



SSGS MAGAZINE

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



PHOTO: Protest outside the Russian Embassy, Latvia, against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022

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

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Welcome

Now in its third year, the SSGS Magazine continues its aim to incorporate some of the key areas of research driving the School and informing its evolving curriculum.

As we look forward to the 2022/23 academic year, I can't help but think of all the achievements of the School during 2021/22. One notable achievement among them is our strong performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 exercise. This is a national exercise that takes place every six or seven years to evaluate the quality of research. We made submissions to six units from SSGS: Development, Geography, Politics (the first OU Politics submission ever), Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Social Policy (jointly with the OU's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies). The evaluation concluded that our research has some world-leading (4-star) elements and quite a large proportion of internationally excellent (3-star) elements. There is at least one good news story to tell in every single submission. Some submissions did remarkably well on outputs, many did very well on impact, and there were a few that were rated very highly for the research environment. In this issue of SSGS Magazine, you will read about some exemplars of our research excellence covering topics as diverse as couples' relationships, the 'wow' moments in life, or the politics of space – a

sign that our research is making its mark in all walks of life. Looking ahead to the next REF, we need to put in place structures that support our research excellence.

In November 2021, we launched the Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice. This Centre helps us to not only support the excellent research that goes on in our School, but also helps us to make connections between our research, teaching, scholarship, and knowledge exchange activity. As we look ahead to 2022/23, we will begin to see the Centre – as an umbrella structure – starting to support work across eight SSGS disciplines while also contributing to the University's agenda on societal challenges articulated in the institution's new Research Plan. In this issue, you will read the snippets of our strengths in global challenges and the wide-ranging work that our academics are doing to understand and intervene in these challenges. As our new curriculum comes on stream, you will also read about a new Level 1 module Global Challenges: Social Science in Action (D113) and what went on behind the scenes in the production of this flagship module.

Across the University, the discussion of ways of working is picking up as society emerges out of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are many reasons for thinking through carefully about the new world that the pandemic has presented us with. Some of the concerns that have informed this discussion are: work/life balance and its positive effects on wellbeing; positive effects of a reduced commuting culture on the environment; reducing the environmental footprint of our estates; reducing operating costs of the University; attracting a wider talent pool to the University; and opportunities for technological and other types of innovation. In one of our School meetings last year, we had a rich and varied conversation about our ways of working. This discussion highlighted that home working is experienced in multiple ways and therefore it is important to acknowledge individual life circumstances in how we work in the future. There are, of course, numerous benefits of meeting colleagues face-to-face, so this year we will support hybrid ways of working that offer flexibility to colleagues.

Our student numbers have continued to grow and our staff numbers have also increased with new members of staff joining us over the past year. The School's leadership team has held induction sessions to meet with new colleagues, as well as sessions focused specifically on early-career academic. We have seen some new colleagues enthusiastically taking on leadership roles within our School – a sign that colleagues are feeling positive about playing their part in the School's journey ahead. At the beginning of August 2022, we welcomed nearly 500 Associate Lecturers (ALs) to the School. A group of colleagues has worked tirelessly over the last year to support the integration of ALs in the disciplines and there is already a sense of excitement as we get to know our newcomers. You will have the opportunity to meet many of our ALs in a large number of hybrid events that will be taking place over 2022/23.

I hope to see many of you at these events, and not just as on-screen avatars!

Shonil Bhagwat

Head of School, Social Sciences and Global Studies



Shonil Bhagwat

Professor 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](#)

This year's Guest Editor

A jangle of keys, giggles in the hallway, the thud of the front door. Serving up dinner around the kitchen table, I mutter about how much groceries have gone up in the last year. But nobody's listening. The radio's on. My four-year-old asks: "When will the war end?" At the other end of the table, a Ukrainian refugee – a new member of my family – looks blankly. Earlier she had asked the same question.

These have been strange times for a while now. From the pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the unfolding climate crisis, people around the world are asking new questions about the present and the future. Where are we going? The social sciences have a special place in helping us understand these global challenges. This magazine showcases some of the brilliant work taking place across the School by our academics, Associate Lecturers and students. From big-picture snapshots to the cost-of-living crisis, from migrant experiences of the lockdowns to climate justice, space ethics, long-term relationships, knife crime, veganism, decolonising religious studies, the beauty of epiphanies, how you can change the political system – and more. While we cannot guarantee the answers, come explore some fresh thinking and new approaches to the questions we've been asking of our world.



Dr Dan Taylor

Lecturer in Social and Political Thought

**FIND OUT MORE
ABOUT HOW**

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

DISCOVER OUR SCHOOL

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](#)

Dr Teresa Ashe ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Baseerit Nissah ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Aiora Zabala ▶
Lecturer in Economics



Development

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Weiwei Chen ▶
Post-Doctoral Research Associate

Dr Arabella Fraser ▶
Senior Lecturer in Global Development



Philosophy

[Visit this Discipline](#)



Politics & International Studies

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Emma Clarence ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Paul Hayman ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Georgina Holmes ▶
Lecturer



Social Policy & Criminology

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Barry Sheehan ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Stuart Taylor ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Jaime Waters ▶
Staff Tutor

Dr Isla Masson
Lecturer in Criminology



Geography

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Ruth Slatter ▶
Lecturer in Geography



Sociology

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Chris Cotter ▶
Staff Tutor, Sociology & Religious Studies

Dr Susan Collins
Staff Tutor, Sociology



Religious Studies

[Visit this Discipline](#)

Dr Chris Cotter ▶
Staff Tutor, Sociology & Religious Studies



Scholarships at the OU

At the heart of The OU mission is the belief that education should be available to all. This is put into practice through a variety of tailored **scholarship and bursary** opportunities, some of which offer free, higher education study or additional support. Could one be right for you, or worth sharing with someone you know?

The Open Futures Fund provides life-changing scholarships, bursaries and support to students who would otherwise miss out on education. These include:



The Disabled Veterans' Scholarships Fund

This offers veterans – disabled as a result of military service – access to free Open University education and specialist disability and careers support. Successful applicants have their fees waived for a maximum of 120 credits per seasonal academic year, up to a maximum of 360 credits – the equivalent of a full Honours degree. In recent years, the OU has provided the equivalent of 210 full scholarships to disabled veterans.

See [more information](#)



Black Students' Support Fund

Launched in 2022, designed for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who identify as Black, this scholarship provides free undergraduate study. These packages typically cover OU undergraduate credit-bearing modules and qualifications, paying for the full tuition cost of a qualification, up to 120 credits each seasonal academic year and 360 credits in total.

See [more information](#)



The Carers' Scholarships Fund

For anyone who is, or recently has been, an unpaid carer, then this fund could allow them to study at The OU for free. There are scholarships open to carers of all ages, as well as some reserved specifically for young carers aged 25 and under. These cover OU undergraduate credit-bearing modules and qualifications, paying for the full tuition cost of a qualification, up to 120 credits each seasonal academic year and 360 credits in total. In recent years, the OU has provided the equivalent of 91 full scholarships to carers. See [more information](#).



Sanctuary Scholarships Programme

Launched in 2022, these scholarships are open to forced migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK, offering opportunities to study for free. Each scholarship covers the full tuition costs of 360 credits of undergraduate study, complete with study-starter pack and access to careers and employability services. There are also 50 OU Access Module Fee Waivers available that will cover the cost of one OU Access module.

See [more information](#)

If you don't match the criteria needed for a full scholarship, there are still ways to study and make savings if cost is an obstacle. Further help is available through a number of means-tested funds, with a sample given below.

Care Experienced Bursary

An award of £250 for study-related costs, available to registered students who are currently in, or have previously been in, the care of a Local Authority, for any length of time and at any stage in their life. This includes adopted children who were previously in care. See [more information](#)

Carers' Bursary

This offers a £250 for study-related costs to registered students to registered students providing unpaid care to a friend or family member who, due to an illness, disability, mental health condition, or addiction, cannot cope without their care. See [more information](#)

Study-Related Costs Funding

Put in place to help students who need extra financial support for their study costs, this fund can be used to cover costs such as internet access, travel to tutorials, childcare, and stationery. It's usually a reimbursement of costs, meaning you'll need to provide receipts as part of your application.

Please check the eligibility carefully. It is not guaranteed that these scholarships will run in future years, but there may be something here that you or a loved one are eligible for. Check the Fees & Funding section of The OU website for the most up-to-date information.

See [more information](#)

Global challenges snapshots

Established to provide interdisciplinary insight and solutions for worldwide issues, the Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice launched in October 2021.



PHOTOS: A Russian production control room full of TV screens; The Totem Latamat; A female agricultural worker in Sierra Leone; United Nations European headquarters in Geneva.

Here we ask academics from across SSGS to tell us about their focuses on the wider world and how taking a global approach informs their work.



**Dr Precious
Chatterje-Doody**

**Lecturer in Politics &
International Studies**

See [full profile](#)

'Trust in politicians and mainstream media is on a downward trend'

My research straddles the areas of Russian foreign security, as well as identity, media and communication. I am interested in how the Russian political elite selectively engages with history to articulate what it means to be Russian, and Russia's place in the world. I also investigate how they disseminate these ideas internationally – using TV, radio and social media –

in attempts to justify Russia's invasion and conduct in Ukraine.

This touches upon broader questions about how people perceive current affairs. For example, we know that trust in politicians and mainstream media is on a downward trend, and in the age of online media, news consumers like to access alternative information sources across various outlets and platforms. This can feed the spread of disordered information – unverified or untrue stories that play on people's emotions.

Domestic and international actors use these divisive issues for their own ends. As my recent book, *Russia Today and Conspiracy Theories: People, power and politics on RT* (Routledge, 2022) argues, Russia's international broadcaster has consistently plugged into conspiracy theories about socially divisive events, platforming 9/11 truthers and lockdown sceptics, for

instance. The network tries to legitimise Russia's foreign policy, for example, by justifying its military intervention in Syria, denying its culpability for the Skripal poisonings, and dismissing allegations with humour.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw such patterns repeated. The Kremlin spreads outright lies about its motivations and its conduct. Russian people are bombarded with the Kremlin's alternative reality, with dissent squashed. Russia's international broadcasters have been forced to quit the EU, UK, and USA, but our politicians and broadcasters are still learning how to report and confront Kremlin statements without boosting or endorsing them. Empirical research on effective counters to disordered information can help address this – one of the key challenges of our time.



Theo Papaioannou

Professor of Politics, Innovation and Development, and Director of the Innogen Institute

See [full profile](#)

'Innovation must be inclusive of the needs and interests of the poor'

Over the years, I've been exploring the global challenges of poverty and inequality (United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 9 & 10) in relation to technological innovation. Although capital-intensive, top-down innovation and technological progress have radically changed the lives of many, they have frequently excluded the very poor by failing to take on board their needs and aspirations – increasing inequalities and spreading starvation, violence, and despair around the world.

The implications for global development are huge. For example, the traditional innovation focus on efficiency gains and profitability has incentivised more widespread colonisation, resource plunder, and dispossession – for example, dispossession of small-scale farmers by massive agro-businesses and small local enterprises by multinational companies. My research has been developing evaluative principles and frameworks of inclusive innovation from the bottom up, which could enable us to identify (and anticipate) opportunities and needs for emerging technologies through participation of excluded groups, thus assisting development policy and practice towards just outcomes. My latest monograph *Inclusive Innovation for Development: Meeting the Demands of Justice through Public Action* (Routledge, 2018) insists that while innovation has great potential to address a number of challenges, it must be inclusive of the needs and interests of the poor. I propose in the book three overarching and interrelated principles of justice in innovation – equity, recognition,

and participation – each founded upon public action and campaigning for the equalising of social relations in the innovation process. As such, they can be defended as non-ideal principles which promote a needs-based approach to inclusive innovation and development in the 21st century.

To explore application of these principles in practice, I've submitted a multimillion-pound project proposal to the European Research Council: Inclusive Innovation for Recovery from Crises. If successful, this project will investigate how Social and Solidarity Economy organisations have been enabling the socio-economic recovery from crises, including Covid-19. In doing so, the project will generate fresh knowledge about this neglected area of social-scientific inquiry. A more just world should not be theorised from an ideal institutional perspective, but from a realist relational perspective that is grounded on civil society mobilisation.



Dr Azita Chellappoo

Lecturer in Philosophy

See [full profile](#)

'Mainstream discourses around 'obesity' cast larger body size as inherently unhealthy or diseased'

The 'obesity epidemic' has been a central target of concern for scientists, clinicians, policymakers, and the public at large for decades. Mainstream discourses around 'obesity' cast larger body sizes as inherently unhealthy or diseased, and as a rapidly growing risk to the health of populations around the world. While 'obesity' has previously been characterised as a Western disease, increasing attention is being paid to the apparently rising rates in the Global South. Often, these biomedical conceptions of 'obesity' feed into stigmatising and blaming fat individuals.

This has been a particular concern during the Covid-19 pandemic, where scientists have warned of 'obesity' as a 'second pandemic'. People of larger body size have been a target of blame for the health burden of the virus, given the purported link between 'obesity' and higher rates of Covid-19 mortality. However, in recent years, there has been forceful pushback against these claims. Fat studies scholars and fat activists have reclaimed the term 'fat' while rejecting the pathologizing connotations of the term 'obesity', drawn attention to the (often gendered and racialised) effects of weight stigma, criticised the conflation of adherence to aesthetic ideals with better health, and denied or complicated the purported link between 'obesity' and poorer health.

My research aims to explore key philosophical issues within the fields that make up 'obesity science', including the role that fatphobic values might play in shaping scientific inquiry, how causation is established in this area, and what this means for the kinds of public health interventions we should pursue. In addition, I am interested in the ways in which weight stigma and widespread fatphobia should be taken into account in biomedical research. A growing body of evidence suggests that racism is at least partially responsible for racial health disparities. Racial discrimination can, for example, cause increased stress and thereby impact a range of physiological or biological processes, including gene expression patterns and the composition of the microbial communities in our bodies.

This evidence has important implications for our understanding of racial health disparities and how to address them. Despite evidence of both institutional and interpersonal fatphobia, the possibility of a similar causal pathway in this case has been thus far neglected. I hope that this work will go some way towards advancing current debates around 'obesity' or fatness, as well as providing paths towards scientific research that is not in tension with the goal of justice for fat people.



Dr Ece Kocabiçak

Lecturer in Sociology

See [full profile](#)

'Priority should be given to gender gaps in the labour movement'

In order to achieve a better, more sustainable future for everyone, the United Nations announced eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, followed by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. My research critically engages with SDG Target 5.a, which aims to increase women's access to ownership and control over agricultural land.

