



**LEARNING  
& TEACHING**  
SPECIAL EDITION

October/November 2012

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Eastwood

## YOUR BUZZ

Next edition 12 December 2012

Copy deadline 16 November 2012

Contact us

[university-buzz@bham.ac.uk](mailto:university-buzz@bham.ac.uk)

Buzz online

[www.buzz.bham.ac.uk](http://www.buzz.bham.ac.uk)

Follow us on Twitter

<http://twitter.com/buzzunibham>

Find us on Facebook

[www.facebook.com/buzzunibham](http://www.facebook.com/buzzunibham)



Edited by Kate Pritchard

[k.pritchard@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.pritchard@bham.ac.uk)

Your details

Please let us know if you want extra copies of Buzz or if you think we need to amend your distribution details.

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the University or a statement of University policy. The publication of advertisements does not imply any endorsement by the University of the goods or services advertised. All submissions may be subject to editing. The Editor's decision is final.

Front cover image:

Professor Karen O'Brien,  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education

# Vice-Chancellor's View

As Abraham Lincoln said, *'we cannot escape history'*.

Nowhere is this truer than when we reflect on the current structure of the curriculum at our leading universities.

In the 1990s, almost all of the traditional universities embarked on a process of modularisation. This was driven by what was then seen as a series of external imperatives: a desire to promote flexibility in student learning, the perceived value of systems of credit accumulation and transfer, an externally-imposed model of progression within university degree programmes, and a belief (which turns out to be misplaced), that curriculum modularisation would facilitate both the rationalisation of teaching and better student learning.

In modularising the traditional universities reflected practice which had been current in the new universities and overseen by the Council for National Academic Awards. They were also aligning themselves with the process that was well underway in GCSE and A Level examinations. The future was bright, the future was flexible, and the future was modular.

At the time many had reservations about the process. In retrospect a number of the key assumptions which drove modularisation have turned out to be ill-founded, and, whatever the merits of modularised curricula, the way in which these were developed was, to say the least, curious. In essence, what occurred was a process in which curricula were modularised without being in any significant sense redesigned. What happened in many universities was that the old wine of long-matured programmes was poured into the new wine skins of a nominally-modularised curriculum. In the process a degree of rationalisation was achieved, there was some modest reflection on standards and progression, and there was perhaps a modest increase in student choice and flexibility.

The problems with the process were, however, far more profound. Formal notions of 'progression' subverted more discipline-specific understandings of the

way in which student understanding developed and subject and knowledge was built. At the same time, synoptic assessment through end of year and end of degree examinations gave way to a much more broken-backed approach both to learning and assessment. Student learning became presented in short, quasi-freestanding modules and then assessed immediately. As a result, though knowledge and a degree of technical understanding could be assessed, deeper subject knowledge and the ability to synthesise began to elude examination.

Over the past few years, sustained effort has gone into refining the way in which modularised curricula operate and modular assessment is conducted. We have, through perhaps a less than ideal system, retained much of the integrity of undergraduate education and university teachers have become adept at ways in rebuilding programme coherence into what had been rather balkanised curricula.

What, in retrospect, was perhaps regrettable about the way in which the Higher Education Sector modularised was less the model that we all chose to embrace but rather the motivation for modularisation.

It was, in many ways, driven by external pressures and rather abstract notions of how students chose and learned, rather than by self confident universities exercising their right both to prescribe their curricula and determine the most appropriate modes of assessment.

Against this backdrop, our University's commitment to a major curriculum review is both welcome and timely. As a leading university which prides itself on the quality and centrality of student education, we are now embarked on a review which will look afresh at the way in which we construct our degree programmes, the way in which we combine deep subject knowledge with wider understanding, the ways in which

we facilitate not just simply subject learning but the development of ancillary and appropriate skills, and the way in which we link the process of student learning and reflection with appropriate and rigorous forms of assessment.

Given the landscape in which we operate there are, of course, constraints on the process some flowing from resources and others from the need to maintain a degree of symmetry between the Birmingham experience and programmes elsewhere. That said, we should use the curriculum review to free ourselves to think rigorously and creatively, and thus commit ourselves to developing an approach to undergraduate education at Birmingham which is at once distinctive and rigorous.

This is a genuinely open process, and the review will come forward with its recommendations in due course. We have already had exciting discussions at Senate and in the committees of Senate which are shaping and overseeing the process. The prize is now within our grasp if we can evolve a 'Birmingham model' which will distinguish us in important ways from the rather homogenised structures which developed in the mid-late 1990s. This, when coupled to a remodelled approach to assessment and our commitment to moving towards a grade point average as a richer description of student achievement, places us in the vanguard of innovation.

Autonomy is at the heart of successful universities. Nowhere is university autonomy more clearly defined than in the ability of universities to prescribe their own academic programmes and assess student achievement in ways they think most appropriate. Of course we are accountable for what we do to our students, to wider disciplinary communities, to professional bodies, and to the society we serve. Nevertheless, that accountability should not lead us to slavish conformity nor should it enslave us to modish and often fleeting fashions. **If we embrace what the curriculum review has to offer, what emerges will, I am persuaded, make Birmingham a beacon of the very best.**

*Professor David Eastwood,  
Vice-Chancellor*

## comment on buzz

Share your views and feedback on any of the content in this edition of Buzz. Visit [intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/buzz](http://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/buzz) to leave your comment and read what others are saying.

## Celebrating teaching excellence

The Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD) works in partnership with colleagues across the University to encourage and enhance the development of a distinctive 'Birmingham' approach to the academic curriculum and experience.

CLAD promotes, and celebrates excellent teaching and student learning support with a wide range of development and training opportunities and the annual Awards for Excellence in Teaching or Supporting Student Learning.

The awards scheme has been running for six years at Birmingham, and not only provides an ideal opportunity to celebrate staff who teach and support student learning, but also gives an insight into some of the inspiring and innovative individuals and initiatives across the University.

The awards raise the profile of learning and teaching activity in Colleges, Schools, and Corporate Services and the individuals and teams that are at the forefront of enhancing the educational experience for students at Birmingham. At the beginning of each calendar year, Schools and Colleges are asked to invite award nominations from students and staff, and to convene a panel to consider these. Prizes are awarded by each Head of College and Head of School, with an overall award for Personal Tutor of the Year. Prizes can be awarded to both individuals and teams who have displayed excellence in teaching, or student learning support.

CLAD help to celebrate the achievements of all award recipients with a celebratory event held during

the annual Teaching and Learning Conference each June. The conference forms part of the wide range of events and workshops that CLAD provide for personal and professional learning and teaching development. Now entering its 10th year the Conference provides an opportunity for staff from across the University to share their experiences and learn about developments in teaching and learning, both on and off campus.

### Learn more

For further details on learning and teaching awards and CLAD training, support and guidance visit [intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/claddivision](http://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/claddivision)



# Learning and Teaching

*Special Edition*

It is a great pleasure to introduce this **special issue of Buzz** which you will find packed with information about recent improvements to education and learning spaces at our university, along with career stories and activities of the academic and support staff who are making such a difference.



Professor Karen O'Brien,  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education

This is genuinely an exciting time to be involved with students. University teaching has not been so high on the national agenda for many years, and, as we are often reminded, now has its rightful place alongside research and knowledge transfer as key charitable objects of universities. The undergraduates and postgraduates who have just arrived this Autumn have high expectations of us, and we of ourselves.

This summer's greatly improved National Student Survey results demonstrated that we are travelling in the right direction, and gave us insight into what our undergraduate students think of us. The results tell us that we still have quite a way to go to close the gap between what students expect of the assessment process and what we try to make of it, that we really do need to carry on investing in learning resources (including a new library), and that academic support at a more individual level is highly valued but sometimes lacking. But above all, with an overall score of 90 for Teaching (placing us joint fourth on this measure in the Russell Group), the results tell us that we have a huge talent pool of inspiring and motivating teachers. Reading through all the free text comments for the NSS and also for the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of rave reviews for committed, kind and brilliant teachers. Nothing else attracts more student comment, nothing else

comes close to mattering as much as this. The energy and talent of our teaching staff is our most important learning resource, and the foundation upon which we are building a resurgence of confidence in teaching excellence at Birmingham.

