Oxford and the Olympics

The art of IT

Building UK Biobank
Professor Andrew Hamilton is holding a Question Time for members of the collegiate University on Tuesday 22 May. Join the Vice-Chancellor to find out about the current challenges facing Oxford and ask him about the issues that matter to you. The event takes place in the Ship Street Centre at Jesus College at 4pm, with refreshments available from 3.30pm. To reserve a place or submit a question in advance, email internal.communica tions@admin.ox.ac.uk.

Oxford Sparks is a new website about the range of science taking place across the University. Created by the MPLS Division in conjunction with the Medical Sciences Division and Continuing Education, the site is aimed at members of the public, from school students to scientists. It contains videos, games and blogs as well as specially commissioned animations with associated teaching packs. Researchers wishing to get involved can register their interest at www.oxfordsparks.net.

Looking for a stunning photo of Oxford? University of Oxford Images (www.universityofoxfordimages.co.uk) is a new online image library, which brings together a wide range of photographs into one easily searchable database. From students to sports, you can browse collections of images and download them for a small charge. This is the first commercial university photo library in the UK and uses the same software as the British Museum, Tate Gallery and V&A.

Have your say about travel and transport across University sites and you could win a £50 Blackwell’s gift voucher. From 22 May until 12 June, a travel survey is running for staff and students, the results of which will be used to improve accessibility to sites and the transport on offer. For details, visit www.admin.ox.ac.uk/estates/travel from 22 May. The site also contains information about cycling, car sharing and the bus and train pass scheme.

Want to find out more about how the University recruits undergraduates? Volunteers are sought to welcome prospective students and their parents at the Undergraduate Open Days on 27 and 28 June. No specialist knowledge is required – the role involves giving directions and handing out the Open Day guide. Email opendays@admin.ox.ac.uk for more information. Commuters should be aware there will be heavy traffic in and around Oxford on both days, particularly at the Park & Rides.

Get a special deal on RAC breakdown cover, with discounts of up to 50%. This offer is available to members of the collegiate University and their immediate families when joining the RAC. There is also a 25% discount on renewal. The rescue service is available whether you’re a driver or passenger in your own or another vehicle. For details and to join, visit www.rac.co.uk/join/benefits or call 0800 096 6836 quoting reference EBS001.

Ever wanted to switch off your computer at the end of the day but couldn’t, either because you wanted remote access or because updates were being run overnight? Help will soon be on hand with the new Wake on LAN service. It’s estimated that the University could save £327,000 in electricity costs if staff and students switched off their computers out of working hours. For details, contact the sustainability team at sustainability@oued.ox.ac.uk.

The Vice-Chancellor has been in Asia from 12 to 18 May, visiting Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo for a series of events and meetings including academic lectures and alumni receptions. In Beijing, the trip had a medical sciences focus, with the Nuffield Department of Medicine organising an event to showcase some of its major medical projects in China. Many of Oxford’s strongest links with the country are medical collaborations and these date back decades: in the early 1980s, the Clinical Trial Service Unit (CTSU) started collaborat ing with the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and the China National Centre for Disease Control. The collaboration began with a landmark study across 69 rural Chinese counties and grew to include large-scale randomised trials that have resulted in changes to clinical practice worldwide for heart attacks and strokes, the results of which have probably already helped save many tens of thousands of lives worldwide.

Today, Oxford’s collaborations with China include a study of common diseases in half a million Chinese people via the China Kadoorie Biobank (see p14 for details of Oxford’s involvement in the UK Biobank); the largest ever study in the world of the genetics of depression; and numerous other projects on the world’s most major diseases, both chronic and infectious.
It is known that fathers, as well as mothers, can develop depression after a baby is born, and it has also been shown that children of postnatally depressed fathers or mothers are at increased risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems. Researchers in the Department of Psychiatry decided to investigate whether changed interaction with the baby was a possible mechanism for this effect. They looked at speech patterns in depressed new fathers talking to their babies, and found that they were more likely than non-depressed dads to fix on negatives and be more critical of themselves. Examples included: ‘I’m not able to make you smile’; ‘Daddy’s not as good as Mummy’; ‘Are you tired?’; ‘Oh-oh, Daddy hasn’t lasted very long, has he?’ and ‘Can’t think of anything to do all of a sudden’. Having established that spoken interaction does change with depression, the next step is to work out whether this could affect outcomes for the child, says lead researcher Dr Paul Ramchandani. However, he assures parents: ‘It’s important to remember that depression among parents doesn’t mean that the children are going to have problems. Most do not.’

