



SSGS MAGAZINE

Introducing the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies (SSGS), our staff and PhD students, teaching and research highlights, broadcast co-productions, and more...



RESEARCH-LED, CUTTING- EDGE CURRICULUM, ADDRESSING SOME OF THE MAJOR NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES FACING THE WORLD TODAY

CONTENTS

Welcome	3	News from the Nations: Scotland	25
New staff in the School of SSGS.....	5	News from the Nations: Wales.....	26
Reimagining crime	6	News from the Nations: Northern Ireland	27
Our Partnerships with the BBC: Highlights	8	Against the hostile environment	29
Is climate change a global challenge?.....	10	Research to drive positive change	32
What is Economic Pluralism and why is it important?	12	Supporting students through COVID.....	33
Teaching through COVID-19.....	15	Our curriculum offering	34
Scholarship in SSGS.....	18	The journey is more important than the destination.....	35
Our research.....	20	SSGS Doctoral Training Partnerships.....	38
How I became an academic	21	Being a PhD student.....	40
Researching global development in SSGS.....	23		



Welcome

Welcome to the **second issue of the SSGS Magazine** – a new publication that aims to incorporate some of the key areas of research driving the School and informing our evolving curriculum.

The School of Social Sciences and Global Studies (SSGS), and its **eight disciplines**, has welcomed over 50 new colleagues throughout the academic year of 2020/21. For many of these colleagues, starting a new job during a pandemic has proven challenging, compounded in some cases, by having to move countries. As a result of the pandemic, we have grown used to seeing new colleagues as on-screen avatars – but we are certainly looking forward to the day we can finally meet in person on campus.

For some colleagues, working from home has been tiresome, whereas for others, it has provided greater flexibility. Our working conditions vary considerably, which is why our blended working arrangements will continue, so we can support the diverse needs of staff in varying roles and different career stages in the School.

Our **ever-expanding curriculum** offering in SSGS, as well as a growing demand for and interest in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, has contributed to a large increase in student numbers. The number of students enrolled on the School's curriculum are currently in the range of 25,000. While we have been able to support this increase by appointing new staff, the numbers continue to rise. We currently have the highest number of full-time degree students on record, and one of our main priorities is to support these students and ensure their needs are met. It's crucial that while these numbers steadily increase, we continue to provide research-informed, flexible online learning, and that the quality isn't compromised.

On page 33 of this issue, Head of Student Support, Julia Prosser, gives an overview of everything we are doing to look after our students. While our staff

grapple with the challenges of working from home, we are fully aware that our students face some similar hurdles. On page 16 **Matt Staples**, Director of Teaching, and **Dr Joanna Robson**, Associate Director of Teaching, narrate the challenges and opportunities of teaching and studying through a pandemic. On page 19, **Dr Zoe Doye** gives an overview of scholarship projects in the pipeline, which will help make studying more accessible to those less advantaged. Elsewhere in the magazine, you will meet new members of staff and hear from those who have had long and successful careers at the OU. We also share our plans and aspirations as we emerge from the pandemic.

Many of our academics are working on research projects that strive to make a difference in the world. This issue includes some fascinating insights into various projects that are really shaping the way we think and behave in a global context.

Our research has gone from strength to strength this past year, and although the travel restrictions on visiting many research sites have proven challenging, our projects maintain strong local collaborations and partnerships. In many cases, collaborators and partners have taken the lead in field-based research activities, with SSGS academics supporting them virtually, creating a stimulating research environment for all involved.

In November 2021, Glasgow will host one of the most important climate conferences – COP-26. Many SSGS academics will feature in the academic discourse surrounding the conference, and the OU in Scotland are likely to be very busy as a result so watch this space. In 2022, we plan to work closely with the OU's marketing and communications teams to enhance, expand and redesign our existing qualifications. As always, we pride ourselves on research-informed teaching.

We are extremely fortunate to have the content of our modules written by some of the world's leading experts in their disciplines. This makes our curriculum relevant, vibrant, and dynamic. In the next two years we will expand our offering of MSc qualifications spanning a number of SSGS disciplines, with a particular focus on independent research skills.

Simultaneously, we will also explore a wide range of short courses that will help us reach students who are interested in micro-credentials for career development purposes or to pursue specific interests. Our curriculum will open up different higher education pathways for our students, to help them gain qualifications and skills that make them highly employable.

I hope this issue gives you an insight into the breadth of fantastic work taking place across the School, and everything this academic community has to offer.

SSGS is very much your School, as much as it is ours. Enjoy!

Shonil Bhagwat

Head of School, Social Sciences and Global Studies



Shonil Bhagwat

Prof. of Environment and Development and Head of SSGS

Shonil's research interests sit at the cross-section between natural and social sciences and centre on the links between environment and development.

See [full profile](#)

**FIND OUT MORE
ABOUT HOW**

**OUR ACADEMICS
ARE COMMITTED TO
INNOVATION, BOTH
IN THEIR TEACHING
AND RESEARCH.**

MEET OUR PEOPLE

New staff in the School of SSGS

It is a real pleasure to welcome academic and professional services colleagues who have joined the School over the past year.

Coming to us from universities across the UK, our new academic colleagues will deepen and broaden the School's current and future curriculum as they join module teams, and enrich the research culture across SSGS. We also welcome those joining the School's support and professional services teams to fill key roles of Team and School Assistants and Coordinators.

Our eight Disciplines



Economics

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Mrs Janet Cole ▶

Staff Tutor

Dr Kevin Deane ▶

Senior Lecturer

Dr Ayobami Ilori ▶

Staff Tutor

Dr Emilie Rutledge ▶

Staff Tutor

Julia Chukwuma ▶

Lecturer

Politics and International Studies

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Prof Jamie Gaskarth ▶

Professor

Prof Simon Usherwood ▶

Professor

Development

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Kate Symons ▶

Lecturer

Dr Samuel Rogers ▶

Post-Doctoral Research Associate

Dr Florian Schaefer ▶

Post-Doctoral Research Associate

Geography

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Kerry Somerset ▶

Staff Tutor

Philosophy

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Azita Chellappoo ▶

Lecturer

Sociology

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Social Policy and Criminology

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Religious Studies

[Visit this Discipline](#)

School admin team

Rae Savill

Coordinator

Louise Brazier

Team Assistant

Laura Collins

Team Assistant

Marie Chopra

Team Assistant

Karriane Wilson

School Assistant

**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT
THE FACULTY OF ARTS &
SOCIAL SCIENCES**

VISIT FACULTY



PHOTO: Demonstrators stage a protest in central London to demand justice on the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire.

Reimagining crime

Q and A with Steve Tombs

Q Your interest in the nature and regulation of corporate and state crime runs through your research and informs your teaching, most recently in DD105. What sparks your interest in these areas of criminology?

I can locate that spark to a very specific time and place. In December 1984, a fire and explosion at a US-owned chemical plant in Bhopal, India, killed thousands of people instantly. It has since led to tens of thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of lives detrimentally affected, and a toxic chemical plant abandoned within the midst of a city of almost two million people. More than 36 years later, it still awaits clean up.

At the time, I was a master's student of Marxist Political Theory. I lived in Wolverhampton between 1981 and 1993 and the 'Bhopal disaster' was of enormous importance. Wolverhampton had a very large Indian population, and the Indian Workers' Association was a very active leftist organisation in the town. So, the 'disaster' greatly resonated with me personally, politically and – though I didn't know it at the time – professionally.

Within 18 months of the gas leak, I was enrolled as a PhD student at what was then known as Wolverhampton Polytechnic, studying the global dynamics of the chemical industry through the lens of Bhopal and the struggles of workers in British

chemical plants for safer and healthier workplaces. This formed a prism which led me to address the relationships between corporate activity and the lives lost and diminished among workers, as well as the institutions of law and regulation, and the failings of 'crime', criminal justice and the state.

This took me on an accidental journey from political economy through sociology to criminology. But it was a criminology of the organisation, mostly of the corporation – even if it was a criminology where there was not a great deal of criminalisation or 'crime', and thus the need to ask critical questions of state-definitions and priorities.

Q You're involved with organisations such as INQUEST, the Hazards Movement and the Institute for Employment Rights. Why is that wider engagement and movement of ideas important to you?

My academic career was formed in the context of a mass killing – Bhopal. And my work since, whether around the loss of life at work, or while in the 'care' of the state – be that in prisons, police custody or mental health institutions – or as a result of avoidable multi-fatality incidents such as Hillsborough, Zeebrugge or Grenfell, has been around death. For the most part, that has involved working with those at the sharp end – the survivors, the bereaved and others affected

by death. To borrow the strapline from the charity **INQUEST**, where I'm a trustee, this involves a long-term struggle for 'Truth, Justice and Accountability'. And in this, while there has to be rigour and care, there is no neutrality, no value freedom. This is not merely academic activity. The work I do and have done has always been for a reason, for me attempting to make **an inch of difference** in the struggle for a world which does not treat the lives of working men and women as disposable in the interests of state and corporate power. And in that, the experiences and the voices of those men and women are crucial – they reveal subjugated truths which often challenge such power.

Q What was the main motivation behind co-writing your latest book 'From Social Harm to Zemiology' (with Vicky Canning)? And where would you locate its main arguments in relation to mainstream criminology?

In the late 1990s, I was one of a small group of academics and activists who began a series of conversations about how a concept of 'social harm' could be more progressively developed as an alternative to 'crime' – a concept defined by the state and which was too unproblematically accepted by much of what passed for mainstream criminology. These conversations developed into a book which I co-edited in 2004, ***Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously***. From this, the study of social harm began to take off but not 'beyond' criminology, rather absorbed within it – for example, 'social harm' entered the discipline's QAA Benchmark statement from 2007 onwards.

The **book** was in part a stock-taking exercise. It sought to lay out, in an accessible teaching text, the origins and nature of social harm as distinct from crime – and thereby to re-state the basis for a zemiology as distinct from a criminology. It set out what we consider to be the ontology and epistemology of zemiology, of 'taking harm seriously'. Zemiology challenges the prioritisation of criminal harms. It seeks to unearth harmful structures, policies, decisions and practices, to evidence the impacts that they have, and thus to

generate sustainable and radical changes so that such harms may be mitigated or eradicated.

Q You taught criminology at a conventional university for a couple of decades before joining the OU. What, for you, was the most interesting challenge in moving from 'face-to-face' teaching to 'teaching at a distance'?

I was never the best classroom teacher – I could never judge time very well, I got all too easily distracted, and I always felt myself one step behind the latest pedagogic pearl of wisdom, not to mention teaching technology. But the one thing I did have in the classroom was passion for whatever it was I was teaching. For me, being in a classroom was an intense, committed physical and emotional experience. So the challenge for me has been to find ways to communicate that passion and commitment remotely – whether in the way I write or the material to which I point students, or in the development of **audio** and **visual** materials. The OU is a wonderfully unique institution and has supported my continual search for different ways of communicating with students.



PHOTO: Aftermath of the Bhopal disaster.



Steve Tombs

Prof. of Criminology

Steve first joined the OU in 2013. His recent article *Home as a Site of State-Corporate Violence: Grenfell Tower, Aetiologies and Aftermaths* was awarded the Best Article Prize in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 2020. Once his involvement on a Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 sub-panel is complete, he'll return to researching the routinisation of workplace deaths through legal and regulatory policy and practice.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTOS: Top left: Patrick Kielty; Top right: *The Extraordinary Power of Poo*; Bottom left: BBC image montage; Bottom right: *Is Race a Myth*.

Our Partnerships with the BBC: Highlights

BBC Ideas

BBC Ideas is an exciting short-form digital video platform providing 'short films for curious minds'. The **OU is proud to be working with BBC Ideas**, co-producing content with the aim to challenge and inform audiences in a digital-friendly and accessible way.

OU academics and BBC Ideas commissioners meet regularly to brainstorm emerging ideas and themes covering science, history, psychology and much more. The films are thought-provoking and encourage fresh, new, diverse voices and talent among both its contributors and filmmakers. The OU has co-produced around 30 BBC Ideas videos, inspired by and drawing on the university's academic expertise to explore the ideas and concepts that shape our world.

