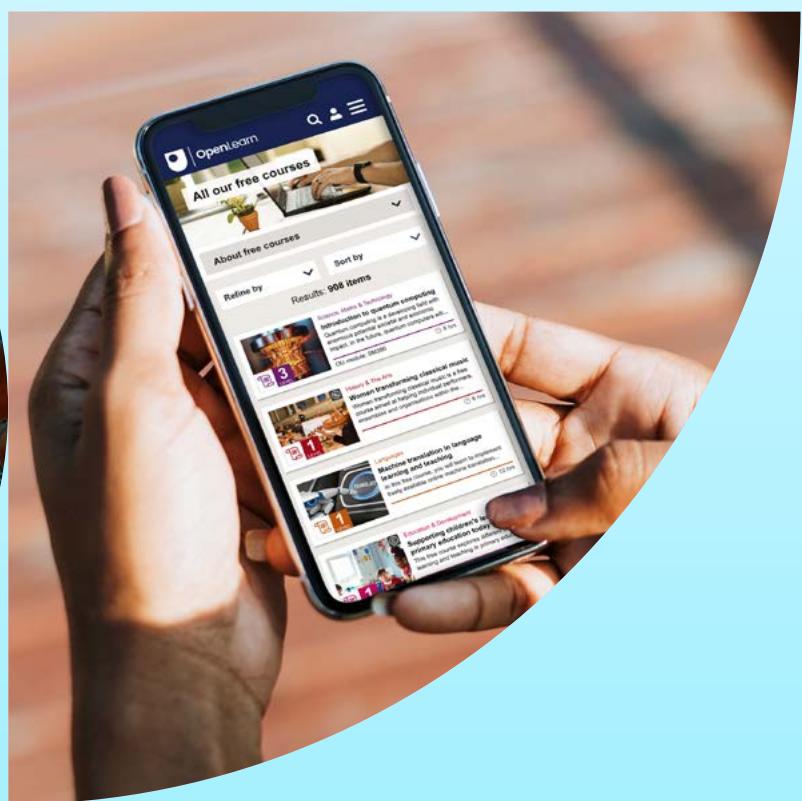


Open Door



**Changing
lives through
free learning**

How OpenLearn
is driving the OU's
social mission, one
learner at a time

Inside your magazine



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Supporting under-represented learners to become the business leaders of tomorrow



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With grateful thanks

A very warm welcome to OpenDoor, the bespoke magazine created especially for you, the OU's inspiring supporters, as a thank you for your remarkable generosity.

Over the coming pages, you'll read about some of the exciting things taking place at the OU, including a deep dive into OpenLearn, your University's world-class free learning platform, and an update on a record-breaking Giving Day, when the OU family came together to change more lives than ever before.

I hope you can join us on Wednesday 15 October for OpenDoor Live, an exclusive online event taking you behind the scenes on just some of the fascinating work showcased in this magazine. Please head to www.bit.ly/opendoorlive2025 to RSVP today.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to welcome the OU's new Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Phoenix, who joined us this summer. A graduate of The Open University's MBA and MA Ed, we're delighted that David has now come full circle in his journey with the OU family.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this edition of OpenDoor.

With warmest wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Karen Hart'.

Karen Hart
Interim Director of Development



Get in touch



alumni.open.ac.uk



giving@open.ac.uk



01908 655 044



**The Open University
Development Office
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA**

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Redefining leadership

HENRY SMITH FOUNDATION

Empowering the new business leaders of the future

When you hear the guiding principles of the Henry Smith Foundation – “to empower people who are economically or socially excluded” and offer support that can “unlock potential and lead to lasting change” – it’s clear how their partnership with the OU is something of a perfect match.

That’s why, in April 2025, these two innovative institutions joined together to provide the pioneering MEL programme.

The Minority Ethnic Leadership (or MEL) programme is a vital project supporting under-represented learners to become the business leaders of tomorrow, through free learning, bespoke workshops, expert mentoring and more. Focusing on the charity and voluntary sectors, MEL is a bold, ambitious but essential scheme tackling stark inequalities in leadership.

Established through generous funding of over £200,000 from the Henry Smith Foundation, MEL is an extension of a successful first-of-its-kind pilot scheme run by the OU’s Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL) in 2024. The expanded programme will now be delivered across six learning hubs within Glasgow, Belfast, Cardiff, Liverpool, Bristol and London, to at least 55 learners.

