



The Open University

Studying while you care

A brief guide to ways The Open University can help support students who have caring responsibilities



Studying while you **care**

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Introduction

Research by Carers UK shows that many carers want to participate in learning and training opportunities, but there are often real difficulties in doing so.

At The Open University (OU) our methods of teaching, learning and continual support can go a long way to overcome these problems so that you can gain undergraduate certificates, diplomas and degrees. The way the OU can help you meet the challenges in your life makes it the best choice for study at higher-education (HE) level.

In the Sunday Times University Guide 2005, the OU is ranked as one of the top five UK universities for teaching quality, with 86% of our departments rated as excellent. The University was also rated the top university in the 2006 National Student Satisfaction Survey. With over 210,000 students we are also Europe's largest university and the OU is the world expert in supported open learning.

In this booklet our aim is to outline the ways in which we can support you through your studies. This includes:

- ▶ the flexibility we can offer through the types of courses we have available
- ▶ the way our study timetables work
- ▶ one-to-one relationships with course tutors
- ▶ a range of support, advice and guidance available from OU staff.

In some circumstances we can offer financial support, which we have explained in some detail.

We welcome contact from enquirers, current students and past students. You will find details of how to contact us by telephone or email, plus links to websites we feel may be of particular interest on pages 18-20.

Ways into study

The Openings Programme and short courses

If you are at the stage of thinking about university-level study, but would like a gentle introduction to help boost your confidence as a learner and get you ready for longer courses, our Openings courses have been designed specifically with you in mind.

The Openings Programme

On Openings courses you don't have to travel anywhere for tutorials or other events. You set your own pace and study in your own home in your own way, to fit in with your caring and other commitments. You will have your own tutor who will provide regular support via telephone and written feedback on your course work. You can also exchange ideas with other students by telephone, email or on our optional online conference. An Openings course will help you organise and manage your time and develop your study skills. Towards the end of your course, you'll receive information about possible study pathways, leading you on to the full range of OU course options.

'The course fitted in nicely around my family life and Tom's needs. It was not too demanding on my time, so if I missed studying one week I knew I could catch up the next. It has given me the confidence to go further and I am looking forward to starting (hopefully) another Openings course shortly. So it is possible to move on, do something for me and still care for Tom.'

Kirsty

Openings courses are open to everyone – there are no entry requirements. The courses draw on examples from everyday life, so it doesn't matter if you've never studied the subject before, or haven't studied since you left school. Starting from your general knowledge and experience, you gradually build up to the kind of work you might expect at university level. Courses last up to 20 weeks and you'll probably need to study from 6 to 8 hours a week. The courses start in March, June, September and November. You can use a computer to do your coursework if you want to, and there's an optional online conference, but you don't have to use a computer at all. All you'll need is access to a landline telephone.

There are no exams on Openings courses. Instead you complete an end-of-course assessment. If you successfully complete your course you will be awarded 10 credit points which you could count towards your degree. Subjects available include understanding society, children, health, management, arts, mathematics, technology and science – and a more general course called *Open to change*. This is designed for those who are thinking about making changes in their lives, such as returning to study, and would like to focus on assessing their experience, knowledge and skills to help them plan for the future.

Short courses

In addition to the Openings programme, we also offer short courses, ideal if you would like to try out study in a bite-sized piece to start with. These focus more on their academic subject and a little less on developing confidence and study skills than the Openings courses. They mostly carry 10 credit points and there are many at Level 1. Short course subjects include a wide range in science, technology, a series on writing, and courses on Shakespeare and Leonardo da Vinci.

Our Student Registration & Enquiry Service (**0845 300 60 90**) will be happy to answer any questions you may have about either Openings or short courses.



Building a qualification

How it all fits together

Whether you start with an Openings course, one of our short courses, or perhaps with one of our other Level 1 courses, you can combine your courses to build a certificate, diploma or degree. You can choose from over 600 courses that can fit in with your interests, career ideas or a combination of both.

The courses that lead to the award of an OU certificate, diploma or degree are generally at Levels 1, 2 and 3. Level 1 courses provide you with a broad understanding of the subject area you are studying, as well as building your confidence and the study skills necessary for you to move on to the more challenging and focused study at Level 2 and finally Level 3.

In addition to helping students develop their study skills, Level 1 courses give students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with how OU study works and best how to organise their time. Level 2 and Level 3 courses build on the more general purpose academic skills you will gain from your Level 1 course and equip you with subject-specific skills in presenting arguments and drawing conclusions from data.