Most recent films involving SSGS colleagues include **The Myth of Race** (**Dr Lystra Hagley-Dickinson** and **Dr Mark Pinder**) and one upcoming is on Sewage (**Dr Carry.Van-Lieshout**).

Learning on Screen

With the summer upon us, we'd like to remind colleagues and students that a wide range of OU-BBC co-productions are freely available for us all to watch via the Learning On Screen website. Many of these excellent broadcast projects are directly relevant to a wide range of FASS modules, and we hope that students and tutors will find this resource particularly useful as 'bridging material' between modules. Please feel free to publicise this site widely and don't hesitate to get in touch with us if you have any questions.

Upcoming co-productions

Patrick Kielty: 100 Years of Union – BBC 1, September 2021 (nominated academic: [Dr Philip O' Sullivan](#))

War on Waste – BBC 1, Autumn 2021, to coincide with COP26. Jointly with STEM (nominated academic: [Dr Vicky Johnson](#))

The Decade the Rich Won – BBC 2, autumn 2021 (nominated academic: [Prof. Susan Newman](#))

Union – Presented by David Olusajo, BBC 1, May 2022 (nominated academics: [Dr Helen O'Shea](#) and [Dr Gerry Mooney](#), FASS)

Ed Balls, can we fix the care crisis – BBC 2, autumn 2021. Jointly with WELS (nominated academic: [Dr Jerome de Henau](#))

Upcoming co-productions for BBC Ideas

Sewage – Summer 2021, jointly with STEM (nominated academic: [Dr Carry Van-Lieshout](#))

MET4 – BBC 1, 2022. Jointly with FBL (nominated academic: [Prof. Louise Westmarland](#))

Black Lives Matter – BBC 2, autumn 2021. Jointly with WELS (nominated academic: [Dr Ayobami Lori](#))

The pandemic has presented unique challenges to programming, and to the ways in which we collaborate with the BBC and work on productions together. Many projects have been subject to delays, while others – such as **Write Around The World** (Nominated Academics [Prof. Nicola J Watson](#) and [Dr Joanne Reardon](#)) in which Richard E. Grant explores travel literature related to France, Spain, and Italy – had to find ways of fitting filming around the various COVID-related restrictions.

Some of our Nominated Academics have contributed towards award-winning productions. We were particularly humbled when **The Fires that Foretold Grenfell** with Nominated Academic [Prof. Steve Tombs](#), won two awards, one at the Learning on Screen Awards (winner of the Broadcast Award) and the other at the RTS Television Journalism Awards (winner of the Current Affairs award). It was a crucial piece of filmmaking because it explored why lessons were not learnt from previous tragedies. Springwatch also won a BAFTA for Best Live Event, which was a proud moment for those involved, including Nominated Academic, Dr Andy Morris.

We're seeing more FASS co-productions that aim to shed light on Brexit, climate change and sustainability, and the barriers faced by black, Asian, and minority ethnic, and LGBTQ people. Promoting equality and diversity is always very important to our broadcast projects. We are working alongside the BBC to make programming more representative, and our Nominated Academics play an important role in this by offering advice on programme content and expert contributors. We are also ensuring our co-productions involve people with a diverse range of perspectives and backgrounds, both in front of and behind the camera, and this includes our Nominated Academics.

Meet the Media Fellows

[Dr Alison Penn](#) and [Dr Joanna Paul](#), FASS Media Fellows, share some of their highlights with us.

Our unique partnership with the BBC has developed in lots of ways over the years, but key successes that come to mind include the launch of BBC iPlayer, BBC Sounds, and BBC Ideas.

There are too many highlights to mention, but some from the past year include our growing collection of co-productions for the **BBC Ideas** platform – an exciting short-form digital video platform providing 'short films for curious minds', with the aim to challenge and inform audiences in a digital-friendly and accessible way. The OU playlist has had 2.8m views from 31 OU videos. These short films have covered a diverse range of topics from critical thinking to race, ghost towns to sewage, and attract large audiences. Co-production highlights include **Forensics: the real CSI** with [Dr Jim Turner](#) as the Nominated Academic on both series 2 and 3, and two series of **Secrets of the Museum**, which goes behind the scenes at the V&A, with [Dr Clare Taylor](#) and [Prof Leon Wainwright](#) as Nominated Academics.



Dr Jo Paul

Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies and a Media Fellow

Jo's research is concerned with the different ways in which the modern world receives, engages with, and uses the classical past. See [full profile](#)



Dr Alison Penn

Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor currently working in Social Policy and Criminology

Alison is the FASS Media Fellow (Social Sciences) seconded into Broadcast & Partnerships. See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: BBC: A Year to Save the World - Greta Thunberg & David Attenborough

Is climate change a global challenge?

How planetary change is affecting the livelihoods of communities around the world

Written by David Humphreys

I recently had the honour of working as an adviser on the three-part BBC series **Greta Thunberg: A year to change the world**. The series traced the life of Greta, arguably the most important political figure of the past three years, certainly in the Global North, and followed her as she set out to travel to the 25th Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP25) due to be held in Chile before being moved to Spain following political demonstrations in Santiago. Greta completed the last lap of her journey – from the USA to Spain – by hitching a ride on a catamaran, crossing the Atlantic in a force 10 storm!

Along with two colleagues from STEM, I was asked to advise on the series, as I've spent a good part of my academic career researching climate change, its causes and effects. As you will see, if you watch the series, there is no part of the global ecosystem that is unaffected by climate change – the most remote parts of the Amazon Rainforest are now warmer, the world's ice sheets are melting and the oceans are now more acidic. The term 'Anthropocene' – signalling a new

geological epoch – has been coined to capture this bleak historical period when humans – we ourselves – are now the dominant force for planetary change.

Climate change is a global challenge not only because it affects almost everywhere and everyone on Earth, but because it calls for globally coordinated political action, with hopes pinned on the forthcoming COP26 in Glasgow this November. But the terrestrial and marine effects will play out unequally at the local level. Unequal because some communities and peoples around the globe will be affected more seriously than others. Simply put, communities in the Global South will be affected most seriously.

Although the increased frequency and intensity of severe weather events – tornadoes, tropical cyclones, wildfires – is affecting many communities around the world, the worst impacts are felt in the tropical latitudes. For example, in Bangladesh, cyclones blowing in from the Bay of Bengal push sea water onto the land and upriver with devastating effects. This happens because once a storm has subsided, the

composition of rivers and underground aquifers often changes from freshwater to saltwater, a process known as salinisation. The saline frontier is moving northwards in the country and is likely to reach the capital Dhaka this century. This has affected the livelihoods of the farmers of the south. For example, Paik Gacha in Khulna province used to be an important rice growing region, but with salinisation it is no longer possible to grow rice. Farmers have had to adapt by growing saline-tolerant vegetables and shrimp farming. In Kenya, Tanzania, and other equatorial regions of Africa, the soil is drying, leading to reduced agricultural yields, affecting the welfare and livelihoods of local communities. In South America, many mountain communities of the Andes that rely on seasonal glacial melt to replenish their water supplies have faced substantial reductions in freshwater availability.

So, climate change is not only a global problem, it is a dense and shifting planetary scale network of interconnected changes to local environments. It is a very real challenge to which people, often those who have done nothing to cause the problem, are grappling on daily basis. It is crucial we understand how a global process such as climate change can impact communities differently, and how environmental shifts that appear incremental have a ripple effect, causing detrimental and sometimes irreversible damage over the long run. Addressing the causes of climate change and adapting to its effects requires innovative responses that connect actors working at multiple spatial scales.

We cannot hope to build a society that cares for the distant strangers of the future until we care for all in the present generation. A more equal and just society is not merely desirable in its own right – it is essential if everyone in the present generation is to turn their gaze to the future and address the increasingly urgent challenge of global heating. As Greta says in the series: 'hope comes from action'.

Interview

[Click here](#) for the interview and discussion between David Humphreys and other colleagues involved in the production of the television series 'Greta Thunberg: A year to change the world' (first broadcast on BBC 1 in April 2021).



David Humphreys

**Prof. of Environmental Policy
in OU Geography**

He joined the OU in 1995 and has won external awards for both his research and teaching, most recently an Advance HE National Teaching Fellowship in 2017.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: Three-part BBC series Greta Thunberg: A year to change the world.



PHOTO: An illustration that relates to the Queen's question 'Why did no one see it coming?' to economists gathered at the LSE in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

What is Economic Pluralism and why is it important?

Written by Susan Newman, Kevin Deane and Andrew Trigg

Some of you might recall the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. The GFC saw stock markets plummet, unemployment rise, housing markets tumble and some big-name investment banks, such as the US Lehman Brothers, collapse and disappear. It was quite an event. But when the Queen asked eminent economists at the London School of Economics (LSE) why nobody saw it coming, they had little to say.

Unsurprisingly, in the wake of the crash and some might say woeful response of traditional economics and economists, many students across the UK and beyond, began to question the way economics was taught in most universities, and campaigned for curriculum reform. To miss something so big, as the Queen pointed out, begs a few questions about the discipline supposedly equipped with the models to detect such crises way before they hit the ground. At the OU, we responded to this call and acknowledged the need to broaden the economics discipline. We did this by further embedding a 'pluralist approach' in our curriculum and this is where we differ from other universities in our approach to teaching economics.

Most universities only teach what is often referred to as neoclassical economics, the approach that dominates standard economics textbooks. Neoclassical economics emerged out of the so called 'marginalist revolution' in the late 1800s, which saw the reorientation of economics from an interdisciplinary approach. This is where social, historical, political and economical aspects of economy and society were studied together providing a narrower orthodox focus on the allocation of scarce resources which fast became 'mainstream'. This approach still holds a tight rein on what is taught at undergraduate level today.

This more orthodox approach excludes many of the key social and environmental challenges of today from the conventional curriculum. For this reason, broadening the scope of economics is critical. Our approach to curriculum development is inspired by pluralist economics education and guided by four dimensions of pluralism. These are the following:



PHOTO: Evening Standard newspaper headlines about house property sellers slashing prices and financial city job cuts, City of London, 18th April 2008.

1: Ideas

The traditional core of pluralism is that we might see it as different schools of thought, involving different types of economic theories or ideas. At the OU, we have Schumpeterians, Marxists and Keynesians representing some of the main schools of thought – yet we continue to teach the core neoclassical approach.

But a pluralist approach to economics education involves more than providing exposure to different schools of thought. A pluralist approach invites us to apply different theories to the same problem, and to reflect upon the specific differences and conclusions from these theories. For example, how would economists explain the well documented fact that COVID infections have been higher in poorer areas in the UK? Economists that understand the world in terms of models of individual behaviour (such as in neoclassical economics and behavioural economics) would focus on why poorer individuals make 'worse' health related decisions, implying that poorer individuals take more risks (for example, not following the government guidelines).

A different perspective focuses on the structure of our economy and 'who does what?'. Poorer populations are less likely to be able to work from home, more likely to be working in a role (health workers, social care workers, public transport, supermarket workers etc.) where they are potentially put at risk and in contact with other people, and are less able to self-isolate (for example, gig economy workers). The policy conclusions

from these perspectives are different, as well as the extent to which they stigmatise (or not) poorer classes. DD309 looks at how economists examine policy issues by looking at the behaviour of individuals and also, in contrast, emphasises the importance of structural constraints.

2: Methods and methodology

Pluralism also includes different types of methodology. Something that is also associated with the economic orthodoxy is a narrowness of method. Mainstream economists tend to use econometrics and mathematics. Tony Lawson came up with the metaphor that it was as if economists use an electric drill to do everything: open a window, close a door. We teach qualitative methods (in DD309), have a pluralist approach to method, and strive to be on the cutting edge of new methods and innovations in economics.