Rule Britannia may now be an anthem of triumphant British national identity, but it was first received as a reinforcement to opposition to King George II, an Oxford historian has discovered. The piece was first performed in 1740 as the finale to Alfred: A Masque, which was commissioned by Frederick, Prince of Wales, who opposed his father’s policies and sought in the performance to draw parallels between Alfred the Great and his grandfather George I. Oliver Cox, a DPhil student in the Faculty of History, came across two letters between audience members. One said of the performance: ‘The whole is a noble Lesson & proper to be exhibited to a Prince that durst hear Truth.’ Cox believes ‘this new evidence suggests that Alfred was not just a general comment on kingship, as previous scholars have suggested, but was in fact a highly specific response to a particular set of political problems that existed in the summer of 1740.’ Rule Britannia, as its finale, was perhaps rounding off an on-stage critique of the King.

Taller women are at greater risk of ovarian cancer, a large study led by the Cancer Epidemiology Unit has found. Researchers used individual patient data from 47 epidemiological studies including over 25,000 women with ovarian cancer and more than 80,000 women without. They found a 7% increase in the risk of developing ovarian cancer for every 5cm increase in height. The analysis also found a higher BMI means a higher risk of ovarian cancer – though this relationship was not found among women in the study who were using Hormone Replacement Therapy. ‘The fact that height is clearly associated with risk may well be important for understanding how ovarian cancer develops,’ explains Dr Gillian Reeves, one of the lead researchers.

The number of parents opting for fee-paying private schools over state-funded government schools in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India is rising dramatically, according to research led by the Young Lives project in the Department of International Development. Even low-income families are ‘voting with their feet’. Researchers tracked 3,000 children who were randomly selected from different social and economic backgrounds, finding that in 2002 about one-quarter (24%) of seven- and eight-year-olds attended private schools, but by 2009 the rate had almost doubled to 44%. The study suggests this is down to an increase in the number of low-fee private schools, and the fact that parents value teaching in English, which is not offered in the state sector.

Some of the Universe’s oldest galaxies have three times more stellar mass – and therefore many more stars – than all current models of galaxy evolution predict. A team led by Dr Michele Cappellari of the Department of Physics has reported in Nature a way of removing the ‘halo’ of dark matter that has clouded previous calculations, allowing new, more accurate estimates to be made. The team’s analysis means that all current models, which assumed for decades that the light we observe from a galaxy can be used to infer its stellar mass, will have to be revised. Dr Cappellari said: ‘Up until now, models assumed that stellar light could be used to infer the stellar masses, and any remaining discrepancy with the observed total mass could be hidden behind a “halo” of dark matter. Our analysis shows that they can’t hide any longer: galaxies are diverse and some have many more stars and are even stranger than we’d assumed.’
People & prizes

Professor Sir Tony Atkinson, Deputy Director, Economic Modelling, at the Institute for New Economic Thinking at the Oxford Martin School, and former Warden of Nuffield College, has been awarded the Neyman Medal by the Polish Statistical Association for his contribution to statistics.

Sandra Fredman, Rhodes Professor of the Laws of the British Commonwealth and the United States, has been made Honorary Queen’s Counsel. The honour is given to lawyers who have made a major contribution to the law of England and Wales outside practice in the courts. Professor Fredman’s work is in the fields of discrimination and human rights law.

Dr Andy Gosler of the Department of Zoology has been awarded the Union Medal of the British Ornithologists’ Union for services to ornithology, including his 30 years of research in Wytham Woods with the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology.

Paul Harvey, Professor of Zoology, has been awarded the 2012 Frink Medal of the Zoological Society of London.

Emily Holmes, Professor of Clinical Psychology, has been made an Academician by the Academy of Social Sciences.

Elizabeth Eva Leach, Professor of Music, has won the Renaissance Society of America’s 2012 Phyllis Goodhart Gordan Prize for her book Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician.

Gil McVean, Professor of Statistical Genetics in the Department of Statistics and Head of Bioinformatics and Statistical Genetics at the Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, has been awarded the 2012 Weldon Memorial Prize for his noteworthy contributions to the development of mathematical or statistical methods applied to problems in biology.

Gero Miesenböck, Waynflete Professor of Physiology, has been awarded the 2012 Health Prize of the InBev-Baillet Latour Fund, which this year has the theme neurosciences. The prize recognises his pioneering research in the field of optogenetics: he was the first scientist to introduce encoded sensors and encodable phototransduction components as optogenetic tools to visualise or control brain activity.