As with Openings and short courses, all courses have a points value that counts towards the total number of points needed for individual qualifications. For example, an honours degree requires 360 points to include at least 240 points above Level 1, with at least 120 points at Level 3. Most courses at Levels 1, 2 and 3 carry either 30 or 60 points.

More information about the range of courses that you can choose from is available on our Courses and Qualifications website at

www.open.ac.uk/courses

The qualifications you can achieve

Jane has completed a degree and is just about to finish her Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). She's also a single mum of two boys, the eldest of whom, 14-year-old Joshua, has Asperger's syndrome and other complex disabilities.

Open degrees

The BA or BSc degree that can give you the most flexibility in choosing your courses is often referred to as the 'BA/BSc Open degree'. The advantage of this flexible pattern of study is that it allows you to study a wider variety of subjects across the range of subject areas. You can follow your personal interests, which may develop and change as your studies continue, or you can choose courses that may help you prepare for a career you are interested in, or both.

Named degrees

Alternatively, you can work towards a named degree that has more specific course requirements. This allows you to gain a degree that reflects a specific academic area of study you are interested in or relates to a particular career area you want to work towards.

Certificates and diplomas

Certificates and diplomas can either be free-standing qualifications in their own right or interim qualifications that can be awarded on the way to your degree. Both require you to follow specific courses. Generally, certificates need you to have studied 60 points at Level 1 and diplomas require 120 points at Levels 2 and 3.

'After I received my signed certificate from the OU I was so proud, and my mum was so proud she told everyone she knew (and even people she didn't).'

Lisa

Support while you study

The OU is well used to the pressures that students face when balancing their OU study with the other areas of their lives and there are a variety of resources available to support students as they study. This support can be of particular importance to you as a carer where you may need to fit your study around the other commitments in your life, especially as there may be unexpected issues for you to deal with.

‘A carer’s responsibility is a heavy one and not recognised as much as it rightfully should be, but the OU understands that carers are out there and doing a very worthwhile job. They also have as much right as everyone else to study and be recognised.’

Lisa

In touch with your tutor

When you register for a course, shortly before the course start date, you will be sent details of your tutor. For each course you will have a tutor who is the person who gives you academic support, marks your assignments with constructive feedback, and provides tutorial support. Your tutor can also put you in touch with other support that is available through your regional centre (see the contact us section on pages 18-19). The regional centre staff can talk through study issues with you, deal with questions about exam arrangements or help you by providing educational or careers advice and guidance to help you make the most of your studies.

Students working together

Most OU courses have tutorials which, depending on your course, may be face-to-face, over the phone or online. Taking part in tutorials is not compulsory, although many students find them useful and enjoyable. Not all students take part in all of their tutorials, participating when their circumstances allow it. Some courses also use computer conferencing, giving students the opportunity to communicate online with their tutor and other students on the course. Each online tutorial conference will last between 10 – 14 days so you can join in at times that suit you.

Some courses also offer residential schools which can be an interesting and valuable addition to your course. If your course has a residential school it will be shown in the course description. However, if you think it may be difficult for you to attend, please talk to an adviser at our Student Registration & Enquiry Service.

Marking your progress

Assessment is an important part of your studies. Continuous assessment runs throughout your course showing how well you are understanding the material as you work through the course. In addition to the continuous assessment there is usually some form of final assessment at the end of the course. This could be an end-of-course assessment or project, or a conventional examination. If you feel that your home circumstances may have affected your continuous assessment, or they may affect your performance in the end-of-course assessment, there are systems in place to make the University aware and they will be taken into account when confirming your overall course result. If an emergency happens on the day of the exam, if you let us know immediately, it may be possible to defer the exam to a later date. If you think your circumstances may affect your assessment, or if something unexpected happens that may affect your study, you should talk to your regional centre as soon as possible to find out how we can help.

‘But also important was the support I received from my tutor. I told her about my circumstances, and how hard everything was, and how I felt I was failing. She told me to carry on with my studies, because then that would be an area in which I could feel I’d succeeded. It was only a little thing, but it gave me such an enormous boost.’

Jane

Keeping going

If there are times when things are difficult for you then your tutor is the first person you can talk to. If there are parts of your course that you are struggling with, your tutor can arrange additional ‘Special Sessions’ with you to give you extra help where you need it. This could also include aspects of study such as essay writing skills or tips to improve your note taking. These extra sessions can either be face- to-face or over the phone. There may be times when you feel under particular pressure and it may be difficult for you to meet assignment deadlines. Your tutor can, for most courses, give you up to 3 weeks ‘extension’ to the assignment deadline. If things get really difficult then your tutor can refer you to advisory staff at the regional centre to talk about how else we might support you through your studies.