The College Directors of Education and School Heads of Education, along with programme leads, welfare tutors and directors of studies, have been an influential leadership group for educational enhancement. We have been trying, in the last year, to coordinate and to share information in a more systematic way. We have created the new Education Matters area of the intranet where all staff and Guild sabbatical officers can access information about initiatives, committee decisions, new policies and codes of practice. 2011–12 was certainly a year of new educational initiatives, just as 2012–13 will be a year of implementation, following through and evaluation.

As Donna Lee explains in this issue, the University appointed Donna as Senior Tutor and overhauled the rules and expectations surrounding personal tutoring. Understanding the value that students place upon a 1:1 relationship with an academic staff member who knows their name, takes an interest in their progress and supports them in their academic studies, we have produced a new code of practice on Personal Tutoring and a guidance booklet

for personal tutors. Allied to this, there will be, for the first time, a university-wide Transition Review in weeks 4 and 5 of the Spring term. The Review will re-induct undergraduate students into the resources and opportunities offered by the University – recognising that much of the information they are given swirls past them when they first arrive – and will include a key meeting with personal tutors to take stock of how well students have made the transition from school/college to university (or, in the case of direct entry students, from another university to ours). Allied to this, we have also opened a Skills Centre in the Library providing individual support and group sessions in key skills of academic writing and mathematics. The Centre will grow and develop as the year goes on, and is designed to offer supplementary support both to students and to those academics who need someone to whom they can refer their students for a brush-up or some extra tuition in some of those basic skills.

The Skills Centre grew out of two pilot projects which ran last year with funding from the Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD). As Nicola Taylor explains in this issue, the Academic Writing Advisory Service, funded by CLAD, was a runaway success in CAL and provided a good model for a more extended, university-wide offer. In Maths support, the national HE STEM Programme (funded by HEFCE



and coordinated at Birmingham) has already helped to set up a large number of Maths Support Centres nationally. Michael Grove, the Programme's Director, explains in this issue how he helped to bring this model to Birmingham.

CLAD is still relatively new and is developing as a main support unit for teaching innovation and enhancement at Birmingham. It works alongside the well established Learning Spaces unit, the only one of its kind in the country, recently responsible for the magnificent refurbishment of the Learning Centre. CLAD's core functions are to deliver e-learning support, to teach the PGCert for new academic staff and to offer continuing professional development opportunities, and also to provide essential training for Postgraduate Teaching Assistants. This training has been greatly enhanced this year, enabling us to give our postgraduate researchers career-building opportunities to teach, demonstrate and to assess. CLAD also has generous teaching enhancement funds which we use to drive change and sponsor innovation in the academy. All staff are eligible to apply for small project funding and, since last year, there has been a 'student-led' project fund (now up to £2,000) to support collaborations between staff and students. Unsurprisingly, this fund has generated some of the best ideas. A striking number of staff projects have been concerned with the lecture format, chipping away at some of its hard edges. Like most universities, we are a long way (in terms of estate, timetable, staffing etc.) from being able to declare the death of the lecture, but we are certainly moving away from the old idea of the lecture as a process of knowledge transmission and frantic student note-taking. Numerous projects have shown how we can 'invert' and 'flip' the lecture, how we can pre-podcast the lecture in ways that

free up the lecture hour for a more interactive, spontaneous kind of conversation, and also how much students (especially students with dyslexia, hearing impairments or those for whom English is a second language) appreciate 'lecture capture' – certainly not because it means they don't have to attend but because they can listen again, revise and absorb better.

We have endeavoured to use CLAD funds strategically to promote larger objectives. CLAD has supported the 'PASS' scheme (Peer Assisted Study Skills) now widely adopted in many schools. 'Progress' a terrific employability skills online resource now embedded within the personal tutoring system, a current project on 'Valuing Teaching at Birmingham' (led by Martin Stringer) which will make important recommendations about the ways in which we recognise and celebrate teaching excellence. Plus from this year, 'Birmingham Friends' a student mentoring pilot project designed to facilitate greater dialogue between home and international students. CLAD funding will also underpin a landmark collaboration between our new STEM Education Centre and the Higher Education Academy, as Michael Grove explains in this issue. Perhaps most influentially, CLAD funding has supported a minor revolution in assessment and feedback protocols in a few Schools. In this issue, we hear about the 'TESTA' overhaul of assessment in EDACS, and how Dr Jon Green, Director of Education in LES,

working with the HEA, has adapted this approach in LES and in Civil Engineering. The 'BALI' project, as it has been called, provides us with a model for a more fundamental review of assessment and feedback as part of the Curriculum Review.

The Curriculum Review of undergraduate degrees, started last Spring, remains the major undertaking for this academic year. Following a series of intensive workshops, two open meetings and some lengthy discussions at Senate and at the University Education Committee, we have some clear 'emerging headlines' and themes. There is a Review website and online consultation to which all staff have been very warmly invited to contribute. This term, a series of 'College Roadshows' invite more in depth discussion of the emerging ideas about assessment, breadth in the curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities for students, recognition and development of key academic and employment-focused skills and more. This term, we will endeavour to set priorities and start to scope the costs and benefits of significant change. After several decades of incremental change and reactive adaptation, the Curriculum Review gives us a real opportunity to modernise and to anticipate, rather than react to, the change that has swept through the sector. It is vital that all those engaged in teaching have their say and share their views.

#### Learn more

For further details visit:

**Education matters** –  
[intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/  
 as/educationmatters](http://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/educationmatters)

**CLAD** – [intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/  
 as/claddivision](http://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/claddivision)

**Curriculum Review** –  
[intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/  
 university/curric-review](http://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/university/curric-review)

**Read more about Karen's  
 personal experience of, and  
 route into, HE on page 20  
 of this edition of Buzz**



# Teaching Fellows

**Bryoney Johnson** meets some of the teaching staff who are helping to make an outstanding impact to the learning experience for students across the University.



I didn't start my career in Higher Education. I'm actually a qualified social worker and spent several years as a practice teacher, taking theory that students learn at university and helping them apply it in practical situations. I did

my masters degree here at Birmingham and also began to dabble with computers, developing interactive multimedia programmes and virtual case studies that provided online versions of real life practice situations.

My first job at the University was as an E-learning Manager, which was a great opportunity to combine my practice knowledge and IT skills and to show that Social Work and computers really could mix! Since becoming Associate Director for the Centre of Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health I've used this varied experience to focus on excellence in teaching and learning, and to help develop teaching development programmes for University staff.

I think that people generally adopt teaching approaches in line with the way they were taught, and in our programmes we try to show the importance of developing new methods that look beyond the classroom, and even beyond the institution. We're living in a world where the 'walled city of learning', as Chamberlain referred to the University of Birmingham, is gone. The ability to communicate and collaborate with people has changed drastically, students have a global network of experts and information to tap into and these are the things that I try

to put into enquiry based blended learning approaches.

For example, I recently created a module to show the potential consequences of using social media in social work. I could stand and point at a PowerPoint presentation on the issues of using sites such as Facebook, but I don't teach that way, so I created a series of closed Facebook groups so that students could engage with the site, reflect on how much information was available about them, and practically consider the ethical boundaries between personal and professional use of this medium.

I think a good teacher will not only impart knowledge but will also look for ways to put students into situations where they have to apply that knowledge in ways they would experience in practice. It's about seeing the reality for students today, and stimulating new ideas.

People on our training programmes have done simple things such as recording audio over a PowerPoint for WebCT, so that more classroom time can be used for debate and discussion. The atmosphere we try to set is that there is no single right or wrong answer for approaches to enquiry based blended learning. Our programmes are there to support people, but the key elements are to be creative, and to push teaching methods that little bit.

There are some great motivational people on campus, and people are really good about giving their time. This variety and real community spirit amongst University staff and students is most definitely what I enjoy most about teaching at Birmingham.

**Tarsem Singh Cooner**, Associate Director, Centre of Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health (CEIMH) and Lecturer in Social Work

I remember the moment I realised that I wanted to teach. It was a windy, dark morning in the East Neuk of Fife and I had turned up to teach a Monday 9am seminar to a group of St Andrews University History undergraduates. As a new PGTA, I was nervous; as a typical group of students, the class was comprised of the keen and prepared, intermingled with the less keen and largely unprepared. Yet somehow, against all odds, something about sixteenth century Calvinism caught their imagination and I experienced at first hand the rush that comes from provoking debate, prompting thought, and stimulating intellectual curiosity.

