

OPENLEARN ANNUAL REPORT

2020/21



OpenLearn



WELCOME

The sustained visitor numbers to OpenLearn since the start of the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 has become our new normal. The adaptation to a more responsive and rapid production of topical content has been a reminder of the inspirational research and subject expertise that exists within The Open University. Shining a light on it on OpenLearn allows us to peep under the bonnet of academic endeavour across all subject areas, without readers requiring in-depth expertise to engage.

That is just one of the reasons why working on OpenLearn continues to be both a privilege and an addiction!

A great deal of data analysis has enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of our learners, particularly the group that found us during the pandemic. For these learners, OpenLearn has provided support during mental health and employment crises, for teachers reaching out to their students online for the first time, for younger learners keen to augment their studies, and for learners who are seeking to upskill or reskill for career development.

As well as widening brand awareness and introducing many thousands of new students to The Open University each year, OpenLearn remains consistent with its social mission including reaching those in low socio-economic groups. The mean reported UK household income of visitors using the site because of the COVID-19 pandemic is lower than OpenLearn visitors overall (see page 8).

The OpenLearn survey was also an opportunity to check that our content meets our audience's needs. So as we find ourselves in the throes of another busy year we are focussing our efforts on supporting digital skills, improving the mobile optimisation of the site and continuing to feed our specialist hubs.

We hope that you enjoy reading this report.

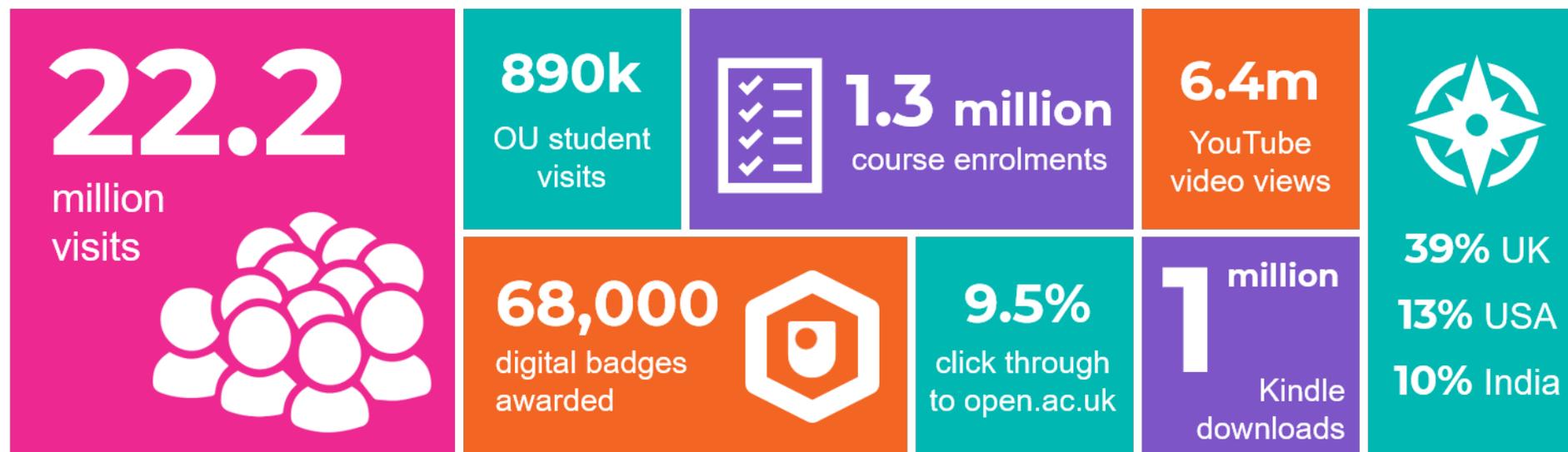
Patrina Law and Jane Roberts, Heads of OpenLearn

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1. 2020/21 HEADLINES



TOP FREE COURSES

- 1 [MSE's Academy of Money](#)
- 2 [Introduction to bookkeeping and accounting](#)
- 3 [Understanding autism](#)
- 4 [The science of nutrition and healthy eating](#)
- 5 [Forensic psychology](#)

TOP NON-COURSE CONTENT

- 1 [Do you have a photographic memory?](#) (Interactive)
- 2 [57 genders \(and none for me?\) – part two](#) (Article)
- 3 [The seven types of plastic](#) (Article)
- 4 [Hitler's rise and fall: timeline](#) (Article)
- 5 [What is technology](#) (Article)