Peter Ratcliffe, Nuffield Professor of Medicine, has won the Robert J and Claire Pasarow Foundation 24th Annual Medical Research Award in Cardiovascular Disease. The Pasarow awards celebrate ‘stellar achievement, creativity and distinction in research in cancer, cardiovascular disease, and neuropsychiatry’.

Dame Jessica Rawson, Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology, has been elected as a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Edith Sim, Emeritus Professor of Pharmacology, has been awarded the 2012 J R Vane medal of the British Pharmacological Society for her outstanding work in drug metabolism and pharmacokinetics.

Dr Nicola Smart of the Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics has been named by the British Heart Foundation as its first Fellow of the Year. The award recognises her achievements in researching ways of repairing tissue damaged by heart attacks.

New FRSs

Two Oxford academics are among the newly elected Fellows of The Royal Society.

Dominic Joyce, Professor of Mathematics and senior research fellow at Lincoln College, is recognised for his ‘remarkable and seminal contributions to differential geometry’. In early work he found a number of ingenious constructions of manifolds with special structures, and his most renowned achievements are probably his proofs of the existence of compact manifolds with exceptional holonomy groups. This blend of geometry and analysis has opened up an entirely new field and much of Professor Joyce’s research also has a strong bearing on current developments in theoretical physics.

Ian Walsmsley, Hooke Professor of Experimental Physics, professorial fellow of St Hugh’s College, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research, Academic Services and University Collections), has made distinguished contributions to the fields of quantum optics and ultrafast optics, including pioneering experimental work in areas as diverse as quantum state tomography and ultrashort pulse characterisation. In particular, he has developed methods and concepts applying ultrashort light pulses to the study of non-classical phenomena in both atomic and optical physics, developing methods for characterising both quantum and classical wave fields.

RSE honours

The Royal Society of Edinburgh has awarded an Honorary Fellowship to Sir Edwin Southern, Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry and fellow of Trinity College. Professor Iain McLean, Professor of Politics and fellow of Nuffield College, has also been elected a Fellow of the RSE.
SIAM Fellows

Three Oxford academics are among 35 new Fellows of SIAM, the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics.

Gui-Qiang Chen, Professor in the Analysis of Partial Differential Equations, receives the fellowship for his contributions to the mathematical analysis of PDEs, fluid mechanics, hyperbolic systems of conservation laws, and shock waves. His main research focus is in nonlinear PDEs and analysis, including their applications in and connections to mechanics, geometry and other areas of maths and the sciences.

Philip Maini, Professor and Director of the Centre for Mathematical Biology at the Mathematical Institute, is recognised for work spanning the modelling of avascular and vascular tumours and of normal and abnormal wound healing, the applications of mathematical modelling in pattern formation in early development, and the theoretical analysis of mathematical models that arise in these applications.

Thaleia Zariphopoulou, Oxford–Man Professor of Quantitative Finance, receives the fellowship for contributions to stochastic control and financial mathematics, including stochastic optimisation and quantitative finance, with specific interests in portfolio management, investment performance measurement, and valuation in incomplete markets.

Communicating with carrots

Dr Andrew Steele of the Department of Physics has won FameLab UK, a competition that aims to spot the best new science communicators by getting them to deliver a nugget of science wisdom in a three-minute talk.

Dr Steele secured the prize ahead of nine other finalists at the Royal Institution with a talk about why carrots are a testing ground for quantum mechanics: their colour can be understood with one of the simplest ideas in quantum mechanics - the so-called ‘particle in a box’ (for more details, see www.ox.ac.uk/media/science_blog 22 March).

His talk won over the judging panel of Andrew Cohen, head of BBC’s science unit; anatomist, science writer and broadcaster Professor Alice Roberts; and Oxford neuroscientist Professor Russell Foster, as well as winning the audience award. Dr Steele will go on to compete for the title of International FameLab Champion at The Times Cheltenham Science Festival in June.

Researchers win BBSRC innovation prizes

Russell Foster, Professor of Circadian Neuroscience, has won the ‘Social Innovator’ category of the ‘Innovator of the Year’ prizes presented by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. Professor Foster was recognised for work which has revolutionised our understanding of the eye. His research has had impacts both in the clinic and across society, helping, for example, with the design of new lighting systems and the use of natural light in buildings. He and his team are now training a new generation of ophthalmologists to deliver improved health.

Chris Schofield, Professor of Chemistry (left), and Peter Ratcliffe, Nuffield Professor of Medicine (pictured on p4), were shortlisted in the ‘Commercial Innovator’ category for the discovery of ‘oxygen-sensing enzymes’ and their development for the treatment of human diseases.