Leadership diversity ensures that organisations reflect the communities they serve, with alternate perspectives driving a more inclusive approach to social change. With recent research* finding that one in four charities have no one from Black, Asian or other minoritised ethnic communities represented across their senior executive leadership team or board, the need to redress this imbalance is as clear as it is urgent.



A catalyst for change: The aims of the MEL programme

- ✓ To establish a high-quality programme enhancing the leadership skills and agency of participants
- ✓ To enable minoritised ethnic leaders (and future leaders) to connect and collaborate on solutions to racial injustice
- ✓ To subsidise as many learners as possible to study for free or at a reduced rate
- ✓ To offer clear pathways into formal OU study, by providing bespoke, accredited, elite learning
- ✓ To improve commitment to equality, through increased representation, influence and voice of minoritised ethnic leaders in the workplace and beyond

*<https://eastsidepeople.org/press-release-charity-esg-survey-edition-1/>



We’ve set up this partnership with the OU to tackle inequality head on. We want to create a pipeline of talent to come into leadership roles, giving them the knowledge and confidence to be able to thrive.

Anand Shukla
Chief Executive, Henry Smith Foundation



This is a great opportunity to bring life-changing business education to a group of people who are going to do great things. We’re really excited about working together to empower future leaders.

Professor Josie Fraser
Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the OU



Learn more about the MEL programme and other crucial work from the OU’s Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership www.bit.ly/oucvsl

Giving Day: a roaring success!

**The seven words
that can change
somebody's life:**

**You have been
selected for a
scholarship!**



Sharon, previous scholarship recipient



OU Giving Day
2-3 July 2025

An inspiring online challenge supporting the Open Futures Fund

On Wednesday 2 and Thursday 3 July 2025, the OU family came together for our annual Giving Day, in support of the Open Futures Fund scholarships programme.

We're absolutely thrilled to announce that an incredible £194,487 was raised by a record 1,525 donors, joining forces to help even more people read the seven words that will change their lives forever:

"You have been selected for a scholarship."

Throughout the 36-hour online challenge, donors had the chance to contribute to a number of bespoke match-funding opportunities, which allowed them to have their donations doubled and see their generosity go even further. Challenge-funding also saw supporters unlock exciting milestones, meaning all donations made across the 36 hours had even more impact.

Thank you so much to everyone who took part in this year's Giving Day. Because of your kindness and the inimitable power of community, Open Futures Fund scholarships will continue to transform lives and futures.

The OU family's record-breaking Giving Day

36
hours

£194,487
raised

1,525
donors

**Even
more lives
changed**

Pete, previous scholarship recipient



What is the Open Futures Fund?

Only made possible thanks to the phenomenal generosity of supporters, the Open Futures Fund is a groundbreaking scholarships programme. It offers a free OU education to five distinct groups: disabled military veterans, unpaid carers, low-income Black students, people who have spent time in the care system, and those seeking sanctuary in the UK.

At the OU, we know that offering everyone the same support – regardless of their identity, background or the challenges they face – doesn't always result in equitable outcomes. That's why we launched the Open Futures Fund, providing essential scholarships to prospective students facing barriers to education.

Since the programme was launched, over 700 students have been awarded a full fee-waiver scholarship. Many previous scholarship students are now gaining their qualifications and pursuing new adventures, all thanks to the compassion and generosity of the OU family.

We're indebted to every single person who's supported the Open Futures Fund. On behalf of the hundreds of students who've been given a unique opportunity to transform their lives through education: **Thank you.**

Words of wisdom from the OU family

As part of this year's Giving Day, we invited everyone who kindly gave a gift on the website to leave an accompanying message to scholarship recipients. Here are a select few of your wonderful words:

 **So happy to be able to give something back after my own life-changing experience with the OU!** 

 **Everyone has it in them – the door just needs to be opened. Hopefully this donation, though small, when combined with others will help someone very deserving unlock the door to their own potential.** 

 **OU study is hard work, but one of the best things I've ever done in my life. I have my degree certificate on my wall, every night I look at it I think: hey, that's mine, I did that!** 

 **You're about to embark on another great adventure. Work hard and good luck will find you.** 

 **As I received some financial help towards my books when I was studying for my OU degree while bringing up a large family, I wanted to give something back. Never give up!** 

 **I wish you a bright future with your studies. There's so much to discover in this world. Be surprised, be inspired!** 

 **Thank you, OU. I O U!** 

 **The Open
Futures Fund**

 **Find out more about the Open Futures Fund www.bit.ly/openfuturesfund**



Want to hear more from some remarkable scholarship recipients?