In low-income countries, approximately 64% of female employment is in agriculture. Considering the importance of women for agriculture, a World Bank report in 2000 initiated a shift within global policy by stating that greater gender equality in agriculture boosts economic growth. Subsequently, the international and national policy frameworks, including the UN's SDGs, have developed initiatives to expand rural women's access to land and other rural assets.

While invaluable in targeting gender gaps in agriculture, such a policy approach neglects that developing countries have diverse gendered patterns. For example, while the majority of women's

employment in East Asia & Pacific, Latin America & Caribbean, and Southern & Western Africa has shifted towards non-agricultural sectors before or around the same time as that of men's, South Asia, Middle East & North Africa, and Middle & Eastern Africa have gender gaps in the shift from agriculture to non-agricultural employment. The neglect of these contrasting gendered patterns reinforces women's position as unpaid family workers in agriculture.

Alternative policy approaches can be found within different historical and geographical contexts. Despite its limitations, the contemporary policy regime in China, for example, encourages the movement of female labour from rural to urban areas through policy interventions in occupational training, guaranteed employment and housing. By identifying the diverse conditions of countries in the Global South, my research investigates that greater gender equality in access to land does not necessarily 'boost economic growth' or bring greater gender equality everywhere.

My research suggests that in order to achieve sustainable development and greater gender equality in the countries where women's exclusion from landownership is associated with the predominance of small landownership patterns, priority should be given to inequalities between men and women in the labour movement. Therefore, a nuanced policy framework is offered, by investigating when and how to help women get out of agriculture.



Graham Harvey

Professor of Religious Studies

See [full profile](#)

'Human exceptionalism treats other-than-human persons as mere resources or expendable scenery'

Much of my research has involved the great privilege of hanging out with indigenous people – Mi'kmaq, Anishinaabeg, Māori, Sámi, Yoruba and Walpiri in particular. Guided by such hosts, I have engaged with festivals and performances rooted in and improvising from ceremonial repertoires. A recent example is events in the journey of Latamat ('Life'), a Totonac carved totem, from Mexico to the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow and its retirement at The Crichton, Dumfries. Creative interventions like that have contributed to what some scholars have called cultural 'revitalisation' but might be better considered 'renewal'. The former can imply that something died and has been reinvented. The latter resonates with the ceremonies that many indigenous nations conduct

at regular intervals to renew the world and recommit to relating well (respectfully and reciprocally) in the larger-than-human community.

One thread of my research has involved contributing to a Norwegian Research Council funded multi-researcher, multi-sited project about reassembling democracy. For this, I spent time at Riddu Riđđu, a Sámi-organised festival in the Arctic. There and elsewhere, I focused on responses to the global challenge of injustices against indigenous people (who are at best marginalised in most political forums). But I have also been led to question the human exceptionalism that treats other-than-human persons as mere resources or expendable scenery. Arising from a still dominant nature/culture separation, such exceptionalism is robustly challenged by indigenous and other communities who celebrate inter-species kinships, symbiosis and co-involved relationality.

By a curious (to me) piece of serendipity, my interest in ceremonies and etiquettes of inter-species kinship has led to an invitation to advise the Alexander McQueen design team on their autumn/winter 2022 collection, Biosys.



Nicola Yeates
Professor and Chair
of Social Policy
See [full profile](#)

'Social phenomena cannot be understood solely by reference to what happens within country borders'

All my research is framed in terms of global challenges. Typically, the issues I'm interested in – labour policy, health and social care provision, and social security – tend to be researched as national or local issues. My research, however, takes a wider approach. I look to shine a light on transnational links and connections among populations and territories around the world, and their implications for health and welfare systems. It's this approach that frames my research. A recent example of this is my study with Ross Fergusson into global youth unemployment. This is a major global social policy issue: worldwide, it's three times higher than the adult rate. Our research also discovered young women are more likely to be affected by a lack of a job. We looked at the connections between what manifests 'locally', and global forces shaping economic production and social reproduction over time (we covered a century). We found enduring discourses, policies and practices that systematically discriminate

against young people and which help explain how they are positioned within global labour streams and within global capitalist restructuring more generally.

Such findings show how vital a genuinely global perspective is because social phenomena cannot be understood solely by reference to what happens within country borders. Countries as we know them today are in many ways artificial constructs – social worlds are by no means contained within them or insulated from what goes on abroad. A genuinely global perspective is more than about looking beyond Britain to see what is happening in other countries. It's about highlighting, recognising and analysing trans-border social links and ties, social formations and modes of consciousness. For that, we need a radically different methodology from the one that prevails in the social sciences. It's good to see this point is now recognised much more widely, with much more attention not just to 'global challenges' but to shared challenges and how to respond to them. However, much more remains to be done.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HOW

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

MEET OUR PEOPLE



The School of Social Sciences and Global Studies is a hub for disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and research-led teaching that aims to tackle some of the most pressing challenges faced by societies across the globe. [Find out more.](#)

Introducing the new Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice

From cutting-edge research to launching a brand-new research centre, Agnes Czajka, Director of Research, looks at some of the incredible work that's taken place over the last year.

Contemporary societies are changing in rapid and unprecedented ways. The climate emergency, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have reverberated across the globe, throwing into sharp relief the unsustainability of our ways of living and the persistent and deep-rooted inequalities and injustices structuring global societies.

In response, the new **Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice (GCSJ)** has been set up to provide critical, interdisciplinary insight from across the School of Social Sciences and Global Sciences, with the aim of developing innovative, social justice-driven solutions to some of these challenges.

The Centre's ambition is to understand what underpins contemporary societies, both structurally and historically. It sets out to understand the systems of oppressions and inequalities that these underpinnings reproduce; and the resistances and struggles they generate. This is done through combining research and teaching to engage communities in constructive dialogue and develop the knowledge and tools required to engage with today's global challenges.

The Centre's work stretches across many disciplines but is structured around four research strands: (1) People and Societies; (2) Systems and Institutions; (3) Environments and Sustainability; (4) Values and Cultures.

Over the course of 2021–2022, members of the Centre's community published several blogs and participated in seminars covering a wide range of research themes across different disciplines.

Some of these great blogs include:

- **Reflexions on 'ordinary' citizenship** by Dr Eleni Andreouli, which explores the dangers for citizenship when what constitutes the 'ordinary' or 'everyday' gets politicised or depoliticised.
- **Gender gaps in emerging economies of the Global South** by Dr Ece Kocabiçak, about a new international research network studying the experiences of women's labour-force participation in different countries of the Global South.
- **Sexual harassment in UK Parliament** by Dr Christina Julios, on her new study about misconduct at the core of Britain's political establishment.

- **How market traders in London produce inclusive public spaces** by Dr Gunvor Jónsson, connected to a wider three-year study with Professor Sophie Watson (Moving MarketPlaces).

Recent events:

- Medical circumcision for HIV prevention in Kenya as a social justice issue (Dr Mark Lamont).
- The connection of smell to war and martial power (Dr Kevin McSorley).
- The philosophical significance of epiphanies (Professor Sophie Grace Chappell, Dr Alex Barber, Dr Sean Cordell).
- What Russia's invasion of Ukraine can teach us about disinformation (Dr Precious Chatterje-Doody).
- A three-part Citizenship Studies seminar series: 'Ordinary Citizenship': Anthropological Approaches (Dr Catherine Neveu); Who should care? Social care and citizenship (Dr Dan Taylor); and Covid Chronicles from the Margins: Migrant Solidarity and Belonging (Professor Marie Gillespie).
- Trans inclusion in female sport: bodies, sex and gender identity (Dr Jon Pike).
- Fiscal policy in the post-financial crisis era (Dr Ayobami Illori).
- A paradox of helping: who should help refugees and how? (Dr Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir).
- The twice migrated Gujarati women of west London: financialization and pensions (Professor Pauline Gleadle and Dr Neeta Shah).
- Voting for 'None of the Above': enabling electoral disenchantment (Dr Richard Heffernan).
- What we can learn from the 'soft skills' of street market traders (Professor Sophie Watson).

Looking ahead, the new Centre will bring together expertise across the School, spanning our eight disciplines. Applying their combined insights can offer incisive, holistic analyses and practical resources for the many challenges now facing societies around the globe.



Our research

From cutting-edge research to launching a brand-new research centre, Agnes Czajka, Director of Research, looks at some of the incredible work that's taken place over the last year.

It was a busy year for research in SSGS in 2021/22. Last October, after a long and inclusive consultation period, we successfully launched the School's first research centre, the [**Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice**](#). Professor Umut Erel (Sociology) was appointed Centre Director, and Dr Maria Nita (Religious Studies) was appointed to lead the Centre's [**Teaching Lab**](#). Both Umut and Maria have hit the ground running, working closely with me and Matt Staples (SSGS Director of Teaching) on several exciting new initiatives, which you can read more about on the next page.

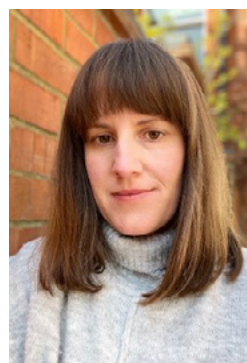
Colleagues across the School continued to pursue original and exciting research projects, knowledge exchange initiatives and policy work. With so much activity across the School, it's difficult to highlight just a few, so this is just the tip of the SSGS research iceberg.

Professor Sophie Grace Chappell (Philosophy) published a new book, *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience* (read her interview also in the magazine). Professor Simon Usherwood (Politics) co-edited a report for UK in a Changing Europe on 'The state of the European Union'. Professor Giles Mohan (Development Policy & Practice) has been leading on a large, international research project called [**REDEFINE, exploring the dynamics and effects of Chinese infrastructure investment in Europe**](#), while Professor Parvati Raghuram (Geography) has been leading on another large international project, [**Decolonising Education for Peace in Africa**](#). The H2020-funded Religious Toleration and Peace Project, led by Professor John Wolffe (Religious Studies), also launched its OpenLearn course [**Young People and Religion: Creative Learning with History**](#).

The OU's Universities of Sanctuary Working Group, led by Professor Marie Gillespie (Sociology), organised a series of events to raise awareness of the lives of refugees around the world, as part of Refugee Week 2022. The series opened with [**No Friends but the Mountains**](#), a poignant film based on SSGS and other research from the Faculty, highlighting real lives in perpetual transit. It also comprised Identity Over Time, a [**digital exhibition**](#) presented as a [**short film**](#), drawing on arts-based ethnographic workshops by SSGS academics and partners, carried out with Spanish-speaking refugees from Latin America alongside local Spanish speakers in Swansea. Also part of the Sanctuary initiative was [**Blood and Gold**](#), in which Mara Menzies, a gifted storyteller, draws on her Kenyan and Scottish heritage to explore migration journeys, in a story that interweaves tragedy and loss alongside love, humanity and healing.

Together with the rest of the higher-education sector, we also received our Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 results. Colleagues across the School did an immense amount of work on our REF submissions, and the work paid off. The School performed very well, with assessors highlighting the significant impact that our research has outside of academia.

The year 2021–2022 also marked my last as the School's Director of Research. I've enjoyed the role immensely, and hope I've contributed in some way to our vibrant, interdisciplinary research culture. Equally, I'm excited to hand over the post to Professor Jamie Gaskarth, who will undoubtedly take our research culture in new and exciting directions.



Dr Agnes Czajka Director of Research

As well as the outgoing Director of Research for SSGS, Agnes is Senior Lecturer in Politics & International Studies. Her research interests include political theory, democracy and migration

See [**full profile**](#)



A word from the Director of Teaching

Matt Staples, Director of Teaching, gives an update on the SSGS curriculum, and the exciting new modules that debuted in 2021/22.

It's been an exciting year in the teaching and learning space for the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies. As well as record numbers of students – nearly 24,000 people are now studying with us – the School has never had so much in its curriculum offering. We had 34 modules in presentation in 2021/22, with four being new: Key challenges in global development (DD871), Changing geographies of the United Kingdom (D225), Understanding digital societies (D218) and Social research: crime, justice and society (D215).

As well as extending our range of modules, 2021/22 saw the School offer 31 different qualifications. Among these was V13, the OU diploma in Economics for those who have a non-Economics degree and want to upskill their knowledge.

Yet as the School expands, the focus remains very much on the quality of what we offer to our students. This year has been focused on learning from what we did to support our students during the Covid pandemic and embedding innovation that worked. We put on a range of extra online activities including 'Meet the module team' sessions, author talks, guest lectures across a range of modules, as well as a seminar series covering various subjects.

What we've found really helpful in guiding how we support students are the consultations that we run every year. In June 2022, we asked students about the Qualification Sites the School run and how they use them. Over the past three years prior to this we've had a cycle of consultations that has asked students about how we support them prior to and at the start of a module, during a module, and finally in getting through to the end of a module and completing it.

This has provided a wealth of views and suggestions from students that we will be looking to implement in coming years.

One of the things that is new to the 2022/23 academic year is the 'Methods Hub', a website containing a range of activities and audio-visual materials that will support students studying research methods at level 3 and master's modules. These include Researching global development (DD872) and Researching everyday geographies (D325). Along with Economics for a changing world (DD321), all of these modules are new for October 2022.

In the staff space, we're looking forward to Associate Lecturer colleagues being formally integrated into the School and have been busy making our 'Talking Teaching' seminars a monthly event. We've also been developing a School-wide 'Teaching and Learning Hub', with channels for the dissemination of scholarship findings to support Associate Lecturer and module team practice, recordings of 'Talking Teaching' seminars, and a host of training materials and other useful links.



Matt Staples
Director of Teaching for the School of SSGS

As well as being Director of Teaching, Matt is also a Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in Politics & International Studies. His research interests include the nexus between environmental and social justice movements.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: The Knife Angel statue by Alfie Bradley, on display in Stoke-on-Trent, 2022.

Understanding and stopping serious youth violence

What can efforts to reduce youth violence learn from public-health approaches? In the very first issue of the SSGS Magazine, Criminology Lecturer Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers touched upon his research exploring the possibilities. Now he offers more detail about the project's origins and objectives.

Interpersonal violence has a tendency to capture the popular imagination. The perceived problem of youth violence, in particular, often takes centre stage in media headlines and political statements, and commands the attention of a range of professionals working with children and young people. While most interpersonal violence in England and Wales in absolute terms is committed by adults, rates of violence are significantly higher among children and young people. Of the 234 homicides investigated by the Metropolitan Police in 2020, for example, 77 (or 33%) were allegedly committed by those aged 10–19. Serious youth violence can have devastating effects on the lives of young people and their communities, and the economic costs associated with this violence have been estimated at more than £1 billion per year.