As outlined in the example above, irreconcilable differences do exist between different schools of thought. A pluralist economics approach foregrounds these differences. After all, no discipline is fully thought through or perfectly coherent. There are multiple examples within the natural sciences where irreconcilable theories operate side by side whilst students and practitioners are furnished with critical faculties to assess the relative validity of competing paradigms. What is critical is our ability as educators to explain the origins of disagreement together with the criteria for assessing validity and where these come from.

3: Voices and Power

There is a danger that pluralism of ideas and methods is still too narrow. There can be a focus on white male Western economists in trying to find an alternative to the orthodoxy.

A more genuinely plural approach would address how power structures shape the ways in which economics is taught. Pluralism needs to consider different voices. As argued by Diana Strassmann: 'A truly substantive, or deep pluralism, must also insist on holding the door open to scholars with different lives and bodies and call for greater diversity in scholarly conversation.'

OU Economics has a long history in developing and teaching Feminist Economics that acknowledges and understands how patriarchal power structures are pervasive in society. In terms of voices, we are working with economists from the Global South (in DD321) and ensuring that economic traditions that were developed outside of the Global North are also considered.

4: Interdisciplinarity

The complex social, economic and political dimensions of the COVID pandemic highlights the critical role for interdisciplinarity. The global health crisis also emphasises the importance of social sciences when it comes to understanding scientific questions.

Mainstream economics has to some extent embraced interdisciplinarity via a process of colonising the other social sciences and stripping economic and social phenomena from their social, historical and political contexts to pose as 'value-free' scientific analyses. Our pluralist approach engages in interdisciplinary research to promote mutual learning between our discipline and others including sociology, politics, history and geography.

Interdisciplinarity opens up how we fit into research projects, and policy evaluations, by being economists who are open to working with other disciplines. These four dimensions of pluralism help to inform our pedagogical approach. We are currently rewriting a number of undergraduate modules and developing a new MSc in Economics in which economic pluralism will be embedded. We are also working with colleagues outside of the OU to reshape the discipline of economics for the future. This has included help in OU Economics' support for the Rethinking Economics for Africa conference, and the recent international workshop on 'The Future of Economics' led by OU visiting professor and long-term collaborator Smita Srinivas.



Susan Newman

Prof. of Economics and Head of Discipline

Susan is currently working on a paper exploring contemporary features of commodity dependency and uneven development, which is reflected in the chapter she's writing for the new *Economics for a Changing World* module.

See [full profile](#)



Dr Kevin Deane

Senior Lecturer in Economics

Kevin's current research projects include a UKRI-funded study on child and women's health in Sub-Saharan African countries, and work on malaria and rapid ART. He is co-editor of *Recharting the History of Economic Thought*.

See [full profile](#)



Andrew Trigg

Prof. of Economics

Andrew is currently writing a paper on exports and the structure of Global Value Chains in relation to Brazil. Later in the year, he will be working on an invited paper for a special issue of *Research in Political Economy* in honour of the Polish Marxist economist.

See [full profile](#)

**FIND OUT MORE
ABOUT**

**OUR ACADEMICS
ARE COMMITTED TO
INNOVATION, BOTH
IN THEIR TEACHING
AND RESEARCH.**

MEET OUR PEOPLE



Teaching through COVID-19

Written by Matt Staples and Joanna Robson

Reflections from the Director of Teaching & Associate Director of Teaching

Living through COVID-19 has been a challenge for everyone in SSGS – academics, professional staff, ALs and students alike. As a School, we faced huge challenges. The duty of care owed to our staff and students meant we had to ensure they got the emotional support they need to continue studying and working.

Here we highlight some real triumphs in the face of adversity, including ways we came together to provide a quality learning experience that works just as effectively, if not more so, in a virtual context.

How SSGS went the extra mile

In response to the pandemic, the OU reviewed both its working practices (nearly all campus-based staff have been working from home) and implemented policies to provide students with some flexibility to be able to complete their module or qualification as planned. In the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) and School of Social Sciences and Global Studies (SSGS), we have been working not only to maintain a teaching and learning community, but to foster new ways of working together as a learning community. The delivery of each module has inevitably been different, but there have also been some positive outcomes to celebrate.

We've had more one-to-one sessions between students and tutors, more tutor groups sessions, as well as catch-up sessions for those students struggling with the pandemic, and lastly, more lecture-type sessions where academics from the module team give lectures and seminars. These attempts to do something different and go the extra mile, have extended to other areas of what we do, prompted by the pandemic, but also by the regular student consultations we have as a school. We are committed to listening to student voice.

Strengthening our teaching and learning community

In April, as part of this aim of building a robust teaching and learning community, the School held its inaugural SSGS 'Teaching & Research Day'. All students registered on SSGS qualifications, as well as Associate Lecturers, were invited to participate in morning and afternoon disciplinary sessions for the pleasure of debate and discussion. Towards the end of the day, we were treated to a keynote lecture from **Professor Parvati Raghuram** followed by a round table discussion. Over 200 delegates attended and the feedback was enthusiastic. Plans are underway for a similar event in Spring 2022.

Ensuring diversity and inclusion remains at the top of our agenda

Supporting students who suffer from structural disadvantage is core to what we do as a school. As part of an event during Black History Month, the faculty announced a new award for Black and Asian students as part of an ongoing drive to reduce the degree awarding gap.

We are making very good progress in this area. In SSGS, the gap has halved in three years, but there is more to do, and the awards form part of our strategy. Tutors will be invited to nominate students who have made significant progress in their academic studies or have performed well despite very difficult circumstances. We are extremely fortunate to have the support of Joan Armatrading and Sir Lenny Henry who together have agreed to award the prizes in 21J. The [Stuart Hall Foundation](#) and the family of [Professor Marcia Worrell](#) will present the awards for B presentations, starting in 22B.

A special thank you to our academic and professional staff

Finally, COVID has been a challenge for our academic and professional staff who write, develop and present our modules. Our teams have experienced COVID in many of the same ways that our students and ALs have, and it's a real tribute to them that we have been able to successfully present our modules, innovating as we go, rising to the challenges that the pandemic brought, and developing new modules for the future.

There may have been few upsides to the pandemic, but as a learning community, there has been much innovation that has brought us closer together.

Studying through COVID-19

How SSGS supported it's students during a challenging year

While all of us have been living under the shadow of the pandemic, each individual experience will have been different. Some students were furloughed and suddenly found themselves with more time, while others have worked more hours to cope with the increasing demand or provide cover for colleagues. Unfortunately, some people have been ill themselves or have been caring for others.

On a positive note, our student figures increased exponentially, which shows that many saw it as an opportunity to take stock of their lives and consider a change. For some, this meant pursuing a qualification for the very first time.

SSGS student numbers

Despite the pandemic, our student body grew considerably in the academic year 2020/21. We continued to release new modules and qualifications, such as BA (Hons) Geography and MSc in Global Development, and saw increasing student numbers across both B (February start) and J (October start) presentations, with 25,256 students registered compared with 19,584 in 2019/20. Our retention increased during 20/21, with impressive results from students with disabilities and those who have low socio-economic status.

Supporting students with the peer mentoring scheme

21J sees the second year of the FASS peer mentoring scheme. Students enrolling on three of the Faculty's Level 1 modules will be offered a peer mentor for the first few months of the module. Student mentors are students who completed a similar level one module within the last two years and the aim is to provide non-academic support at the start of the student journey.

Honouring our Associate Lecturers (ALs)

The role of our ALs in supporting students during the pandemic has been immense. As we work towards ALs supporting students on a new contractual basis, we are also thinking about ways to best integrate them into the School. In March 2021, the School hosted an online conference for ALs where academics and AL colleagues discussed explored new ways of working.



Matt Staples

Director of Teaching, SSGS

Matt has a degree in Politics and History and an MSc in Politics and Governance.

See [full profile](#)



Dr Joanna Robson

**Lecturer and Staff Tutor
Associate Director of Teaching**

Joanna is module chair of *Making Social Worlds* and cluster manager on the *Introducing the Social Sciences* module. She was previously Programme Director of two Access to HE courses.

See [full profile](#)



How it feels to... study through a pandemic

Written by **Jennifer Gray**, DD102 student

My experience of studying during a pandemic has been mostly positive. It gave me purpose, something to focus on that was a welcome distraction from the situation we were living in.

I found the tutorials went extremely well. They ran several times so you could attend more than once to really get clarity and engage with different tutors and students. It gave a much fuller experience and allowed me to really understand the topic. Those who engaged with the tutorials were acknowledged by the tutors and their questions were answered in a way that made them feel valid and valued. They were also recorded which was a real bonus!

The student forum was a brilliant space. For those who engaged with it, it was a way to understand that you were not on your own and that others were going through the same thing. It also eased a bit of pressure on the tutors as you could ask questions here instead of emailing them, and most of the time, other students could answer with their opinion which really helped with academic skills, critical thinking and sometimes challenging your own opinions.

Plenty of discussions were opened up by students in the forum, surrounding module activities, and sometimes things external to the module that were relevant, which encouraged engagement and opinions from others, students, and tutors alike. This helped create a deeper understanding and challenge thoughts and approaches. The forum felt very much like you were valued and a part of a community – so vital during quite isolating times.

How it feels to... tutor through a pandemic

Written by **Dr Yvonne Parrey**, SSGS tutor

The pandemic raised a plethora of issues for a tutor – they were not all new or unfamiliar, but the numbers of students raising such concerns was unprecedented.

A big impact on workload was the uneven spread of marking due to extensions and needing to give advice on work for which students had missed online tutorials or found the recorded versions hard to use, or where they were trying to catch up on things from previous assignments.

A lot of students sought extensions for practical problems – children home from school self-isolating or being home-schooled, or just the time taken to try and arrange shopping for elderly relatives – all sorts of things that cut into normal study time.

The most harrowing thing emotionally was the fear, isolation and desperation students often shared about ill relatives, tiredness after COVID, lost jobs, and wider concerns for the future. For younger students, it was the boredom, not seeing friends, not being able to go away to university, no social life and feeling a lack of independence living at home. These things seemed to bring a drop in confidence for all age groups and a hankering for human contact and conversation.

Many expressed wishes that face-to-face tuition could soon return. Sometimes it felt like instead of tutoring a discipline and skills, one was trying to help manage a sea of human misery so that people could study at all.

One tool I found very useful was the asynchronous cluster forums. This was a place where students could at least see that other people were studying, that others had similar questions to the ones they felt the need to ask about study materials. The forum reading seemed to increase during the Pandemic lockdowns. The students shared their answers which started to change the atmosphere to a more autonomous and collaborative one, one with some real sense of building an academic community.

I think a big gain that emerged from the difficulties of teaching in a pandemic has been highlighting that human learning and confidence grow inside supportive networks and communities of collaboration. If we can continue to build these links – and nurture the idea that learning doesn't have to be a solitary activity but can be shared – then we will be in a better position to face future challenges. Learning communities and exchanges within those academic communities promote vibrance in learning, a sense of belonging, and are bulwarks against some of the challenges of new difficulties such as the pandemic.



Scholarship in SSGS

FASS Teaching Excellence and Scholarship of Teaching (FASSTEST) is the Centre for Scholarship and Innovation in The Open University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Established in October 2018, it was created in response to the OU's Academic Strategy's commitment to 'increase collaboratively developed, research-informed, knowledge exchange and teaching that meets the needs of students'. FASSTEST supports scholarship across the three Schools within the faculty, including the School of Social Sciences & Global Studies (SSGS).

Why scholarship matters to us

The importance of informing developments in teaching and learning is finally being acknowledged and, as a result, interest in scholarship in SSGS has increased. There are, for instance, strong lines of communication between the School's Scholarship Lead and the SSGS Director of Teaching to ensure not only that scholarship feeds into institutional and faculty teaching and learning priorities, but that issues that would benefit from scholarship investigation are highlighted.

