OpenLearn:

2023 in Review

The Open University | OpenLearn

Welcome

It is always an overwhelming task to review and celebrate the achievements of the pan-university team at The Open University who continue to develop OpenLearn each year – it's hard to keep up! This Review spotlights just a few of the 180 new courses, articles, videos and activities that have been developed across the whole curriculum and the data that surrounds them.

Whilst developing new content is educational to us all as a team, there's much that goes on behind scenes that complements OpenLearn production that isn't a product of research or university curriculum. For example, the IT development and infrastructure is a labour of love, working to bring out the best for our learners in terms of user experience, keeping up with industry standards and thinking big about how we can better develop the platform to support learners.

Data analytics and communications also drive our business of knowing who our learners are and finding new ways of reaching those who are hard to reach. Our Facebook activity exemplifies the way we are able to find people who might not have otherwise searched for free learning or identified a need of their own to personally or professionally develop themselves. Short articles and fun educational activities are a great way to reach out and open a door to free learning that we know supports mental health, as well as professional and personal development.

We also share the responsibility of updating old material, retiring whole courses and activities that have been superseded and responding to hundreds of learner queries. Taking a moment to breathe in and reflect on the platform as a whole, its reach and the impact it has had over the years is profoundly fascinating and joyful. We hope you enjoy some of the highlights in this review!

Dr Patrina Law, Head of OpenLearn
Jane Roberts, Head of OpenLearn

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About OpenLearn

OpenLearn is the home of free learning from The Open University. With over 15,000 hours of online courses and content available to all, absolutely free. The site attracts millions of visitors each year, giving learners the opportunity to explore a range of subjects, and build skills and confidence.

The award-winning learning platform offers thousands of short courses, articles, videos and educational interactives. No matter what you're after, you'll find it on OpenLearn for free. You can get a quick introduction to OpenLearn in our animation here.

Our vision is to break down barriers to education through free educational resources, addressing access, lack of confidence, and cost.

Our content

OpenLearn is home to around 900 courses, and more than 8,000 articles, interactive activities, podcasts and videos covering just about everything from space exploration to Agatha Christie. Collections such as the Race & Ethnicity Hub and The Women's World Cup 2023 bring together topical content in one location.

All our material is created by Open University academics and subject specialists who are experts in their various fields. Content on OpenLearn includes extracts from formal Open University 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, reused and adapted by educators and organisations around the world for free.

Our learners

We are really proud to reach learners who traditionally face barriers to higher education. In a recent study 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.

This year learners earned 357,000 free certificates and 44,000 free digital badges for completing OpenLearn courses. Hear directly from our learners in our collection Why I study with OpenLearn.

Our other channels

The OpenLearn YouTube channel hosts over 1,800 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.

You can also find us on:
Facebook (@ouopenlearn)
Twitter (@oufreelearning)

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[1] Responses to 2020 OpenLearn platform survey.

2023 Headline Data

9.2
million visits
to OpenLearn

3.5
million YouTube
video views

150k
Kindle
downloads

51%
UK

945k
course
enrolments

48k
digital badges
issued

10%
US

7%
India

OpenLearn awarded its 250,000th free digital badge to learners in May. The badges are the first and only Open Educational Resource (OERs) with digital recognition. They are a recognition of professional development and commitment to studies.

Top free courses

1. Introduction to bookkeeping and accounting
2. Everyday English 1
3. Understanding autism
4. MSE's Academy of Money
5. Understanding ADHD

Top non-course content

1. Do you have a photographic memory?
2. 57 genders (and none for me?)
3. Hitler's rise and fall: timeline
4. Are you a super recogniser?
5. 12 famous Confucius quotes on education and learning

Top YouTube content

1. The Silver Bridge disaster
2. The history of English
3. Shakespeare: Original pronunciation
4. Alkali metals in water - Chemical elements: properties and reactions
5. Finance: The History of Money

Our Nation-specific hubs

OpenLearn Ireland

OpenLearn Scotland

OpenLearn Wales

OpenLearn Cymru

CPD 'Points' for Learning

All 24-hour badged courses available on OpenLearn have successfully completed a Continuing Professional Development Standards Office (CPDSO) assessment process and have been awarded [CPDSO accreditation](), each course equating to 24 CPD points. On successful completion of these courses, learners will be awarded a digital badge, and a free printable Statement of Participation which provides evidence of CPD accredited learning.