Watch inspiring video stories
www.bit.ly/offvideos



Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius

A love letter to a literary legend, from the esteemed OU/BBC partnership

In May 2025, BBC audiences were treated to a fascinating three-part deep-dive into the life and works of Jane Austen, one of history's most influential and lauded novelists. A docudrama pairing dramatic reconstructions with talking-head testimonials from academics, writers, actors and experts, it tells the story of Austen in astonishing detail, charting the gripping narrative of her rise to success.

Released to celebrate what would have been Austen's 250th birthday, *Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius* – the latest in a long line of renowned OU/BBC collaborations – was met with glowing praise from audiences and critics alike.

Eagle-eyed viewers will have spotted in the credits the OU's very own Dr Emma Claire Sweeney (Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing) and Professor Nicola Watson (Professor of English Literature) listed as OU Academic Consultants. Working alongside production company 72 Films, they imbued accuracy and attention to detail into this revelatory biographical series, which revealed some amazing details of Austen's life to its captivated viewers.

Many years after her death, as the programme reveals, Austen's beloved older sister Cassandra burned hundreds of letters between the two (in what is widely regarded as a bid to protect Jane's posthumous privacy and legacy), meaning that

information on her life is scarce. But through the expertise of academics including Dr Sweeney and Professor Watson, and the in-depth research of the production team, a remarkable narrative was pieced together, coupling historical precision with absorbing storytelling. This remarkable series is available to view on BBC iPlayer now.

 **Watch now on BBC iPlayer**
www.bit.ly/riseofagenius1

Step into the parlour where Jane Austen wrote her world-famous novels

Jane Austen's World is an online interactive produced by Biki Zhang (OU Connect Producer) and Emma and Nicola, to accompany the series. You can click on the objects scattered about Austen's writing parlour to travel to spaces that shaped her, locations featured in the novels, and parts of the world her incredible books have since reached.

 **Explore behind the scenes**
www.bit.ly/riseofagenius



In conversation with...

Dr Emma Claire Sweeney, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and OU Academic Consultant on *Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius*

How did your involvement in the brilliant *Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius* come about?

As part of the commissioning process, Professor Nicola Watson and I were approached by the Media Fellow in FASS (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences) to be the OU Academic Consultants. I was asked as I co-wrote (with Emily Midorikawa) *A Secret Sisterhood: The Literary Friendships of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot & Virginia Woolf*, while Nicola (Professor Watson) does a lot of fascinating work on writers' houses, including Austen's.

It was great working together because we're from different sides of the department. To have English Literature and Creative Writing collaborating on a project was quite exciting for us all.

What does being an 'Academic Consultant' actually entail?

We were sent the scripts right from the early stages of production; we read each draft and gave feedback, particularly in terms of accuracy. We also met with producers and researchers to make suggestions for angles or areas to explore in later drafts.

We also had long discussions about different approaches the production team could take to balance crafting a compelling and dramatic story with rigorous accuracy. It was a really collaborative and enjoyable process.

How difficult is it to craft such a compelling narrative when historical events may not be that well documented?

As a creative writer myself, I'm really interested in biography and biographical fiction, and how to present a story that is engaging but also authentic. And that's exactly the same conundrum faced by documentary makers.

To that end, I was incredibly impressed by the extensive nature of the research that the BBC researchers undertook, and by their willingness and desire to engage with Nicola and me. There are big gaps in Austen's life, but there is also lots of information, a great deal of which was compiled into a hugely useful chronology by the late Deirdre Le Fay, a brilliant amateur researcher.

How has this collaboration informed the OU's teaching?

The docudrama and accompanying interactive will be used as teaching resources on the new Creative Writing Level 3 course which launches this October (A363, Advanced Creative Writing), as well as on upcoming English Literature courses.