TOP COLLECTIONS

- 1 [LGBTQ Hub](#)
- 2 [Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#)
- 3 [University Ready](#)
- 4 [Race and Ethnicity Hub](#)
- 5 [National Learning Hub for Volunteers](#)

VISITS TO NATION HUBS

Hub	Visits
OpenLearn Wales	5,100
OpenLearn Cymru	1,600
OpenLearn Scotland	2,500
OpenLearn Ireland	2,200

TOP YOUTUBE CONTENT

- 1 [The Silver Bridge disaster](#)
- 2 [What is shell shock? – Understanding shell shock](#)
- 3 [History of English \(combined\)](#)
- 4 [Shakespeare: Original pronunciation](#)
- 5 [Alkali metals in water – Chemical elements: properties and reactions](#)

Internal readers can find more detailed OpenLearn data on the [OpenLearn Impact Data](#) intranet page.

Data: 01.08.2020 – 31.08.2021

2. ABOUT OPENLEARN

OpenLearn attracts more than 14 million visitors each year from around the world. Whether it's a 60-second animated video or a 24-hour course you're after, you'll find it on www.openlearn.com for free.

Delivered by The Open University as part of its Royal Charter commitment to support the wellbeing of the community, OpenLearn has reached almost 100 million visitors since 2006. Our vision is to break down barriers to education through free educational resources, addressing access, lack of confidence, and cost. What started as a two-year experiment is now a core part of the OU family!



OUR CONTENT

OpenLearn is home to [over 1,000 courses](#), and more than 15,000 articles, interactive activities, podcasts and videos covering just about everything from [understanding homelessness](#) to the [exploration of Mars](#). Collections such as the [Race & Ethnicity Hub](#) bring together topical content for particular audiences or events. Everything on OpenLearn is free!

All of our learning material is written by academics and subject specialists who are experts in their field. This includes extracts from formal OU modules, academic research output, and bespoke items commissioned especially for OpenLearn.

Almost all content on OpenLearn is released under a [Creative Commons licence](#), meaning it can be shared and reused by educators around the world for free.

OUR LEARNERS

We are really proud to reach learners who traditionally face barriers to higher education. In 2020 14% of OpenLearn users considered themselves to have a disability; for 19% English is not their first spoken language, and 15% were unwaged and/or unable to work.¹

Each year thousands of OU students use OpenLearn to augment their formal studies, including completing their [new student induction](#), developing [study skills](#), researching their next module, or keeping their mind active between modules.

“Just signed up for a free OpenLearn course on recording music. Hopefully making use of the free courses will keep my brain in ‘uni mode’ during the break between modules!”

Rebecca Greenow, OpenLearn user

This year learners earned 535,000 free certificates and 68,000 free digital badges for completing OpenLearn courses.

OUR OTHER CHANNELS

The [OpenLearn YouTube channel](#) hosts over 1,700 bite-sized videos including our globally popular ‘60 second adventures’ in subjects such as philosophy, economics, history of English, astronomy and religion.

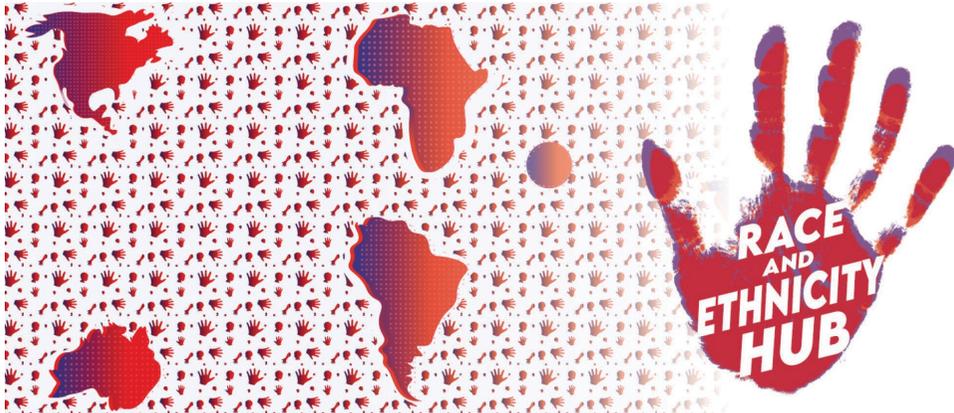
eBook versions of OpenLearn courses are available on [Amazon Kindle](#) and [Google Play](#).