Matt Staples, Director of Teaching for SSGS, confirms that 'scholarship has become increasingly important as an opportunity to both reflect on what we are doing and to mainstream best practice across the School and wider faculty'. This active interest in scholarship is evidenced by the increase in the number of FASSTEST scholarship projects within SSGS. Between 2018 and 2019, only five projects were green-lit, whereas we have seen 11 projects granted approval in 2020/21. FASSTEST has approved 28 SSGS projects in total, 13 of which are now complete.

As a school, it's important for us to ensure that our scholarship has impact. Scholarship projects have been published on the Scholarship Exchange for wider dissemination. Project members have given presentations at events such as the 'FASSTEST tuition' (November 2019), Talking Teaching, and 'Scholarship Across the Faculties' (October 2020). SSGS scholarship has also fed into the review of the faculty's assessment and tuition policy, was included in a report on scholarship and tuition for PVC students, and helped to inform the university-wide recording policy.

Recent scholarship projects within SSGS

Although we are fortunate to endorse a variety of projects both past and present, here are just two examples that are helping inform the way we interact, support and engage with our students.

The Quality of Tutor-Student Early contact in Post Level 1 Modules

Wendy Humphreys and Vicky Johnson

The purpose of this project was to examine a range of factors connecting early engagement and tutorial approaches, including day schools, across a range of level 2 and level 3 modules within the School. This project is a good example of the organic nature of scholarship, as it responded to and refined the project trajectory according to its early findings.

The Project Team wished to understand whether different tutorial strategies impacted upon student engagement and the tutor-student relationship, with subsequent effects on retention and completion rates. Early into the project, the team started to realise the importance of the early stages of tutor/student relationship in the student's learning journey. Because of the critical nature of this early contact, they decided that this needed to be the focus of their initial study, leaving other aspects of the project to form subsequent elements of scholarship work.

The first stage of this completed project found that there was extreme variation in both the interpretation and practice of tutors, in terms of early communication with their students. The project team are now following up these initial findings with a subsequent project, whose intention is to examine tutor-student communication throughout module presentation from both the tutor and student perspectives.

Understanding student learning of emotive and sensitive content

Julia Downes, Ruth Wall, Anne Alvaer

This project worked in partnership with undergraduate criminology students to examine how diverse distance students experience studying sensitive topics (for example, the Grenfell Tower fire). The project used online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and collaborative workshops to develop evidence-based recommendations, tools, and strategies to remove barriers to learning, and support the emotional aspects of learning.

Their findings suggest that students experience a complex interplay of positive and negative emotions in their learning journeys. What was experienced as sensitive and emotive was highly individual and connected to lived experience. Students arrived with and used a range of emotional resilience skills to identify, manage emotional responses and engage with emotive and sensitive content. Interventions, such as content warnings and guidance, helped students to identify content as well as activate and normalise emotional resilience skills.

The inclusion of sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence, was linked to feelings of validation and improvements in wellbeing for those with lived experience. Interestingly, some students reported a preference to learn about emotive and sensitive topics at a distance. Benefits of distance learning included having more control over their study environment and more flexibility and freedom to express and process emotional responses. Their final report, emotional resilience framework and toolkit will be published in October 2021.

Stay informed with the latest in SSGS scholarship

It's an exciting time to be involved in scholarship of teaching and learning at the university and within FASS. To get an idea of the range of scholarship projects within the Faculty, you could take a look at the FASSTEST **blog** where you'll find interesting discussion, or follow us on **Twitter**.



Dr Zoe Doye

Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor

Zoe is the Scholarship Lead for SSGS. She is currently working on a scholarship project on *Exploring the use of WhatsApp in a distance learning context and An enquiry into the impact of assignment extensions*.

See [full profile](#)

Our research

Understanding the world around us through timely and imaginative research.

The global pandemic of 2020 has laid bare existing inequalities. In the highest levels of government, scientific evidence became fashionable again when dealing with mortality predictions for COVID-19. It also rapidly became clear that this virus did not affect all sections of society equally. Social scientific research is crucial to understanding the distinctive outcomes of the pandemic. The [SSGS blog](#) series on COVID-19 and the Social Sciences has highlighted many examples of how research in the School can help us understand and improve the social effects of the pandemic.

Some of the reasons why the poorest sections of British society suffered much more acutely from COVID-19 have been explored by Professor of Economics, [Paul Anand](#). Paul's [research](#) team persuasively demonstrated that people living in shared accommodation, especially with key workers, are [not effectively protected by stay-at-home orders](#). Meanwhile, a recent working paper by a cross-university research team including Economics Lecturer [Dr Lorena Lombardozzi](#) shows that British state-led food initiatives were short-term, scattered, top-down and under-funded, leading to the food poverty crisis revealed during the lockdowns.

OU researchers have been at the forefront of highlighting the importance of the global focus in social scientific research on the pandemic. As early as May 2020, Professor of Politics, Innovation and Development, [Theo Papaioannou](#), highlighted the effects of global inequality in [vaccine production and distribution](#). This important issue was stressed again at a recent [webinar](#) in the OU International Development and Innovation Seminar Series, with particular attention to the situation in India.



Suzanne Newcombe
Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies and Acting Director of Research for SSGS

Her research centres on immortality, rejuvenation practices and the medical interventions of sadhus.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: Woman wearing a surgical face mask sat on a bench at Barbican station.

Professor [Umut Erel's](#) work has long explored the challenges of caring for elders, as well as raising children. A recent [online webinar she hosted explored](#) the inequalities of gender, race, income, nationality and migration status which have been worsened by the pressures of caring for family members during the COVID-19 crisis. [Marie Gillespie](#), Professor of Sociology, raised awareness of how the [COVID-exacerbated mental health crisis](#) has particularly harmed migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Meanwhile, [Dr Daniel McCulloch](#), Lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy, has been exploring the devastating effects of the pandemic on deaf prisoners.

Our academics continue to use the social sciences to actively promote social justice and encourage a more equitable world. We know that research informs our world view and makes us better equipped to face global challenges. Our researchers also understand the importance of communicating these new findings to their students through teaching, and it's this assimilation of knowledge that can provide real purpose and lead to positive societal change.



Umut Erel
Prof. of Sociology and Associate Director of Research

Umut's interests cover migration, ethnicity, racism, gender and citizenship.

See [full profile](#)

How I became an academic



Jamie Gaskarth

Prof. of Foreign Policy and International Relations

Jamie joined the OU in February 2021 and is contributing to the new MSc in International Relations.

He is the author and editor of six books on ethics, foreign policy and international relations, with his most recent book, *Secrets and Spies: UK Intelligence Accountability After Iraq and Snowden*, published in 2020. He is co-editor of the *ISA Journal of Global Security Studies*.

See [full profile](#)

Q What were your ambitions growing up? Did you always want to become an academic?

For 100 years, all the men in my family – and a few of the women – were in the Fire Service. Growing up around fire stations, squirting water at things and dressing up seemed fun, so that was an early ambition. But as a teenager, I developed asthma. Add that to my fear of heights, and fighting fires was no longer a viable career path.

Looking back, you can see there was an alternative lurking in the background. Two of the most important films I recall as a kid were *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Ghostbusters*. But my favourite bits were not the action scenes, they were the bits in the library. I didn't want to be pulled along by a rope behind a truck (although my brother did convince me to do this once behind his bike, to painful effect). Nor did I want a proton accelerator. I wanted to be Professor Jones teaching an Archaeology class, or Marcus Brodie, regaling government officials with his knowledge of biblical history, or Egon, reeling off Ancient Mesopotamian myths.

And I read. I read stuff that was 'too old' for me. I would find an author and read everything they had ever written. I would beg the local librarian to order in new stock. I would read late into the night, using a glow in the dark car that was so bright I could hold it under the covers and read the lines 2 at a time.

Q What was your first introduction to the OU?

Around the same time, my dad started an Open University degree. His background was not academic. In fact, it was the opposite. My grandma proudly declared that she'd gone to bed praying she'd fail the 11 plus so she wouldn't have to go to grammar school. Dad was different. His father had moved often to get promoted and so my dad had taken to reading, since any friends would only be temporary. He'd had dreams

of being a journalist. As he rose up the Fire Service ranks, mixing with accountants, lawyers, and architects in the county council, he became more conscious of his lack of a degree.



PHOTO: Actor Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

So, growing up, The Open University was higher education. It was *Educating Rita*. It was tapes of lectures, workbooks, television programmes, Saturday drop-offs and summer schools. That learning would filter across to us, through dinner table conversations or the television programmes. I'd go to school quoting Thucydides. Education became a semi-mystical thing. A local councillor with a PhD was pointed out with reverence in the street. 'He's a Dr!'. After eight years, dad graduated with a first. We were very proud.

Can you tell us about your experience as an undergraduate?

I had always done well in English and went to Cardiff University. I loved it. The degree was modular, and you could sign up to classes across the whole curriculum. I was inspired by lectures on Medieval English, child development, romantic poetry, and Shakespeare.

But in my second year, my dad got cancer and he died during my finals. I scraped a 2:1, just. Things felt flat. Indeed, they got so bad, I joined Prudential and started training to be an actuary.

Many of our students face adversity during their studies. What gave you the courage to push on despite facing such difficult, personal challenges?

After nine months, I'd had enough. I desperately searched library prospectuses for something, anything, to study. I spotted a master's course in International Relations at Exeter and applied. Suddenly, that bug returned. I was reading everything again. I was throwing myself into lectures and sparring with other students. My grades were high. But then what to do?

'Why don't you do a PhD?' asked Karen Fish. Karen was American. She was on my master's course. She had no idea who did and didn't belong on a PhD programme. She thought everyone in England sounded alike. 'I don't know if I'm smart enough for that,' I replied. 'Course you are. You've got the grades...' she said, in a matter-of-fact manner. 'Well, yes, but' I said, stumbling over my words. 'But what?' she probed. *But what*. It was those two words gave me the courage to pursue my dreams.

Fast forward two decades and you've got a successful career in academia. Can you share some of your highlights?

Yes, I've now been in academia over 20 years! My research looks at the ethics of how people make decisions and how you hold them accountable afterwards. I have a particular focus on British foreign policy, although I have published work on German, Indian and Chinese perspectives as well. I've presented my work at Downing Street, the Foreign Office, and conferences all over the world. My latest book, *Secrets*

and Spies, was on intelligence accountability – how you can hold people accountable when you don't know what they are up to. It was fascinating speaking to current and former intelligence and security personnel about the moral dilemmas they face.

In February 2021, I became a Professor of Foreign Policy and International Relations at the OU. I get a glow of pride just typing those words. I know what it means for people of all ages and stages of life to get the chance to learn and grow with the OU. To be a part of that is really special. I saw how it benefited my dad, and by extension the whole family, including me.

Any advice for burgeoning academics wanting to follow a similar path?

I want to encourage others to pursue a PhD and am already taking on a number of excellent applicants. For some, that may lead to a career, but I've always felt that education is like love – it's valuable for its own sake and the more of it the better.

Looking ahead, which areas do you and your colleagues wish to make the most impact?

A key aim is to build back a vibrant research culture in the department as the pandemic (hopefully) passes. I hope all OU students will feel able to attend and participate in the events we organise.

We want to ensure that colleagues and I form a prominent part in national conversations about politics and international relations, contributing more to select committee hearings, policy briefs and think tank work and ensure that the work of OU staff is on the minds of policymakers.

We're also launching a new MA International Relations – trainee actuaries are welcome to apply!

Find out more

You can find out more about what is going on in POLIS by **following us on Twitter** and see how we are collaborating with colleagues in the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies.

Latest news relating to research at the OU can be found on the main **OU research news** webpage. Discover our individual researchers and team of academics **here**.



PHOTO: Kenyans rally to demand government to act on rising cases of cancer, Nairobi, Kenya, 2019

Researching global development in SSGS

Written by Charlotte Cross

The word 'development' is often associated with processes happening in 'poor' countries, to which wealthy countries such as the UK give development aid. In our research and teaching in the Development discipline in SSGS, we take a broader approach, considering how social, political, and economic change takes place at different scales, and how such change is pursued and contested.