Arrivals board

BP Professor of Information Engineering

Paul Newman, Reader in Engineering Science and fellow of New College, University of Oxford, took up this post in the Department of Engineering Science and became a fellow of Keble College on 1 April.

Paul Newman studied at the Universities of Oxford and Sydney and subsequently worked in industry and at MIT before returning to Oxford in 2003 as a lecturer in Information Engineering. His research concentrates on enabling long-term infrastructure-free reliable navigation for mobile robots and autonomous vehicles, especially via the use of 3D mapping using both vision and laser.

Under his leadership the University’s Mobile Robotics Group has developed an international reputation and developed techniques and software which will underpin long-term large-scale autonomy. A particular application focus of the group is that of intelligent transport. As part of an EPSRC funded collaboration with BAE, Nissan and Guidance Ltd, they operate the ‘Wildcat’ autonomous rally car at Begbroke Science Park to further this agenda.

Professor of Sociology and Demography

Francesco Billari, Professor of Demography in the Faculty of Economics and Vice–Rector of Development at Bocconi University, Milan, and Research Fellow at the Innocenzo Gasparini Institute of Economic Research, will take up this post in the Department of Sociology on 1 August. He will also be a fellow of Nuffield College.

Francesco Billari studied at Bocconi University and the University of Padua, and has worked at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and held a number of visiting posts in the US and Europe. His research focuses on family and fertility, the transition to adulthood, life course analysis, population, and social and economic dynamics. He was Founding Director of the Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics, is currently Secretary–General and Treasurer of the European Association for Population Studies, and was in 2010 elected a Fellow of the European Academy of Sociology.
New College Choir

CHORISTER OPEN DAY

Activities
Sing with the choristers
Q & A for parents
Tea & games
Films
Evensong in chapel

For boys aged 3 - 6
Generous scholarships at New College School (day boys)

To register, please contact
Edward.higginbottom@new.ox.ac.uk & 01865 279519

Saturday 19 May 2012 - 4.00pm

for more details see www.newcollegechoir.com
What’s on

Exhibitions

Vigilia: Inversive Art by Daniel Eltinger
Until June 2
Abstract paintings by German artist Daniel Eltinger. There will be a poetry reading to accompany the exhibition on 22 May at 7.45pm. Tickets £5/£4 including glass of wine or soft drink. To book, call 01865 248380 or email billjenkinson@btinternet.com.

The Renaissance in Astronomy
Until September 9
Museum of the History of Science
www.mhs.ox.ac.uk
Beautifully crafted astronomical instruments and books tell the story of 16th-century astronomy.

Out of the Woods
Until September 30
Upper Gallery, Oxford University Museum of Natural History
http://wythamwoodcraft.webplus.net
Prints and wood sculpture by Robin Wilson and Rosie Fairfax-Cholmeley, artists-in-residence at the University woodlands at Wytham. The exhibition explores the myriad ways of looking at a tree.

Dickens and his World
2 June–28 October
Exhibition Room, Bodleian Library
www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about/exhibitions
Exhibition celebrating the novelist’s bicentenary in which contemporary materials show something of the world he lived in, from the stage adaptations that were performed before the novels had completed their serialisation to the plays Dickens produced and acted in.

Talks

What money can’t buy: the moral limits of markets
Monday 21 May, 6pm
Chapel, St Peter’s College
www.spc.ox.ac.uk
Talk and panel discussion chaired by Andrew Marr, featuring Professor Michael Sandel (Harvard), Professor Jeremy Waldron (All Souls) and Professor Ngare Woods (Blavatnik School of Government).

Law and globalisation – powerful or powerless
Thursday 24 May, 6pm
Hall, Wolfson College
www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/content/880-annual-berlin-lecture
Baroness Helena Kennedy QC gives the annual Isaiah Berlin lecture.

Much Ado about Something – Shakespeare with an Indian flavour
Monday 28 May, 5pm
Bernard Sunley Theatre, St Catherine’s College
www.stcatz.ox.ac.uk
Meera Syal, Cameron Mackintosh Professor of Contemporary Theatre, will be in conversation with director Iqbal Khan. Online booking recommended.

Mercator: the man who mapped the planet
Tuesday 12 June, 7pm
Museum of the History of Science
www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/events
Nicholas Crane, geographer, explorer, writer and Coast broadcaster will discuss his book about Renaissance cartographer Gerard Mercator.