In recent years, a remarkable decline in levels of interpersonal violence has occurred in Scotland. Roughly during the period 2004–2015, levels of non-sexual violence dropped by nearly 50%. Glasgow went

from being a city with the highest murder rate in Europe to one considered an extraordinary success story. The often-termed 'miraculous' decline prompted major political, media, and academic interest, with many people seeking to understand and learn from what happened in Scotland. A strong narrative has developed, framing the 'public-health approach' to violence reduction, and the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit more specifically, as being primarily responsible for the reductions in violence.

This narrative has proven to be highly persuasive. Regional and national policymakers in England and Wales have followed suit and attempted to develop public-health approaches to violence reduction south of the border, driven in large part by newly established regional Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). Robust empirical evidence and research scrutinising the crime decline in Scotland, however, is lacking, and it remains unclear how successful similar approaches to violence reduction in England and Wales might be in bringing about significant reductions in violence.

These are the roots from which the Public Health, Youth & Violence Reduction (PHYVR) project has grown. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council for three years, and involving a collaboration between the University of Glasgow, the University of Edinburgh, London School of Economics and Political Science, and The Open University, PHYVR aims to dig deeper into the best-available empirical data concerning the crime decline in Scotland, not only to understand 'what worked', but how, when and under what circumstances. In addition, through qualitative fieldwork with the recently established network of regional VRUs in England and Wales, the project aims to explore the potential of public-health approaches south of the border, informing policy and practice in real time and throughout the project's duration.

Ultimately, the project hopes to contribute an evidence-led understanding to numerous bodies of literature – including those around policymaking and policy transfer, the causes of violence, and violence reduction – and, by improving policy and practice in a range of areas, to help build safer communities and societies in which children and young people can grow up and flourish.



Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers Lecturer in Criminology

Keir's research centres on the happiness, health and wellbeing of children and young people. He is studying with the OU for a BSc in Economics & Maths

See [full profile](#)

Student focus: Adam RW Monk

I'm currently studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics. I left education at 17 to pursue a career in the military, which sadly I didn't manage. After four years out of education, I felt a desire to start learning again, so I became a student to enhance my career opportunities. I have followed in my mum's footsteps, as she earned a degree with The Open University. In this short piece, I share some reflections based on what I've been learning.

The crisis in Ukraine

As I write, the war in Ukraine leads the world into a modern dilemma, unparalleled for my generation: Russia has occupied eastern Ukraine. Two modern and formidable militaries are at war, from two cultures that are both integrated into our global network. People my age have witnessed the war on terror in Afghanistan and Mali, for example, but a nation-versus-nation, soldier-versus-soldier conflict on our doorstep is unprecedented. The situation is evolving, and by the time you read this, things could be very different, so this article is one perspective within a snapshot of history.

In a globalised world, with oil and gas fuelling our system and our comfort, Russia has temporary power over those who condemn the invasion, as they control much of the coal and gas supply crucial for everyday life in European countries.

But why has Russia invaded Ukraine? Why are some nations using sanctions, while others remain neutral? And why haven't Britain or NATO put boots on the ground and fought alongside Ukraine?

There are many potential reasons why Russia has invaded Ukraine. Is it a romantic or nostalgic view of the Soviet era? Does it reflect Russian President Vladimir Putin wanting to expand his power, creating outposts of influence to deter NATO? Or is it Putin's genuine view that they are fighting Nazism in Ukraine? Ukrainians are fighting for their lives as the world watches on, largely hoping that they succeed. The war, spreading beyond Ukraine's borders, has generated a cost-of-living crisis across the rest of the world.

It's also caused a proxy war, with governments arming Ukraine for battle and NATO deploying further troops to secure its eastern flank. And it's also causing the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

To understand Putin's romantic hope of restoring Ukraine back into the Russian motherland, we may need to look to poetry and literature, but it is social science that teaches us that to have harmony, states need to find a balance of power. This conflict reflects a struggle of interests between the United States and



PHOTO: Ukrainians flee their homes as Russian troops invade the city of Irpin, 2022.

the expanding NATO alliance, versus Russia's need to expand its influence.

To conclude, I'll leave you with something to question: where is the world heading? Are our values and interests too different to remain so interconnected? Are we heading for more conflict, be that physical or political war? And what alliances will break, be forged or survive as we head through these uncertain and turbulent times?



Adam Monk

Studying BA (Hons) Politics, Philosophy and Economics

Learn more about [this course](#)

Student focus: Lilybell Evergreen

I'm studying BA (Hons) International Studies, and chose the OU because of the flexibility to pursue a career alongside studying. I've enjoyed expanding my conceptions of the underpinning ideas and structures in international politics. Comparative case studies – such as between the UK and US political systems – have deepened my knowledge and been valuable when stepping into real-world politics. Here is a sample of the type of work I get to do.

Challenges for the transatlantic relationship: Russia, Trumpism and the environment

It is an understatement to say there's been a lot going on in international politics over the past few years – from Brexit to Covid-19, looming climate disaster to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This has prompted states and international institutions to reflect, generating new ideas and debates around cooperation and whether the existing systems are now ineffective.

Once omnipotent, Europe and North America now face a changing global order in which they no longer dominate. The transatlantic relationship is undergoing multiple challenges which could signal an evolution in historically close ties.

There are currently two key forces of change for European security. Firstly, the threat of Russia and increasing tensions with China, and secondly, the potential for both NATO and EU expansion. Alongside the reinvigoration of NATO, these forces have driven a shift in Europe-US relations.

The US is highly important for European security but this reliance generates its own challenges. I recently attended the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) Czech Pre-Presidency Conference in Prague as a winner of a TEPSA policy paper competition. It was discussed that although transatlantic cooperation requires strengthening, Europe must also recognise that the US is an unreliable partner.

Domestic politics in the US are increasingly volatile and fundamental rights are being threatened. Furthermore, around one in three Americans are not confident their votes in future elections will be counted – a view held by 60% of Republicans and less than 20% of Democrats ([Washington Post-University of Maryland, 2021](#)).

During the conference, it was emphasised that the Republican Party has become dominated by Trumpism and that if someone influenced by Trump becomes



PHOTO: Donald Trump supporters protest Joe Biden's election win at a 2020 'Stop the Steal' rally in Washington, D.C..

President, this may harm transatlantic cooperation. If Europe cannot rely on the US, it may have to pursue its own strategic autonomy or capacity.

This has concerning implications for attempts to achieve global environmental cooperation. A breakdown in US cooperation could prove globally disastrous considering the US's high environmental impact and reluctance to address it. Europe must also be cautious to ensure that the international system is not dominated by a US-China duopoly.

Overall, there are multiple challenges to the transatlantic relationship. The international system has been fundamentally altered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the climate crisis and the changing transatlantic relationship. Although Europe and the US will surely remain close, Europe must act strategically to ensure its own aims are achieved and that it's not overly reliant on a partner experiencing significant domestic pressures.



Lilybell Evergreen

**Studying BA (Hons)
International Studies**

Learn more about [this course](#)

Student focus: Juan Carlos

When I came to the UK in 2015, I arrived with the dream of earning a living. I was not just able to do that, I was also able to study at the OU. I chose a BA in History and Politics, as I believe political ideas and concepts are best understood within a social context. It's given me the opportunity to study an interdisciplinary course where the social sciences are intertwined, allowing me to gain more elaborate insights about political affairs. Below is an example of how I put my learnings into action.

Thoughts on the Freedom House Report 2022

In 1989, political scientist Francis Fukuyama predicted the victory of economic and political liberalism in the world. He suggested that the universalisation of Western liberal democracy corresponded to the end of history, or namely, the end of the clash between conflicting ideologies on the world stage. The fall of the Berlin Wall later that year and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 allegedly marked the culmination of Western liberal values. Political theorist Samuel P. Huntington regarded the latter as the third, and last, event on a series of waves of democracy, which transformed liberal democracy into an ideology of universal value that every individual, group, and nation in the world would endeavour to accomplish. Although, we regretfully must come to the conclusion that the end of history might not be as clear in 2022 as it was in the 1990s.

Freedom House, a non-governmental institution that inquires into the state of democracy at world level, has been warning about the global decline of democracy for 16 consecutive years. Its 2022 report is an alarming sign that authoritarianism is on the rise and that democracy is in a dire situation. In the well-established democracies of the West, populism has become mainstream. Populist political parties disregard the international liberal order – embodied in the United Nations – and have been strategically dismantling liberal institutions and values essential for democracy. Two examples are free political elections as seen in the assault on the US Capitol in 2021, and on the right to protest in the UK with the passing of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act in 2022.

Populist discourses about the will of the people 'taking back control' and its anti-elitist rhetoric can be regarded as a symptom of rising inequalities, but also as a root of the erosion of liberal democracy. Since the global economic crisis that started in 2008 and the austerity measures that followed suit, citizens in the Global North, namely, in the wealthiest parts of the world, have bought into populist ideas about 'The



PHOTO: Donald Trump supporters storm the US Capitol, 2021.

System'. This idea claims that financial institutions, the political class and the media make up a sort of establishment – an elite – whose interests clash with those of ordinary citizens. This distrust on liberal institutions has allowed savvy political figures to benefit from these frustrations by opposing liberal democracy. So, are we really at the end of history or are we in an intersection towards a more authoritarian way of doing politics?



Juan Carlos Serralvo Quintero

**Studying BA (Hons)
History and Politics**

Learn more about [this course](#)

News from the Nations: Northern Ireland

Although many projects have been realised within Northern Ireland in the past academic year, perhaps one attracted the most significant attention.



PHOTO: Philip O'Sullivan, SSGS Senior Lecturer and Academic Consultant, with One Hundred Years of Union presenter Patrick Kielty.

This was the OU/BBC co-pro ***Patrick Kielty: One Hundred Years of Union*** on which ***FASS Senior Lecturer Phillip O'Sullivan*** was the academic consultant. Here's an insight into making the documentary from the team involved.

Ideas for the programme had first been floated in spring 2020. The 2021 centenary anniversary of Northern Ireland's creation presented an opportunity to see how the occasion was – and in some cases wasn't – being marked across the country and assess the appetite for a united Ireland. It was also a chance to explore growing unrest about the proposed sea border following Brexit, and its potential to reignite 'The Troubles' and conflict many had hoped were over as a result of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

One of the most crucial tasks in any factual piece is casting a presenter. Patrick Kielty may have seemed an unusual choice to a public who recognise him more as a comedian and a TV and radio presenter, yet what many don't know is how The Troubles affected his family. In 1988, his father, John Kielty, was shot and killed by loyalist paramilitaries. John was just 44, and Patrick on the cusp of his 17th birthday. It was moving to get Patrick's perspective on the historic Good Friday Agreement, which brought an end to fighting but also saw his father's killers released from prison. Ultimately, Patrick said, it was 'a price worth paying'.

Another interesting part about casting Patrick is his relationship with England. Although he was born and grew up in Northern Ireland, he left in his late twenties and now lives in London. Showing him use the ferry to cross from Britain to Northern Ireland was a pertinent way of symbolising the connection he has with both places – and the same dual identity that exists within Northern Ireland.

Locations were a key part of telling the story. Meeting Protestants in the Union Jack shop and hearing their loyalty to 'queen and country' was a striking place for Patrick to reply, 'but when I go back in London, no one really talks about this place'. Of course, no documentary could be made in Northern Ireland without the backdrop of its iconic mural paintings. Alongside showing traditional political pieces, a Derry Girls mural became a focal point for highlighting the lighter side of life in Northern Ireland, as well as Derry's pride about being associated with something so positive.

As well as filming on location, news footage was used throughout. Sifting through reels can be a time-consuming job, but getting the right piece can make all the difference – and no more so in the scenes which talk about opposition to the proposed sea border. Showing footage of young people – some as young as 12 – rioting and throwing petrol bombs visualised the very real danger that history may repeat itself.

However, securing interviews with real people, such as loyalist protestor Joel Keys, allowed us to give voice to those anonymous figures. We were also delighted to have former World Boxing Champion Carl Frampton speak. Seeing him talk about his love for the country and getting emotional at thoughts of leaving because of rising tensions over Brexit was powerful. As were his comments that protestors are 'good people', serving a reminder that compassion and understanding are needed if Northern Ireland is to progress positively.

And it's compassion and understanding that sum up the documentary's themes, along with identity, the futility of violence and transgenerational trauma. Perhaps the most important theme of all is hope. Hope for a fully inclusive future.

News from the Nations: Scotland

How can we grow the salmon farming industry while protecting nature? How have Covid and austerity affected one of the UK's most deprived areas? The OU in Scotland has been delving deeper.



PHOTO: Fish farm salmon nets in Loch Awe, Argyll and Bute.

Following their report on fish farming in Scotland, academics from the OU and University of Edinburgh's Innogen Institute were approached to prepare a policy brief for governments and other stakeholders. The guide outlines positive ways to sustainably feed the world, while also being aware of climate change and biodiversity loss. Suggestions cover everything from aqua-feed production to raising the standards of animal welfare currently found in the industry. Professor Joyce Tait, lead author of the policy brief and Co-Director of Innogen, said: 'Innovative technologies are key to shift food production systems towards achieving net-zero emissions as part of a circular bio-economy.'

The policy brief was shared by the OU in Scotland with the Scottish Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, ahead of the Vision for Sustainable Aquaculture due for launch later this year. Scottish Government circulated the brief to teams within Marine Scotland, specifically aquaculture, innovation, and climate change policy, and a number of science divisions. They commented on the paper as follows: 'It is interesting, thought-provoking and relevant to a number of Scottish Government workstreams.'

While life begins returning to normal for many in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic and financial fallout is still being fiercely felt by some – even more so with the cost-of-living crisis on top of many years of austerity. Funding by the OU, under the Royal Economic Society Covid Academic Support Fund, was awarded in February 2022 to Gerry Mooney, Professor of Scottish Society & Social Welfare, and Janet Cole, Staff Tutor in Economics, to support their work in this

area. Together with other OU in Scotland colleagues, they will research the impact of the pandemic and ongoing hardship on Glasgow's Pollok estate, an area with historic issues of deprivation and disadvantage.

Gerry commented: 'We want to capture the ways in which self-organisation and mobilisation from within the Pollok community during the Covid-19 pandemic highlights an important dimension to daily life in the area – and in other large social housing estates – which is frequently overlooked. That – contrary to the othering and misrepresentation of these locales as places of deprivation, decline, despondency, and dependency – there are positive expressions of "community" 'from below', vibrant working-class agency that belies the kinds of narratives which often dominate in policy debates about such communities.'