That was twelve years ago; nine of those years since have been spent first as Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Early Modern History here at Birmingham, where I also act as Director of Studies to more than 700 undergraduates. It's not that I didn't enjoy conducting historical research in that period, but I never felt it nearly as fulfilling as teaching; as a result, earlier this year I decided to request to move to a teaching-focussed contract, and I've not looked back. Now, I can devote undivided attention to teaching-related matters that interest or concern me most, such as trying to improve our communication with our students, enhancing student employability, and getting involved with the University's Learning Environment Group. I've been especially

supported in developing my own teaching by Oliver Ireson, the Learning Spaces' Classroom Experience Project Support Officer, who has let me loose to play in the Teaching Innovations Lab (the so-called 'Sandbox').

This is proving an invaluable opportunity to experiment with new technologies and unorthodox classroom layouts in a bid to better engage students' learning. My teaching has also gained a great deal in recent months from an off-campus source, via voluntary emergency response and first aid work with the British Red Cross. The dynamism and rigour of their approach to teaching has done much to inform and energise my own, and persuaded me of the value of pushing myself and others out of the learning comfort zone.

**Dr Elaine Fulton, Senior Lecturer in Early Modern European History, School of History and Cultures**



I came to Birmingham as a Research Fellow after 10 years of purely having done research, so teaching was initially a bit of a shock for me! A colleague had said to me before I came to Birmingham that I would make a good teacher because I explained things with empathy for the listener. I hope that my students still think that's true.

One of the areas in which I work is in the adaptation of engineering to climate change. As part of my teaching role I introduce first year students to some of the implications that climate change has for the UK. For me the real synergy came when I brought what I had learnt through the PGCert into practice, designing a new topic about climate change that uses project work to encourage students to interact and debate controversial topics.

One of the things that I don't like doing is lecturing. Standing in front of a room and talking is not my cup of tea at all, I would much rather get students doing something. I remember lectures when I was at university as something where I had to get a

complete set of notes down on a piece of paper, it was nothing to do with learning. My experience of undergraduate education was in what I now recognise as a very old-fashioned lecture course. The realisation that there were other ways of approaching teaching was a revelation. Of course hand-outs and WebCT make it different now, but fundamentally Maths and Engineering are about doing not listening, and lectures are therefore just a small part of what students need in order to learn.

As a result, small group teaching as a key feature of the Birmingham student experience will, I think, have a profound effect. Having a more personal interaction with students in the learning process will be increasingly valued by students. If we can get that personal link back, it will be energising for the educational ethos.

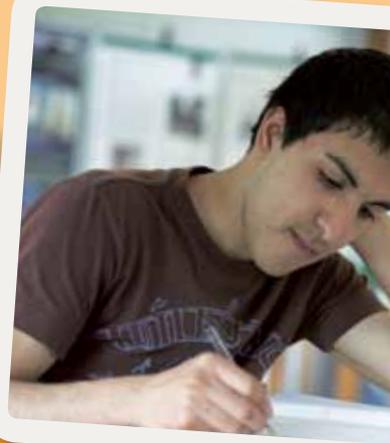
I will always owe Maxine Lintern and Cat Jones, who ran the PGCert course when I first arrived at Birmingham, a great debt as they got me through those first few months of bewilderment and terror as I started teaching for the very first time. I now enjoy the freedom to do different things, and have had a very busy and varied summer doing industrial research, working with summer students, and preparing new material for the coming year.

**Dr Andrew Quinn, Senior Lecturer in Atmospheric Science and Engineering, School of Civil Engineering**



# COLLEGE CATCH-UP CAL

Caroline Ashton, Events Manager for the College of Arts and Law, gives Buzz an overview of some of the great people and projects that are helping to enhance learning and teaching experiences for both students and academic staff.



The College of Arts and Law (CAL) teaches more than 5,000 students across six Schools. It is home to renowned research centres, the world-famous Shakespeare Institute, and the Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage. The College is forging ahead with new schemes and initiatives to enhance the learning and teaching experience for students and academic staff, and is seeing positive results. Trialling a number of new schemes for the University and piloting new ideas has seen positive results across all Schools.

## Helping students develop as academic writers

The Academic Writing Advisory Service (AWAS) is a dedicated service for College of Arts and Law students, set up in response to student requests for writing advice. Nicola Taylor, the College's Academic Writing Advisor, says 'I came to Birmingham in September 2011 to take up the part-time post of Writing Tutor for the CLAD funded College pilot project. I am thrilled that, building on the success of 2011-12, the initiative is being expanded this academic year and the College is funding a full-time post. In addition to providing one-to-one tutorials for students, email support and online materials, I have assumed responsibility for coordinating a group of postgraduate students who provide small group workshops. The College has increased its funding for these workshops this year too, again in response to very positive student feedback'.

*'I have thoroughly enjoyed working with*

*Birmingham students' Nicola continues. 'I have found them to be receptive, appreciative of the support available and keen to help their fellow students by taking part in focus groups and video shoots to provide material for the new AWAS website. Recent challenges have included learning how to incorporate new technologies such as QR Codes and Twitter links into publicity materials, and over the next 12 months I am looking forward to liaising closely with academic staff about the discipline-specific writing needs of students throughout the College'.*

## Undergraduate research scholarship scheme

The undergraduate scholarship scheme has been designed to increase opportunities for first and second year students to engage with the College's research agenda, whilst at the same time extending the high quality undergraduate experience. During the summer of 2011/12 undergraduate research scholars undertook five weeks of purposeful research under the supervision of academic staff, with a further 18 scholars benefitting from this experience in 2012.

The scholarships have received much positive feedback, from both the students and academics involved with the scheme. Scholars noted a boost in their confidence, an invaluable insight into the collaborative nature of research, and the rewards, commitments and challenges of an academic career.

This research time has also helped the students to further understand the option of postgraduate study and positively influenced their decision to continue with

postgraduate studies. Several of the scholars have since applied for a postgraduate course here at Birmingham, and four had abstracts unconditionally accepted for the 2011 British Conference on Undergraduate Research.

Academic staff supervising the scholarships found that students offered original insights into research findings which made significant contributions to their area of study. Significant contributions to academic papers were made by the scholars, and a number of those co-authored papers submitted to academic journals.

One undergraduate scholar commented, 'The scholarship has helped me to become more confident in myself and my ability to overcome unfamiliar challenges, and I am confident that the transferable skills I have developed will be as valuable as the new appreciation I have gained for the rewards and challenges of a career in academia. The scholarship has helped me to develop a far deeper understanding of what an academic career would entail and the skills I will need to hone in order to achieve my aim of completing an MA and PhD.'

## Bank of Assessed Work

In the 2011 Birmingham Student Survey (BSS) only 27% of students indicated that they had been provided with examples of good and poor work. In response to this feedback the College will launch the Bank of Assessed Work later this term to enhance students learning experience.

Funded through the generosity of College Alumni, this new initiative contains pieces of assessed work across a quality range to help improve student understanding



of how marking criteria are used and the academic standards expected for a first to a 2:2 degree. The Bank gives students the opportunity to critique work using the same criteria that markers use.

The Bank will contain four pieces of work (at the level of a first, high 2:1, low 2:1 and 2:2) for 100 modules across Arts and Law, with a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate taught modules available. In development are some further practical exercises to reinforce student learning.

It is hoped that as direct results of this initiative students will be able to evaluate their own work more effectively which should lead to an improvement in students' marks. There should also be an increase in scores received in future student surveys.

### Sixth form study afternoons

The College of Arts and Law experience begins even before our students have chosen to study at Birmingham, as we extend our schools outreach activity. Piloted in February, the first sixth form study afternoon 'Love Sacred and Profane in Renaissance Literature: Othello, Doctor Faustus and the Poems of John Donne' was aimed at A Level English students. Designed to give both lower and upper sixth pupils a taste of the University learning environment, the event provided an ideal opportunity for prospective students to visit the campus and discuss possible programmes of study with staff.

Staff and students from fifty-eight schools and sixth form colleges were invited to attend the event. 44% of attendees had not previously visited the University, whilst almost 50% of attendees

were interested in, or had applied to study, an English programme with us, providing the College with a unique pre-application and post-application conversion activity.