Ed Vaizey, MP: Policy for the digital era
Friday 15 June, 10.30am
Oxford Internet Institute
www.oi.ox.ac.uk/events
The Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries considers how government communications policy can support the development of an internationally competitive and culturally vibrant digital economy in the UK. To register, please email your name and affiliation to events@oii.ox.ac.uk or call 01865 287209.

Special events

Museums in Tune
Friday 18 May, 7pm–11pm
The University museums, including the Pitt Rivers, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and the Ashmolean, are holding a late-night event as part of Museums at Night 2012. Explore the exhibitions, enjoy an eclectic mix of music and take part in creative activities.

Halford Tour Series cycle event
Tuesday 22 May, 1pm onwards
St Giles
www.tourseries.co.uk
A cycling extravaganza takes over St Giles. Includes the Oxford v Cambridge race at 3.45pm, the Women’s race at 5pm and the Men’s race (lasting approx 75 mins) at 7pm. The University’s Sustainability Team will be running a stand offering a mobile mechanic stall (free labour for University staff bikes, parts at cost), plus food, maps and cycle registration packs.

Concerts

Via Anglica
Friday 1 June, 7pm
Bodleian Library
www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/about/exhibitions/forthcoming_events
Latin Church music from Renaissance England, performed by Alamire, directed by David Skinner. Tickets £20 (£14 for Friends of the Bodleian) from fob@bodleian.ox.ac.uk or call 01865 277234. A selection of first editions of the performed music will be on display in the Proscholium.

1961 Re-enactment concert
Saturday 23 June, 8pm
Tom Quad, Christ Church
Tickets £18–£35
www.chch.ox.ac.uk/conferences/jubilee-concerts-2012
Open-air concert by Oxford Philomusica featuring music by Dvorak, Walton and Verdi and concluding with Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture to commemorate the bicentenary of the Battle of Borodino. (Re-enactment of a 1961 student concert.)

Theatre

Shakespeare’s Hamlet
10–26 July (not Mondays)
Old Schools Quadrangle, Bodleian Library
Tickets £18
www.oxfordplayhouse.com/show/?eventid=2618
For the 5th year running the Bodleian and Oxford Playhouse host the Globe Theatre on Tour, with players taking to an Elizabethan-style stage in the atmospheric setting of the Old Schools Quadrangle. Free pre-performance talks in Convocation House by members of the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University English Faculties from 7pm before some evening performances. See website for more details and to book tickets.

For more events, visit www.ox.ac.uk/staff/events
Into the home straight

As Olympic fever mounts, Matt Pickles commentates on the University’s involvement

With the torch relay beginning on 19 May and the opening ceremony taking place on 27 July, the build-up to the London 2012 Olympic Games is entering the home straight. But while the eyes of the world will soon be on London, many at Oxford University are also busily preparing for the event.

The Olympic Torch arrives in Oxfordshire on 9 July and will come to Iffley Road in the early morning of Tuesday 10 July. A torchbearer will carry the flame on a lap of the Bannister Track, and it is expected that Sir Roger Bannister will also carry the torch to the finish line over which he ran to break the four-minute mile on 6 May 1954.

Three University members have also been selected as torchbearers. Professor Richard Cooper has been heavily involved in sport at Oxford for 45 years and recently retired as chair of the University Sports Committee after a 15-year tenure, during which time the sports service trebled the size of its student sports provision. Nicola Byrom is a DPhil student who launched Student Run Self Help in 2009, a volunteer-run organisation which provides self-help groups across the country for students with eating disorders. Maureen O’Neill, Director of Development in the Law Faculty, was nominated by her husband for her extensive volunteer work. ‘I am no Olympian but in carrying the torch, I have the opportunity to represent all those ordinary people who celebrate excellence,’ she says. Like many University members, Maureen has also made herself available as a volunteer during the Olympics. Volunteer activities include showing people to their seats and other stewarding duties, helping to prepare the sports fields, driving VIPs, and translating.

Part of the Olympic message is to encourage others, particularly children, to engage in sport and on Monday 9 July two local primary schools will join members of staff from the University’s widening participation and sport teams at Iffley Road for an Olympic activity day. Students from East Oxford Primary School and Larkrise Primary School will get the chance to try out fencing and rowing and learn more about the history and ethos of the Olympics. Tara Prayag, head of widening participation, says: ‘We hope the day offers an opportunity for local school children to try a new sport and also take part in activities to highlight the importance of the Olympic movement locally, nationally and internationally. Year 6 is a key time for enthusing young people about the importance of sport for health, wellbeing and most importantly fun. We hope this day will inspire the students to seek out new sporting opportunities when they move up to secondary school in September.’