Gerry has also been leading a project to create a collection of learning materials on the theme of [Women and Workplace Struggles in Scotland over the past 120 years](#).

Elsewhere, The OU in Scotland has continued to work closely with The Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS). Mike Robinson, CEO of RSGS, shared more about the work being done through this partnership: 'The RSGS has retained a close relationship with The Open University for years, collaborating on a number of exciting projects and events. In working together, we have maximised the outreach and impact of our joint work, engaged more people, and raised awareness about important topics across Scotland.'

'We have been delighted to collaborate with The OU extensively on our "Inspiring People talks" programme, where we have worked together with many of The OU's excellent speakers to share learning, including Professor Mark Brandon on The OU/BBC co-production, Blue Planet II. We further co-badged a successful lecture with renowned journalist Kate Adie, and in celebration of the 50th anniversary of The OU, we worked closely together on a popular edition of our magazine *The Geographer*, which explored the fascinating subjects of satellites, space, and place – drawing on the expertise of many disciplines across The OU.'

As a charity with a strong academic background, we share The OU's passion for educating and inspiring everyone from all ages and background, creating a synergy in what we have done together, and we look forward to continuing this partnership in the future.'

News from the Nations: Wales

Helo a crose! The 2021/22 academic year saw The Open University in Wales (OUiW) emerge from strict lockdown restrictions, with two standout projects gaining traction.



With Welsh Parliament assuming more and more power since the beginning of devolution, it's becoming increasingly important that everyone in Wales ensures their voices are heard. And that's why the OUiW launched an engaging collection of free online resources to help people think critically about society and politics in Wales. Active Citizenship in Wales is an OpenLearn hub covering everything from understanding devolution to recognising fake news. Louise Casella, Director of the OUiW, said: "For devolved democratic government to function effectively, we need informed citizens who can read between the headlines and scrutinise the work of policymakers. I hope learners and other organisations across Wales will find it useful and thought-provoking."

Thinking further afield, the war in Ukraine unleashed unprecedented sympathy for those forced to flee their homes. Wales has long been at the forefront of the UK-wide Sanctuary movement and is set to become the first nation of Sanctuary – an initiative that receives sterling support from the OUiW. Marie Gillespie, Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Sanctuary Working Group, outlines that work below:

'Over the last couple of years, the OU's Sanctuary Working Group has been striving towards the goal of becoming a University of Sanctuary (UoS) – as an institution that cultivates a culture of welcome for all forced migrants and shares good practice across the full breadth of its activities. The UK-wide Universities of Sanctuary network is a growing and thriving initiative and part of the more long-standing Cities of Sanctuary movement. In Wales, a growing number of schools, colleges, universities as well as museums have been recognised as institutions of Sanctuary. The Sanctuary Working Group has conducted research, written papers, liaised with senior management, and sought to develop a coordinated and strategic response to the OU's



approach and is delighted that 12 Sanctuary Scholarships, alongside 50 Access module fee waivers, have been announced, which is a great step forward. It has worked closely with the OUiW, for example, collaborating on the immensely successful Improving Access to HE for Forced Migrants Conference in June 2021!

Scott McKenzie, Assistant Director of Learning & Curriculum at OUiW and a core member of the Sanctuary Working Group, says there is a real desire by the Welsh government and higher-education institutes (HEIs) to develop a collaborative and strategic response to meeting the needs of Ukrainian students, in line with Wales becoming a Nation of Sanctuary. The OU submitted its application to become a UoS in December 2021 but there is still a long way to go to be awarded that status.

There is also a growing demand from Ukrainian students wanting to transfer to Welsh HEIs and desire from the sector to support them, but big problems have arisen due to the complexities of the UK Home Office's visa regulations. Nevertheless, all Welsh HEIs have suspended activities that link with Russia. The Welsh and Scottish governments together are exploring becoming 'super sponsors' for Ukrainian students – offering additional provision for education, wellbeing, and healthcare. The OUiW has also been promoting OpenLearn resources for refugees which have great potential for offering much-needed support for newly arriving students, and continues to work closely with the Wales higher education sector response group to identify opportunities for the OUiW/OU more broadly to support. The Sanctuary Working Group hopes the warm welcome and empathy being offered to Ukrainian refugee students might be extended to other forced migrants. With colleagues at the OUiW also working towards that goal, we hope to influence everyone across the nations.



Behind the scenes of a module

Making a module can, quite literally, take years. Peter Redman, Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Chair of the upcoming *Global challenges: Social Science in Action (D113)*, describes the creation process, with a glimpse of the module's cinematic approach courtesy of Dan Taylor.

Q How did D113 initially come about?

We started thinking about it a couple of years ago. Donald Trump was president in the US; we were living through the aftermath of the Brexit vote; right-wing populism was rampant in parts of Europe; the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements were making waves; the climate emergency was gathering pace; and the global economy still hadn't recovered from the 2008 financial crash. In other words, it felt like we were living through a period of quite seismic change.

Since then, we've had the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, so we haven't had cause to change our minds. Given that background, we wanted to write a module that engaged with some of the big challenges facing the world and why social science is an important resource in responding to them. We also wanted to leave people with a sense of hope and possibility. Consequently, the module explores what it means to be an active citizen, someone able to use social scientific knowledge to make a difference in the world.

Q What are the global challenges, and how will studying the social sciences help us do something about them?

Well, there are obviously many challenges facing the world and the module can't cover them all. In fact, the module team spent quite a lot of time debating which ones we should address. In the end, we decided on the climate crisis, legacies of colonialism and enslavement, and digital technology. We could easily have chosen a completely different set of issues, of course. But those three seemed important and good to grapple with – something for students to sink their teeth into.

Needless to say, social science isn't the only resource you'd want to draw on in order to understand and respond to those challenges. For instance, to address the climate crisis you need to listen to environmental scientists. However, social science does have important things to say about all three challenges. Perhaps the most obvious thing it can tell us concerns power and inequality. You can't really understand or do something about the challenges without grasping how power works and who has power and who doesn't. D113 addresses those issues through two of its core themes: power/knowledge and inequality/social justice.



PHOTO: The Warrior Moms, a campaign group, in Chandigarh, India, featured in one of the films for the new module Global Challenges.

Q What kinds of things will students be able to do and learn about?

There's lots of good stuff, some of which is quite innovative. As you'd expect, the first block of study introduces the three global challenges and explores how social scientists understand and respond to them. Its way in is through a case study of the smartphone, something many of us now take for granted. However, as with many everyday objects, once you start to 'unpack' the smartphone it begins to tell an interesting and complicated story, one that reveals important things about the world around us. The second block of study involves a shift in gear. Students will be channelled into one of three disciplinary clusters or strands where they will investigate one or some of the global challenges from a more disciplinary perspective. For example, if you're studying International Relations or Politics, Philosophy and Economics, you'll be channelled into a strand that will revisit the challenges in light of those disciplines. The third and final block of study is different again. Students will explore what it means to be an active citizen using social scientific knowledge to respond to global challenges. One of the main things they will do is work on a set of resources – research articles, policy documents and so on – to write a report for a non-academic audience. It's the sort of thing that is central to the hard graft of making change happen and we want to teach students to do it effectively. Obviously, we're not expecting students to write massive documents, undertake original research or take on big corporations. Instead, we'll be introducing some of the skills needed to do work of that kind in post-degree life. It's dipping a toe in the water, if you like.

Q What's one thing on the module that you're really excited about?

That's a difficult one because there's a lot that's exciting. For instance, I've really enjoyed reading work by indigenous scholars and learning more about important early social scientists who were Black or from the Global South. But I guess if you pushed me, I'd say I am most excited by the focus on how social science can help address global problems. Like the man said, 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world... The point is to change it.'

Dr Dan Taylor on visualising D113

It's what we talk to all day but never replies. It's where many of us spend most of our time, but it has no address.

Forty years ago, they would've been unimaginable, magical. But today many of us take our smartphones for granted.

For D113, we were interested in how an everyday object could guide us through the three global challenges. Working with a film company called Common Story, I've been developing four films over the past year that explore these challenges.

In one film, you will explore how farmers and local people are responding to the climate crisis in Lincolnshire and India. In another, you will meet activists involved in Ghana's #FixtheCountry movement, and walk Glasgow's streets to consider its historical connections to the slave trade. In the last film, you will think about how digital technology is creating new forms of inclusion and exclusion. What happens if you can't afford it? Or when governments abuse this technology for surveillance and censorship? We trace that story through China and Hong Kong.

Around the world, smartphones are being used as a tool for change, but they're also connected to exploitative mining practices, pollution, and surveillance. In other words, they can be a tool for change, but they can be an obstacle too. We hope these films are thought-provoking snapshots of where we are – so that our students can figure out and lead the way on where we are going.

Global Challenges: Social Sciences in Action (D113) will be available to study from October 2023.



Dr Peter Redman Senior Lecturer in Sociology

Peter has worked at the OU for more than 30 years, starting out as an Associate Lecturer in Birmingham. When not at his desk, he likes riding down country lanes on his touring bike.

See [full profile](#)

Find out more

You can find out more about studying a qualification with the OU on our [study page](#).

Navigating the cost-of-living crisis

More than just a media buzz phrase, the cost-of-living crisis is tangible for many in the UK. Two experts give their take on how we got here, and how people can cope.

For households, April and October 2022 may seem like the 'cruellest months'. The cap that keeps a lid on household energy prices is expected to rise again in the autumn after it soared by 54% in the spring, meaning that typical domestic fuel bills will have doubled in just a year.

On top of that, food price inflation has continued to soar and petrol prices are so high that some households cannot afford to get to work.

The Bank of England, tasked with maintaining low and stable inflation, has responded by raising interest rates. This aims to dampen economic activity and so stop wages rising by as much as price inflation. While it may help the economy in the medium run, this adds to the pain for households who have already seen falling real (i.e., adjusted for inflation) wages through much of the last two decades.

As well as meaning real household income will fall (by 1.7% according to Bank of England forecasts – the largest fall since records began in 1964), it becomes much more costly and harder to pay back loans. For some, higher interest rates will tip them into debt problems with the risk of penalty charges and court orders.

How did the UK get into such a crisis and what can households do to survive as inflation ravages their standard of living?

A perfect storm

In 2020, at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, half the world's eight billion population across 90 countries were in some form of lockdown. In 2021, as economic activity revived, global supply chains struggled to meet the surge in demand. This triggered a rise in oil and gas prices, which started to feed through to domestic energy bills and the cost of all sorts of other items that use energy in their manufacture or distribution, such as fertilisers and food.

However, the major disaster came when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Russia is a major oil and gas supplier, while Ukraine is a major producer of grain and sunflower oil. Many countries around the world responded to Russia's aggression with economic sanctions. The combination of war and sanctions has driven global prices even higher.

What can households do?

The UK Government has provided some help with a council tax rebate and lump-sum payments to people

on means-tested benefits, disability benefits and state pensions. A £400 reduction to household electricity bills is also planned for October 2022. It all helps to ease the squeeze, but it's not enough.

The Energy Saving Trust website has lots of tips on how to save on energy bills, from taking shorter showers to draught-proofing gaps. The MoneySavingExpert website gives advice on heating yourself rather than your home, for example using layers of clothing, hot water bottles, and electric gilets or blankets.

When it comes to food, being flexible is the biggest recommendation – adjusting weekly meal plans around foods that are seasonal or on offer. Shopping from a range of supermarkets, selecting the best deals from each is another option. Bear in mind that chickpeas, beans, and pulses are cheaper sources of protein than meat and fish. Food campaigner Jack Monroe's website, *Cooking on a Bootstrap*, is a good source of ideas on shopping and cooking cheaply.

Conserve your fuel for essential journeys, walking or cycling instead whenever you can. The RAC website has helpful tips on 'hypermiling' (saving the most fuel as you drive), for example, driving in the highest gear, anticipating traffic lights so that you keep moving, and dressing for the temperature rather than using your car's heating or air-con system.

These are difficult times, and the impact on mental health and wellbeing is sharply felt. Try to stay connected with family and friends in cost-effective ways by going on local walks or cooking shared meals at home.

If you are really struggling to make ends meet, you can ask your local council, Citizens Advice or other community organisation to refer you to a food bank and advise on any other sources of local help, such as petrol vouchers. Citizens Advice and other debt charities can also help you with budgeting advice and negotiating with creditors if you are falling behind with bills and loan repayments.



Jonquil Lowe
Senior Lecturer in Economics and Personal Finance

Jonquil is an economist and author specialising in personal finance, who works as both a personal finance practitioner and academic

See [full profile](#)

A heavy debt – did pandemic measures make the outlook worse for many?

Money worries are a significant cause of stress, mental health problems, and relationship breakdown – during the pandemic these problems rose to new heights. Yet take-up for debt advice actually fell. Personal finance and economics expert Nick Lee explores the causes.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, despite short-term government financial support through schemes such as furlough, almost two in five UK adults experienced a reduction in income. Partially compensating for this, many were able to reduce their spending on travel, holidays and shopping. But still, more than 10% of people reported that Covid had caused them to fall behind with bills. Surprisingly, however, demand for debt advice fell. For example, the number of debt sessions delivered through The Money and Pensions Service funding dropped to 371,000 in 2020–21, down from 541,000 the year before.

There were a range of reasons. People often learn about debt advice through referrals from other organisations such as mental health or family support. However, many of these services were suspended or switched to phone-based delivery, which tends to be less holistic and less able to identify wider issues. Debt advisers also report a common theme with clients during the pandemic: many struggled through the lockdowns and restrictions and ultimately avoided dealing with their ongoing financial difficulties.

Also, government policies had unintended consequences. During the height of the pandemic, the priority was managing health. Bailiff visits and homelessness were virus transmission risks. We were experiencing enough stress without payment demands when we had few options to work more. The Financial Conduct Authority directed lenders to allow customers to defer payments for up to six months. Similarly, the water, energy and telecoms regulators required suppliers to offer more support, and in March 2020, legislation effectively blocked landlords and mortgage lenders from starting repossession action.

But the demand for payment – the threatening letter, the bailiff knock on the door, the court hearing about losing your home – is a major spur to people to seek debt advice. And so, the temporary breather – needed at that time – seems to have contributed to a reduction in people getting to grips with their finances.

As the world moves on from the pandemic, a cohort of people has been left behind: those who would normally have received debt advice but who haven't

yet addressed their financial problems. For many, their debt has escalated and is now harder to resolve. One advice agency reports seeing clients with £10,000+ rent arrears – levels that previously were very rare, as landlords would usually take possession action earlier to prevent this build-up.