We are interested in the different ways in which people all over the world think about what a good life might look like, and how they go about trying to achieve it in the face of global challenges such as the climate emergency, entrenched inequalities, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope to understand how and why such challenges are experienced differently by different people in different places, and to identify ways in which such problems might be better understood and addressed.

Exploring community policing in East Africa

My own research mostly explores the relationship between policing, politics and development, and I've spent a lot of time conducting research in East

Africa. Before joining the OU, I researched community policing initiatives in Tanzania, whereby citizens are encouraged to participate in policing their neighbourhoods through conducting nightly patrols, performing dispute resolution, and sharing information with the state police.

Community policing is a fairly vague concept that has been used to describe a huge range of different policies and practices with different objectives. Nevertheless, it has been promoted all over the world by inter-governmental organisations like the World Bank and United Nations (UN), bilateral donors including the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, NGOs, and private consultancy firms contracted to deliver police reform. I was interested in exploring how implementation of this 'global' approach is shaped by different historical and political contexts, and what the implications were for, who benefited from community policing, and who did not.

Tanzanian community policing is particularly interesting because, rather than entailing the imposition of a western model, which is a critique often levelled at development projects more broadly, it is based on historical forms of policing practised in some parts of Tanzania, and so was often understood

as reflecting local 'tradition'. The idea that practices or ideas drawn from the past can contribute to development has become increasingly popular in recent years, and the importance of heritage is recognised in the **Sustainable Development Goals** agreed by the UN General Assembly, which will influence the international development agenda until 2030. I'm currently editing a book with **Dr John Giblin** from **National Museums Scotland** that critically explores how different actors seek to mobilise the past for development in order to address contemporary challenges such as biodiversity loss, post-conflict reconciliation, food security, and improving mental health.

More recently I've been investigating the impact of increasing use of mobile phones and the internet on policing in Tanzania. On the one hand, it has become easier for citizens to contact police officers and community police, and by sharing videos of police misconduct on social media it is sometimes possible to hold police to account. However, the police have also enforced controversial cybercrimes legislation that criminalises political dissent. Arrests of people deemed to have 'insulted' political leaders and the designation of criticism of the government as 'fake news' have limited freedom of speech. Tanzania is certainly not unique and other countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world have **adopted similar measures** to control the internet, often justified as necessary to ensure 'security'.

Analysing how cybercrime has been understood and enforced in Tanzania offers a good reminder that policing is political. This is particularly evident in formerly colonised countries like Tanzania, where colonial laws designed to repress political opposition remain on the statute book, and where the police are closely linked to the ruling political party. I hope to use my exploration of understandings of cybercrime to understand more about processes of political and social change, as well as people's everyday experiences of crime and policing.

Research collaboration exploring cancer care in East Africa

Since 2018, I've had the opportunity to be involved in an exciting multi-country research collaboration, **Innovation for Cancer Care in Africa**, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. I'm working with colleagues based at leading research institutions in India, Kenya and Tanzania, at other UK universities, and here in SSGS. We are investigating factors that shape access to cancer care in East Africa and have been able to interview a large number of patients and medical professionals in Kenya and Tanzania to try to understand patients' pathways through diagnosis and treatment. Alongside this, we are exploring industrial innovations that could expand access to care, such as local manufacturing of important products such as intra-venous fluids or oncology drugs that might

make them cheaper or reduce delays in procurement. As current debates about unequal global access to COVID-19 vaccines demonstrate, these questions are certainly not just relevant to thinking about cancer care.



PHOTO: Mwanza police welfare unit, Tanzania.

Teaching and learning about research in global development

My research has an important influence on my teaching. I'm currently working with colleagues in Development to produce new modules for the MSc Global Development, which launched in 2020. In the final module, students will conduct their own research to produce a dissertation. In writing this module, my colleagues and I will reflect on our own experiences of conducting research.

We want to consider not only how we have used different methods of data collection, such as interviews or surveys, but also to engage with some important contemporary debates in Development and other disciplines about the politics of knowledge production. The very idea of 'development' is closely linked to histories of European colonialism, and scholarship and practice within development today can perpetuate these unequal relationships between countries and individuals. Therefore, it's important to think about how our own research might be shaped by power relations and where we are positioned within them.



Dr Charlotte Cross
Lecturer in International Development

Her research explores the relationships between politics, security and development, with a geographical focus on East Africa.

See **full profile**

News from the Nations: Scotland



Derek Goldman

KE Manager, The Open University in Scotland.

Derek currently leads on the OU in Scotland's work in knowledge exchange and innovation, including taking forward the OU in Scotland's response to COP26 and associated activities. He has considerable expertise in programmes supporting disengaged learners and those with a poor experience of formative education. With an eclectic interest in education, he is particularly interested in how learning can be applied in practice.

How the OU in Scotland, Wales and Ireland is each leading initiatives to help tackle one of the biggest issues of our time

The Open University is unique in having a physical presence in all four of the UK Nations. Here we provide a short update on work underway and planned by the OU in Scotland, Wales and Ireland as each addresses the challenges presented by climate change.

As the UK, in partnership with Italy, are at the centre of global debates and actions on climate change for the 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP26), The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) has ambitious plans to showcase our strengths in the sustainability arena as the COP heads towards Glasgow in November. While COVID-19 has made our planning for COP26 fluid, the realities of climate change march on, regardless of the pandemic.

Given the OU has identified environmental sustainability as a key priority in the new strategic plan, it is vitally important that the OUiS makes contributions to the wider debates in Scottish society. This includes supporting the development of policy imperatives on climate change, influencing, and informing public opinion, and mobilising people to coalesce and act around, arguably, the biggest societal challenge of our time.

The OUiS's various contributions, pre, during and post COP26 will take many forms, and will draw on the OU's expertise as a digital educator, and trusted public face who effectively communicates complex ideas to a mass audience. Our activities will be cross disciplinary, drawing on our expertise in, for example, the sciences, social sciences, arts, business, law, education, and in health and wellbeing. Climate change has been

described as a wicked problem, without a formulaic, quick-fix solution. It requires us to bring all of ourselves to get to grips with the issues, if we are to make any impactful change.

With COP26 fast approaching, our activities at OUiS are in development but will include working developing COP26 pages on Openlearn; supporting a range of high-quality digital talks with inspiring speakers; hosting activities in Glasgow, including creative writing events with a focus on nature and the environment; and finally, working with a range of OUiS partners, including Scottish Union Learning and Royal Scottish Geographical Society, to focus on green skills, extending our reach, and amplifying our capabilities and unique strengths.



PHOTO: A giant sand artwork adorns New Brighton Beach, Wirral to highlight global warming and the forthcoming COP 26 global climate conference, 2021.

News from the Nations: Wales



Lynnette Thomas

Deputy Director, Strategy & Development (OU Wales)

Lynnette's focus is to provide leadership to the OU in Wales in areas including strategic planning, partnerships, research, innovation and engagement, and business development activities.

She promotes and secures opportunities to aid growth in the University's reach and impact across Wales. She is Chair of the Wales Civic Mission Network.

How to embed sustainable development in universities in Wales

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is a unique piece of legislation and aligns to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. At the time, it was the only piece of legislation globally to enshrine the duty of sustainable development into the legislature.

Wales, as the first country globally to create legislation to embed sustainable development in all areas of its work through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, is also leading the way in embedding this in universities through its work on civic mission.

Lynnette outlines how all nine universities in Wales collaborated to agree a Civic Mission Framework.

The Civic Mission Framework

The framework is intended to demonstrate the impact of the HE sector's civic mission work across their local communities, Wales and globally. It will guide universities in their decisions and frame civic activity across Wales through making strategic choices to prioritise certain civic objectives, and help universities engage and work in new ways to reframe the conversation with partners, leaders and communities.

There are five strategic themes:

- Leading place – engaging with other key civic leaders at a national and community level
- The contribution to raising education standards by developing links with schools, colleges and other learning environments
- Developing active citizenship
- Acting as the engine of social enterprise, business skills and employability
- Responding to global issues.

Each of these themes capture the range of activity happening within Welsh universities and highlights how it aligns with the seven different wellbeing goals and five ways of working in the Act.

Helping society through action

Universities have agreed to update these annually and together they form a clear picture for the sector on its contribution to society and the economy in a place-based manner. Never has this been more important than through the work the sector did so quickly in responding to the pandemic and its role in a green recovery and renewal.

The OU in Wales has responded to the economy by working with Careers Wales to provide support for furloughed workers and upskilling Working Wales staff by providing free online training webinars and OpenLearn courses.

Furthermore, a project – Cardiff Commitment CPD – was established through co-design with Cardiff Council teachers and Cardiff and Vale College to support the development needs of teaching staff, both in response to the global pandemic as well as in preparation for the new Curriculum for Wales.

It's crucial universities help communities thrive and recover quickly from any impacts from the pandemic, but this has to be done in a sustainable way for our future generations. Civic mission is the way in which universities demonstrate we are up to that challenge.

This piece was originally featured on Open.ac.uk, in English and Welsh.

News from the Nations: Northern Ireland



John D'Arcy

Director of The Open University in Ireland

John has been Director of The Open University in Ireland since October 2010. Prior to this, he was CEO of Colleges Northern Ireland; Director of BDO Management Consultants, and Principal Officer for Research and Statistics at the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

See [full profile](#)

Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA in conversation with John D'Arcy, Director of The Open University in Ireland

Q You've had a huge impact at the Northern Ireland Assembly in raising environmental and climate issues. To what extent do you think that people, in particular young people, are ahead of governments in their thinking on these issues?

The science on climate has been clear for the past couple of decades; it's undisputable that human activity and greenhouse gas emissions are causing the climate breakdown we're witnessing around us. As with many issues, grassroots activism has played a huge role in putting the climate emergency on the agenda of policymakers and politicians.

Young people, in particular, have been key to highlighting the need to tackle the climate emergency. The 'Friday for Future' and global climate strikes have grabbed the imaginations of young people around the world and helped increase visibility and shape the conversation. That's to their credit and encouraging young people to be active and informed can have huge benefits for democracy and policymaking in general.

Q How important is it that the Assembly has declared a climate emergency following its support for your motion?

I put forward the motion declaring a climate emergency as Sinn Féin's first private member's motion following the re-establishment of the institutions in January 2020. I felt it was important that the first debate proposed by Sinn Féin on the floor of the Assembly be about climate change. Not just to get the ball rolling on the action that needs to be taken,

but to send a signal that we're treating this issue as an absolute priority and with the utmost urgency. I was pleased to work with the Green Party on that motion and to have the support of parties other than the DUP and TUV to pass that motion.

Since then, significant progress has been made. A climate change bill was a commitment in the New Decade New Approach agreement which re-established the institutions, however, the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs refused to commit to bringing forward a bill before the end of the current mandate. As a result, activists and NGOs worked to bring forward a bill which had cross-party support from the majority of parties (my colleague Philip McGuigan is a signatory to the bill on behalf of Sinn Féin). That bill has now progressed through the Assembly and is currently being scrutinised by the AERA committee. The AERA Minister has now also introduced his own bill to the Assembly, which is less ambitious in its intent than that brought forward in collaboration with the NGOs. It's great that this progress is being made, and again it shows how working collaboratively can pay dividends for progressive politics.

Q What actions are ongoing as a result of the climate emergency being declared?

The climate emergency motion passing was a positive first step, but it's the action that follows that's important. The cross-party climate change bill currently progressing in the Assembly would formally declare a climate emergency in law and require action plans to be developed to tackle greenhouse gas

emissions. Across the various Executive departments, actions to reduce emissions are being included in a number of strategies being developed. These strategies will have to take cognisance of the target set in the climate change bill and, therefore, it's important they are ambitious and achievable.

Notably, a new Energy Strategy is currently being developed by the Department for the Economy. This will be key to moving away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy across our society, including how we heat our homes, produce power and get around in both public and private transport. From my perspective it's really important that this strategy empowers individuals and communities in terms of the transition away from fossil fuels.

Q Are there particular challenges and opportunities facing Ireland?