Why do you think Jane Austen's writing has stood the test of time?

I think she does something incredibly clever, which is to write this series of novels that can be considered harmless or 'light' by all sorts of powerful people, and therefore they can go under the radar while actually exploring very important and often radical themes.

Austen wore her radicalism so lightly that her work could be seen as a source of comfort to a very wide audience, despite being really quite pioneering and forward-thinking. Her writing also does that wonderful trick of being simultaneously specific and universal.

Would you be interested in collaborating on further TV productions?

Oh, definitely. I'm currently working on a biographical novel about the half-sister of Virginia Woolf, so I'm keeping an eye out for any Virginia Woolf productions that might come up!



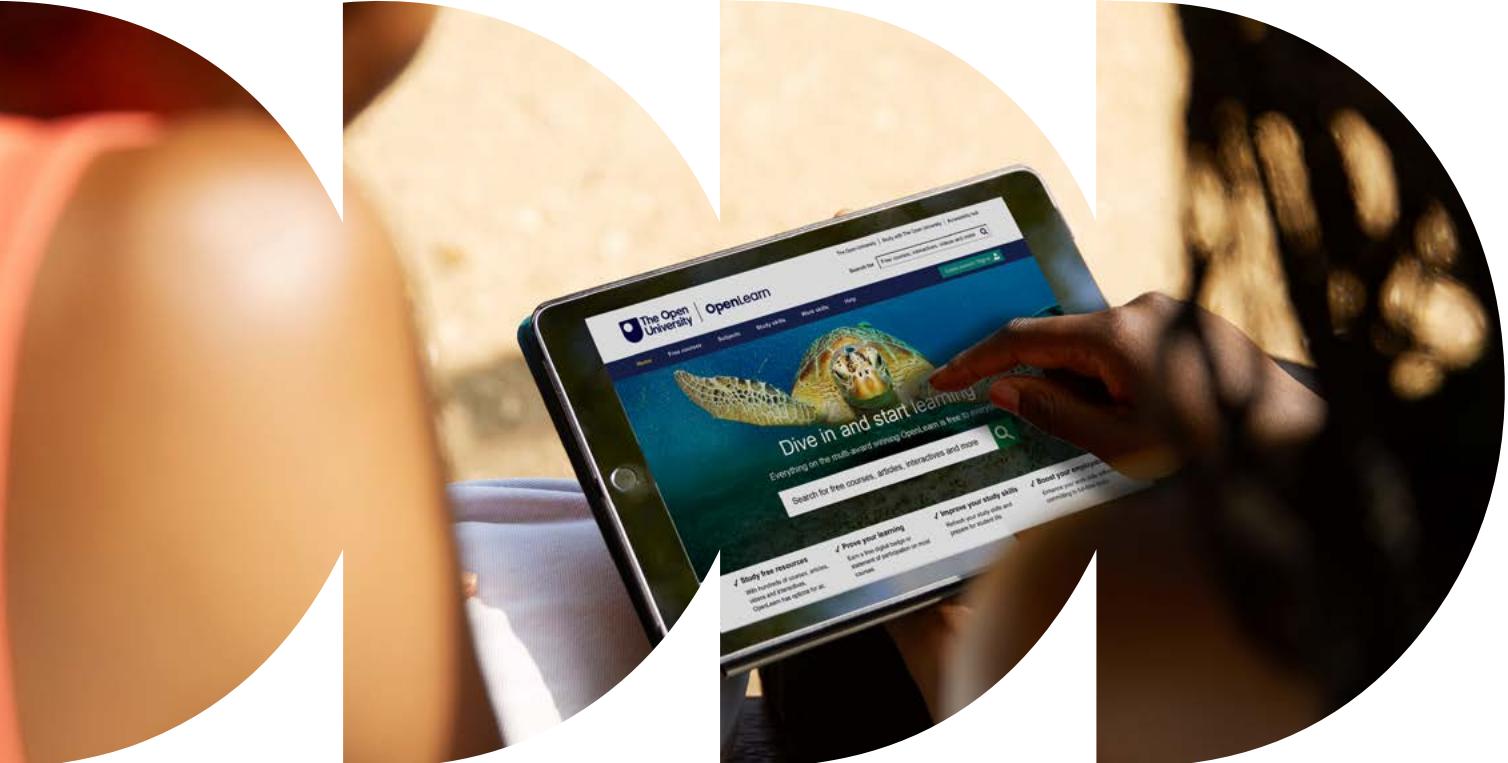
Take your learning further

Learn more about the Advanced Creative Writing course and other Arts & Humanities qualifications



Course details

www.bit.ly/oua363



Changing lives through free learning

How OpenLearn is bringing the OU's social mission to life

The Open University's Royal Charter, granted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in April 1969, included the following two goals, setting in stone the OU's vital social mission:

- Advancement and dissemination of learning and knowledge.
- Promoting the general wellbeing of the community.