Taking a break

The OU is currently piloting a scheme, on a limited number of courses, where it would be possible to take a break from your study while on a course. If you select one of these courses you will receive more information once the course has started.

It is also important to remember that it is possible to take time out between courses, although there are time limits on how long certain courses can be counted towards a named degree. There may also be implications for continuing financial support. If you think taking time out between courses may help, you can talk about the implications with an adviser at your regional centre.

Developing your career

If you have caring responsibilities you may feel that the idea of developing a career, changing jobs or even thinking about returning to work cannot possibly apply to you. This may be for all sorts of reasons but can involve concerns about lack of qualifications, not having the experience employers look for, the practicalities of working and caring or possibly an overall lack of self-confidence. Each student's situation is very individual and there are many success stories about how OU study has helped carers return to work and helped them to develop their career. Employers think very highly of OU qualifications and the personal qualities that OU students demonstrate, these include commitment, motivation and the ability to manage competing demands.

Emma Beadle from Unilever has this to say about OU students 'The reason why we are so interested in OU graduates is that the challenges they face while completing a degree and working at the same time, or looking after a family, are probably ten times more than other graduates.'

'Having now got through the Openings course, I feel that I've been able to prove to myself, as much as to anyone else, that I can still read and write and that this old dog can still learn a few new tricks! Given the circumstances which first brought me to this point, it will probably come as no surprise that I have already chosen to follow a path which can lead me into a career in the field of oncology.'

Paul

'You don't realise what you're capable of and once you get the support, you can achieve things. The OU helped with my graduation ceremony and both my boys were very proud to be there.'

Jane

As an OU student you will be entitled to use the Open University Careers Advisory Service. Through our resources you will gain advice and support on exploring career and employment options, planning your studies to fit in with your career ideas and timescale, choosing the right courses for the right qualification and, when the time is right, finding and applying for jobs.

We also have professional careers advisers who can talk through with you issues related to planning your career, job hunting, producing a CV or going for interviews. Contact with a careers adviser can be by phone, email or if you can get to your OU regional centre, face-to-face.

Our careers website will give you, as an OU student, access to all of our careers resources including our Career Links networking scheme, online notice and discussion boards as well as links to useful careers and employment websites. If you have additional requirements which lead to difficulties accessing online resources, we will be happy to investigate relevant printed alternatives.

You can access the Open University Careers Advisory Service website at www.open.ac.uk/careers



The cost of studying and help with fees

Students often worry about the financial implications of their study. The OU tries to ensure that you have all the information necessary in order to make choices and decisions. Details of course fees are in the leaflet accompanying the *Undergraduate Prospectus*, and on our website.

Paying for your study

You pay course by course as you progress. You can pay in full by credit/debit card or cheque when you register. Alternatively you can pay by monthly instalments through the Open University Student Budget Accounts Ltd (OUSBA). Further details will be included in your registration pack.

Financial support

The government and the OU fund a range of financial support to help you with the costs of studying. There are four types of support:

- ▶ help with paying course fees
- ▶ help with paying study expenses (such as a computer, childcare costs and books)
- ▶ help for students who get into financial difficulty during their course
- ▶ help for students with disabilities, medical conditions or specific learning difficulties.

The *Undergraduate Prospectus*, the *Postgraduate Prospectus* plus the financial support website will give you a full explanation of the support that could be available in your particular circumstances. You can find out quickly and easily if you could be eligible by using the ready reckoners on our website www.open.ac.uk/financialsupport

Where you live

The type of financial support you receive will depend largely on where you live but other factors such as the number of credit points you are studying and whether your courses are undergraduate or postgraduate level will also be relevant.

More money available

From September 2006 more money than ever is available to OU students (last year we provided support for more than 20,000 students).

Whether you're in or out of work, if you live in England, Northern Ireland or Wales and your total annual household income is less than £25,645 (more if you have a dependent partner or children) you're likely to qualify for some support. A Carers' Allowance would count towards this assessment of your income.

For Scotland the income level is up to £15,345 (plus allowances for dependants). If you already receive a Carers' Allowance you will automatically get an award.