There are certainly opportunities in terms of the potential for sustainable renewable energy development, but we need to see investment and support for R&D to help fulfil this. We also have opportunities with our amazing natural heritage to promote sustainable tourism delivered in partnership with communities.



PHOTO: Sinn Féin's Caoimhe Archibald grew up in Coleraine and was educated at Loreto College and Queen's University, Belfast.

In terms of challenges, it's really important that legislation and policies are developed in an all-island context. Climate and environment recognise no borders, so there needs to be clear collaboration and transboundary considerations. The Executive in the north and the Dublin government need to work collaboratively across all departments and at the highest level to ensure coordinated action. Both north and south, agriculture is important to both our economy and our communities. Farmers have been the custodians of our land for generations, and it's important they are partners along with all key stakeholders in the development of plans to reduce emissions and supported to do so.

Q How important will COP26 be in taking forward climate issues?

I think we're at a key juncture in terms of tackling the climate emergency. It's five years since the Paris Agreement, so it's long past time for talking. We need to see commitment to ambitious action and delivery on commitments made. I hope COP26 will achieve a renewed focus on the action that's needed to achieve net zero and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees. We need to see countries come together, commit the necessary funding and match words with actions.



PHOTO: The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) logo seen displayed on a smartphone.

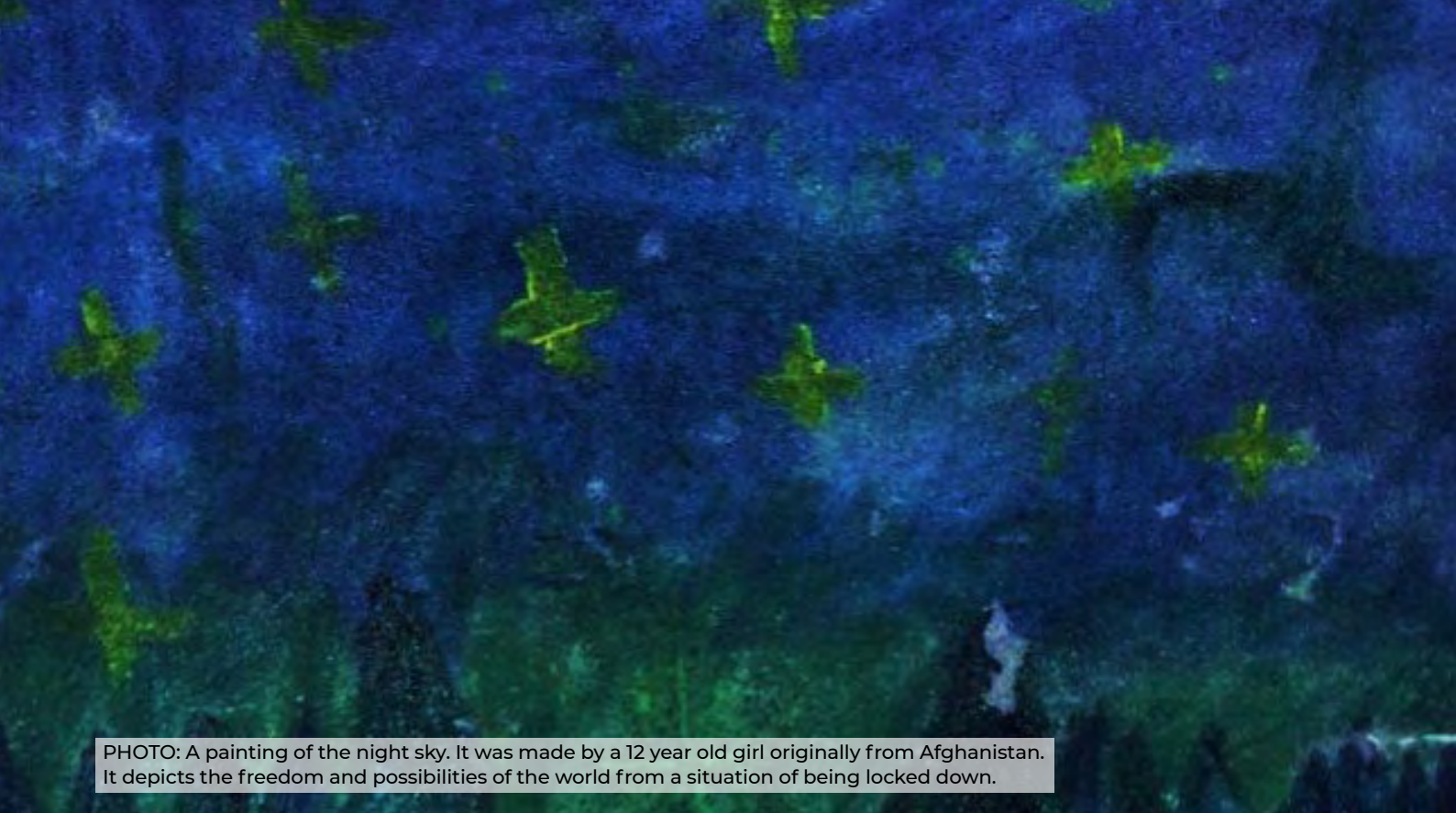


PHOTO: A painting of the night sky. It was made by a 12 year old girl originally from Afghanistan. It depicts the freedom and possibilities of the world from a situation of being locked down.

Against the hostile environment

In conversation with Marie Gillespie

Michael Pryke talks to Marie about how her interests and projects have evolved over the years...

Q How did you develop an interest in researching migration?

Growing up Irish in London, I was aware from an early age of invisible differences in language, culture, religion and family life. This awareness of difference grew stronger when I went to university. Studying Sociology, I was greatly inspired by anthropological thinking and ways of analysing cultural and ethnic differences. After university, I travelled extensively, living and working in France, Morocco and Mexico, learning Arabic and French while teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Upon my return to the UK, I accidentally registered on a Postgraduate Certificate in Education to teach English as a Second Language (I'd intended to study EFL but ticked the box for ESL). Serendipitously, this brought me to Southall, West London, locally referred to as 'Little India', where I taught refugee children of all ages in a hut which was segregated from the mainstream school. Other kids threw stones at the window and made monkey noises.

A pivotal year for me was 1981. Riots broke out in Toxteth, Handsworth and Southall to protest against

the police's 'Stop and Search' practices, and the brutality with which they treated Black and South Asian youth. I ended up writing my first ethnography about the lives of the young people I worked with in Southall. It was an attempt to understand their experiences. They felt misunderstood by their teachers and even their parents – but especially by police. We used the ethnographic account to communicate their concerns. So began my life as an ethnographer.

Q How did your early teaching experiences shape your later research?

While teaching basic literacy skills in Southall, I developed a fascination with the agile and creative negotiation of identity among second-generation British Punjabi youngsters. It was apparent to me that their diaspora identities defied the commonplace 'clash of cultures' stereotype: the idea that being bi-cultural means conflict and confusion. The daily chat which I overheard in the multilingual classroom alerted me to the diverse literacies my students deployed. It struck me that they were mobilising culturally diverse film and television narratives in skilful identity negotiation across peer groups and families. The video cassette recorder arrived early in Southall, and movies were delivered by the milkman – Bollywood and Hollywood films were family viewing alongside 'sacred

soap serials' based on Hindu religious epics, as well as EastEnders and Neighbours.

Southall families were also early adopters of satellite dishes and watched TV news in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and/or English. The young people acquired many different perspectives on the world. My first published ethnography was titled Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change and it demonstrated how diverse narratives and literacies provided cultural resources with which to debate values and norms, political and religious ideologies, ways of seeing, feeling and living. Seemingly trivial 'TV talk' was providing a key site for the elaboration of diasporic consciousness, and in the words of Stuart Hall 'new ethnicities'. That was something I could really relate to – living in and across cultural boundaries.

Q Your teaching and research focuses on very different diasporas in quite diverse contexts – what are the connecting threads?

Philosophers ask how people should live. Anthropologists ask how do people live together? The connecting thread across the different diaspora studies is the concept of socio-cultural change. I'm very curious about how we migrants negotiate our relationships to self, others, and the world through the narratives and metaphors we live by, especially given the ways narratives and metaphors are embodied and shaped by uses of media and communications technologies. In recent years, television has become far less important in my research, as the internet, social media and mobile phones have taken over as diaspora communications tools. But my main concern is always with what binds us together and what tears us apart as families, as nations, as societies. How are inequalities or solidarities perpetuated, challenged, transformed? This also means challenging all forms of cultural and ethnic determinism.

My first book focused on ethnicity, but only to undermine that concept. I find it useful, in subverting conventional, essentialist understandings of 'race', religion or culture, to analyse 'critical events' – a term coined by the Indian anthropologist Veena Das, referring to events that change how people relate to the world and 'others'. This helps guard against essentialising identities, which is key to the process of decolonising the academy. That's a long, hard struggle, requiring a range of strategic practices. Personally, I am committed to collaborative empirical research, gathering multi-dimensional data to underpin theoretically informed assessments of the ways in which communications technologies are embedded (rather than simple causal factors) in socio-cultural and political change.

Q So, what kind of critical 'events' have you researched and in what contexts?

Three different examples might help here. First off, in 2001 I was working on an audience ethnography of Indian film and television with a focus on diasporic Hindu nationalism. Then 9/11 happened. In my fieldwork in multilingual households with multinational satellite TV, I witnessed first-hand a range of very different perspectives on the events as they unfolded, and their immediate aftermath. This led me to coordinate a collaborative ethnography: After September 11 2001: Television News and Transnational Audiences. My multilingual team produced a comparative analysis of how different political histories, particularly relationships with colonialism and 'western' powers, produced markedly different responses. A key insight was around 'Our Ground Zeros': the other histories of atrocity which the 'west' largely 'forgets'. That was quite a prescient study. It foreshadowed things to come.

In my second example, I developed the collaborative ethnographic method and comparative analytical approach in a follow-up ESRC-funded study called *Shifting Securities: Television News Before and After the Iraq War 2003*. This was published in a special issue that underscored once again the depth of political anger and alienation among certain diasporic groups when interpreting global events through the lens of plural linguistic and media literacies.

A third and very different example is an AHRC-funded study called Tuning In: Diasporas at BBC World Service. This grew out of our 'shifting securities' research but involved historical perspectives and organisational ethnography. My team investigated various BBC contact and conflict zones – from the colonial roots of the BBC Empire Service in 1931 to the digital diasporas of today's BBC World Service audiences. This was a very multidisciplinary project, involving researchers based at the OU and other institutions. One key line of research was how during and after World War II, refugee diasporas – exilic intellectuals, writers, linguists and technicians – made it possible for the BBC to achieve effectively global reach as a multilingual radio broadcaster, even though the World Service remained invisible to the UK public and there was no appreciation of the contribution made by these people, even within the organisation. We also tracked how technological and political changes have impacted on the organisation, and how its diverse audiences engaged with its content. The BBC World Service was and still is a uniquely trusted news source in many conflict zones across the world – not least for forced migrants.

Q Your open access OU report Mapping Refugee Media Journeys was influential in policy circles. Can you tell us more about that?

This was another collaborative, multi-disciplinary study that involved many of my brilliant OU colleagues. It was one of the very first studies to flag the significance of the smartphone in forced migration journeys today. It highlighted contradictory features of smartphone technologies for refugees. When you want to escape to safety, a smartphone is a lifeline, as important as water and food, and a potential threat. Criminal gangs and networks of smugglers are ready to exploit refugees' desperation, providing false and dangerous misinformation, while hostile political forces aiming to prevent escape can track refugees' phone signals. A phone may carry documentation of abuses, which in a court of law in the UK, for instance, can be proof of a right to refugee protection, but if found by hostile state security forces can mean torture or death. We began the study at a critical moment in the Syrian War in late 2015, during the exodus of millions of Syrians fleeing war, torture and violence. We worked with Keo Films to produce a BBC-OU documentary series Exodus: Our Journey to Europe – a series of heart-breaking but eye-opening narratives shot by refugees on smartphones, as they tried to reach Europe. That broke new ground and won many awards. I'm proud to have worked with such brilliant colleagues at the OU. We have an excellent track record in multi-disciplinary migration studies, and are pioneering digital migration studies, developing new fields of enquiry.