Olympic fever will increase in July as the Chilean track and field team and the New Zealand triathlon team arrive in Oxford, having chosen Iffley Road as their pre-Games training base. Their athletes will probably be seen pounding the streets and pathways of Oxford, the Bannister track and the Rosenblatt pool.

From 7 to 27 July, the art display produced by the University’s Legacy Fellow will be exhibited at the Old Power Station in Oxford. Renowned artist John Gerrard was chosen for what is believed to be the first academic position to
combine art and sport and, having worked with a group of elite Oxford athletes training for the Olympics over the last six months, he has created an ambitious new work that brings together sophisticated motion capture and 3D modelling technologies.

‘This complex, visually arresting work reflects on the powerful links between competitive sport, military training, theatrical performance and dance,’ says Paul Bonaventura of the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art.

The University will not only be represented on the tracks, fields, pitches, rivers and pools at the Games, but also in the committee rooms of Olympic organising and decision-making bodies. A panel discussion at Oxford’s 2011 Alumni Weekend included alumni Roger Mosey, BBC director of London 2012; Gordon Smith, director of communications at the Olympic Delivery Authority; Ed Warner, chairman of UK Athletics; Alison Walsh, disabilities director of Channel 4; and Charlie Wiejeratna, former director of commercial negotiations at games organisers LOCOG who helped start the bid process.

No doubt these ‘gamesmakers’ have studied the successes and failures of previous Olympics, and an Oxford researcher is hoping to help future Games organisers learn from the London Olympics. Allison Stewart, a DPhil student at the Said Business School, is studying the Games from a management perspective. She explains: ‘Using interviews collected from over 100 people involved in Games around the world, I seek to explain the cost evolution from a social science perspective, to understand why costs are so often underestimated in the Games. The impact of my research on the Olympic Games will be primarily in developing recommendations for future host cities, as well as for the International Olympic Committee’s knowledge management programme.’

When the pageantry of the build-up to the Olympics comes to an end and the Games begins, Oxford’s interest will be far from over. Oxonians have won 75 gold medals, 42 silver and 31 bronze in Olympic history, including a sailing gold for the future King Olav V of Norway in 1928, a gold for Bill Bradley in the USA’s 1964 basketball team, and four consecutive rowing golds for Matthew Pinsent from 1992 to 2004. Over the next month, Oxford’s Olympic candidates hoping to follow in their footsteps will know whether or not they have qualified for Team GB.

DPhil student Kathryn Twyman has already been selected for the rowing squad. Upon selection, she thanked her lab partners for their support and flexibility in allowing her both to train and row. ‘The way labs function, it’s a bit like being on a team. I’ve had a great lab group that have been able to work with me so that I can achieve both,’ she says. Constantine Louloudis is set to stroke for the men’s eight boat at Eton Dorney, the 20-year-old having helped Oxford win the 2011 Boat Race over Cambridge. He joins a squad containing another Oxford Blue, Andy Triggs-Hodge, who will be competing in the men’s four and hoping for another gold medal to add to his 2008 victory in Beijing.

Second-year history undergraduate Daniel Hooker hopes to represent Britain in the Paralympic Games, specialising in the 100m, 200m and long jump. As the Games approach, he is working on the mental aspect to competitive sport. ‘I learnt to visualise a race before it happens so that I know how I ought to feel at various times in the race,’ he says. ‘Ideally as many different scenarios as possible should be visualised so that you’re ready for anything. I remember a race two years ago where I visualised everything really well except for the one thing that happened – me getting ahead of two GB Paralympians – which was such a surprise that I promptly lost my form!’

Another student, swimmer Jack Marriot, has his last chance to make the team in June, hoping to seal the second spot for the 100m Butterfly. He came second in the first qualifying event in March but missed the qualifying time by 0.3 seconds. But he nearly didn’t even make the final of that meeting, after his cousin stretched his goggles while trying them on over lunch, so that when Jack dived into the pool, the goggles filled up with water. ‘From the very first second of the race, I was completely blind. I could not see the line at the bottom of the pool, the lane ropes or the end of the pool, I panicked.’ But Jack kept swimming and made it through to the final by 0.02 seconds. With determination like that, watch this space – or better yet, your TV screens – for more Oxonian medals this summer.