Feedback from the event has been excellent. Many attendees commented on the invaluable nature of what they felt had been an 'enjoyable' and 'excellent' afternoon. Furthermore, 45% of attendees were certain about being more likely to apply to the University of Birmingham as a result of the afternoon. A larger programme of activity across several Schools in the College is now agreed for 2012/13.

### Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD) funded projects

Since the establishment of CLAD in 2010, a number of innovative staff and student-led projects have been funded within the College of Arts and Law.

CLAD funding enabled colleagues in English to review their assessment regime for the BA programme using the TESTA approach (Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment). What began as a small 'proof of concept' project has inspired a large CLAD project 'Birmingham Assessment for Learning Initiative' (BALI) across 4 colleges that has included a successful application to participate in an HEA change programme to introduce the approach across all colleges.

Other notable projects have included a project from the Department of Theology and Religion aimed at supporting student learning, local schools and faith communities in Birmingham through the

creation of multimedia images and video footage of 600 places of worship across Birmingham. Students have also carried out exciting project initiatives such as creating a new campus magazine 'The Linguist' and enhancing teaching opportunities on offer to Doctoral Researchers in CAL. These projects can be seen in the June/July edition of Buzz 'Students take centre stage'.

### Distance Learning PhD

The College of Arts and Law is the first to introduce a PhD by Distance Learning across all subject areas. Enabling the University to attract excellent students from around the world, the College launched this forward-thinking initiative in May 2012. The programme offers both full and part-time pathways to enable maximum flexibility for potential students.

Distance Learning allows students who would otherwise not be able to study with us to undertake the majority of their research off campus, making one annual trip to the University. Students receive the same level of support and supervision as on-campus students. The only difference is that supervisory sessions take place via communication services, such as Skype, rather than in person. The success of the scheme is already being seen, with 15 students now registered in 2012/13, 11 of which joined us on campus for Welcome Week

# COLLEGE CATCH-UP EPS

Liam Singleton, Internal Communications Officer for the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences, shares some of the new initiatives and recent developments that are enhancing the educational experience for students across the College, and University.



## Learning and teaching for the real world

Professor Bob Stone's enthusiasm is contagious. It's not hard to see why his students, many of whom have gone on to excel in their careers, convey genuine appreciation and affection about their time working with him. Bob is Director of the Human Interface Technologies (HIT) Team within the School of Electronic, Electrical and Computer Engineering, and is involved in a number of projects that combine the technological and human, including medical and heritage virtual reality simulations, ship-wreck tours, and classified military projects.

When it comes to teaching, getting the most out of his students, and getting his students out of the laboratory, is key to Bob's approach. His students might get the opportunity to go test new submersible equipment with navy divers, teach soldiers how to use advanced robots through simulation, or assist amputee war veterans during their rehabilitation.

Built into the programme itself, these external activities are an essential part of Bob's teaching methodology, and he is fully aware of the need for students to not just produce good grades. *'It's reminding them that it's not just about a piece of paper'*, Bob explains. *'All of our research projects feed into first, third and fourth year teaching; it's about learning the processes of designing for real people with real issues, and knowing how to exploit new and emerging technologies to solve those issues'*.

This is echoed by alumnus Tim Snell, who is now Hybrid Systems Verification Engineer for Jaguar Land Rover. *'The final year of my MEng provided not only a level of technical competence, but also the experience of working with real stakeholders and delivering a real product. By working with the Royal Navy Defence Diving School*

*and many other parties, I developed the skills which graduate employers chomp at the bit for.'* In one case, Bob even took an MEng student to the Space Simulation Centre in Southern Russia, to present the results of his spacecraft docking 'serious game' to cosmonaut simulation specialists.

'Real-world' is a phrase that comes up a lot when talking to Bob. *'I encourage students to take screen grabs of their work at significant stages in their projects, build up a portfolio, produce a demo CD – all this is invaluable during their interviews at a later date'* explains Bob. However it's not all about the end product. Arguably more important knowledge for a student is deciding if this is what they want to do for the rest of their lives. Getting out into real-world situations and working alongside industry professionals provides an invaluable glimpse of what to expect after graduation. *'I had little idea about my future career plan before taking my final year project, a 'serious game' project involving development of a Virtual Hospital Ward with simulated medical procedure training'*, explains Yan Zhang, Senior Software Designer at NetEase. *'This opened a completely new world for me. It was amazing to work with hospital staff, and afterwards, I was determined to take developing computer games as my career!'*

*'These projects have also been hugely beneficial in terms of my teaching'* continues Bob. *'For example, with one of our more challenging first year courses, Statistics and Experimental Design, it's often difficult enthralling students to the necessity of learning about statistics and ethics. However I can use as examples the experiments we've run on nuclear submarines, or with nurses and clinicians at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Using these and other examples throughout the course has certainly made my life so much easier!'*

The Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD) is a division of Academic Services. They work in partnership with colleagues across the University to progress all aspects of educational enhancement. These are just some of the recent exciting CLAD supported projects from the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences.

### Immediate assessment and feedback

Led by Dr Nicola Wilkin, a Lecturer in the School of Physics and Astronomy, this project developed relevant questions for core year one and two mathematics modules within the School. The underlying software, STACK, is free and developed within the School of Mathematics by Dr Chris Sangwin. Improvements and modifications are made in response to student comments, and a number of students have expressed interest in becoming question authors.

### Employability Toolkit for Academics

Led by Joan Cartledge, Careers Network Development and Learning Consultant, the project designed an 'employability toolkit for academics'. This includes examples of how employability skills and attributes are currently embedded in academic activities, case studies of subject specific work and voluntary experience opportunities, information about graduate destinations for each academic School, information and guidance for tutors, and information for academics on how to access careers support and guidance.



## Ensuring equal opportunities for participation

**Michael Grove is Director of the University's STEM Education Centre. He was also Director of the National HE STEM Programme; a three-year, £21m initiative hosted by Birmingham that worked to enhance the way universities recruit students, and delivered programmes of study within STEM subjects. Michael explains how the recently launched Centre will enhance teaching and learning at Birmingham.**

### Can you tell us about the recent National HE STEM conference that was held at Birmingham?

The conference created a real buzz around all aspects of STEM education. It was great to see so many project leads presenting their work, sharing ideas, and discussing future plans and collaborations. The keynote speeches were a real highlight, particularly Lord Robert Winston, who

reinforced there remains work to be done within STEM. The conference was a fitting conclusion to the publicly funded component of the Programme, but its legacy and work will continue. I am enormously grateful to my colleagues in the Programme and the University who helped make it happen.

### How will the STEM Education Centre improve learning and teaching across the College?

The STEM Education Centre, which is a direct legacy from the Programme, and funded by the University, will build upon the work of the last three years. It will maintain an active national profile, working with the Higher Education Academy and National STEM Centre on specific initiatives. We will also enhance our practices at Birmingham by building on knowledge and learning from across the sector, better co-ordinating our activities, sharing practice, and raising the national and international profile of the University in relation to learning and teaching. Ultimately, it will help us to further enhance the learning experience our students receive.

Establishing the University's Mathematics Support Centre is our first activity. Based on the first floor of the library, it forms part of the recently launched Academic Skills Centre, and provides a relaxed and friendly environment, staffed by experienced mathematicians, where students can drop in for one-to-one help. We want the Centre to act as a focus for anyone teaching mathematics or statistics to students as they make the transition to University; and we welcome staff to get in touch if they would like to become involved.

### What are future challenges for STEM education in the UK?

Many challenges remain, despite the significant progress made over recent years. Some students still experience difficulties making the transition to university, and adapting to a different approach to learning. We need to continue to widen participation, a number of groups of learners are currently underrepresented within higher education, certainly within the STEM disciplines, and we must help those in the pre-university education sectors to make informed choices about their future careers and study. A-level reform is a timely opportunity for higher education. Working together, we can help influence future developments and ensure that students arrive at university with the best possible preparation.

### What has inspired you to push these projects forward?

We have a collective responsibility to ensure equal opportunities for participation within higher education. I was lucky, I had a good experience here at Birmingham as a student, but we need to ensure that all of our students have a positive experience and progress to interesting and rewarding careers – we want them to become ambassadors for Birmingham and for STEM.

