

Virtual MPhil provides online support to postgraduate research community

A NEW Virtual MPhil is giving postgraduate Computing research students continual online support with access to other students, supervisors and experts working internationally in the same field.

The pilot degree, launched in October, is completely online giving research students coherent support to their study and an opportunity to develop their own research and problem-solving skills.

It also enables them to tackle research problems of their choosing, under the supervision and guidance of experienced researchers.

Choice of different technologies

The Virtual MPhil offers a choice of different technologies in order to work collaboratively with other students and experts in a virtual graduate school. This creates a distributed research community of supervisors, peer students, and researchers and academics with a shared interest in the subject matter.

The programme is particularly relevant to students who intend to progress to a PhD as well as IT professionals who are looking to boost their knowledge and skills.

In order to gain an MPhil, a student's research should make a distinct contribution to scholarship in a specific field.

Dr Lucia Rapanotti and Dr Leonor Barroca, Senior Lecturers in the Department of Computing have led the project for the past 18 months with Dr Maria Vargas-Vera, also a Computing Lecturer.

Dr Rapanotti said: "The hardest part of studying for a part-time research degree is the isolation and often a student's only interaction is with their supervisor.

"They are often in full-time work and our international students cannot afford to come to the OU for a workshop or a chat, and that increases the isolation.

"If you do not feel part of a community, it is very easy to become side-tracked or demotivated. It is a big commitment.



The three OU academics as their Deep Think avatar selves on Second Life

"Virtual MPhil students will benefit from a more coherent approach"

"If we improve the reach we will increase the number of research students and improve their research experience. We have created an infrastructure which can be used for any discipline."

Among the technologies available to students are online Elluminate Live! classrooms and a virtual Second Life campus called Deep Think to complement popular online tools like Skype calls and Ning social networks.

Among the islands on the Deep Think Second Life development are a study island with special purpose meeting spaces, common rooms and exhibition facilities; a

library island for accessing resources for study and research; a sandbox for scripting activities; and a central island with a main auditorium and smaller lecture theatres.

Dr Barroca added: "The OU has a large community of part-time external research students and some of them have very few opportunities to visit the campus, so a lot of these technologies are being used across the University.

"However, the Virtual MPhil students will benefit from a more coherent approach, that not only supports the relationship between supervisors and students, but also provides an environment for the development of research skills which have been mostly only available through sessions which external students cannot attend."

More information about this programme can be found at www.virtualmphil.open.ac.uk/

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Ruth Brooks

Student Services Manager

THE STUDENT Support Review could be a way to open up an array of career possibilities for students in the world of sports and fitness, according to Ruth Brooks (pictured right), a Student Services Manager (Younger Students and Careers) based in Cardiff.

Ruth is part of a new team that has been established to work on one of the Student Support Review pilot projects: providing a pathway of support to students taking courses in the new Foundation Degree in *Sports and fitness* (G10), which began last year.

Her role involves providing career support and guidance to all students on the courses – not just those in Wales, which would be her usual area of support.

"What this role has done has made me aware of how much activity and how many job roles there are in sports and fitness," said Ruth, who has been with the OU for two years. "I have been getting more familiar with the sector which is enormous.

The number of people involved is massive and it is one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK encompassing coaching as well as sport and fitness.

2010 Olympics

"There are lots of volunteers and organisations found in this area. It is becoming increasingly important because of the 2012 Olympics; the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow; and, perhaps most important of all, because sport and fitness has been brought on to the UK Health agenda as one of the means to tackle childhood obesity."

Focusing on a particular degree as part of the Student Support Review is a departure for OU careers advisors such as Ruth who are generalists.

Across the OU there is a student services manager with responsibility for careers in every region and nation and their brief is to provide advice, guidance and information

to their students about any possible opportunity path arising from their studies.

As a consequence of her role as a careers adviser within the OU, Ruth is a member of the heads of Welsh Higher Education Careers Services and has ensured that the OU has become a partner in GO Wales, the all-Wales graduate placement scheme. In addition, she represents this group on the Research, Innovation and Engagement Committee of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

Ruth also has the role of an educational advisor in addition to her work with the Careers Advisory Service, and is involved with course choice and study skills enquiries.

She said: "It is a cliché but every day is different. Often students know what they don't want to do and they know that a degree is a good thing to have, but they have not really analysed why it is a good thing – through no fault of their own.



"We live in a society that relies on qualifications but we have to manage expectations. A qualification is not an end in itself. Often it is about what they can bring to their current role by using the skills they have gained through study.

"The solution may be on their doorstep. So the careers adviser's role is more than providing a job information Service, it is about trying to encourage people to reflect upon themselves and see how higher education is changing them in the broadest sense."