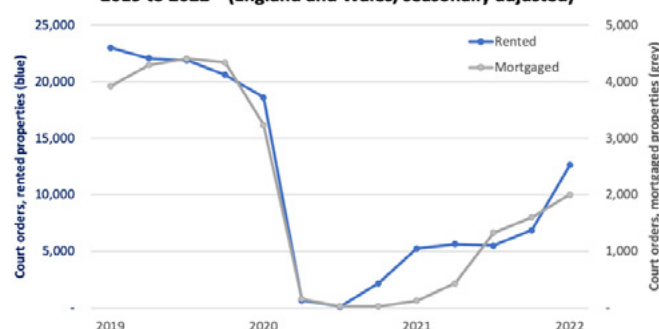
Creditors are once again taking action. Court possession orders, which dropped dramatically during 2020, have recently seen significant increases (see Figure 1). We don't know where this increase will end – whether figures will stabilise at their 2019 levels or rise higher, all while the cost-of-living crisis makes it harder for people to afford their bills and manage their debts.

Free debt advice services are still available.

Free debt advice

Providers include stepchange.org, payplan.com, and communitymoneyadvice.com.

Number of court possession orders for mortgaged and rented properties 2019 to 2022 (England and Wales, seasonally adjusted)



Nick Lee

Associate Lecturer in Personal Finance and Economics

Nick is an Associate Lecturer teaching Personal Finance and Economics. He has worked extensively in the advice sector including for Citizens Advice and Shelter.

It's just a battery, right?

The Lithium-ion electric battery is key to the 'green transition'. But, and there's always a but, the switch from internal combustion engines (ICE) to electric vehicles (EV) is neither straightforward nor wholly technical. Much of the complication lies in the battery's composition. EV cars require more than 200kg of minerals in their production; conventional cars use only 40kg.

The green energy transition is also dependent on emergent supply chains that enable the movement and transformation of these crucial ingredients from point of extraction to, eventually, being under a car bonnet. There are the added pressures from international bodies to ensure these supply chains meet social and environmental sustainability targets, and also address questions of social justice.

Over simply perhaps, an energy transition in the Global North, enabled by EV technologies, may be damaging and have unjust outcomes in the Global South. What we're interested in is the link between sustaining supply and sustainable supply chains that must be understood to realise the contribution of EVs to green transition. Unless we understand these global interconnections and how best to mitigate the negative impacts of lithium-ion batteries, any green transition will be illusory.

To start addressing some of these issues, we've assembled an international, interdisciplinary research network connecting Chile and Australia (two key sources of lithium), through to Europe, via the Democratic Republic of the Congo and China. This network ranges across political ecology, business, law, economics, philosophy, through to chemistry and physics.

The initial questions we're interested in are, what should a sustainable lithium-ion battery supply chain look like? How does sustainability need to be rethought, and what knowledge needs to be developed within the academy and across academic and policy divides to inform industry and government



PHOTO: Brine pools used for lithium mining in Silver Peak, Nevada.

policy to get us to that point? How can we substitute a globally responsible and 'just' supply chain for one where value and social justice are created and distributed in a highly unequal fashion? For investors in the Global North to local communities in the Global South, value and sustainability are two interrelated and highly contested sides of the same battery.

The powering of electric vehicles, the provision of domestic energy storage, through to the policy shift to 'sustainable cities', all fuel the demand for lithium-ion batteries. Achieving a 'sustainable' and just supply chain is not easy. It entangles so many pressing global issues – from climate change, the technological push for renewable energy, to human rights. The geopolitical terrains the chain moves through, most notably China, complicate matters further.

Our ambition is to strengthen the international network we've already put together by working with representatives from the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and impacted communities to unbundle these issues. The breadth and international reach of our network is much needed: the lithium-ion battery at the core of the green transition is far more than just a battery.



Michael Pryke
Professor of Economic Geography

Michael is the founding Head of SSGS. He's leading production of the Geography strand in the School's new level 1 module D113.

See [full profile](#)



Giles Mohan
Professor of International Development

Giles works mostly in West Africa, and recently in Europe where Chinese firms are investing in infrastructure.

See [full profile](#)

Great Scott: one man and his dog



Dr David Scott

Senior Lecturer in Criminology

Dr David Scott joined The Open University in 2016, and was Chair in production and presentation of *Introduction to Criminology* (DD105) from 2016 to 2021. He co-created the multi-award-winning film *The Grenfell Tower Fire and Social Murder* and is Chair of The Weavers Uprising Bicentennial Committee charity.

See [full profile](#)

When David Scott, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, adopted a rescue dog back in 2020, he had no idea the journey she would lead him on – personally and professionally...

Flossy, my rescue dog, was in a terrible mess when I got her. She had no muscle in her back legs and was biting herself – I didn't realise dogs could self-harm. She wasn't trained and hadn't even been on a lead, so I had to take her to isolated places for walks where I could keep her under control. Chatterton Memorial Playing Fields was one of them.

What appeared to be a place of tranquillity turned out to be the site of a massacre. In 1826, during the weavers uprising, around 4,000 people gathered to protest hardship following the introduction of power looms. Rather than listen to workers, mill owners arranged for the British Army to come in. Soldiers fired at random into the crowd and six innocent people died. This was indiscriminate killing, carried out by the state.

The small amount of knowledge that exists labels it as a luddite riot, with the purpose of destroying machinery seen as putting skilled tradespeople out of work. But this, of course, obscures the fact that people were killed. It is a profound epistemic injustice that these people have been characterised as irrational criminals perpetrating vandalism.

Literally hundreds of children died of starvation in the period around the uprising, and this motivation for protesting has effectively been covered up. I thought, 'I need to raise awareness of this' and decided to do a remembrance walk that would retrace the journey these people had taken.

It took five days to complete the 45-mile-long walk.

Others came out to join me at various points on the way, people from Leeds, Liverpool, York. Flossy was there for the majority too, naturally. On day three, the same date as the massacre, we laid a wreath to acknowledge those who had died. The point was to give victims a name because when somebody has a name, they become a human being again.

I raised £1,500 for my local food bank, Ramsbottom Pantry, choosing that charity purposefully. Socially, we are going backwards and getting closer to where we were in the 1820s. In the UK, we are not exactly at death's door with starvation kind of problems, but we are heading down that way – with a 2022 report estimating one in seven adults face food insecurity. We need to learn the lessons from the past to make sure they don't happen in the future.

A book about the walk, a criminology book, is in the pipeline. I have also set up a charity, The Weavers Uprising Bicentennial Committee, which will allow more people to take part in future walks, including the 200th anniversary in 2026. So there are many more walks to come!

My number-one item for walking is a trouser chain, to keep keys safe. Waterproof trousers, walking boots and a backpack are a must, as are warm layers and snacks, but that £2.99 piece of kit is essential.

Changemakers: inspiring political change



Dr Donna Smith

Senior Lecturer in Politics

Donna has worked at the OU for more than 10 years in a variety of roles. In addition to lecturing on Politics, she is also Deputy Associate Dean Teaching and Learning in FASS, as well as Director of The Open University Tuition Programme. In 2022, Donna was awarded the Jennie Lee Prize for Outstanding Teaching by the Political Studies Association.

See [full profile](#)

Donna Smith, Senior Lecturer in Politics, talks to Dan Taylor about collaborating with the UK Parliament, encouraging political engagement, and winning an Outstanding Teaching award.

Q How did your work with the UK Parliament begin?

In 2020, FASS partnered with the UK Parliament on [UK Parliament Week](#) (UKPW) – an event held every November that aims to spread the word about what the UK Parliament is, how it works, and how ordinary people can get involved. This partnership has since expanded and we're now paired more generally through the UK Parliament's Participation Partnership Network, which gives us access to a variety of individuals and departments at Westminster. As part of our partnership, we publicise UKPW and in return Parliament works with us on different activities, both student and public facing. So it's a win-win for both of us.

Q As part of the partnership, you have worked on the Changemakers project. Can you tell us more about it?

Changemakers was designed with OU Politics students, and sought to engage OU students, students from other universities and schools, and the wider public in making a difference by learning about political and democratic engagement. The aim was to get everyone thinking about people who've made a change in our society and what impact they've had. It was a social media project, with nominations submitted via Twitter.

We decided to take Changemakers further for UKPW 2022 by creating a [free online guide to making political and democratic change](#), aimed at OU students as well

as the general public. The guide encourages people to engage with the UK Parliament in particular, as well as politics more generally, giving people the essential knowledge and tools needed to make change. We hope the guide will help people to understand how they can be a changemaker, whether big or small. Catherine McKinnell MP, Chair of the UK Parliament Petitions Committee, wrote the foreword and then ran a webinar for OU students about making change in Parliament.

One of the students involved wrote a [blog about the event](#), and it was really important for us to include students as much as possible in the project, with students as partners. In fact, as well as seeking feedback from the general population of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) students, we employed two students to help with the guide, and two more to assist on the original social media campaign.

Q Did you encounter any difficulties and, if so, how did you get past them?

The major obstacle we addressed was engaging students as partners in design of teaching and learning, a key OU priority. When students actively engage in their learning, they feel the benefits across their studies – with a direct correlation between positive learning experiences and outcomes. Getting involved gives students a stake in the curriculum and an authentic link to learning itself, while also helping to create a community of learning and providing valuable developmental skills for greater employability. We wanted to go beyond the usual way of engaging

students in design (feeding back on modules, etc.) and instead link them into the core of the design itself.

This was quite an involved process, and included negotiating University processes, ways of working, related systems, and the need to reach as many students as possible. The time and effort it involved was worthwhile, though, as we were able to engage students in the original Changemakers social media project, as well as in the design of the guide itself, running the webinars and the communications. All of this helped us foster some great one-on-one relationships with key student leaders, as well as the overall POLIS student community.

Q How was the project received?

We were thrilled to receive positive feedback about Changemakers from Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP (Speaker of the House of Commons), who said:

'This year, UK Parliament Week reached almost one million people. I think this is a number that should be celebrated throughout the nations. The collaboration video – joining up Changemakers and UKPW – has had a fantastic effect, engaging OU students and many more across the higher education sector and beyond. I believe that together, we can make a mark and bring the people together to talk about what matters to them.'

I was also lucky enough to be awarded the Jennie Lee Prize for Outstanding Teaching by the Political Studies Association. The project was 'highly commended' by the Your UK Parliament Awards, too.

Q What's next for Changemakers?

The future is exciting! I'm working on an OpenLearn course, which brings two things together: Changemakers, and promotion of our new level 1 module, *Global Challenges: Social Science in Action* (D113). We will also link Changemakers into D113 more generally, as part of the module's focus on active citizenship. We're actually expanding the focus of Changemakers for the OpenLearn course, to bring in perspectives from the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, and international governments. We aim to launch the OpenLearn course as part of UKPW 2022.

Q How does this all fit in with the wider work of POLIS?

Changemakers and the partnership with UK Parliament is part of our wider **Open Politics** project. This is a student-focused initiative with three clear goals: to further the Politics and International Studies OU student community, to bring politics and parliaments closer to students and, finally, to be student-led in design and scope of activities.

I would like to thank all of my POLIS colleagues for their help, particularly in relation to communications, as well as the FASS Comms and External Engagement teams, whose work has been invaluable



PHOTO: The Changemakers guide.

PHOTO: The doors to a Shropshire polling station on UK election day.

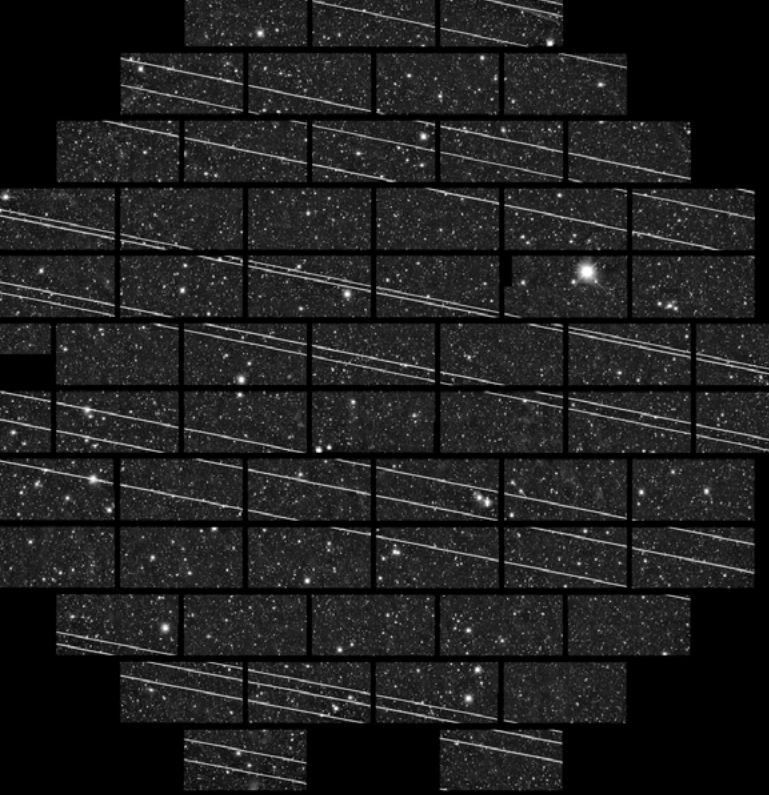


PHOTO: A telescope image of streaks in the night sky, believed to be the result of Starlink satellites being launched, 2019.

Space, mega-constellations and the social sciences

With many struggling to keep up, never before has academic comment and critique been needed so urgently. Three leading minds from the OU bring us up to speed on the dawning of a new space age, and the questions we all need to be pondering.

The space age roared into life in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik 1 – spurring a space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was quickly identified that governance would be necessary, and so came the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. This established an internationally agreed framework to protect the space environment, restrain the weaponization of space, and ultimately ensure the benefits of any exploration are shared.

The use of space since then has expanded to influence normal life, from weather forecasts to tracking a takeaway. These technological wonders have all been developed in an environment dominated by nation-states and based on the competitive structures of the late 20th century. Expanding beyond this 'old space' ecosystem was difficult due to the high price of launching, however, recent advancements have reduced the cost of space exploration – allowing new commercial actors into the sector.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in telecommunications, specifically in the deployment

of mega-constellations. Traditional (and slow) satellite communications are rapidly being replaced by smaller, cheaper models that can be launched into lower orbits to provide lightening-speed internet. Many countries and commercial companies are keen to be involved in this developing field, with proposals from China, Russia and the United States, each containing thousands of spacecraft.

The first major constellation has highlighted worrying problems. Some companies – such as Elon Musk's SpaceX, which owns around 40% of all operational spacecraft – nobly proclaim aims of supplying cheap connectivity to democratise internet access. But with a multi-billion-dollar launch resulting in initial fees of \$599 and minimum monthly subscriptions of \$110 for users, it's difficult to see how this will be affordable to the global poor in the medium term.