I am fortunate to work as part of a supportive and collaborative national community on a range of different projects and initiatives. It's a very enjoyable area in which to work, and one where you can see the impact of your efforts. It is also great to be part of a University that has a longer-term vision and commitment to enhancing STEM higher education.

# COLLEGE CATCH-UP LES

Dr Jon Green, College Director of Education, tells Buzz more about the staff, schemes and structures that are helping to enhance the student experience across the College of Life and Environmental Sciences.



## Leadership and committee structure

Dr Jon Green from Biosciences is the College Director of Education with newly appointed Dr Vikki Burns from Sportex as Director of Teaching Quality Enhancement. Vikki covers Quality Assurance aspects as well as being responsible for identifying and disseminating good practice in teaching around the College. The College Education Committee (CEC) oversees all aspects of teaching and learning and Jon leads the College Careers and Employability Committee, which has as part of its remit, a strategy for embedding employability skills in the curriculum. Vikki chairs the College Teaching Innovation and Enhancement Committee that also covers aspects of student engagement with learning. Two further committees cover College Marketing and Admissions (including Outreach) and Programme Approval.

## Enhancement activities

The recently launched College e-newsletter, EducationMatters, communicates to staff snippets about exciting activities and innovations to enhance teaching in the College. It also gives staff information on the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and other relevant societies and groups, CLAD projects and key resources on topics such as peer assessment and interactive lectures. This is linked to more detailed information on the new intranet and to College Education workshops which allow staff to discuss and share ideas. A new series of College seminars will cover aspects of pedagogy and exciting developments in teaching. The overall strategy is to inform staff so that their teaching uses ideas that will engage students and encourage them to become active learners.

## Developments in student engagement

Kerri Badger has recently been appointed to the new administrative role of 'College Student Relations Manager'. She will have coordinating responsibilities for support for students covering student recruitment, student engagement, and alumni relations. Kerri will work closely with school academic leads and Professional Services colleagues in and outside of the College. This will enhance the individual relationship with applicants who first come into contact with the College, before becoming new students, returning students, and emerging as alumni. It involves supporting the work of student representatives to ensure their success in these roles and to ensure that there are regular opportunities for students to talk to staff so that any problems can be sorted out quickly.

## Breaking down communication barriers and closing the feedback loop

The College is developing strategies to ensure that there are effective communication lines between staff and students and between student reps and their student community. We want our students to see how we have responded to their feedback and concerns. An example of this is the role that Dr Amanda Ludlow has developed in Psychology. Her role as a 'student ambassador' is to help to get students views across to staff and help to feedback information about the department and responses to concerns to students. Amanda works with student reps to enhance staff-student interaction. Posters have been produced and placed around the School to highlight the many changes that have been implemented

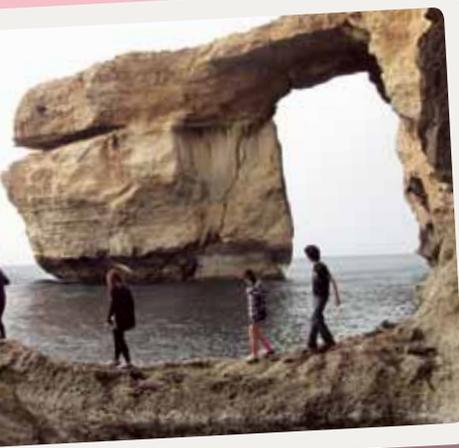
based on student feedback under the theme 'You Ask...We Answer'. Social networking is used to promote informal discussions on psychology topics. Charity events with students and staff (eg, football and netball matches) have been organised to raise money for Children in Need. Informal coffee sessions are planned throughout the term for staff and students to drop in and have discussions. A newsletter is distributed each semester outlining staff and student achievements and changes made in the School based on student feedback; it also provides a platform for other departmental news.

## Embedding skills and enhancing teaching in our programmes

School Careers Officers have been collaborating with staff from Careers Network to ensure that employability skills are becoming an integral part of the curriculum. Several CLAD-funded projects have enhanced the teaching across the College including:

**Dr Julia Lodge (Biosciences)** has used CLAD funding to develop an approach using PGATAs to help develop first year undergraduates writing skills. She has introduced PASS (Peer Assisted Skills Sessions) to help first years with skills – this is linked to a Cell Biology module. A group activity based on producing a video on a science-related topic, and linked to both 2nd year tutorials and a module on Skills and Communication, has been designed by **Dr Jeremy Pritchard (Biosciences)**.

**Dr Lesley Batty (GEES)** has also introduced PASS to support Chemistry and Physics teaching and has a CLAD-funded project that has involved the design of a set of online tutorials that can be accessed before the start of the academic year.



**Dr Jon Catling (Psychology)** is improving student engagement with research methods for psychology students. He has developed a new 'lab book' for all students, covering all the research methods modules, that will be used within computer labs, and will contain weekly worksheets, exercises and 'walk-throughs' or relevant analysis techniques. Jon has also set up a series of sessions with International PGTA's to develop their skills and their ability to help teach undergraduates.

**Professor Nikos Ntoumanis (Sportex)** is using screencasts to promote understanding of statistics for Sport and Exercise Sciences undergraduates. He has created a series of movie files (screencasts) to show students how to use SPSS (a statistics software package) in a 2nd year module. This will help students better understand how to use SPSS and to learn about statistics and its applications to sport science studies.

**Dr Maurice Brennan (GEES)** has developed a Virtual Learning Platform that will be used to create interactive case studies which will allow students to put theory into practice in various occupational health and safety scenarios. This new distance learning resource is a student-led enquiry-based interactive programme with minimum staff input.

**Professor David Hannah and Dr's Phil Jones and Warren Eastwood (GEES)** have put together a new first year Physical Geography module combining mobile technologies and a new virtual fieldcourse DVD.

A CLAD student-led project: Enhancing the NGO-Academic Interface: Exploring Opportunities and Avoiding Pitfalls. This Doctoral Researcher focused project was organised by **Dr Tom Disney, Elly Harrowell, Rachel Mulhall and Megan Ronayne (Sportex)**.

A conference was set up to help

Doctoral Researchers understand the concept of impact from an academic perspective, but also to show them the different methods by which they might be able to achieve impact rather than the traditional publication of findings in a closed access journal. This included workshop sessions with third sector and business/industry representatives who worked to explore methods and opportunities of collaboration between academics and outside partners. Furthermore there was a workshop on the dissemination of research findings via the media so that researchers could learn more about disseminating their data in different ways. This conference was run under the auspices of Start2Finish.

### Welcome Week – Speed BSc

Around 200 students just completed the second annual Speed BSc induction programme in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, designed by Dr Vikki Burns. Charged with forming the organising committee of a fictional 'Speed Triathlon' to be held on campus, students worked in small groups to complete a variety of sport science themed tasks. Run this year by Dr Andy Blannin, the School's first year tutor, Speed BSc is designed to help reduce social isolation, manage expectations about the degree, and encourage an independent and pro-active approach to learning. As well as getting to know the other new members of their cohort, this induction introduced students to the concepts of independent learning; they had to find their own information, solve problems and work together to produce a piece of written work and a presentation. The day was a great success, and we'll be evaluating the student feedback over the next few weeks, to inform its ongoing development

and dissemination of this induction as an example of good practice.

To watch a film on Speed BSc visit [birmingham.ac.uk/schools/sport-exercise/teaching/index.aspx](http://birmingham.ac.uk/schools/sport-exercise/teaching/index.aspx)

### Evaluation of, and changes to, assessment and feedback across programmes

We are using the TESTA approach (Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment; HEA Change Programme) to introduce a new focus on programme-level assessment. This uses audits of assessment and feedback, student questionnaires and focus groups to provide evidence that can be used by programme teams to consider a more coherent strategy on assessment. Funded by CLAD, the BALI Project (Birmingham Assessment for Learning Initiative) has enabled this approach to be used in Biosciences and Psychology within LES (led by Dr's Jon Green and Anka Buttner).

### LESIS More: a student-led initiative for College-wide seminars

Two MSci students in Biosciences – Benjamin Turnbull and Emma-Louise Bryant – have set up LESIS More, a Life and Environmental Sciences Interface Series of talks, to promote greater integration between the Schools of the College, increase student engagement with the College and present exciting subjects to those who may not have experienced them in their curriculum.