For further information and advice on what financial support may be available to you please contact the following:

- ▶ if you live in Scotland contact the Enrolment & Fees team on **0131 226 3851** or email scotland@open.ac.uk
- ▶ if you live in England, Northern Ireland or Wales contact **0845 300 60 90** or email general-enquiries@open.ac.uk

For Openings courses and short courses

There is limited help with funding for Openings courses and other short courses so only those students who are unemployed or on certain benefits will generally receive support for these courses. Details can be found in the *Openings* and *Short courses* booklets and on our website. You will need to use the forms in these booklets if you wish to apply for financial support.

Help for students who get into financial difficulty during their course

If you find that you have higher than expected costs or you face serious financial problems during your course you could get help from the Access to Learning Fund. The University also has a Student Assistance Fund, money raised by the trustees of The Open University Foundation through charitable donations. It's an emergency fund for all OU students who need immediate financial support. Your regional centre will be able to give you further details.

'The OU were fantastic, I didn't get any financial assistance in my first couple of years and that was very tough, physically and emotionally. I had to do all of this on a really tight budget. At one point things got so bad we didn't even have anywhere to live. But I wrote and explained my situation and I received help. Finance is an enormous issue for carers and now the OU offers help with books and travel.'

Jane

Contact us

For information, registration and advice, and to order any of our prospectuses or booklets, please:

Use our website at www.open.ac.uk/courses

Phone our Student Registration & Enquiry Service on **+44 (0)845 300 60 90**

Our lines are open:

Monday to Friday 08.00 to 20.00

Saturday 09.00 to 17.00

OU regional contacts

The Open University in London (Region 01)

020 7485 6596

london@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Greater London

The Open University in the South (Region 02)

01865 736032

south@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Channel Islands, Dorset, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Oxfordshire, part of Wiltshire

The Open University in the South West (Region 03)

0117 925 9336

south-west@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, Somerset, the Scilly Isles, most of Wiltshire

The Open University in the West Midlands (Region 04)

0121 426 3539

west-midlands@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Herefordshire, Shropshire, most of Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands, Worcestershire, British Forces Post Office (except Cyprus)

The Open University in the East Midlands (Region 05)

0115 962 5451
east-midlands@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Most of Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, part of Staffordshire (Burton-on-Trent area)

The Open University in the East of England (Region 06)

01223 364721
east-of-england@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk

The Open University in Yorkshire (Region 07)

0113 234 1225
yorkshire@open.ac.uk

Area covered

North, South and West Yorkshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, British Forces Post Office (Cyprus)

The Open University in the North West (Region 08)

0161 998 7007
north-west@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Cheshire, part of Derbyshire, the Isle of Man, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside

The Open University in the North (Region 09)

0191 284 1611
north@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Cumbria, Durham, Northumberland, Teesside, Tyne and Wear, the European Union (except the Republic of Ireland), Switzerland

The Open University in Wales (Region 10)

029 2066 5636
wales@open.ac.uk

Contact with this office can be in either English or Welsh.

Gallwch gysylltu â'r swyddfa hon yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

Area covered

Wales

The Open University in Scotland (Region 11)

0131 226 3851
scotland@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Scotland

The Open University in Ireland (Region 12)

028 9024 5025
ireland@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Ireland

The Open University in the South East (Region 13)

01342 322642
south-east@open.ac.uk

Area covered

Kent, Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex

Organisations for carers

Carers UK

The Carers UK website is a useful link for many kinds of information about help for carers. Their information page (www.carersuk.org/Information) includes the following:

- ▶ *Financial Help* lists and explains very clearly a wide range of benefits and allowances. It has a link to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) website enabling online application for some of these benefits.
- ▶ *Help with Caring* explains the impact of legislation on carers' rights.
- ▶ *Policy and Practice* will give you a more detailed explanation of legislation.

There are also links to the following topics: *Help in your Area*, *Caring and Working* and *Learning Opportunities*.

To contact the London branch of Carers UK please phone **020 7490 8818**

Other organisations of interest to carers

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers

Phone 020 7480 7788 (London office)
www.carers.org

For young carers

Phone 020 7480 7788 (London office)
www.youngcarers.net

Crossroads Caring for Carers

Phone 0845 450 0350
www.crossroads.org.uk

Working Families

Phone 020 7253 7243
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Useful book

The *Carer's Handbook* by Jane Matthews – information and support for all those in a caring role, How To Books, Oxford 2006, ISBN number 1845280962

Regional activities

Regional centres offer local activities and resources and you should contact your region for further information (see pages 18-19). For events near you, please see our website www.open.ac.uk/events

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