Then there's the environmental impact. Mega-constellations have already begun to change the night sky, with bright spacecraft 'trains' visible to the naked eye. Although they dim as they move to higher orbits, it's expected there will be bands of satellites visible at dawn and dusk throughout the year and all night long at high latitudes during local summertime, forever changing our view of the universe.

This exponential expansion in operational spacecraft also greatly increases the risks of collision and threatens the space environment, where an impact between two satellites could contaminate an orbital band with debris well beyond the immediate area and deny access to all nations.

'New space' or Space 2.0 led by commercial actors has the potential to bring great benefits to the world and connect us in ways never before possible, if handled responsibly. The coming years will provide environmental, political and legal challenges to international cooperation in space. Therefore, a need to establish behavioural norms and, where necessary, restrict space operations will become critical.

These issues lie firmly in the realms of the social sciences. A failure to engage at this early stage leaves the direction of travel in the hands of others, affecting all global communities and potentially creating an environmental issue for future generations.



Ian Muirhead
Associate Lecturer in
Physics and Space Science

Ian's research interests cover space science and engineering, and he founded the OU Space Society in 2020. He is keen to promote interdisciplinary engagement in space exploration.



PHOTO: A NASA astronaut floating in space above Earth.

(Philosophy) and Dr Alessandra Marino (Geography/ AstrobiologyOU) – asks the question: even if we can access/exploit/technologically occupy/colonise/ terraform space, should we?

A New Space Age

The space age is awash in fantasies of space colonisation, including plans for settlements on Mars, which often take the headlines. However, our group will take a broad view of space-related activities, ranging from exploration to exploitation, and will investigate their fundamental assumptions as well as their interconnected social, political and environmental aspects. Redefining space ethics as an interdisciplinary conversation means that the ‘should we?’ question is not merely a theoretical one, but one with ramifications in policy and practice.

Interstellar issues

Let’s provide an example. International, national and commercial actors, from the United Nations to private corporations, brand their space efforts as crucial tools to harness for the benefit of our planet. The launch of mega-constellations in orbit, with their hundreds or thousands of satellites, provides a case in point. SpaceX’s *Starlink* is predicated upon the objective of extending the benefits of internet coverage to underserved communities on our planet. However, this seemingly benevolent objective and the consequence of satellite launches need close investigation. How can we reframe the public conversation about mega-constellations, if we place the problem of space debris (or space junk) at the centre of planetary environmental ethics? How can we talk about space benefits in new ways?

Leap into the conversation

The aim of this group is to bring together scholars from arts and humanities and the social sciences who have an interest in space research and innovation, and bridge conversations with space scientists. If you’re interested in joining us for reading groups and talks, or if you want to share ideas for possible activities, please write to alessandra.marino@open.ac.uk.

Questioning the ethics of space exploration

From space technologies enabling navigation and communication to space missions enhancing knowledge about the universe, human activities in space are more varied and even more mundane than we often tend to think. With commercial actors entering the space economy, giving rise to what is often referred to as the New Space Age, these activities are developing as fast as our technological capabilities.

Scholarship has been slow(er) to catch up with the current discourses, plans and fantasies about space access and use. At the OU, where space research is of international standing, a group is being formed to spearhead the study of space-related activities from an ethical perspective. In plain terms, the Space Ethics Group – co-led by Professor Derek Matravers



Dr Alessandra Marino
Research Fellow,
International Development
and Inclusive Innovation

Alessandra works in AstrobiologyOU and has co-led two projects designing space technologies for environmental monitoring.

See [full profile](#)



Derek Matravers
Professor of Philosophy

Derek has worked at the OU since 1994. He is currently Chair of the Philosophy MA (F30) and Deputy Chair of the new Philosophy level 2 module (DA223).

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: Chris Packham and Michaela Strachan on the set of Springwatch.

Our partnerships with the BBC: highlights

For more than 50 years, the OU and the BBC have been co-producing inspirational content, bringing learning to life for millions of people.

But it's not all just about TV programmes, we also co-produce a range of content across radio, podcasts, digital and social. The OU's unique partnership with the BBC has developed in many ways over the years, with key successes including the launch of BBC iPlayer, BBC Sounds and BBC Ideas.

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. The OU has co-produced more than 40 BBC Ideas videos, inspired by and drawing on the University's academic expertise to explore the ideas and concepts that shape our world, and co-produced hundreds of hours of programming and bringing learning to life for millions.

It's been an exciting year for our long-standing BBC partnership, with the OU/BBC Ideas playlist winning a Webby Award in May 2022 for the Science and Education Channel. The Webby Awards are leading international awards honouring excellence on the internet. Established in 1996, during the web's infancy, The Webby Awards are presented by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, a 2,000+ member judging body.

BBC Ideas also won the Learning on Screen Award for Online Education Resource in 2021, and our co-production *Trump Takes on the World* was also nominated for a Current Affairs BAFTA in May 2022.

FASS/BBC co-productions from the previous year

Patrick Kielty: One Hundred Years of Union on BBC One (nominated academic: Dr Philip O'Sullivan)

Kielty uncovers some of the turning points in Northern Ireland's history since 1921. Watch Patrick Kielty in conversation with Philip on OU Connect. Read more about the programme elsewhere in the magazine.

We are Black and British on BBC Two (nominated academic: Dr Ayobami Ilori)

Six Black Britons discuss together tough, unsettling and emotional questions about being Black and British. Working on this co-production, Ayobami said: 'Working as an academic consultant on the project was both exciting and enlightening for me. Exciting because it provided me with the opportunity to work on Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues of interest and provide professional insights on them. Enlightening

because it helped me to better understand how to constructively engage with non-academic stakeholders in a way that is appealing and fosters mutual understanding of the goal.'

The Decade the Rich Won on BBC Two
(nominated academic: Professor Susan Newman)

In this programme, the people with power in Britain reveal how their decisions shook politics, transformed the economy and reshaped society in the decade following the 2008 financial crisis. After the programme aired, Susan was approached by producers from Radio 4's *Start the Week* to discuss money, power and class in *Wealth, influence and the global elite*.

Inside the Care Crisis: with Ed Balls on BBC Two
(nominated academic: Dr Jerome De Henau)

Ed Balls goes on an immersive journey to the frontline of care to explore the biggest challenges facing the sector. OU Connect hosts an interview with Ed Balls which includes questions compiled by Jerome.

Springwatch 2022 on BBC Two (nominated academic: Dr Andy Morris)

The OU's involvement in this dynamic and popular programme continued. Andy wrote the *Avian City* piece, which looks behind the urban veneer at the hidden life of birds that exist just out of sight.

Think with Pinker on Radio 4 and BBC Sounds
(nominated academic: Professor Derek Matravers)

This 12-part series, presented by psychologist Professor Steven Pinker, offers a 'critical thinking toolkit', exploring a range of topics from the way we make decisions to conspiracy theories.

Thinking Allowed on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds
(nominated academic: Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers)

A long-running radio discussion programme exploring new ideas and research into how society works.

BBC Ideas

The OU continues to work with the BBC Ideas platform, producing 'short films for curious minds'. We recently launched a new collection called *Navigating Modern Life*, featuring 'Five simple ways to sharpen your critical thinking', developed with SSGS academics Dr Mark Pinder and Dr Paul-Francois Tremlett.



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](#)

Upcoming FASS/BBC co-productions:

The Story of Wales with Huw Edwards on BBC One and BBC Wales (nominated academic: Dr Donna Smith)

A follow-up to the original series, looking forward and considering the future for Wales. Due autumn 2022.

Union, presented by David Olusoga on BBC Two (nominated academics: Professor Gerry Mooney, Dr Helen O'Shea and Dr Dan Taylor)

This series investigates the development of the United Kingdom, using personal stories to explore how religion, class, politics and identity interweave over a turbulent and contested history. Due spring 2023.

Inside the Factory on BBC Two (nominated academic: Dr Emilie Rutledge)

Now in its eighth series, this popular programme presented by Gregg Wallace and Cherry Healey offers exclusive access to some of the largest factories in Britain to reveal some of the secrets behind mass production. Due autumn 2023.

The Troubles (working title) on BBC Two and BBC Northern Ireland (nominated academic Dr Philip O'Sullivan)

This tells the stories of the men, women and children who were drawn – both willingly and unwillingly – into a violent political struggle that spanned over three decades across Northern Ireland, Ireland and England. Using first-person testimony of ordinary people, it lends new insights into the events that took place during the Northern Ireland conflict from 1969 to 1998. Due spring 2023.

Brickies on BBC Three (nominated academic: Dr Rajiv Prabhakar)

Gain insight into the building industry and follow gangs of young brickmakers. BBC Three is aimed at a younger audience and different socio-economic backgrounds, and this co-production is aligned with one of the OU's key priorities of reaching younger audiences. Due winter 2022.



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](#)



PHOTO: Extinction Rebellion activists stage a 'Disco Disruption' climate protest in Melbourne, 2019.

Activists and the ticking clock of climate change

Despite decades of stark warnings about the planet's future, human activity continues to have a devastating impact on the environment. How can the social sciences help change that direction? Two academics in different disciplines, Dr Maria Nita and Dr Aiora Zabala, set out some of the key lessons of their work.

Q How is your research addressing climate change and climate justice?

MARIA: My research examines the climate movement's many manifestations, from Extinction Rebellion (XR) to the more recent Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil. This reshuffling inside the movement follows the same axis I've been observing for many years: radical protest exists at one end of the spectrum, lifestyle and education at the other. Both are important aspects of addressing the climate crisis and ensuring we do as much as possible for those most affected by it – today and in the future – which is what climate justice refers to.

I feel privileged that activists have accepted me as a researcher in their midst, someone who is trusted to represent them, and I attempt to contribute a fairer portrayal that fights misrepresentations. I'm also looking at other campaigns among young people (e.g. Youth XR and Fridays for Future) and have signed up to become an OU climate ambassador in the hope of taking these conversations to schools and local communities.

Q What does 'sustainability' mean, and what are some of the challenges it faces?

MARIA: In my own research, I understand sustainability as a core dimension of the new 'ecological citizenship' scholars are discussing. This comes from a growing understanding that we need allegiances to extend beyond our human community to the bigger ecosystems we are part of. I really like this concept because it incorporates both values and behaviours – so it's not only what we believe and value that's important, but also what we do.

Two of the key dimensions for this are 'sustainability' and 'responsibility' – for the planet, its biodiversity, endangered species, and future human generations. It's also something that describes our relationships to the ecosystems we belong to and ourselves as well. The concept of 'sustainability' can potentially be very useful in education as it can help us and our students consider our relationships to the human and non-human communities we are part of.

Q To what extent can activism help us understand climate change?

MARIA: In social movement scholarship there are different theories that look at what ingredients enable activism to happen. For example, why are activists not waiting for governments to respond to the crisis? Are they simply impatient? Are activists enabled to act by an optimum threshold of political opportunity that allows them to act?

In the UK, it's possible to be a climate activist and still rely on a sound legal system to protect your human rights if you are fined or imprisoned. This is not the case in every country. It's hard not to feel humbled by the extraordinary sacrifices climate campaigners make every day.

Overall, there's one key lesson: this is the time to act. XR's symbol is an hourglass, urging us to recognise time is running out. Scientific reports have long been saying we mustn't wait in responding to this threat to our survival. Activists take this seriously. We should too.

As Maria eloquently argues, listening to activists is crucial. Aiora agrees, and suggests a compelling analogy that could help transform people's relationship with what they consume...

Q How is your research addressing climate change and climate justice?

AIORA: After years of researching different perspectives, I've understood there is broad consensus about the desire for planetary health. But I've also found that it's in the details of how to ensure environmental quality where disagreements arise between social actors. These disagreements result in either paralysed action, strategies with unacceptable consequences for some social groups, or unexpected effects on complex and connected social-environmental systems. We can become either passive witnesses of environmental degradation, victims, or perpetrators of environmental injustices.

I'm passionate about improving environmental and sustainability policy implementation – which includes climate change mitigation and adaptation – focusing on two areas. First, understanding differing perspectives about how to address environmental challenges, especially regarding contentious issues. Second, designing effective, fair and efficient policies with the right incentives to support positive transitions. I use theories and methodologies mainly from environmental and ecological economics, but also draw from other fields such as behavioural economics or political ecology.

In the last 15 years, I've investigated transport policies, deforestation, wildfires, waste management, and tree-growing policies in light of zero-carbon pledges. I'm currently exploring the meaning of environmental success, the implications of neoclassical economic

theories for sustainability, and electronic waste as a boundary object to understand conflicts.

Q What does 'sustainability' mean, and what are some of the challenges it faces?

AIORA: Depending on the discipline, sustainability can be defined in myriad ways. I like to think of it pragmatically, as using the available resources in the wisest way, ensuring our lifestyles positively affect others on the planet.

Imagine we are living on a small island, where we see our food and water sources, as well as the impact of our waste, next to our home. We'd be thoughtful about how we produce, consume and dispose of goods; how we care for the soil where our food grows.

Many of us don't have such direct experience and get shocked by reports about water toxicity in the Andes from lithium mining to feed our mobile phones, or the amounts of energy (and emissions) needed to power human mobility.

Q What does 'sustainability' mean, and what are some of the challenges it faces?

AIORA: Activism is crucial to bring climate change to the fore in the media and public perception. It certainly triggers emotions and highlights important events and stories. These can boost action where researchers alone bring evidence that often remains largely ignored.

Activism also has an important role in promoting participation to find solutions to environmental challenges. Activists can also help social scientists incorporate forms of knowledge that have been historically disregarded.



Dr Maria Nita

Lecturer in Religious Studies

Maria is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Educational Academy. Her research is concerned with climate and cultural change, with a focus on activism, ritual and performance.

See [full profile](#)



Dr Aiora Zabala

Lecturer in Economics

Aiora joined the OU in January 2022. Previously, she was Senior Editor at Nature Sustainability and Affiliated Lecturer at the University of Cambridge.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: A Muslim praying at home, while wearing a Covid face mask.

Religious and spiritual experiences during the Covid pandemic

Covid Chronicles from the Margins is a digital archive project that investigates how inequalities and solidarities have been playing out during the pandemic among migrant groups.

Here, Professor of Sociology Marie Gillespie, who leads [the Covid Chronicles project](#), talks to Paul-François Tremlett, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, to share ideas about what this digital archive tells us, particularly about religious experiences during the pandemic.