Special web pages at www.ox.ac.uk/olympics give details of University connections with the Olympics, including details of how staff and students can get involved

‘I am no Olympian but in carrying the torch, I have the opportunity to represent all those ordinary people who celebrate excellence’

Maureen O’Neill, Director of Development, Law Faculty
Very few employers would dispute the value of an Oxford degree. Even amid an economic downturn generating discouraging headlines for graduate job-seekers, the number of employers seeking to recruit at Oxford has continued to rise. And an increasing number of students are taking the opportunity to put valuable management consultancy experience on their CVs, thanks to an innovative programme run by Oxford’s Careers Service.

The Student Consultancy is now in its eleventh term of offering eight-week projects with local businesses. Student participants get a crash course in management consulting skills and the chance to work with a local business as part of a team tackling real strategic or management projects. Since it started, the programme has placed over 300 students in 50 local businesses, and Hilary term 2012 saw a record 200 applications. Projects have ranged from pricing fresh fruit and vegetables for a non-profit organic food start-up business to researching the best marketing strategy for launching a frozen yogurt chain in Oxford.

Interest in the programme alone is not enough – students are screened via a CV and covering letter, and are then further assessed through a short exercise replicating a typical consultancy case study. Students placed with businesses are given two half-day training courses covering skills such as project management, market data collection, report writing and hypothesis testing. They are grouped into teams that aim for a mix of backgrounds by age, gender, subject and previous work background.

‘Students increasingly tell us “show me, don’t tell me”,’ explains Careers Services Director Jonathan Black. ‘This programme provides students with an unrivalled opportunity to try consulting and working in third-sector or other organisations before committing to a career in the field. And they get the benefit of experiences for their CV and interviews that a chalk-and-talk presentation by consulting companies in a local hotel does not provide.’

The equation is a simple one: students get hands-on work experience and the chance to learn and develop skills that will make them employable; local employers get smart, motivated students trained in basic consultancy skills, with fresh ideas. No money is exchanged and 90% of businesses are repeat customers, such as Julian Fifield, a local entrepreneur who has used student consultants every term since the programme began. The main benefit of the scheme to employers, he says, is the energy and perspective the students provide: ‘The programme has a real focus on keen, inquisitive, bright people from multiple backgrounds, and that team input produces interesting discussions. The well-roundedness of the group is great because it gives you the opportunity to ask a real question and get a great range of possible answers.’

Yvonne Kramo is a postgraduate student studying for an MSc in Criminology and Criminal Justice and worked as part of a team evaluating whether Oxfam could set up an employees’ charitable giving scheme at Oxford University through its payroll system. Though she already has a background in human rights work and the law, she says the project was both challenging and interesting. ‘It’s a great way to develop practical skills which are essential in the working world – particularly good communication, teamwork, negotiation and organisation,’ she notes. She also says the benefits of leaving the bubble of her Oxford studies for a project with impact in the local community were equally significant.

With employability skills becoming a particular focus of the student experience at university as a result of the new fees regime, there is scope for The Student Consultancy to expand considerably. An employer mix heavily weighted towards charities and arts organisations means it is not just students interested in management consultancy as a career who will find the placements appealing.

More information via www.careers.ox.ac.uk/about-us/whats-on/learning-and-development-programmes
At Beijing railway station I saw big groups of peasants arriving from the countryside, their possessions stuffed into old fertiliser bags, and I wondered where they came from, and why they were coming to the city, recalls Rachel Murphy. The year was 1989: students were protesting in Tiananmen Square and Chinese society was on the brink of profound change. Seventeen-year-old Rachel, having studied Mandarin Chinese at school in Perth, was spending a year in China on an Australian government-sponsored programme.

A desire to better understand the lives of the migrant workers who have provided the labour for China's astoundingly rapid economic development later formed the basis of her PhD, and today continues to inspire her research as University Lecturer in the Sociology of China, based at Oxford's multidisciplinary China Centre.

The Chinese authorities’ attitude to migrant workers has always been ambivalent. Whilst realising that huge numbers of rural people were needed to work in the new factories, they were anxious about the strain that unregulated urbanisation would put on the existing infrastructure and services of cities. The household registration system that was established in 1958 and continued in various modified forms into the 21st century has constrained rural people’s freedom of movement by allowing them access to state-provided healthcare, education, housing and other essential services only in their place of origin. ‘That legacy of the socialist planning system persists to the present and affects people’s life choices and life chances,’ explains Dr Murphy.

Today around 150 million Chinese workers do not have permanent work in the cities, nor the right to settle there, so move from factory to factory and city to city. One consequence of the situation – and the main focus of Dr Murphy’s current research – is that these people are in effect forced to leave their children behind in the countryside, with grandparents or other relatives, or in rural boarding schools. This has a profound impact on family life. Many parents and children see each other less than once a year, their contact otherwise limited to a brief weekly phone call. Figures obtained in 2005 showed that around 30 million children between the ages of six and 14 were ‘left behind’ by one parent and 15 million by both.