You can also find us on [Facebook](#) (@ouopenlearn), [Twitter](#) (@oufreelearning) and [Instagram](#) (@openlearn).

¹ Responses to 2020 OpenLearn platform survey.

3. THE RACE AND ETHNICITY HUB

Following the success of the [Black History Month Hub](#), OpenLearn launched the much-anticipated [Race and Ethnicity Hub](#) in November 2020 to offer fresh perspectives on race, racism and ethnicity curated from across The Open University.



In the wake of the events across the world in 2020, it was felt that an Open University resource – created by experts across (and sometimes outside) the OU – should be developed with the support of the University’s Black and Minority Ethnic Network. The Hub is intended to be constantly evolving and growing, responding to current affairs and offering insight and thought-leadership. Its contents should be easily recognisable through the use of its logo, used on all media and reports concerning the Hub.

With a dedicated working group seeking contributions, and with content quickly volunteered from across the OU, the Hub already has more than 150 items. All the content featured during Black History Month 2020 can now be found here, alongside a host of new items that have been added over the last 8 months, ranging from articles on [The historical and ongoing persecution of Europe’s gypsies](#); to videos on [policing and racism in the UK](#); a free course on [the American Civil Rights Movement](#); and a badged course, [Youth justice in the UK: children, young people and crime](#).

Sas Amoah, Co-Chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Network and a Digital Media Producer in OpenLearn said: “This Hub will use our academic expertise and high-quality teaching to challenge assumptions and show different perspectives... the resources will help people to understand both historic and contemporary ideas of race and how these ideas can be used to better inform our decisions and interactions.

“So far, we’re delighted with the level of interest it’s receiving, as well as being really pleased with the quality and variety of the articles already submitted.”



Jane Roberts, Head of OpenLearn commented: “We are delighted that OpenLearn is the home of The Open University’s new Race and Ethnicity Hub. This has already proved a hugely popular and rewarding new addition to the site – one that gives a platform to new thinking and challenges preconceived ideas of race and ethnicity, and that can be built on and evolve for many years to come.”

4. OPENLEARN AND FORMAL STUDY



In addition to our informal learners, OpenLearn is also used by thousands of Open University students every year. As well as using OpenLearn to develop study skills, research their subject or next module, and for employability and career development, OpenLearn is increasingly embedded in the formal study experience. A number of modules require students to show evidence of completion of badged courses on OpenLearn as part of their formal module assessment, and many modules link to articles, videos and other OpenLearn material as part of students' study.



[Being an OU Student](#), the OU undergraduate induction course, had over 16,000 enrolments and over 6,000 completions in 2020/21.

Students who engage with this course are more likely to succeed in their formal study compared to those that don't engage.

NEW IN 2020/21

[Where to take your learning next](#) is for OpenLearn visitors thinking about taking their learning to the next level. It includes two short animations that give information about two possible routes into studying an Open University qualification: Access modules and the Level 1 module [Making your learning count](#) (YXM130), which allows students to count study from OpenLearn towards OU qualifications.

[Building confidence in using online forums](#), published in August 2020, is a course designed to support learners with building confidence in participating in online learning forums, as an important and rewarding part of their learning.



"I've completed the module and found it very useful. I fully intend to try to be more involved in the forum posts this year. I'm particularly conscious of it as we have a collaboration section at the end of ... my last uni module. I get put off commenting on forums due to worrying about what to write & saying the 'wrong' thing, combined with intimidation of how intelligent other students sound. The module has given me some useful ideas to manage these areas."

Learner on 'Building confidence in using online forums'

[Becoming an ethical researcher](#), published in October 2020, is a badged course which explores the ethics of planning, carrying out and reporting research which involves human participants. It is recommended for OU students studying the postgraduate module Learning and teaching: understanding your educational practice (EE831), and is also endorsed by the CPD Standards Office as evidence of continuing professional development.

The new Open University postgraduate module [Advance your independent learning](#) (YXM830) was introduced in 2021. A sister module to the undergraduate module [Making your learning count](#) (YXM130), it gives students the opportunity to advance their research skills whilst investigating a problem or topic of their interest, drawing on a variety of resources including Open Educational Resources on OpenLearn.

5. OPEN DOOR TO SUCCESS

A joint programme between The Open University, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus (JCP), was introduced to all of JCP's 750 offices across England, Scotland and Wales in November 2020 following a successful pilot scheme.