As a member of the OU family, you will doubtless have seen this social mission in action, but nowhere is it more evident than in OpenLearn, the home of free learning from your unique University.

Launched in 2006 through generous initial funding from the Hewlett Foundation, OpenLearn breaks down traditional barriers to learning – including access, cost and confidence – to create a platform where knowledge is freely accessible to everyone, everywhere.

With an extraordinary **118 million visits since its launch**, OpenLearn has established itself as a global leader in open educational resources. The platform offers an extensive library of over 12,000 hours of high-quality content, spanning interactive

courses, in-depth articles, engaging videos, and innovative educational tools – all available for free to anyone with an internet connection!

In this edition of OpenDoor, we thought we'd take a deep dive into OpenLearn and give you just a small glimpse into the transformative impact it's having on learners around the world.

A pathway to OU study

All OU degree modules have at least 5% of their content available for free on OpenLearn, allowing potential students to 'try before they buy'!

With the OU's 56-year history as a pioneer in accessible, scalable education, it's no surprise that OpenLearn reaches literally millions of learners each year. In 2024 alone, for example, there were 11.8 million visits to the OpenLearn website, with just 5.2% of all course enrolments coming from existing OU students.

Who's using OpenLearn?

118 million
visitors
since launch

47%
of users don't
have a degree

36%
of learners are
low-income

43%
identify as having
a disability

The site's users are a mix of those who previously faced obstacles to education, lifelong learners who want to keep education in their lives, career professionals looking to upskill or retrain in a specific field, and beginners with little to no educational background.



I appreciate the opportunity to study free courses which both underpin my job role and development of personal interests – keep up the excellent work!

OpenLearn participant

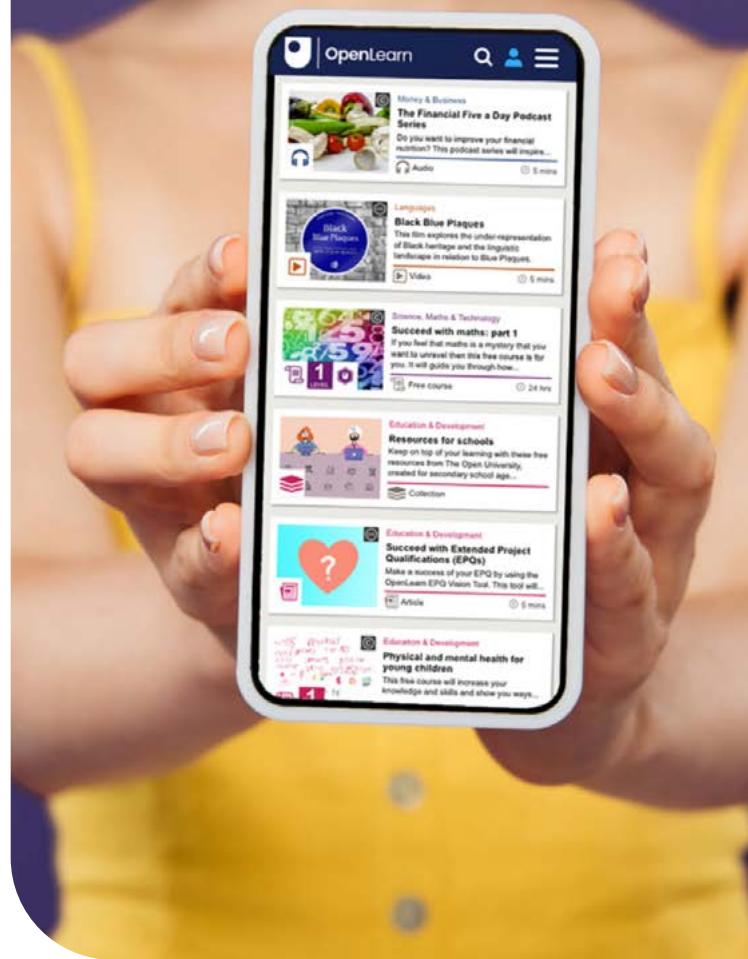


There's no 'typical' OpenLearn visitor, although a 2024 opt-in survey revealed that:

- 47% of users don't have a degree at time of enrolment
- 36% of learners come from low-income households
- 43% of those surveyed also self-identify as having some form of disability

These statistics show how OpenLearn is catering to many who would otherwise miss out on essential education opportunities.

OpenLearn is designed to be accessible across a wide range of devices including smartphones



Learning that's truly for everyone

All OpenLearn resources are optimised for accessibility, including compatibility with screen readers and alternative formats.

Many of the courses on OpenLearn are 'badged', meaning they are CPD-recognised (Continuing Professional Development) and can be displayed on careers websites such as LinkedIn, demonstrating the badge-holder's commitment to self-development. This is particularly important for career-focused learners, who can demonstrate key critical skills to potential employers, significantly improving job prospects.

These badged courses cover an impressively wide spectrum of fields, from 'Understanding autism' and 'Managing your money' to 'Forensic psychology' and even 'Microgravity: life on the International Space Station'. There truly is something for everyone!

In recent years, the Government-led initiative Skills England has identified a number of critical issues which OpenLearn is perfectly placed to address.

Facing national issues such as a significant mismatch between curricula and employer requirements, vast regional inequalities in skills access, and a growing necessity for CPD across many industries, OpenLearn is a trusted, rapid, educationally-sound response.

OpenLearn's proud continuation of the OU's social mission is true testament to your University's commitment to keeping education open to all.

Continue your learning journey



Visit OpenLearn online today to see where free learning could take you
www.open.edu/openlearn

Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa



Highlights from 20 years of the TESSA programme

As many of you will have read in your last edition of OpenDoor back in the spring, 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the groundbreaking Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) programme.

A game-changing global network providing free resources to support the millions of unqualified teachers working in sub-Saharan Africa, TESSA is underpinned by the extraordinary generosity of our amazing donor community.

To celebrate the programme's remarkable 20-year milestone, we wanted to take a closer look at just some of the highlights of the past two decades of TESSA. And, in the spirit of collaboration so pivotal to TESSA's success, we asked Academic Director Dr Kris Stutchbury and Senior Programme Manager Oli Biard to join us!

2005

TESSA is conceived as an emergency response to an education crisis in Africa: 38 million children in sub-Saharan Africa are not enrolled for primary education at the time; over 1 million more skilled teachers are required, more than half of these in Africa; in several countries, 50% of primary school teachers are unqualified and working voluntarily.

The programme aims to drastically improve teacher education across sub-Saharan Africa, with a potential reach of millions of teachers and their pupils.

2005-2010

Resources are designed and integrated into teacher education programmes in ten countries and four languages across sub-Saharan Africa. Initially, these resources are delivered as CD-ROMs, then memory sticks, then online content, and now the tech used is almost unrecognisable from those early days – including cutting-edge Raspberry Pi computers!



I joined the OU in 2009, teaching on the PGCE course. I worked in a huge open-plan office, and became aware that OU colleagues around me were going off to Africa, doing fascinating things. My Line Manager visited Sudan, and I thought "How do I get to do that?". It's been a particular privilege to work with our African colleagues for 17 wonderful years.

Kris



A teacher and students at Egerton Primary School, Kenya

Over 2 million
teachers and teacher educators reached

The TESSA website has over **1,000** visitors per month

The programme is available in **15 countries**, with resources in **4 languages**

TESSA has been proudly transforming lives in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond for **20 years**

2009

TESSA is awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher Education, celebrating its innovative approach and sheer scale of impact. This is closely followed by a prestigious WISE (World Innovation Summit for Education) Award in 2011.

2010–2015

Delivery is extended widely throughout the programme's target regions. A number of sister programmes are also introduced, including the now multi-award-winning initiative TESS-India (which can be explored by following the links in the box at the end of this article).



