Urbino, Italy.



PHOTO: The Shankill area of Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The course that asks: why riot?

For some young people, violence can seem the only way to be heard. Gabi Kent talks about her involvement in the OpenLearn course *Why Riot?*, which strives to give young people the skills and tools to use their voice instead.

“People ask why these boys choose rioting and violence over other avenues, and there is no simple answer.”



PHOTO: A burnt-out bus in the Shankill, April 2021.

Several real-life events in Northern Ireland, both in the past and more recently, sparked the making of *Why Riot?*. The course wouldn't exist without The Open University in Ireland's oral history archive *Time to Think*, so it's important we start there.

Spanning a 30-year period, The Open University taught Loyalist and Republican politically motivated prisoners in British and Irish prisons. This was a radical act. No other university had removed barriers to higher education for this group of people in this way. Ex-combatants, many of whom had been imprisoned as teenagers, could access courses and use this knowledge to reimagine, plan for and shape a more peaceful future.

Years later, my colleagues Dr Jenny Meegan, Dr Philip O'Sullivan and John D'Arcy from The Open University in Ireland decided to capture the stories of these OU students. I joined the team in 2016 and together with the OU library we created *Time to Think*. My job today involves drawing on this past to address present-day challenges of conflict and political division. Many of the lessons from the archive still resonate, as we discovered during the 2021 street disturbances in working-class communities in Belfast.

Events that provided a catalyst

In the spring of 2021, fuelled by political tensions around Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, young people took to the streets in Belfast and other inner-city areas. These events made international headlines when a bus was burned on the Shankill Road in Belfast. Police were attacked, and violence broke out at flashpoints along the 'peace wall' dividing Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) and Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) communities. Numerous young people

were arrested, as youth workers tried to defuse things on the ground.

In the aftermath, I called one of our former students from *Time to Think*, Dr William Mitchell, to see how we might help. William runs the **ACT INITIATIVE** in the Shankill. He was working with a group of boys affected by the riots and described how they were frustrated about not being able to 'make their voice heard'. From these discussions, *Why Riot?* was born.

William and I felt it important to develop a course with these boys that could also help other young people find a way to express themselves and deal with the complex realities they are navigating. We wanted to enable young people to make a difference without putting their own futures and lives at risk. *Why Riot?* is framed around the themes of community, choices and aspirations, and explores ways young people can find their voice and act individually and collectively for positive change.

Actively listening to those affected

To understand the challenges of growing up in a community such as the Shankill, we interviewed some of the boys, making a film told through their eyes. It was clear the boys were dealing not only with current political unrest but also with the legacy of the conflict. They were growing up in an area deeply affected by poverty and social inequalities, where hundreds of tourists flock every week to observe the legacy of violence as people go about their daily lives. This shaped their own sense of identity, and how others saw them. Their film, *Welcome to the Shankill*, challenges these assumptions and is a core part of the course teaching about community and identity.

People ask why these boys choose rioting and violence over other avenues, and there is no simple answer. There is the issue of their frustration about being heard, and how they are represented in the

media. Another factor is the role of external influences, including social and mainstream media. This is why we focused on digital literacy and critical-thinking skills in the course, to help young people question online information before acting. The boys also talked about their experiences of online abuse and hate speech. So, we provided examples from other contexts of young people dealing with similar challenges in constructive ways.

We also sought to encourage young people to explore new possibilities in their lives, including through activism, again with examples from other contexts. With *Why Riot?* we wanted to demonstrate how anger can be a useful tool for change if channelled in the right way.

Going further afield

Although this course draws on the experiences of boys in the Shankill, it can be applied to other contested societies and contexts. We are now working with youth workers in Belfast on a research project to see how the course can be used or adapted for different groups of young people, including girls, CNR and other communities, and to understand its impacts.

My hope is that *Why Riot?* lights a spark for other young people to find their voice and use the power of education to change their social and political worlds for the better. This would be a fitting legacy too of *Time to Think*.



Gabi Kent
Senior Knowledge Exchange
Lecturer

Gabi is Knowledge Exchange lead on *Time to Think*. She uses storytelling and co-production methods in her praxis on community-led conflict transformation and peace-building processes.

[View Gabi's profile](#)



PHOTO: Mural in the Shankill, 2021.

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