MARIE: Paul-François, I'd say that one of our earliest findings across the digital archive was how religious organisations and volunteers – local churches, mosques, gurudwaras – rushed in to provide vital safety nets for people who had been left destitute by slow or no state provision. Some are still doing so.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: Yes, there are many initiatives which go unnoticed but are very, very important to the fabric of a lot of people's daily lives and their survival in difficult times. No amount of Covid restrictions will

take these away. One of my research students is doing a PhD on Rastafarianism and she reports how during Covid some Rasta women in London set up a food bank offering Ital food for those in need.

MARIE: It was interesting to observe the generational divide in volunteering. A lot of support work with our local asylum seekers and refugees was done by religious groups (here in Swansea where I live and do research with diverse migrant groups), but what is quite striking is they tend to be over 60. What are your thoughts on generational differences in the cultures of care that sprung up during the pandemic?

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: I guess it ties in with the fact that the churches have become top-heavy age-wise, with virtually nobody under 50 committed to community support and solidarity – as far as it is possible to tell. When the Census data 2021 is released this year, we will know more. It could be we just don't recognise the kinds of community care and solidarity activities young people engage in – maybe as researchers this is something we need to get a better grasp of.

MARIE: Yes, the stratification of volunteering has implications for the organisation of civil society as well as for the role of the state in levelling up. I think it's interesting to compare the different religions in Swansea because certainly the mosques have much more multigenerational congregations, as do Sikhs and Hindus. Giving food, sharing food, and eating together is common and ritualised. I'm not sure this is the case for Christian churches?

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: The role of food in religious practices came to the fore during the pandemic. At times, there were food shortages and, as some of the contributors to the archive explain, that experience was nothing new for refugees.

MARIE: Yes, a frequent refrain in our interviews was that the pandemic might help the general population better understand what refugees experience, often for years – afraid to go out, fear of an invisible enemy, food shortages. Faith helped migrant groups cope with adversity and uncertainty – it's a very strong finding across the archive – the enduring and profound significance of religion and spiritual experience during the pandemic.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: Religion is quite an expansive concept and entire theories are based on ceremonial and ritual aspects. But what you see in the Covid Chronicles archive are tiny, everyday moments in life that show religion isn't going away, contrary to secularisation theses. It shows how things like faith or experience gained currency during the pandemic as people looked for solace and consolation. Maybe because it was an existential crisis when we were faced with death every day, forcing us to think more about life.

MARIE: I really like the writer Arundhati Roy's suggestion that the 'pandemic is a portal' through

which we can reimagine our social worlds. That's something we've tried to do with the *Covid Chronicles* – to archive this extraordinary moment in history.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: When you think about it, entire theories of religion have been erected upon the edifice of spiritual and religious experience. Ineffable, self-shattering encounters with the sacred lie at the heart of Rudolf Otto's theology, William James's psychology and R. R. Marett's anthropology. But in the *Covid Chronicles* we find a different register, as people sought to make sense of the pandemic through creative expression.

MARIE: Yes, the archive shows people creatively coping with Covid. Social relationships also changed – social distancing actually meant greater digital proximity to people online and living far away. The archive shows how distance and proximity pivot in dynamic relationships – and can be geographic, social, affective, political. What we didn't expect was how the project started in Swansea and went global. People living in refugee camps around the world sent us texts, photos, videos, voice-texts and songs of their pandemic experiences.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: There are three items in the archive I found very powerful in what they say about religious and spiritual experience. First, the [video of a single mother and refugee](#) – whose only social outlet was attending church. Forced to attend online services, she talks about how her son learning to play the piano rekindled her faith. You can hear him playing in the background and towards the end she starts singing along for an improvised jam. It movingly captures a small domestic moment full of love.

MARIE: Thanks for highlighting that – it's great to discuss items together because we sometimes see different things. This digital archive can be mined in many ways to analyse pandemic experiences as a whole – that's the ethnographic aspiration.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: I also like the [two kids in Wales who made their own cardboard mosque](#). There's a lot of interesting theology that can be gleaned from the very idea of making your own mosque, and then it raises the possibility of setting it up wherever you want, and even carrying it about. I like that a lot. And there's a lovely film about [celebrating Eid under lockdown](#) – again the kids have made a cardboard mosque to play and pray.



Marie Gillespie
Professor of Sociology

Marie is an ethnographer who researches migration, diasporas, and identities. Her recent work investigates the difference that digital technologies make to migrant rights, representation, and security. See [full profile](#)

MARIE: It's interesting how in Hinduism domestic shrines and worship are pervasive. Many religions worship at home but the publicness of religion is also important isn't it, and the mosque is like the symbolic expression of publicness.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: Mobile mosques are not new, though. For example, in Denmark, there are pop-up mosques led by female and LGBTQ-inclusive imams, where the mosque is carried around in a bag. You set it up, pray, put it back in the bag and take it somewhere else.

MARIE: There's a wonderful video of how a [young Iraqi Kurd living in the Calais 'Jungle'](#) is surrounded by debris and rubbish and then he takes out this pristine prayer mat and, despite the uncertainty of his life, prays five times a day

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: The video of the [mosque in Berlin](#) is also good. The man doesn't really say anything, and yet he does. He speaks as a failed asylum seeker about his sadness at the restrictions on praying together and how the mosque was for him a place of sanctuary.

MARIE: I think you hit the nail on the head. He may have said little, but he expressed a lot. He captured something of those early days of lockdown. He was talking quietly, with reverence, and he showed us around, like visitors. Empty mosque and empty streets – we have another wonderful film by Syrian refugees in Kuala Lumpur called [Lonely Streets](#). It signifies an empty public life. When you watch that video it brings back memories of that strangeness of early lockdown which, quickly, became ordinary. We say in anthropology: our purpose is to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. We're delighted that the National Archives of Wales have approached us to make *Covid Chronicles from the Margins* a permanent collection, so what we have collected and curated will be available for future social scientists to mine and analyse.

PAUL-FRANÇOIS: We might draw two conclusions: first that spiritual and religious experience and their affective and cognitive dimensions have not lost any of their social vitality and remain important as people make sense of their worlds. Second, too often the words 'spiritual', 'faith' and 'religious' are linked to the big questions and detached from the minutiae of lived life in which they are mobilised and communicated. What the remarkable archive of the *Covid Chronicles* shows is that these words acquire their currency precisely through the small moments through which life obtains its texture.



Paul-François Tremlett
Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies

Dr Paul-François is an anthropologist of religion and has done extensive ethnographic research in the Philippines, Taiwan and Hong Kong. See [full profile](#)

A large group of graduates in blue and yellow academic regalia are seated in an audience, looking towards the left. Two women in the foreground are smiling at the camera.

2022 Degree Ceremonies

The return of physical degree ceremonies has been much welcome, with events held once more across the UK. From Brighton to Belfast, Newport to Harrogate, see all the ceremonies here.

[WATCH VIDEO](#)

Decolonising Religious Studies



Dr Suzanne Newcombe

Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies

Suzanne's research has focused on minority and new religious movements in the modern period, particularly yoga, alternative models of health and wellbeing, as well as millenarian groups. She is Module Chair of Exploring religion (A227).

See [full profile](#)

What is decolonisation and how can it help us improve teaching at the OU? That was the question the Religious Studies team faced on *Exploring religion* (A227). Dr Suzanne Newcombe, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, explains how they addressed it.



PHOTO: Jen Reid poses in front of her statue titled *A Surge of Power*, installed on the vacant Edward Colston plinth in Bristol city centre.

Q Suzanne, you and your colleagues began a project called *Decolonising Religious Studies* in 2020. Can you set the scene?

With photos of Black Lives Matter protesters defying Covid restrictions and the Edward Colston statue being pulled into Bristol Port dominating newsfeeds, the summer of 2020 felt like an important time to re-evaluate the extent to which Religious Studies at the OU was following best practice in evaluating colonial legacies and promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Modules at The Open University have long lives – we design a module to run with minimal changes for a 10-year period. When we wrote *Exploring religion* (A227), we took a decision to move explicitly away from what we call the 'World Religions' model as being outdated and reinforcing colonial assumptions. However, we didn't explicitly explain the theory behind the approach we took and found less students were completing the module than we'd hoped. (For more, see [Why not 'World Religions'?](#)).

Therefore, we wanted to figure out how we might be able to improve our teaching so that students had a better understanding of why we were emphasising religion 'as lived' and what we could do to help more students complete the module more successfully.

Q There has been a lot of interest in decolonisation and decolonising the curriculum. How did you and the team understand the term 'decolonising' in relation to religious studies?

This is a really great question. I think the point is, and what was reinforced by the research we did on this project, is that 'decolonising' is first and foremost a process and practice.

A major aspect of 'decolonising' is a commitment to hold a space for understanding different opinions, experiences and world views. For religious studies specifically, it is a commitment to make a point of seeking out voices that have something important to contribute to the discussion of how we create meaning in our human lives, how we organise ourselves socially and the various ways we, as humans, relate to other-than-human aspects of the world around us.

For this project, we talked to our Associate Lecturer colleagues on how they understood the term. We also talked to 10 colleagues in other UK universities teaching religious studies about how they understood and applied 'decolonising' in their institutions. What we found was that there was a real spectrum of thinking as to what 'decolonising' might mean as an approach to teaching and research. For some colleagues it was about simply narrating the colonial history of the discipline; other colleagues called for the abolition of both religious studies and philosophy as they currently exist. The ideal would be to replace these disciplines with the study of religious and non-religious ethical and metaphysical frameworks in a global context.

The fundamental point for 'decolonising' religious studies is that the idea of religion, as popularly understood, was developed in the context of modernity and colonialism. This concept of 'religion' was modelled on Christianity; other beliefs and practices were judged by its standard. The modern concept of 'religion' was used to justify colonialisation and enslavement. Therefore, it is important we understand and re-evaluate this word and think more carefully about the beliefs and practices that provide meaning to humans.

Q What challenges has your project faced, and what have you learnt from it?

For me, the biggest challenges have been around bringing together the two streams of this process. These are the EDI issues and the question of how to best articulate what we want to teach: that religion – as both a concept with a particular history, as well as an important lived experience for the majority of the world's people – continues to be incredibly important for understanding the contemporary world and addressing our shared global challenges.

In the process of our research, we discovered that 38% of students on A227 were registered as having a disability. Students from global-majority ethnic backgrounds were in the minority and often faced invisible challenges related to disability and socio-economic resources as well. Interventions that help students with disabilities and mental health issues would likely help all students better meet their study goals.

Q What's next for you and your team?

In our surveys and focus-group interviews with students we discovered they want to see their own challenges and interests more visibly reflected in the module materials. We can and should do more to enable students who face limitations owing to their physical energy, time, mobility, and struggle for the 'head space' to process new ideas. My colleagues and I are committed to reflecting upon and improving how we can best support student learning.

This means paying a lot more attention to who can access our teaching, who is excluded and why are there differences? What can we do to enable more students to contribute to the discussion and succeed in their studies? The processes of research and teaching – of decolonising and promoting EDI – are inseparable.

Delve deeper

Keen to learn more or in need of some support? Check out these helpful resources.

Educate yourself on the history and experiences of others – [the Race and Ethnicity Hub](#) on OpenLearn is a great place to start, as is the OpenLearn LGBTQ Hub.

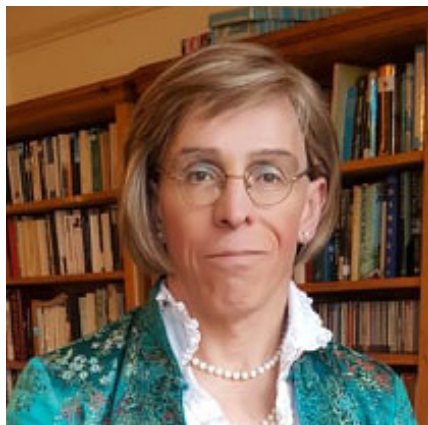
Studying is intellectually and emotionally challenging in the best of circumstances. Make sure you actively get support for any disabilities you might have, as well as look after your mental health.

The [OU Students Association](#) does a lot to promote student voices being heard by the University and ensuring students are informed on how to get the best support for issues relating to EDI. Join in the conversation – your experience is important!

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THE FACULTY OF ARTS &
SOCIAL SCIENCES**

VISIT FACULTY

In conversation with Sophie



Sophie Grace Chappell

Professor of Philosophy

In addition to *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience*, Sophie Grace is also the author of *Knowing What to Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics* (OUP, 2014). She is the UK's first openly transgender philosophy academic, having transitioned in 2014, and campaigns actively on feminist and transgender issues.

See [full profile](#)

Ever had a sudden burst of clarity? Professor of Philosophy Sophie Grace Chappell has written a new book about such revelations: *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience*. Here, she reveals more about the wow moments that can be truly life changing, as well as about hamster wheels and soul food.

Q What is an epiphany, and why do you think they can be so valuable?

An epiphany is a moment where you see something or you hear something or something occurs within you which – in a big way or a small one – transforms how you see your position in the world. The idea of an epiphany is the idea that certain experiences can be revelations of value to you.

Q Can you give an example of an epiphany?

Lots! Here are two, one from Iris Murdoch, one from me.

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.

– **Iris Murdoch**, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge 1970)

I woke up this morning in an attic room in the Goodenough Club in Mecklenburgh Square in Bloomsbury. I opened the window and looked blarily out. My first impression was vague green and vague

cold. Then the cold resolved itself into a delightful cool breeze on a sunny London morning, and the green resolved itself into the tall mature plane trees in the private garden in the middle of that deserted Georgian space. I was four flights up yet my eye-level seemed to be little more than half-way up the great planes, and from root to leaf-tip these huge trees were swaying gently in the wind like giant living creatures that secretly dance. The top of a red crane visible in the distance above them was swaying too. I felt like I was on board a tall ship in full sail; I felt like everything I was looking at was charged with life. Yet I have walked across Mecklenburgh Square a dozen or twenty times, and never even noticed the trees before.

– **Me**, Facebook, 6 June 2015

You suddenly become aware of the value in your environment... and everything changes. So, something happens to Iris Murdoch in this description that takes her right out of her previous frame of mind. What seemed to matter before was her prestige, her ego, her status in the world. And then she saw something in nature which is going about its own purposes, and which has a certain kind of beauty. It arrests you and stops you and stills you and takes you out of those petty egotistical concerns and makes you see things in what one wants to call a truer perspective.



PHOTO: The Piatra Craiului mountain range, Romania.

Q One concept in the book is soul food. What is it, and what is its place in everyday life?