An absolute highlight in my decade at TESSA has been the introduction of Small Grants, which are directly funded by alumni donations. Network members are able to apply for funding to address local teacher training needs with local solutions. In Ghana, for example, a Small Grant was used to develop the hugely successful 'TESSA Clubs', which help student teachers better prepare for teaching practice.

Oli



2017

The first TESSA 'MOOC' (Massive Open Online Course, providing global online education) is designed, reaching over 9,000 teachers; TESSA proudly reaches many people who've never studied online before. Additionally, another sister programme is launched, with ZEST (Zambian Education School-based Training) rolled out in 500 schools in Zambia.

2018

The programme is awarded yet another top prize, this time receiving the PIEoneer Award for Digital Innovation.

2025

Celebrations begin for the 20th anniversary of this game-changing programme, which continues to touch the lives of teacher educators, teachers and pupils across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

"We're marking the anniversary at an upcoming DETA (Distance Education for Teachers in Africa) conference in Mauritius, where one of our Ambassadors is running a workshop to share TESSA's mission to even more education professionals. This network of Ambassadors, kindly supported by the Small Grants programme, is crucial to sustaining and delivering TESSA."

Kris

A heartfelt thank you

Thanks to all the donors who've supported TESSA over the past two decades. With your support, millions of people have had their lives improved through the remarkable power of education.



Learn more about TESSA
www.bit.ly/csgdtessa



See the impact TESSA is having
www.bit.ly/tessaimpact



Access the TESSA resources
www.bit.ly/tessaresources



Explore TESS-India
www.bit.ly/tessindia

2015–2025

Along with extensive, ongoing research into delivery and a continued increase in global reach, the recruitment of TESSA Ambassadors begins, as local experts are appointed to promote and run the programme in their regions.

"We're proud that TESSA is becoming more of a network of global partners who work proactively and are becoming increasingly self-sufficient. This is one of our aims: for the University to become more of an advisor than a facilitator, and for the devolved programme to be inherently sustainable."

Oli



The rain can't stop remembrance

Celebrating supporter generosity in the Legacy Garden

On Thursday 17 July 2025, we were thrilled to welcome guests to Walton Hall campus, to remember those who've kindly left gifts in their Will to The Open University.

Staff, alumni, family and friends gathered to pay tribute to those whose legacy gifts were received in 2024, alongside the unveiling of commemorative plaques in our beautiful Legacy Garden.

While the weather may have let us down (following optimistic forecasts of 31°C and blazing sunshine), guests braved the rain to honour their loved ones, contemporaries and fellow OU family. As the University Secretary, Dave Hall, pulled back the curtain to reveal this year's plaques, the rain was all but forgotten.

Other highlights from this day of celebration included:

- Professor Mark Brandon MBE, Lead Academic on the BBC's sensational Frozen Planet, giving a captivating talk on the importance of polar oceanography, and how climate change is transforming the world.
- A fascinating exhibition on the history and archives of the Betty Boothroyd Library. Baroness Boothroyd herself, once OU Chancellor, was among those whose legacy gifts were celebrated this year, making the exhibition all the more timely and moving.

Thanks to all guests and contributors for a wonderful day, and of course to the kind, compassionate supporters who left gifts to help keep education open to all.

On arrival, one guest was asked "Do you know anyone else attending today?". Without hesitation, she responded, "Being friends with the institution is enough for me."

The importance of legacies

With gifts in Wills making up over 25% of recent philanthropic support to your University, their importance cannot be over-stated. These gifts were fundamental in establishing our scholarship

programme, The Open Futures Fund, with other gifts going to vital research and other areas of student support.

One particular moment from 2025 highlights the importance of gifts in Wills. Thanks to the incredible generosity of a legacy donor, the number of places available for Carers' Scholarships (part of the always-oversubscribed Open Futures Fund) has been doubled for the upcoming academic year, from 10 to 20. Now, the lives of twice as many unpaid carers will be transformed through the invaluable power of education. It really is difficult to imagine a more powerful tribute.



Baroness Betty Boothroyd

Find out more

If you're interested in learning more, we would love the opportunity to talk to you about what inspires you, and how your kindness could support the OU family for generations to come.



For more information, please email giving@open.ac.uk or call 01908 659 141.