## COLLEGE CATCH-UP MDS

Angie Gibson, Internal Communications Manager for the College of Medical and Dental Sciences (MDS), shares some of the recent College learning and teaching innovations, initiatives and new programmes.



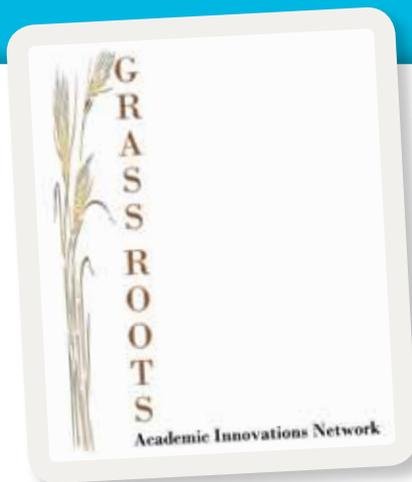
The College is also delighted to announce the appointment of Professor Prem Kumar as Director of Education.

### Grass Roots Academic Innovations Network (GRAIN)

GRAIN provides an informal forum in which all staff actively involved in teaching can meet to share and discuss ideas and good practice. Within MDS, the Academic Innovations Committee (AIC) is responsible for module and programme approval and fostering innovations in education and GRAIN is very much connected to this. Encouraging innovations in education, helping new ideas to be generated and refined by bringing teaching staff together to share and discuss their ideas.

The group meets monthly and the emphasis is very much on informality. Topics for discussion are circulated in advance, but there is always an opportunity for individuals to raise issues of interest. Professor Mary Keen, who was involved in the establishment of the network, says 'if someone is thinking of trying out something new in their teaching and wants to discuss their ideas with other teaching staff, GRAIN offers a forum to do this.' Topics for meetings cover a variety of aspects of teaching and education, and forthcoming themes include Enquiry Based Learning, ideas for enhancing practical classes and assessment and CLAD projects and funding. The group has also shared ideas about the best approach to inducting new students, novel ways of collecting student opinion, and ways to improve student engagement with academic feedback. Discussions have led to more widespread adoption of a 'treasure hunt' for new students to help them navigate their way around the building.

'Perhaps the most useful outcomes of the discussions are those that are most difficult to measure', says Professor Keen. 'The seed of an idea for improving some aspect of education, a new relationship between



staff who have not previously met and the development of a real community of practice. Although GRAIN was established as an MDS forum, the ideas that are discussed can be of interest to anyone involved in education, and staff from other Colleges are very welcome to come along. I feel that this sort of forum would be useful in every College.' For more information, email [m.keen@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.keen@bham.ac.uk).

### Community Based Medicine – training the next generation of doctors

Next time you visit your general practice, have a look to see whether you can see a notice with the University's crest on it. This indicates that undergraduate medical students are learning there. Since 1995 Primary Care Clinical Sciences has organised learning for groups of 4–6 students under the supervision of General Practitioners in over 100 practices across the West Midlands. Birmingham was one of the first universities to develop early clinical experience for students in the community and PCCS continues to run one of the largest programmes in the UK. Students attend practices one day a fortnight from week two of year one. In the first two years at medical school they learn in lectures and

small groups, with Community Based Medicine (CBM) providing their introduction to patients and their problems. This enables the students to put their theoretical learning into a clinical context and to talk to patients, starting to develop a professional persona. They also put into practice their ethics teaching through obtaining patients' consent to talk to and examine them and through patients sharing confidential information. As students progress they attend a different practice each year, experiencing great diversity of patients and settings. We have a team of staff, comprising GPs who work in the University two days a week and educationalists, who design both materials for the GPs to deliver and assessments. By the fifth year medical students are able to see patients independently and construct a plan of management of the patient's problem, they then call in the supervising GP who will endorse or correct their plan. Academic staff are supported by an outstanding administrative team who, amongst other tasks, made 2,406 placements this summer. In 2012 the General Medical Council undertook a quality assurance visit to the Medical School and commended 'the well organised community-based medicine placements, and the opportunity this provides to students to link clinical and basic sciences at an early stage of the programme'. An accolade for both University staff and the over 350 GPs with whom we work. If your practice does teach students it can be a reassurance to you that you're registered with a practice that is up to date, enthusiastic and keen to pass on their knowledge and skills to the next generation.

**Kate Thomas, Lead for Community Based Medicine**



## Dr Anthony Cox, Lecturer in Clinical Pharmacy, talks about his career and preparations as the College of MDS embarks on delivering its new Pharmacy programmes.

The first half of my career was in the NHS working as a clinical pharmacist, and I always enjoyed the teaching and mentoring of staff. After obtaining a teacher-practitioner post, teaching undergraduate pharmacy students at City Hospital, I took up a part-time Teaching Fellow position at Aston University. My work as a Pharmacovigilance Pharmacist at the West Midlands Centre for Adverse Drug Reactions led me to complete a PhD examining the reporting of adverse drug reactions, following which I obtained my first lecturer post in Pharmacy.

I've had links with academic colleagues in the Medical and Dental Schools at Birmingham for a number of years and when the opportunity arose to develop a new Pharmacy programme at a University of this calibre, it seemed a natural move to make. Very few people have the chance to develop an entirely new course from the ground up. The strengths of Birmingham in teaching and research, and the other health professions on site, make this an ideal location. Since coming here I've been deeply impressed by the professionalism and enthusiasm of both academic and support staff at Birmingham. It's a lovely working environment.

The flagship for Pharmacy is the new MPharm degree, which my colleagues and I are currently steering through professional accreditation with the General Pharmaceutical Council. This is the professional degree which is required to become a registered pharmacist. We've

developed two variants, the standard 4 year course, and a 5 year course which integrates the 12 months professional training required to register as a pharmacist. We've aligned it with expected changes in pharmacy education, and we believe we have an innovative pharmacy programme that will develop future leaders in the profession. We plan to take a cohort of 70 students in October 2013. Alongside these programmes, we are already operating a Doctorate in Pharmacy, and will be establishing an accredited course for non-medical prescribing.

I have enjoyed the blank canvas we've had to write our new curriculum. Watching it start to come to life is fascinating. We've had great support from colleagues within our College in developing an integrative and collaborative programme. The mind maps we drew on the wall a few months ago are now approved modules and the course content is now in development. We've been involved in open days, and the interest in our undergraduate course has been high. 2013 is going to be an exciting year.

## New programmes

From September 2013, the College will be offering degrees in Pharmacy, the latest addition to our wide portfolio of healthcare programmes. The MPharm course complements existing programmes across the University and allows students to work with medical and nursing students enabling greater experiences of patient care and stimulating inter-professional learning. The programme offers a clinical and patient focussed approach, but also contains fundamental pharmaceutical and medical science taught by research active academic staff. The course will prepare students for all careers in Pharmacy,

including roles in community, hospital, primary care or industrial sectors of the pharmacy profession in accordance with each student's own interests. There are options to take the MPharm over 4 or 5 years, with the 5-year programme intercalating the professional pre-registration year, necessary for registration as a Pharmacist. To learn more about these programmes, visit [birmingham.ac.uk/pharmacy-4-year](http://birmingham.ac.uk/pharmacy-4-year) or [birmingham.ac.uk/pharmacy-5-year](http://birmingham.ac.uk/pharmacy-5-year)

*NB. The running of these courses is dependent upon accreditation by the GPhC*

The College is also expanding its portfolio of postgraduate programmes, developing a number of new courses for launch in 2013:

- MSc Translational Medicine: Interdisciplinary Biomedical Technologies
- MSc Urology
- MSc Pharmaceutical Enterprise
- MSc Immunology and Immunotherapy
- MRes Cancer Sciences

In addition, the following programmes have received approval and will start this academic year

- MSc Advanced General Dental Practice – Distance Learning – starts February 2013
- MSc Exercise and Sports Medicine (Football) – starts Autumn 2013 – this innovative programme has been developed through a partnership between The Football Association and the University of Birmingham.