The Open Door to Success programme, designed to tackle common skills gaps with courses covering leadership, networking and career resilience, enables jobseekers and claimants to gain recognition of their existing skillsets and to build new skills to increase their employment opportunities. The [Open Door to Success](#) hub on OpenLearn includes free courses, content on careers advice and information on how to write a CV.



The rollout was supported by a number of OpenLearn and wider OU staff volunteering to mentor JCP's work coaches on the basics of using OpenLearn. This included support on creating accounts and enrolling on courses, as well as giving advice on how to make the most of OpenLearn and the new hub.



The feedback has been positive, with JCP staff 'enthusiastic about its potential as a resource' to help jobseekers. The programme has also attracted some attention in the local community, with other local businesses and partners such as Unilever, Fulham Football Club and Kingston Adult Education now also actively endorsing and promoting the initiative.

As part of this ongoing collaboration, a second curated site to address the particular needs of the new Government [Kickstart](#) programme, focused on 18-24 year old jobseekers, was added to OpenLearn in early 2021. This collection of courses allows learners to enhance their digital and employability skills to suit any industry placement; to plug any skills gaps; build confidence; and will help younger people transition into their next job, create a business or continue to explore learning pathways open to them.



Simon Tindall, Head of New Business at The Open University said: "We know that the skills gap is very much a long-term problem, so this is a further step towards making training available to everyone for free. The growth of the Open Door to Success scheme gave everyone the encouragement to introduce Kickstart, and we very much hope to see some real-life success stories on the back of it very shortly."

6. THE OPENLEARN AUDIENCE

In November-December 2020 we conducted the 5th OpenLearn platform survey to find out more about who our audience is, what their motivations are, and their desires for learning. We received more than 6,600 responses, including more than 800 from Open University students. A summary of some key findings from the survey is shown here.

DEMOGRAPHICS



14% of OpenLearn users consider themselves to have a disability



For 19% English is not their first spoken language



85% of UK respondents were white, 10% were BAME, 5% preferred not to say



14% were aged under 25, 27% 26-45, 44% 46-65, 13% 66+

“A lot of my friends are in the same position as me at this time, the OpenLearn courses are a great way to enrich your life, whether it be improving study skills, for future employment or just for personal interest. There are a wide range of courses that I would say cater for everyone, especially on low income, who would find it impossible to find the funds at this time.”

COVID-19



51% said that Covid-19 influenced their decision to study on OpenLearn



27% used OpenLearn to support their mental health

“There are lots of people suffering with mental health problems during COVID 19. The courses I have read have taken my mind from the present situation and I've become more positive about the wonders of life. I recommend that people should try the courses.”

EDUCATION AND WORK



53% are employed
13% are students
15% are unwaged and/or unable to work



36% of those in employment in the UK had a household income **under £25,000**



51% do not have a degree



10% are currently working as a teacher or trainer in 'school education'

“I'm a primary teacher and have humanities as my subject lead so I took a few free courses to support my subject knowledge and ideas for planning and teaching in the classroom. I became quite addicted to them and thoroughly enjoyed doing them during the lockdown. Thank you.”

OU STUDENTS



51% used OpenLearn to study or research their subject before joining their course



59% have more confidence about their study skills due to OpenLearn



51% feel more motivated to learn due to OpenLearn



32% used OpenLearn to upskill or reskill for career development

“When I tell people I am an OU student & they seem interested in becoming one too, I send them to OpenLearn. I explain that it gives an excellent example of what to expect from course materials. I know at least 2 people have enrolled with the OU due to this.”

Survey findings inform OpenLearn commissioning strategy, IT development and academic outputs. Internal readers can [access the full survey report](#) on the Intranet.

7. RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

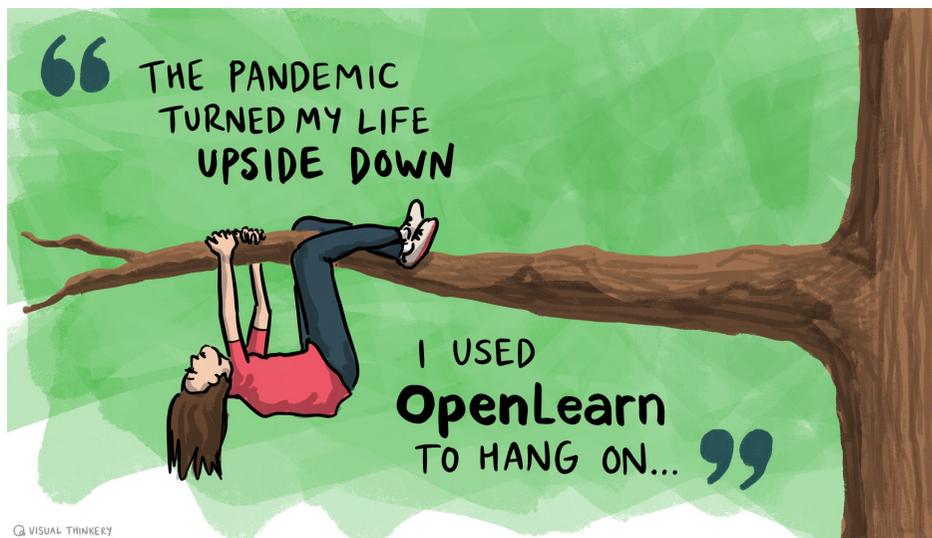
OpenLearn's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has continued throughout 2020/21. [Last year's annual report](#) detailed the huge increase in visitor numbers in the early months of the pandemic, and how the team responded to the needs of learners by creating relevant content quickly and supporting teachers and students of all ages in adapting to a distance learning model.

One of the most notable developments in 2020/21 was the creation of four new [home learning hubs aimed at students aged 16-18](#). Academics from each Open University faculty worked with the OpenLearn team to select content suited to the needs of these students, and the hubs were gathered into one central resource designed to serve student needs throughout the pandemic and beyond.



In April 2020 five OpenLearn courses were selected as part of the launch of the Department for Education's National Careers Service [Skills Toolkit](#) – a collection of tools and resources to help those in England affected by coronavirus. In September 2020 this was increased to 19 courses and, by November 2021, this has accounted directly for almost 50,000 course enrolments.

We have continued to publish content on the Coronavirus and surrounding issues, and two further hubs were curated to support [primary school teachers](#) and [teaching assistants](#) with free resources both during the pandemic and beyond.



8. AWARDS

Such was the impact of OpenLearn's response to the pandemic, it was recently named as winner of the Open Resilience Award, in the [OE Global 2021 Open Education Awards for Excellence](#). The award recognised OpenLearn's exemplary leadership and open educational practices implemented in the context of COVID-19, as it "built on its pioneering experience in distance learning at scale to empower more than 2.7 million people to enrol and learn through free online courses. It also cemented [The Open University's] reputation as a global pioneer in distance learning and showcased its academics' cutting-edge research."

OpenLearn's ['Intimate not Intimidated: It's Time to Talk about Sex and Disability'](#) film was another award-winner, winning in the Educational Film (University) category at the [Learning on Screen Awards](#); while the film, ['The Language of Lying'](#) won the [MEDEA Award 2020](#) – an annual award which recognises and celebrates the very best in educational media from across Europe.

OpenLearn's contribution has been instrumental in The Open University's shortlisted nomination for [Times Higher Education University of the Year](#).



9. SPOTLIGHTS

There's so much that we are proud of from 2020/21, we can't fit it all in! Here's just a small selection of items we created this year that we want to share with you – it was very hard to narrow it down, so don't forget you can always find our [latest content](#) and [most popular content](#) collated on OpenLearn too.

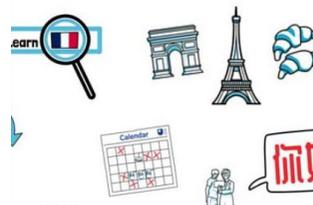


[LGBTQ Hub](#) | Collection | January 2021

A collection of free resources exploring sexuality and LGBTQ+ history across the core Open University faculty areas. First created to recognise LGBTQ+ History Month in February 2021, the collection continues to grow and currently includes 31 articles, activities and videos.

[Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#) | Collection | June 2021

The Open Centre is a collection of free taster courses in a range of languages and communication-related subjects. It features a series of three beginner level courses in each of five languages: Chinese, Spanish, French, German and Italian, each with a suggested learning time of 6-8 hours.



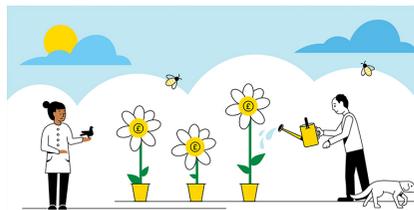
[No sex please, we're British!](#) | Interactive | January 2021



There have been major changes in sexual attitudes over the years, but what are the views of the 'average' British person in terms of sex? Try our sexual attitudes interactive, based on research by The National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), to see how your views compare to the majority.