Q Since the pandemic you've been working on a project called Covid Chronicles from the Margins. Can you tell us more about this?

This project has helped me and all of us working on it to keep going through the pandemic. It's been a wonderful collaborative experience, despite the dark side of the inequalities that we have been chronicling. Our project documents and shares the devastating impacts of the inhumane treatment of asylum seeker and refugees around the world. In the UK, the government's hostile environment policy has left so many families destitute and living in poverty. The website is rare in offering a platform for self-expression and representation for people whose voices and stories we don't often get to hear.

Through an arts-based collaborative digital ethnography (jokingly referred to as ABCDE in my blog), we have collected and curated a huge range of cultural artefacts – personal expression in different media by refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and globally. The 'light side' of the pandemic is apparent in the artful resistance to marginalisation and the strong social solidarities that have been forged across all kinds of boundaries. It has been inspiring and instructive to work with a fantastic team of researchers with refugee backgrounds and/or with expertise in refugee studies,

and a huge range of community organisations. We have learned a lot together as our project video shows. The project started very local and went global. We have created good relationships with, for example, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and persecuted LGBTQ+ internally displaced people in Kakuma Camp in Kenya, as well as Swansea City of Sanctuary – part of a UK network that cultivates a culture of welcome for sanctuary seekers. We recently partnered with them for a conference on Improving Access to Higher Education and Employment for Forced Migrants. That is a crucial stepping stone for the OU's initiative to become a University of Sanctuary.

Q What would becoming a University of Sanctuary mean for the OU? Why is it important, and how can students get involved?

This is my current main OU initiative – one that I feel very passionate about. The process of applying to become a University of Sanctuary is important if the OU is to cultivate a culture of welcome and opportunity for forced migrants. Currently, we know little or nothing about our students or staff who have forced migrant backgrounds. We have no structures or systems in place to improve opportunities for this particularly vulnerable group. You can judge an organisation by how it treats its most vulnerable members, and if we open up access for forced migrants, we can improve access for all.

To that end, we have just started a feasibility study to see how we can improve access for forced migrants, and we are discovering that The Open University has actually been a vital source of opportunity for refugees in the UK for a long time, because of its unique accessibility to people without conventional qualifications. But to become a University of Sanctuary means putting special measures in place to ensure the OU is more emphatically welcoming and enabling. This includes things like bursaries and targeted support, and content that supports English as a second language learners and study skills. The OU as a University of Sanctuary (there are more than 20 others already) can be a beacon of hope in these often dark times, showing commitment to fight inequalities and nurture solidarity.



Marie Gillespie
Prof. of Sociology

Her most recent research projects investigate forced migration and digital exclusion among Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees.

See [full profile](#)

Research to drive positive change



Claire Cooper

Head of Research, Enterprise and Scholarship Support

Part of Claire's role is providing support for the Faculty's Research Office, reviewing the use and allocation of internal research funding, as well as improving bid support.

Claire has been commended on the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) submission in the STEM subject area, as well as the five-year and three-year plans for the Faculty and School Research and Enterprise Strategy Development.

Q You've been working at the OU for quite some time, most recently as Senior Manager (Academic Support). Tell us something about that role.

As my role is new, it provides a great opportunity to shape and develop it to meet emerging needs, but with that comes some challenges in terms of defining the role. Essentially, my role is to bridge the gap between operational management of research, enterprise, and scholarship support and supporting the faculty and Associate Dean for RES in looking further ahead, addressing future needs, and shaping and influencing FASS and OU strategic objectives. It's my job to ensure we have the right resources to deliver those objectives, and that delivery is focused on what the faculty needs to maximise success in our research, enterprise and scholarship work.

The challenges are of course time, effecting quicker change, and doing more with less. We have an excellent track record in FASS, great people, lots of good will and expertise to make a difference.

Q A lot seems to be in flux at the level of UK Government HE policy, particularly around research and its funding, and where the OU fits in all of this. What's on your radar?

The UK Government is under pressure to provide more funding for research, especially research that makes a real-world difference and positively impacts communities. As a result, we face greater competition to access those funds. It's important we are clear about the ways our research fits with the government's and other funder priorities. To help increase our chances, we work collaboratively both across the OU and with external collaborators and partners to create opportunities to access funding and larger streams of funding. Insights into funder priorities and anticipating what opportunities are coming up is also important. It's

up to us – the Research Support team – to support our academics to through the bidding process to give them the best possible chance.

Q As a school with a mix of social science and humanities disciplines, what should we be anticipating and looking out for in terms of research opportunities, enterprise and increasingly 'knowledge exchange'?

Collaborations both within and across discipline areas certainly helps. We also look out for consultancy support and partnership opportunities within existing networks, communities, and with businesses. Academics usually have strong networks, so it's building on those and providing support to take these further where potential opportunities arise. Looking at funder priorities and ways we can contribute to the development of the new OU Research Plan also helps align SSGS research. We are seeing an increasing focus and shift towards meeting societal challenges, such as sustainability, diverse communities, and international development.

**OUR RESEARCH
STRIVES TO SPARK
DEBATE, PRESENT
NEW IDEAS AND
FIND POSITIVE
SOLUTIONS.**

EXPLORE HERE

Supporting students through COVID



Julia Prosser

Head of Student Support, FASS

Julia oversees the Faculty's student support team, which is responsible for evaluating the impact of the interventions made on student retention, in order to inform future activity.

Her team's proactive work with students focuses on Access and Participation Groups to help reduce gaps in their completion and attainment.

Q What are the most common student issues your team has to respond to and have they changed in recent years?

The most common issue that students present to the student support team (SST) relates to what options they may have to enable them to continue with their studies. This might be because their circumstances have altered, and they want to discuss the module or qualification they are studying, or the impact that events in their lives are having on their ability to study. Students value the opportunity to talk to staff who are not directly responsible for their assessment and learning and are often surprised that options exist to enable them to carry on, or that there is the possibility to return to study at a more suitable juncture.

Q What impact has the pandemic had on your work with students?

COVID-19 changed the content and nature of the conversations we held with students. Many concerned the impact on study and grades of the alterations to regulation and assessment. There was an increase in difficult and distressing things shared with members of the SST. Students are also querying their rights with us more commonly – relating to race, disability, and gender. Valuable assistance was provided to students by the SAF COVID fund, which alleviated some of the difficulties students were facing, but the enormity of some of the issues presented has had an emotional impact on staff, particularly given that the exchanges took place away from the support of their peers.

Q Looking ahead, what do you see as the most important challenge your team will face in supporting students over the coming year?

The biggest challenge will be to continue to provide the same level of support to our rapidly increasing number of students. It's important, therefore, that we think creatively about new ways of offering support to

students in addition to our standard model of one-to-one conversations, and to consider the preference of emerging and different student demographics.

Q How have the proactive campaigns you're involved with changed over the years?

Our proactive team of staff was established in 2018 and their work is primarily to contact students at key points during the academic year when research has shown that a contact can generate a sense of belonging and pre-empt issues that might lead to a decrease in motivation and dropping out from the module. Team members are affiliated with one of the FASS Schools and can be deployed to support reactive work, if needed.

They also make contact with students in response to requests from the School, when an issue emerges that needs telephone contact, or to promote events that are designed to encourage success. We have recently made such contact with students on DD102 20J who had not submitted final TMAs and yet could still pass the module if they submitted the EMA, and to students registered for DD225 to inform them of the change to its start date and to discuss the possible impact on their study pathway.

Q What do you find most rewarding in the work you and your team do in supporting students?

Making success possible for students is the key thing that motivates members of the SST, underpinned by a belief that their work directly supports the mission of the university to make study available to all.

For me personally, it's the partnering of the work of the SST with that of our academic colleagues – embedding curriculum knowledge to inform our work with students and sharing our first-hand experience of large numbers of students to contribute to school strategic thinking.

Our curriculum offering



Mark Simmons

Senior Curriculum Manager

Mark joined the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) in 2006 and is currently working on the new MA in International Relations.

Q To begin with, what exactly is a Curriculum Manager?

That's actually quite a hard question to answer! The role is hugely varied and interesting, because we have links to almost every aspect of university business. Curriculum Managers (or CMs as they are known) are an integral part of each module team, and Project Manager is probably the closest industry term for what we do. I like to describe our role as providing the link between the academic and the administrative parts of the university. We are involved in both the production of new modules, as well as the day-to-day running of modules that are already in presentation to students. CMs typically look after a portfolio of three or four modules from any of the three Schools and have to manage their time very carefully. CMs have to be adept at finding things out, as we are often the first port of call when complex issues arise.

Q I notice you're a Senior Curriculum Manager, can you explain what that entails?

The Senior Curriculum Managers have additional responsibilities. There are five of us in FASS and we each lead a team of eight to 10 other CMs, providing line management and support for their everyday work. We also use our experience to get involved in additional projects beyond managing curriculum, for example, I'm currently on a group looking at supporting students who study at full-time intensity.

Q There is a lot of new curriculum being produced in SSGS – are you involved and what will you be doing?

Yes, I'm pleased to be working on the new MA in International Relations. This is an exciting project because the MA is being produced to a new faculty

model that can be completed by students within two calendar years. With international events like Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change all hitting the headlines, the MA is also highly topical and relevant to us all. I'm responsible for planning and keeping the project on track – for example, I'm currently working on a drafting schedule for the team's authors to make sure we can be ready by the module's start date in September 2023. I'll be supporting the team throughout by raising contracts, minuting meetings, and completing the myriad of paperwork required to get a new module off the ground.

Q What's the most challenging part of the role?

I think it's probably the sheer breadth of knowledge that's required, coupled with the pace of change at the moment. CMs are expected to have a full working knowledge of more than a dozen different software packages that are used for various aspects of curriculum delivery, from the module inventory through to student records, the VLE and systems for processing exam results. We also need to keep up to date with policy changes to make sure module teams don't get caught out by changed regulations or new procedures. Working from home has also been particularly challenging for CMs over the past year, as we rely on each other to share information and stay up to date.

Q That sounds like a lot to think about... how can SSGS colleagues help their CM?

Just staying in touch really helps. We appreciate a quick response to queries to help keep students happy. In module production, we can often find a fix for any issues that arise, just as long as we're kept informed before things get out of hand!



PHOTO: Glastonbury Tor, Somerset.

The journey is more important than the destination

In conversation with Marion Bowman

Q You've followed an interesting route through the academy. Can you tell us how that route has shaped your approach to Religious Studies?

There have been various serendipitous turns in my route. When I first went to the University of Glasgow, I assumed I would become an archaeologist, but in my second year I took what was called 'Principles of Religion' and became totally hooked on the study of religions. I transferred to Lancaster University to specialise in Religious Studies, and by the end of that degree I knew my interests lay firmly in religion as what people actually do. How they see and interact with the world and others in everyday life (including other people, the dead, other than human others), not in what scholars or others might think they should do, or in some idealised or purely theoretical form of religion.

Through my fieldwork in Newfoundland – and then later living and working in both Bahrain and Hong Kong – I have been very aware of the old Religious Studies adage 's/he who knows one, knows none.' It's not until you encounter different ways of seeing the world (including the other than human world), and

observe and experience notionally familiar things in varied contexts that you really learn to appreciate different perspectives and look more carefully below the surface at what's going on and what people are actually doing.

These experiences have all fed into my research interests being fieldwork focused and very much rooted in contemporary vernacular religion – the experiences, worldviews, beliefs, practices and material culture of individuals and groups in specific locations and contexts. The co-edited volume we're about to hand over to publishers, *Vernacular Knowledge and Beliefs: Contesting Authority*, presents vernacular knowledge as a realm of discourses and beliefs that challenge institutional authorities and official truths.