## Learn more

Further details and the full range of the College's Postgraduate programmes, are available at [www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate-mds](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate-mds)

## CLAD Supported Projects

The College has had a number of educational enhancement projects supported by funding from the Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD). Projects currently being supported are:

- **Development of an employability skills passport for 1st year BMedSc**
- **Assessing and enhancing student experience throughout the medical science programme** – both being led by Dr Alison Cooper, School of Clinical and Experimental Medicine
- **Assessing the impact of lecture recording on dyslexic students** – being led by Dr Karl Nightingale, School of Immunity and Infection

## COLLEGE CATCH-UP CoSS

**Danann Swanton, College Marketing Officer, shares some of the recent learning and teaching events, and initiatives across the College of Social Sciences.**



The College of Social Sciences (CoSS) is the largest College at the University with over 9,000 students, 20% of whom are from overseas. CoSS has four schools and over 500 academic and professional staff across a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields.

CoSS has a number of research institutes including the School of Education's Jubilee Centre for Character and Values and the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC). Through the many academics, professional staff and alumni who work alongside their students, CoSS' graduates leave the University having received the best learning, teaching and overall student experience possible.

### New Employment Placement module for CoSS undergraduates

From the next academic year onwards, CoSS plans to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to take a new Employment Placement module.

Placements could range from spending a week in a commercial organisation to working with a charity or a public sector body. This opportunity already exists on a number of courses such as Social Work and Business Management (Year in Industry) but will now be open to all undergraduate programmes. Students who take the Employment Placement module will be assessed and marks will contribute to their final qualification.

In the current economic climate, students are under pressure to perform, not only academically, but by showing prospective employers that they have the necessary skill set required to be a successful employee too. CoSS has worked hard to create

placement opportunities for their students, but always in addition to the student's academic programme of study. By working closely with University and College employment teams, CoSS has designed this new initiative to give all of their students the opportunity to bridge the gap between university and the working world of graduates.

### Dr Kevin Myers, School of Education, receives the 2012 award for Excellence in Teaching

Dr Kevin Myers, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education and Social Justice, School of Education, received the 2012 School of Education and College of Social Sciences Award for Excellence in Teaching. Kevin's students nominated him for the award saying they found him to be *'one of the most inspirational lecturers'* who *'actively encouraged us to develop our own thoughts and ideas'* and *'worked tirelessly to improve the student experiences of the course.'* Over the last year, Kevin has overseen numerous changes to the Childhood, Culture and Education Programme (now known as BA Education) which included the implementation of a Curriculum Review, the introduction of new modules to the Programme, the establishment of joint honours programmes, the initiation of an International Exchange Programme for second year students and the re-branding of the course. He has also been responsible for the highest response to the NSS in the College, which is a testament to his engagement with students and their respect for him.

These awards are a tremendous

achievement and important recognition of Kevin's hard work in improving the undergraduate programme in Education. *'No other person,'* one student suggested, *'can be more deserving.'*

*Dr Chris Lonsdale, Department of Management, Birmingham Business School, also won the Guild of Student's Personal Tutor of the Year award.*

### KPMG initiative lets students earn while they learn

This year, the Department of Accountancy and Finance, in conjunction with KPMG, has launched a new six-year programme for students taking the BSc honours degree in Accountancy and Finance. There are a number of benefits students will receive from KPMG as part of this new initiative; as well gaining work experience and earning a professional accountancy qualification, students will have both their fees and accommodation paid for. In addition to this, all BSc Accountancy and Finance students will receive a salary of around £20,000.

Professor Andy Lymer, Interim Director of Birmingham Business School, praised the partnership, *'As a School, we have a longstanding relationship with KPMG as one of our key recruiters. This new programme however, takes forward this relationship in providing a unique opportunity to the next generation of accounting students at a critical time in the history of provision for undergraduate degrees. It is a unique offering in this field in the UK and we are therefore confident it will enable us to continue to attract the very best students to Birmingham.'*

Birmingham is one of only three universities in the country that KPMG



is working with on this programme. It will give students the unique opportunity to immediately apply their classroom learning in the professional environment of a world-leading organisation.

David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science said *'I welcome the expansion of this innovative scheme, which has already proved very popular among prospective students. Improving social mobility is at the heart of the Government's agenda and providing new routes to the professions is an excellent way of helping people reach their full potential.'*

KPMG envisages that in due course, its school leaver programme may account for the majority of its annual trainee chartered accountant intake. Graham Neale, head of audit at KPMG in the Midlands said, *'We are delighted that Birmingham, a top-class university, is planning to work with us in this scheme. We believe that our proposition offers a truly innovative model that will help to broaden access to the accountancy profession. We want to increase the diversity of the intake into the profession and this scheme is central to our plans to make that happen.'*

*'At a time when the affordability of higher education is uppermost in many people's minds, this scheme clearly offers an alternative route that should see students emerge, not only with first class qualifications, but also a positive bank balance. We very much look forward to working with Birmingham to make this scheme a success.'*

## POLSIS enhances the student experience

The department of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS) has been working on a number of extra-curricular events. Some are targeted at helping students build skills and experience for their CV while others are open events designed to expose individuals to high-level speakers on current debates relevant to the course.

UK government MPs and members of the US Congress have been invited to speak to POLSIS students. David Miliband MP, The Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow and Alistair Darling, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, are amongst those who have spoken. As well as attending talks by high profile speakers, POLSIS students have the opportunity to be involved with the organisation of the event. Such activities helps broaden their career horizons and helps students develop key employability skills employers are looking for.

In addition to this, every year, POLSIS MA students have the opportunity to take part in a week-long study trip to Brussels. Students are given the opportunity to visit some of the international organisations based in Brussels, both those that are part of the European Union and of NATO, to learn about and see at first-hand how they operate.

## QuestionTime@IASS

The School of Social Policy recently hosted QuestionTime@ IASS, based on the BBC1 television programme, Question Time. This was a key event for returning social policy and social work students, staff and alumni. Each week the hugely popular programme features a panel of politicians, policymakers

and other social and political commentators who answer pre-selected questions put to them by a live audience. QuestionTime@ IASS replicated this format to provide students with the opportunity to put their own questions to a panel of exciting and highly interesting national and local figures. The panel included James Burn, Chair of West Midlands Green Party, Social Worker, former Senior Policy Advisor to Cabinet and Member for Adult Social Care Birmingham City Council; Alison Garnham, Chief Executive, Child Poverty Action Group; Siobhan Harper-Nunes, Shakti Women, Birmingham; John Hemming, Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley; Paul Nowak, TUC, Head of Organisation and Services; Owen Williams, 4th year Economics student and Vice President of Birmingham University Conservative Future; Gisela Stuart, MP, Labour MP for Birmingham Edgbaston and Sue White, Professor of Social Work (Children and Families), University of Birmingham.

As well as giving students the chance to engage directly with the people making the crucial decisions in today's society, both before and during the event, students were able to tweet their questions using #QTIASS.

After the event, Dr Chris Allen commented, *'The student experience is not just about learning and teaching in the lecture theatre. We have brought together an event where students could apply their learning and thinking to a real life situation, to pose questions to politicians, policy makers and to what we may call 'community activists'. It gave them the chance to come face-to-face [with these people] and ask the questions that were important to them.'*

## Donna Lee... in my own words



University Senior Tutor, Donna Lee, tells Buzz more about her role and her route into higher education.

I was the first person in my family, and the only person in my class at school, to go to university. My route into HE is one of those classic stories of a single dedicated teacher making all the difference. That one teacher encouraged me to consider university and gave me the confidence to think I could actually get in! I graduated from Manchester Polytechnic (as it was then) with a degree in Social Science and then won a scholarship to do a PhD at the University of Connecticut where I completed my dissertation on multilateral cotton trade negotiations. My grandmother and my mother worked in the cotton mills in Lancashire and so my academic interest was driven by personal experiences of the cotton industry.

I have been at Birmingham since 2002. I took over the post of University Senior Tutor in October 2011. My role is both operational and strategic. At an operational level I work with individual students on a 1:1 basis. They come to see me when they have concerns that have not been resolved within their School or with Student Services and I can offer them advice and guidance, often in liaison with other University staff. I tend to see about four or five students a week, and at the moment I'm mostly seeing students considering withdrawal from their programme in the hope that I can encourage them to stick with their studies through guidance on how to get more academic and welfare support. I also meet with academic staff seeking advice on how to better support a particular student who is experiencing difficulties.

At a strategic level I work with staff and students across the campus to enhance personal tutoring, and academic and welfare support for our students. I work with the whole University community to develop new processes such as Transition Review, and to create new student support services such as the Academic Skills Centre which is now up and running in the Library. I meet regularly with student focus groups, Guild sabbatical officers, Student Services staff, and academic staff from each School to discuss and plan enhancement initiatives.