Being part of the CPD Standards Office 'points' offering is important to our learners and to our students. Offering over 77 free badged courses with CPDSO accreditation status has enabled us to further contribute to professional development opportunities for everyone, with no fee required.

We know our learners love badged courses in particular as a means of recognising self-directed learning achievements and subject mastery, and with the endorsement of this national scheme, it not only provides increased visibility for OpenLearn, but another important marker for employers to recognise and feel confident in their employees' achievements.

Dr Patrina Law, Head of OpenLearn

OpenLearn Platform Developments

Throughout 2023 we have continued to invest in developing OpenLearn, including moving to a fully Moodle site architecture and improvements to user experience including:

- Making it easier to add new languages and alphabets to OpenLearn.
- Making key statistics for courses and articles more easily available.
- Improving usability in several areas of the website: ratings, mobile experience of courses and articles, and header titles.
- Changes to improve our carbon footprint such as reducing the file sizes of banner images.

Race and Ethnicity Hub

Now in its third year, OpenLearn's Race and Ethnicity Hub has reached a milestone, publishing more than 200 pieces of content.
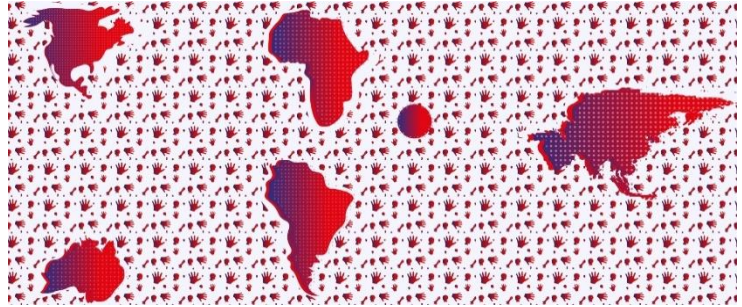
The award-winning Hub contains hundreds of articles, videos, courses and podcasts which offer fresh perspectives on race, racism and ethnicity. The Hub was created to collate expertise on race and ethnicity, from the OU and beyond, not only for general learning and personal interest but to directly inform all OU staff and to support Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic staff on topics that might affect their wellbeing and mental health. The Hub continues to fulfil its original aim, reflecting current events and attitudes as an evolving and ever-growing resource.

It's such a great milestone to have reached 200 pieces of content, particularly as much of what we host was created specifically for OpenLearn. We're grateful that so many people both inside and out of The Open University have recognised the need for such a space and developed documentaries, articles and animations for the Hub. Hopefully, this milestone will be one of many as it continues to grow, educate and support staff and students both within and outside the OU.

Sas Amoah, Co-Chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Network

Hub Highlights

Introducing Black leadership | Course
Created to develop skills that empower individuals as leaders, this course explores the challenges and possibilities of Black leadership, promoting competence and confidence in a wide variety of contexts.

Unsung Women Who Shaped the Blues | Article
Often associated with male pioneers, Blues is a musical genre that has been influenced by women. This article shines a spotlight on three women who shaped the genre: Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

Our Partnerships

Each year OpenLearn delivers dozens of projects with continuing and new external partners. 2023 has seen us work with a range of partners to deliver free learning, including:

Campaign for Learning

Learning at Work Week promotes the importance of a learning culture in the work environment. The thousands of courses, articles and interactives on OpenLearn, alongside the free webinar _The benefits of digital badges to you, your staff and your business,_ were used to support Learning at Work Week activities.

British Business Bank

A partnership designed to help UK businesses get off the ground and stay there has continued this year, particularly those who may find it difficult to get traditional business loans. A range of courses have been identified that provide vital information for anyone that's new to being their own boss, or who are would-be business owners considering taking the plunge.