Soul food sounds like a James Brown song title, and that's fine by me, but actually the phrase comes from Plato's *Protagoras*. 'Man ist, was man isst', as they say in German: 'You are what you eat'. What our psyches, and our souls, are fed on shapes what they are. I think today a lot of the materially richest people in the world are spiritually, psychically, absolutely parched and starving. Or they have soul food, but it's poisonous junk. We need art (good art) to fix that, so in chapter five I talk a lot about art. And one thing that art gives us that is crucial nutrition is epiphanies.

We live in a society that is, spiritually speaking, starving to death. We need to feed ourselves, and each other – and not on poison or junk, but on things that are genuinely psychically nourishing. Plato is the first great philosopher to articulate the idea that training and helping people to enjoy soul food that's nutritious and beneficial, and to reject poison and junk – that's exactly what education is for.

Q A recurring argument in your work is that experience trumps theory. Why do you think that is?

These days moral philosophers often seem to have got sucked into what I call the contest of the theories, where everyone is trying to build The One True Moral System and all alternative possibilities must be refuted and destroyed to make space for it, and it alone. My view, by contrast, is that philosophy is not a cage fight. Doing philosophy, I believe, ought to be soul food; it ought to give us psychic nutrition; it ought to be an escape from the treadmills and the prisons and the hamster wheels that our society is so full of. But the way moral philosophy is now so often done seems to me to be a way of turning the doing of philosophy into just another hamster wheel.

What I want to say about moments like mine and Murdoch's described above, is that there's something here that can liberate us from the hamster wheels, the pointless competition and the invidious confrontationalism, the urge to come out as top dog. Thinking about epiphanies can be a resource for us in thinking about how to escape the treadmills of philosophical competitiveness. It can help us see *how* else we might do philosophical ethics.

Q How does that position shape your new research?

I am not trying to knock down everyone else – my work is not focused on the construction of a single neat systematic theory of moral philosophy that is uniquely and dominantly true. I'm not in the game of trying to show that I'm right about everything and everyone else is wrong. Accordingly, my claim about epiphanies is not a silver-bullet claim.

Epiphanies don't solve every problem, and they aren't the only thing that you need for philosophical ethics. But the central 'anti-theory' point is just that there are things that can happen to us which should undermine our confidence in our usual practice in moral philosophy. A lot of the most conventional ways of doing ethics around today can't handle epiphanies at all. And that should make us want to try and explore experiences like that. We should want this as philosophers – because as philosophers, we're filled with a spirit of inquiry and curiosity. Or at least we should be. So we should try and grasp on what it is that such experiences have to teach us about what it's like to be a human being living in this world: striving for value, and striving for meaning. And that's the programme for my new research.

Miscalculations: gender and social injustices in economics

When it comes to gender ratios in the economics sector, the numbers still refuse to add up. Dr Christina Laskaridis, lecturer in the field, speaks about her work to celebrate the women who have broken through, as well as her current research on the little-known issue of International Monetary Fund (IMF) surcharges.

Women make up just 26% of academic economists in the UK (Royal Economic Society, 2021). This statistic has matched a lack of research into women economists, coupled with an overemphasis on the canon of traditional figures. Therefore, it was welcome news when the *History of Political Economy journal* announced its annual supplement would be *Women and Economics: New Historical Perspectives*.

I contributed with a paper on Margaret Garritsen de Vries. One of the first female PhD students to graduate in 1946 from the newly established MIT Economics programme, she studied under the supervision of Paul Samuelson – titan in the field and eventual Nobel Prize recipient.

Despite her high pedigree in economics training, de Vries was unable to practise as she wanted. She was unable to find academic position. She was unable to have a family and a career in the way she wanted. Upon re-entering employment after having a family, she was unable to continue as an Operational Economist, so instead settled into what was a very successful second career as an IMF historian.

Such hurdles didn't deter de Vries. She reached the level of Division Chief at the IMF and was awarded multiple times for progressing the status of women in the economics profession – including by the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession.

We need different voices in economics for obvious reasons of fairness and equality. My work has investigated such injustices elsewhere, and again, features the IMF. It is a little-known fact that the IMF places surcharges on top of interest and other fees when lending to countries in crisis. These

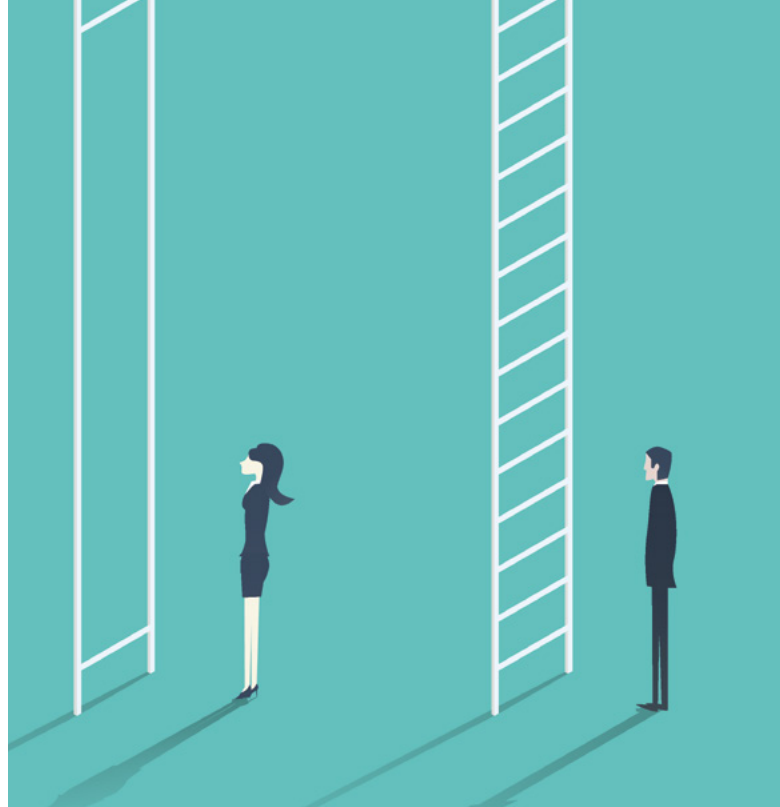


PHOTO: An illustration of a man and woman stood in front of two ladders, with the woman's ladder having fewer rungs.

additional payments effectively mean the deeper the crisis and the longer a country is in it, the greater the cost of borrowing.

I **co-authored** a report with the Centre for Economic Policy Research in Washington DC in September 2021 – one of the first resources on this matter – to highlight the procyclical, punitive and counterproductive nature of such surcharges. The number of countries subject to them has peaked during the pandemic and is projected to keep rising. The five largest IMF borrowers provide most of the surcharge income, which provides approximately half of the IMF's operating income.

Around the world, there are increasing calls to eliminate the policy. Our work is one of the few resources out there on this issue. It is being cited in the main letter by **progressives in Congress asking the US Treasury** to repeal it, and has been used by a **large civil society campaign** launched for its elimination. Earlier in 2022, at the Civil Society meetings of the spring meetings of the World Bank and the IMF, I **presented the reasons** why this little-known policy has a disproportionately harmful effect on women and girls.



Dr Christina Laskaridis Lecturer in Economics

Christina has been at the OU since September 2020. Her PhD was recently awarded the 2022 Joseph Dorfman Best Dissertation Prize by the History of Economics Society.

See [full profile](#)



PHOTO: Tagged cows on a farm in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

Veganism and the environment

There are around two million vegans in the UK, a number that is rapidly growing. With increasing focus on the environmental benefits of a vegan diet, is the movement at risk of losing sight of its core values? Dr Matthew Cole, Lecturer in Criminology, dives in.

Once a **marginalised or derided social movement**, in the last few years veganism has become a highly visible and commonly recognised aspect of contemporary society. In many ways, it's an exciting time to be a vegan and witness all these changes. One way veganism has become more visible is through pioneering organisations like The Vegan Society, a UK educational charity that has administered the **Vegan Trademark** since 1990, a distinctive sunflower logo denoting food and other products suitable for vegans. In recent years, major supermarkets and restaurant chains have not only carried a growing range of Vegan Trademarked products but also expanded their own vegan ranges and improved in-house vegan labelling and consumer information.

Alongside this increased visibility is growing awareness of the part that veganism can play in reducing the **environmental harms caused by livestock farming**. These harms include greenhouse gas emissions that contribute significantly to the climate crisis, as well as deforestation and the squandering of land and freshwater resources.

This growing visibility and acceptability of vegan-suitable products has made everyday life for vegans much more convenient. But it has arguably come at

the expense of the **founding motivations of the vegan movement**. That is, to seek compassion and justice for nonhuman animals, by challenging, resisting, and ultimately ending their exploitation by humans.

Veganism is underpinned by a commitment to anti-speciesism. Anti-speciesism means challenging the widely held assumption that human interests are always more important than those of any other species. But you may be surprised to hear that the advancement of veganism isn't yet automatically helping nonhuman animals. Why is that? **Sociological research** of mainstream media coverage of veganism finds that it is often framed as merely a lifestyle movement – just one consumer option among others. That framing dilutes the radical roots of veganism and separates it from concern for nonhuman animals.

In other words, a reductive 'lifestyle veganism' is anthropocentric (meaning human-centred). Its concern is merely with the individual human consumer rather than with the nonhuman animals that might be liberated from exploitation by a societal transition to mass veganism.

We can see a similar risk in the discussion of the environmental benefits of plant-based lifestyles, such as advertisements that proclaim the environmental sustainability of plant-based products. While those pro-environmental claims may well be accurate, so long as the climate crisis and associated environmental harms are framed in anthropocentric terms, it is the benefits to humans – rather than to nonhuman animals – which get prioritised.

By contrast, if we start from a vegan, anti-speciesist ethical position, what matters is to find alternatives to the ways in which nonhuman animals are exploited, so that they are not subjected to the injustices of being confined and killed to provide food and other products. With that starting point, environmental benefits, such as reduced greenhouse gas emissions and the preservation of forests and fresh water, become additional dividends that undoubtedly benefit humans, but also the other animals who share the planet with us.

To learn more about how veganism relates to anti-speciesism and mitigating environmental harms, take a look at the free OpenLearn course **Why are nonhuman animals victims of harm?**



Dr Matthew Cole Lecturer in Criminology

Matthew joined as a Lecturer in Criminology in 2019 and has been an Associate Lecturer tutoring on a range of social science modules since 2009.

See **full profile**

Jacqui Gabb on lasting love



Jacqui Gabb

Professor of Sociology and Intimacy

In addition to her role at the OU, Jacqui is Chief Relationships Officer at Paired. Her award-winning study on long-term couple relationships, *Enduring Love?*, received widespread critical acclaim, with findings being reported around the world.

See [full profile](#)

Jacqui Gabb's research into long-term relationships continues to have long-term impact, with her work now part of an award-winning app. But what can couples do to go the distance?

Q Can you tell us about your *Enduring Love?* study and what it set out to do?

I've been researching relationships in different contexts for more than 20 years now, so it built upon my earlier research on interpersonal relationships. The focus of the *Enduring Love?* study came from a gap in knowledge. There is long-standing and extensive research on the stressors that can lead to relationship breakdown, but there was no existing research evidence in the UK on how couples sustained long-term relationships. *Enduring Love?* generated this.

Q What small things can couples do each day to strengthen their relationship?

There's no one thing that all couples should do. Yes, better communication is key and underpins everything in many ways, but even then, communication can take many forms. For some, it's talking often and openly, for others it's not talking and deep knowing.

Small thoughtful gestures often stand in for verbal expressions. The *Enduring Love?* study famously demonstrated the value of a cup of tea in relationships, as a small gesture of appreciation that spoke volumes. But it's basically any gesture that gifts emotional connection, kindness and time.

Taking out the recycling or emptying the dishwasher aren't glamorous or obvious declarations of love. But the thoughtfulness of these gestures is the kind of thing that was highly valued in relationships. What's important is that the means of communication is shared and works equally well for both partners.

Q Your research has found that couples argue about chores as much as they do about money. Why do you think that is?

For most of us, domestic chores are the drudgery of living together. You have to work very hard to make them fun or sexy! So whose turn it is to do the washing up can become a source of tension as small niggles develop into ingrained resentments.

In heterosexual relationships, research has shown that men overestimate their contribution to household labour while women underestimate the amount they do. This is because traditional cultural norms are hard to shift, and women are associated with responsibility for household labour and childcare – even when they work full time.

In same-sex relationships, this cultural power differential often transposes onto who earns more and/or who owns the house, for example.





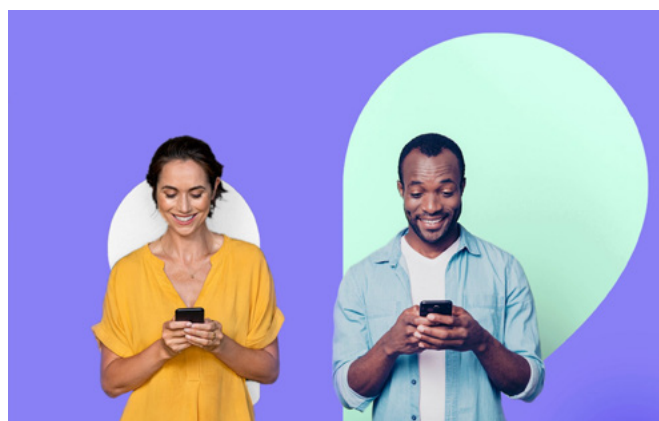
Q How can couples avoid one person taking on more chores than the other?

Household labour may be essential, but it's often invisible. If mess is cleared up there is no mess to be seen, so one partner may not be aware of what the other person is doing for them. To prevent resentments building up, both partners need to listen and hear each other and be open to compromise. Turn-taking and bartering also go a long way in resolving issues around chores.

Q Can you tell us about any exciting projects you've been working on recently?

In terms of relationships research, I've been focusing on public engagement and impact. Being seconded to **Paired** (a relationship app that helps partners connect each day) has given me a unique opportunity to turn relationship science into practical outcomes – to change relationship behaviours at a population level. Launched in 2020, it has gone on to win a Google Play Award and featured as one of Apple's 'Apps we love'. Paired was also part of a REF impact case study that was submitted to C20, a Unit of Assessment that achieved 80% 4* (world-leading) for research impact.

Paired is now the number-one global couple relationships app with over 300,000 installs every month. **Evaluation of Paired** completed by the OU, the University of Brighton, and the University of Bradford found that couples' relationship quality improved by 36% over the three-month study. This far exceeded our initial estimations and shows that the app really does work!



Designed by relationship experts, Paired is a guide to improve communication, stay connected, and deepen intimacy as a couple. It's available to download for free in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

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

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SSGS team acknowledgements:

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