Supporting staff in their role as personal tutors and welfare tutors is a crucial part of my role. This is why I made it a key priority to produce a new handbook

on personal tutoring for staff to use from this academic session onwards. This year, with the support of the Personal Tutor's Forum and CLAD, I will be working to develop new personal tutor training courses.

The University is working hard to enhance the student experience with a key initiative being the recent launch of the new Academic Skills Centre. As Chair of the Advisory Board I will be working with staff to develop the work of the Centre in supporting our students' academic development. We already have a range of workshops students can sign up to and improve key skills such as essay writing, exam preparation, statistics and numeracy.

Throughout last year I worked with Academic Services and academic staff in each School on Transition Review. This is a major new initiative for 2012-13 designed to provide additional academic and welfare support for all our new undergraduate entrants during a two-week period in the middle of the second term. Students will have timetabled meetings with their personal tutor to discuss their academic progress and review how well they are settling in. Personal tutors will be able to point students in the direction of a range of activities during the Transition Review fortnight to encourage them to take advantage of development opportunities and support services available across campus. I think this will be an exciting time on campus with all kinds of events taking place including a Get Involved Fair in the Great Hall, a high profile GRAB lecture, and a host of student support campaigns on issues such as Wellbeing. We'll also be running more library tours, a series of College/School-based lectures led by recent alumni to support student career planning, and extra skills sessions in the Academic Skills Centre to help students who might need that extra bit of academic support.

Before becoming UST I really only had detailed knowledge of the student experience in Social Sciences but now I get to work with people in all Colleges, and am amazed at the diversity and wealth of opportunity we have developed to enhance the students' experience here at UoB. The key challenge is making sure our staff and students are aware of all that we have to offer. ]

# Giving students the space to learn



**Toni Kelly, Head of Learning Space Development for the University,** tells Buzz about how developments in learning and teaching practices are reflected in physical campus spaces.

On behalf of the University, Learning Spaces, a division of Academic Services, has for several years managed a programme of development and refurbishment of teaching and learning spaces. This programme has not only included the continuous upgrade of classroom and lecture space and computer clusters, but also the creation of open access study spaces for students.

Over the past few years, teaching and learning has been changing and the spaces in which we teach must be able to adapt and respond to those changing needs. Both teachers and students require greater access to audio visual equipment and other technologies in order to access and display the wide range of resources used throughout the academic year.

During the summer, the Learning Centre on West Campus was completely refurbished with extensive works to upgrade both internal and external spaces and the café. This work was commissioned by Learning Spaces.

The Learning Centre is an important University building, accommodating a significant amount of space dedicated to supporting both the delivery of teaching and learning and independent study. It houses a number of teaching rooms, used by many Schools, departments and student societies across the University. The Centre is also home to approximately 270 PCs for both teaching and study, and provides valuable 'out of hours' study space for

students until 1am during the week, and during the day at weekends throughout the year.

Many teachers no longer want students lined up in 'ranks', but would rather adapt room layouts to suit their needs and be able to move easily around rooms to speak to students. Students also increasingly require access to spaces where they can study both individually and in groups. As a result, the aims of the project to refurbish the learning centre included:

- Remodelling classrooms to provide high quality teaching spaces with dual projection and movable furniture
- Remodelling computer clusters to provide new layouts and high specification units
- The creation of three open access study areas, with PCs and technology rich group study facilities
- The creation of a visible reception desk to better manage enquiries from students and visitors to the University

The new open access study areas have been created specifically to give students places where they can work with and without technology, and in groups or independently. 'The Gallery', located on the first floor, has been designed to facilitate smaller groups working with their own mobile devices and resources.

The Learning Centre is located in a prominent place on campus, close to the

West gate and railway station, and is the first building to greet visitors to campus. The external element to the refurbishment project concentrated on improving the flow of people into and past the building whilst also improving wheelchair access. Space has been opened up creating an easy and direct route through to the centre of campus, whilst also providing outside spaces for people to sit.

This project was an ambitious one to undertake with only a 16 week window of opportunity, so thanks must go to colleagues in Estates for making it possible, in particular, thanks to the Project Manager, Maria Romera for keeping a tight rein on what was a complicated project. Other significant contributions came from staff in IT Services, LRAT, and Timetabling.

In addition to works to the Learning Centre, the Garner Learning suite in the Chemical Engineering building has been remodelled, increasing the number of study spaces and PCs. The Nuffield Learning Centre has also been refurbished. The student learning suite here also has increased study spaces and PCs, and also for the first time, students have access to interactive projectors to use either with the PC provided or via their own mobile devices.

Throughout the autumn term Learning Spaces will be monitoring use and evaluating staff and student feedback about the improved facilities.

## Karen O'Brien... in my own words



I suppose I've always been involved in education in one way or another. I used to volunteer in schools when I was younger, worked as a clerical officer for an exam board, and became an A-level examiner. I also got a place for a PGCE, and still think a school-based teaching career is something that I would have enjoyed. However the kind of teaching that really suits me is the kind that reflects my deep interest in my subject of Intellectual History. I still write and give papers, and it is still very important to me to be active in my research, because I think that shapes the way I approach teaching.

During my PhD studies I spent a year at the University of Pennsylvania, and that international experience was what really made me interested in Higher Education. At Oxford I chose St Cross College for my postgraduate research because it was, and is, such a genuinely international place. I was one of very few people from Britain, and almost the only person studying my discipline. Everybody else was doing something different, from Islamic Studies to Astrophysics, and it was fascinating to be in a really global and mixed subject environment.

I got my first teaching job at the University of Southampton, and moved quite shortly afterwards to Cardiff University. I then spent the best part of 10 years at Warwick University, before joining Birmingham. Whilst at Warwick I realised how much I enjoyed spending time in departments other than my own, finding out about how other people teach, and talking to students with different ambitions. Suddenly the world of my own department seemed a little too parochial; this is probably partly because my own work has always been interdisciplinary. I've always been based in English departments, but my work on the Enlightenment inevitably brings in History, Geography, History of Science and even Music, so I've always been someone who crosses boundaries in my research and practical work.

I really enjoy this collaborative approach, particularly with Professional Services, and working with extraordinary people who have a completely different perspective on the University. For example I worked with colleagues from Academic Services, and other academic departments, in developing the new Academic Skills Centre which opened in the library this autumn. It involved understanding students' skills needs within Schools, and working with learning support advisors, the library, the projects team, and IT, to make something that's really multi-faceted.

A recent personal challenge was becoming executive Chair of the national HE STEM programme. I'm not in any sense someone who teaches or knows enough about STEM subjects, but it's an educational initiative and it's been really interesting to learn about national priorities around producing STEM graduates, and supporting young people in choosing STEM degrees. It's something to which I'm personally strongly committed and I learned a great deal from collaborating with the professional bodies, universities and colleagues involved in the programme, which culminated in a very successful conference here on campus in September.

My experience as Chair of last year's BUAFTA judging panel also demonstrated how for so many people at the University a job is not merely a job. It's a whole commitment, a way of life, and the level of appreciation that colleagues have for each other is really inspiring.

A love of teaching comes from many different places; for some of us it comes from research, for some it comes from a deep and really thoughtful engagement with the practice of pedagogy. What makes a great university teacher is also not the same set of qualities that make a great school or college teacher. A great university teacher, however they derive their inspiration, is ultimately aiming to make themselves dispensable, and to guide their student into an independent grasp of their subject.

I think across our campus academic staff are achieving this by using the lecture in new and innovative ways. Many recognise that the old 'chalk and talk' can be deadening and that in the age of multi-media technology you have to find new ways of engaging your students. Finding new ways of using lecture space is something we're becoming quite good at across the University. We're beginning to use space for teaching in more varied ways, and breaking down some of those traditional classroom hierarchies by creating new spaces.

The person who inspired me most throughout my career was my DPhil examiner John W Burrow. He was a professor of Intellectual History at Sussex University, and the most delightful, down-to-earth character. He wrote about complex ideas in the most beautiful prose, he truly understood that the medium of ideas is language and showed how ideas can crystallise and condense currents of social experience in ways that can transform the world for good, as well as ill. He died recently and I'm currently editing a book that I'm going to dedicate to him. ]