The OpenLearn Team

Spotlights

Here is a small selection of achievements and items we have created this year that we want to share with you. As always, it is very hard to narrow down the wealth of content we've created across the year to share in this report. You can always find our latest and most popular content collated on OpenLearn.


Resources for Ukrainians settling in the UK & Ireland - Winner | Open Resilience Award
This translated content for Ukrainians won a global award that honours practices that have found the best ways of overcoming adversity.

What does it mean, to be a man? | Activity
Beliefs about what makes a 'real' man have changed enormously over time. This activity explores what it means to be a man in the twenty-first century.
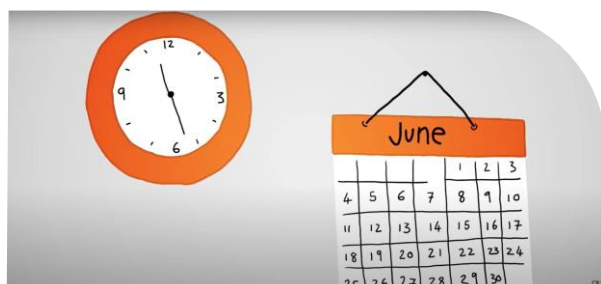
Study skills: one-minute tips | Animation
Check out our series of one-minute study skills animations which explore revision tips, beating procrastination, what's involved in a remote exam and other essential skills for success.

Agatha Christie and the golden age of detective fiction | Free course
This course examines one of Christie's most significant works and explores the evolution of British detective fiction.

Is 'Barbenheimer' going to save cinema? | Article
Did the social media hype around the release of 'Barbie' and 'Oppenheimer' save the box office during a difficult time for the industry?

Creativity and artificial intelligence | Animation
Is artificial intelligence capable of being creative? This animation and associated article explore the meaning of 'creativity'.

Young children, the outdoors and nature | Badged course

This course looks at the importance of babies and toddlers having opportunities to engage with rich outdoor environments, introducing the benefits of outdoor engagement.

COVID-19: Immunology, vaccines and epidemiology | Free course

This course explains how antibodies protect against viral infections and how the incidence of antibodies can be used to track an epidemic.


The Women's World Cup 2023 | Collection

To celebrate the biggest sporting event in the Women's Football calendar we published a selection of content offering an insight into the challenges faced by female footballers as well as articles on women in sport.


How to make the best of your digital badge | Article

As OpenLearn was preparing to issue its 250,000th digital badge this year, we reflected on their history, meaning to learners, and how to make the best of earning one.
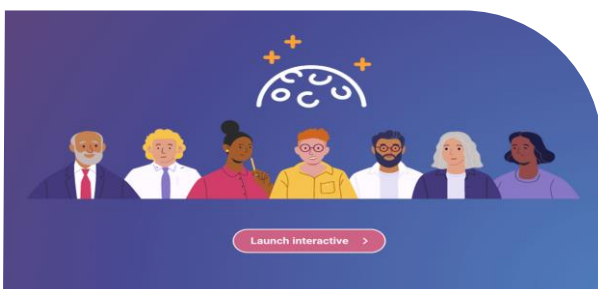
Space: to boldly, but cautiously, go | Activity

Space exploration is full of possibilities, especially when searching for signs of life. What lies behind the decisions that are taken to design and run a space exploration mission?
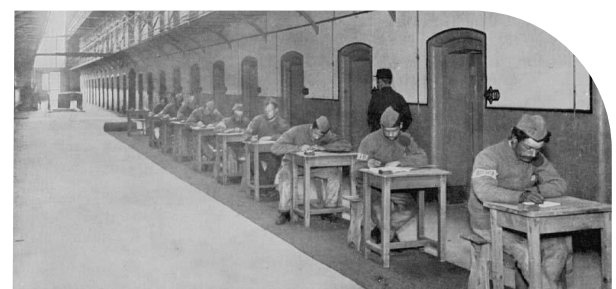
Understanding the historical prison discipline of silence and separation | Mini documentary

The second video in a nine-part documentary series linked to our free course *Exploring the history of prisoner education.*