Q You place a lot of emphasis on doing fieldwork-based research as you investigate pilgrimage, particularly non-traditional pilgrimage. Why this approach and why the focus on non-traditional pilgrimage?

My interest in pilgrimage stems from my long-term ethnological study of the town of Glastonbury, which has long been a significant pilgrimage destination

for a variety of spiritual seekers, and provides a sort of microcosm of contemporary spirituality and vernacular religiosity. Glastonbury is by no means typical, but it is indicative of the varied, often 'non-aligned' religious/spiritual ideas and praxis that are 'under the radar' elsewhere. When I first visited Glastonbury in the 1990s, it was already being hailed as the 'epicentre of New Age in England'.

Pilgrimage emerged as very obviously an important part of the Glastonbury scene, though not necessarily pilgrimage as traditionally envisaged in the Christian traditions. Pilgrimage is a topic that has many different aspects and nuances in Glastonbury. A major interest for me is the way people envisage and relate to the landscape in and around Glastonbury. I'm fascinated by what they perceive there, what benefits they feel they have both gained and given through walking the landscape, and with whom or to what they feel connected through pilgrimage.

The modern explosion of interest in pilgrimage and pilgrim routes, particularly in traditionally Protestant and increasingly secularized areas of Europe, is quite a remarkable and comparatively recent development. And while there are undoubtedly some elements of continuity, there is considerable change. 'New' pilgrimage attracts an immensely broad demographic, from walkers, and Christians (including those of denominations who roundly rejected pilgrimage at the time of the Reformation), to assorted spiritual seekers including pagans, people who self-identify as being 'of no religion', and individuals simply needing

to take 'time out' and choosing to do so in the form of heritage-rich and experientially enriching journeying.

The growth of interest in pilgrimage, like the renewed interest in Cathedral visiting, is part of a bigger trend towards heritagisation of religion and the spiritualisation of heritage, but that's a longer and more complicated story! A highly relevant part of the story, however, is the popularity of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela – famous due to its coverage in numerous books, articles, television programmes, films, blogs and myriad other media – and the phenomenon of 'Caminoisation'. Among the main features of Caminoisation is the idea that the journey is more important than the destination.

Q You were a visiting professor in the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Norway (2016–2018), and remain a Guest Researcher there. This sounds wonderful – tell us more!

I've had links with Norway since 2002 when I was a visiting lecturer for the wonderful 'Magic, Myth and Miracle in Modernity and Post-Modernity' Research Project, jointly conducted by the Departments of Folklore and Religious Studies at the University of Bergen. However, the invitation to Oslo came as a delightful surprise. I was there under its Professor II scheme, so that meant a 20% appointment, 'bundling' the days so that I could go for periods of 10 days to a few weeks, depending on fieldwork conditions, events at Oslo, and so on.



PHOTO: Pilgrimage sign-post, Oslo.

In Oslo, I taught graduate seminars and workshops with two Culture Studies colleagues, Dirk Johannsen and Ane Ohrvik (both folklorists). Our teaching was research-led, focusing on the phenomenon of 'new' and 'renewed' Caminoised pilgrimage in Norway and other parts of northern Europe. We looked at The Route of St Olav's Way, a network of routes through Denmark, Sweden and Norway, terminating at Nidaros Cathedral where the shrine of St Olav had been a major attraction. It became a Council of Europe Cultural Route in 2010.

We looked at how this 'new' pilgrimage is managed, represented, and re-presented, in light of the heritagisation of religion and how Norwegian heritage is being 'operationalised' in relation to pilgrimage. How do 'new' pilgrims relate to the landscape and the past, and to what extent are sites and routes not just being restored but 're-storied'?

Fortunately, following a number of conference panels, the main task we had designated for 2019/20 was the production of a special issue of the journal *NUMEN*, **Reframing Pilgrimage in Northern Europe**, so that was able to proceed despite the pandemic. As September 2019 until April 2020 was also a period during which I was undergoing surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment for breast cancer, getting that issue done was a bit of a challenge, but extremely satisfying. I look forward to going back to Oslo, but it won't be for a while, I suspect.

Q You're involved with a cross-country collaborative project about inclusive spaces and places. Can you tell us about this?

Re-storied Sites and Routes as Inclusive Spaces and Places: Shared Imaginations and Multi-layered Heritage is a great project that grew from shared interests in 'storyworlds' relating to landscape, place-centred relationality, and narratives. It builds on the growing revival and reconceptualising of pilgrimage, and the creation of other 'routes with roots' in former Soviet countries (in this case Estonia, Latvia

and Lithuania), as well as Norway and other culturally Protestant parts of northern Europe.

I was involved in framing the proposal and I'm now acting in an advisory capacity through existing connections with the University of Tartu. The project considers how places and routes with a religious, mythical or significant historical past can gain (indeed in some places have gained) renewed significance through processes of narration and heritagisation. We're also looking at the extent to which such places and routes might be able to function as inclusive spaces, attracting diverse groups of people and individuals.

Among the most socially significant aims of the project is to explore the potential of restored and re-storied sites and routes in relation to helping diverse people feel 'at home' in heritagised (as opposed to contested) cultural landscapes. These newly reanimated, multi-vocally narrated places will hopefully provide inclusive socio-cultural environments. Through exploring the changing meanings of (mainly) rural places and routes, and their potential in promoting social inclusion, we aim to identify models for enhancing the integrative power of places in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway.



PHOTO: St Olav's Way marker on the pilgrimage route to the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim (Dirk Johannsen).



Dr Marion Bowman

Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies

Marion is Vice-President of Theology and Religious Studies UK and was recently elected an International Fellow by the American Folklore Society, which recognises significant contributions to the field.

A guest researcher at the University of Oslo, Marion collaborates with researchers in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway as the external scientific expert for *Re-storied Sites and Routes*, a project exploring the changing meanings of rural places and routes.

See [full profile](#)



SSGS Doctoral Training Partnerships

In conversation with Steve Pile and Paul Lawrence

Are you looking to start your own journey as a PhD student? We hear from two colleagues, Steve Pile and Paul Lawrence, about all the things you need to know before you start, and how one is acquired.

Steve is the OU's Associate Director of the ESRC Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership, and Paul is Director of the AHRC Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership.

Q So, what exactly is a PhD?

SP and PL: The PhD (doctorate) is a research-based degree, which normally takes more than three years to conduct and complete. Doctoral students typically plan and undertake (under supervision from academic staff) a piece of independent and original research and write up their findings in an 80,000 to 100,000-word thesis.

While traditionally text-based, it is possible to include 'non-text' elements (such as short videos) in the final, examinable thesis. When you've completed your PhD, it will feel as if you have written a book and you will be examined on the work you have produced by experts in the field, in an oral examination called a 'viva'.

Q OK, but why do a PhD?

SP: The PhD is the highest qualification that can be achieved at a university. Accordingly, the research and communication skills which are developed during the course of a PhD are of a very high order. The PhD is now a requirement for most teaching posts in higher education but, beyond this, it equips students with sophisticated transferable skills in research, analysis and communication. Both the AHRC and ESRC estimate that more than half of the doctoral studentships eventually lead candidates to employment outside of academia, and employers of all types value the skillset and independence of mind which PhD-level training fosters. Plus, you'll be able to put the title 'Dr' in front of your name.

Q How do I know if it's for me?

SP: Typically, Open University students are highly motivated, determined, self-organising, adaptive and hard-working. These are all essential qualities for the successful completion of a PhD. Gaining admittance to a PhD programme, and securing a funded studentship, is a highly competitive process. Academic attainment is one key component. So, too, is

the proposed area of research, as well as a broad range of other factors. It's worth looking at [these videos on YouTube](#) if you'd like to know more about what it's like to be a PhD student at the OU.

Q How to I apply for and fund a PhD?

SP and PL: The Open University is currently involved in 14 doctoral training partnerships across all the full range of its faculties. SSGS is heavily involved in two of these – the ESRC-funded Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) and the AHRC-funded Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP. These two DTPs, which are consortiums of universities along with external, non-university partners, provide funded studentships for doctoral-level study. Which DTP you might apply to depends largely on which subject area you have chosen to research.

The Grand Union DTP

SP: Within SSGS, **The Grand Union DTP** offers training pathways in Development Policy and Practice, Geography, and Citizenship. The Grand Union DTP disperses about £2 million a year to support doctoral training (on behalf of the Economic and Social Research Council). This enables us to fully fund around 40 studentships a year, spread across three institutions – Brunel University London, the University of Oxford and The Open University. Patterns of study vary widely and are tailored to students' needs. Broadly, however, about half of our studentships are awarded to people who have master's degrees and simply need funding for a PhD. The other half go to people who need support for a master's degree and then go on to doctoral research. Whichever route is taken, each student will usually be supported for around three to four years with a stipend (maintenance grant), paid fees and access to a wide range of additional funds for placements, research training and fieldwork, for example. If you'd like to learn more, you can explore the work of current doctoral students on the [GUDTP website](#).

The Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP

PL: The **Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP** offers studentships in subjects within Arts & Humanities. From SSGS, these include Philosophy, Religious Studies, some aspects of Human Geography and Development Studies. The DTP is one of the largest

AHRC DTPs and funds a minimum of 77 studentship each year for doctoral study only. The DTP does not fund master's-level degrees. A proportion of the studentships allocated each year are so-called 'Collaborative Doctoral Awards', where the PhD research is undertaken in conjunction with a non-university partner (often a museum, gallery, NGO, charity, or other such organisation). Our university partners in the Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP are – you've guessed it – the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Our non-university partners in the consortium are the National Trust, the BBC World Service and BT. Candidates who secure AHRC funding via our consortium are registered for study at one of the constituent universities, have their fees paid and receive a maintenance grant for three years and three months (with the opportunity to extend this if undertaking a work placement, or if additional training is required).

Q What are my next steps?

SP and PL: Most people who are successful in the AHRC and ESRC studentship competitions already have master's degrees or strong plans to do a master's degree relevant to the research they wish to undertake. Once you feel ready to apply for doctoral funding, your first step will be to think about what area you wish to research in. The most important thing is your enthusiasm to do research on a particular issue, question or problem. You will need this to sustain you through years of research and study. All doctoral-level research is guided by one or more academic 'supervisors', so it is well worth discussing your ideas or thoughts (no matter how vague) early on with an academic who seems to research the kind of topic you are interested in. Academics are very used to receiving queries about possible doctoral study, and you should feel free to outline your initial ideas and ask for advice on how to develop an application.

Once your plans are further developed, descriptions of Pathways in The Grand Union DTP can be found on [their website](#).

The Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP accepts applications across all Arts & Humanities subject areas. Details on who to contact and how to apply [can be found here](#).

Steve Pile

Prof. of Human Geography

Steve is the OU's Associate Director of the Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

See [full profile](#)



Paul Lawrence

Prof. of History

Paul is Asa Briggs Professor of History, and Director of the Open-Oxford-Cambridge AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership.

See [full profile](#)

Being a PhD student

Our PhD 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-time or full-time employment. They are all united by their curiosity and fundamental passion for learning. **Here are some of our current students within SSGS.**

“

I chose the OU for its excellent standard of education and academic support, including easy access to expert material and people essential to the success of my project.



Ian Watson, Philosophy

“

I'll always be grateful to the OU for recognising that there are people with exciting and worthwhile research ideas who need flexible options to pursue them.



Sally Latham, Philosophy

“

A piece of advice I would offer relates to writing. Writing is hard. Write something about your research straight away.



David Debenham, Economics

“

Studying with the OU has provided me with tools to investigate socio-economic phenomena from a radically empowering perspective.



Francis Garikayi, Economics

“

It felt like a real achievement to have followed those threads all the way from the initial idea, to planning the methods, conducting fieldwork, analysing the material.



Owen Coggins, Religious Studies

“

I loved doing my PhD despite the intellectual difficulty of the task! Above all, I'm grateful for the rigorous training I gained in skills relating to research, writing and presentation.



Sarah Flew, Religious Studies

Designed by Glen Darby, Corporate and Commercial.

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