[Retirement planning made easy](#) | Short course | August 2020

ReStudio, Getty Images



Legal & General to support people with planning a financially secure retirement.

Planning your retirement is probably the most important aspect of financial planning for you to consider. Making the right decisions and building a sound financial plan can help to ensure that you have the quality of life in retirement that you aspire to. This course was produced in collaboration with

[Beyond belief: talking to the dead](#) | Interactive | May 2021

Are paranormal experiences real? Can being 'spiritual' help with the way you feel about death, dying and grief? This award-nominated film interactive delves into spiritual healing and your views on life after death.



[Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing](#) | Badged course | October 2020

Olga Enger, Shutterstock.com



Children's mental health is a global concern, which is reflected in the impressive enrolment numbers for this new badged open course that focuses on the mental health and wellbeing of babies and young children (aged 0–8 years), and its importance in the modern world.

[Understanding ADHD](#) | Short course | March 2021



This course explores the experience of ADHD from the perspective of those who are diagnosed with the condition, and those who care for them, covering the contribution of scientific research to understanding ADHD, with a focus on treatments and therapies. This

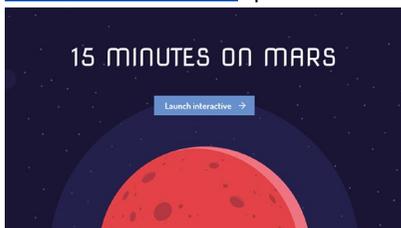
OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University module Brain, mind and mental health (SK298).

[The ethics of cultural heritage](#) | Short course | August 2020

How much should we pay to restore the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris? In wartime, how should soldiers make decisions when they are forced to choose between protecting cultural heritage and protecting human beings? Through several fascinating case studies these theoretical questions are grounded in real-world examples, addressing the single puzzle at the core: how can we compare the value of cultural heritage with the value of human life?

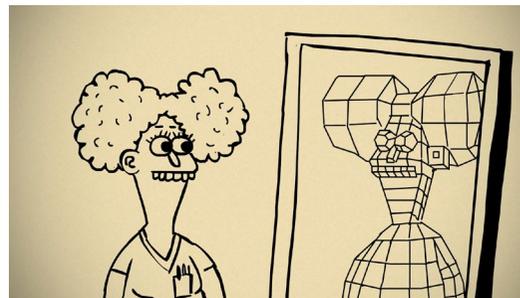


[15 minutes on Mars](#) | Interactive | October 2020



In this interactive, you can explore the geology of Mars and find out what the future holds for the planet. Will humans ever step foot on Mars? Will we find evidence of life? This family-friendly interactive is the way to find out.

[60 second adventures in artificial intelligence](#) | Animations | July 2021



The '60 second animations' series has been expanded with the addition of this series of 4 short films on artificial intelligence (AI). Topics include how AI works and how it is used in science, with all animations once again narrated by comedian, author and presenter, David Mitchell.

[Rare diseases: low numbers, high impact](#) | Article | February 2021

The article aims to explain rare diseases (of which there are an amazing 7,000) and raise awareness of these fascinating and devastating conditions. It was written to celebrate Rare Diseases Day, which occurs annually on the last day of February – meaning every four years it appropriately takes place on the rarest day of all!



Rare Disease UK

[University Ready](#) | Collection | May 2021



The bilingual University Ready hub was created in partnership with the Welsh Government and all nine of the Wales-based universities to support students who are embarking on their university journey during a period of uncertainty and after disruption to their A-levels during the pandemic. It has also

inspired further collections for students in [Northern Ireland](#), [England and Scotland](#).

“I’ve done some OpenLearn courses and other MOOCs but be careful, they can be an entry drug to harder substances. I started with these and now I’m taking an online degree in Astronomy so be warned!”

Peter Cooper, OpenLearn learner

“OpenLearn is the reason why I’ve enrolled for OU study, the resources are incredible and I’m always telling everyone about them 😊”

Beth O’Shaughnessy, OpenLearn learner

“I didn’t know about OpenLearn until this year, but I’ve found it to be an amazing source for learning different things and figuring out what field of interest I might be interested in doing.”

David Lucey, OpenLearn learner

“Love these courses! Highly recommend for anyone – there’s so many topics, I’m sure everyone will find something for themselves :)”

Kay Aloe, OpenLearn Learner



FIND OUT MORE

www.openlearn.com | www.open.ac.uk/about/open-educational-resources | [Open Media & Informal Learning Intranet](#) (Internal only)

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