Dr Murphy and her Chinese colleagues have interviewed 1,020 left-behind children in Jiangxi and Anhui provinces, to find out how the situation affects their relationships and well-being. ‘Most of the children we talked to were really aware of their parents’ sacrifice,’ she says. ‘They felt very bad if their school grades were not good, and grades were the main topic of conversation in their phone calls with their parents.’ Parents, meanwhile, feel that their lack of contact with their children can lead to them becoming almost like strangers to each other.

Dr Murphy’s research is contributing to discussion of what to do about what is widely acknowledged to have become a major social problem. Possible solutions include encouraging more industrial development in rural areas – this is already happening in some places – and changing laws so that children can accompany their migrant parents and obtain access to education and other services in the cities.

She is also looking at the impact on society of the Chinese government’s ‘one child’ policy. Son preference, combined with near-universal access to ultrasound and abortion services, has led to a dramatic inequality in birth rates: 120 boys are now born for every 100 girls. Many boys who are now reaching adulthood cannot find life partners. Research is informing practical strategies to normalise the sex ratio, through, for example, public education campaigns, the payment of welfare subsidies to the parents of girls, and the prevention of sex-selective abortion. As Dr Murphy says: ‘What connects these two areas of research is the role of the state and the market in shaping families.’

For more information, see www.chinacentre.ox.ac.uk
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t all began with belly dancing; not a conventional starting point for an art group, but the Dragonfly Cooperative does have a rather unusual history. Formed by a group of female staff at Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS), who had met at belly-dancing classes run by a colleague, the group started out producing silk-painted dancing veils. After discovering a supply of discarded computer wire in the office, they started experimenting with wire crochet and the focus soon turned to jewellery. ‘We found we were all closet crafters,’ remarks Wendy Simmonds, ‘and it was a great way to meet colleagues after work and relax.’

The cooperative now specialises in upcycled jewellery, producing a range of environmentally friendly pieces from recycled computer parts, such as network cable and computer keys, as well as other discarded materials. They sell at craft fairs and markets, with profits going to Ingotec, a social enterprise run by Lyn Waddington, one of Dragonfly’s founding members, which offers low-to-no-cost IT services to charities.

The idea of exhibiting as part of Artweeks – Oxfordshire’s open studio event – came about four years ago, when the group began discussing a community art project around recycling and the environment. The art project never quite materialised, but an exhibition did, with the aid of sponsorship and a workspace provided by OUCS. Artweeks at OUCS 2010 featured work by the Dragonfly Cooperative, together with photography by Kate Lindsay, Denise McDonough, Rob Zachlod and Jason Zerdin. The exhibition was a first in many respects. For Kate, who showed a series of black and white landscapes, it was the first time she had mounted and framed a set of photographs. ‘It was a great experience,’ she recalls. ‘I sold some pieces and my exhibition went on to London.’ For Rob, who had recently purchased his first DSLR camera, it was a chance to share his passion for photography with colleagues as well as challenge some misconceptions. ‘OUCS is perceived as a department focused on technology,’ he says. ‘What Artweeks does is highlight the diversity of people’s interests and show that many of us are creative types.’ It’s a view echoed by Melissa Highton, potter and head of the Learning Technologies Group, who first exhibited her work in 2011: ‘Artweeks gives us an opportunity to showcase the work of the talented artists who work in IT.’

This year’s exhibition sees OUCS staff joined by colleagues from Business Services & Projects (BSP) in a collaboration that reflects the forthcoming integration of the three central ICT units. Avril Harrison, a trainer at BSP, will be showing resin and wirework jewellery, while database consultant Zakir Khan will be exhibiting photographs from Oxford and Pakistan. For Avril, whose interest in jewellery-making began five years ago when she taught herself beading, this will be the first time she has exhibited alongside other artists. ‘I’ve attended craft fairs before but this feels much more professional,’ she says. Participating in Artweeks has also signalled a move into a more professional arena for Zakir. ‘Since signing up, I’ve been invited to display my work at the Jam Factory, the Old Fire Station and the King’s Centre,’ he says. ‘And on a lighter note, my work colleagues now introduce me as a photographer who does some IT stuff as well.’

So what is it about working in IT that fosters creativity? ‘We’re very logical and practical people and crafts play to these strengths,’ comments Avril. For Rob, the technical nature of his work enhances his abilities as a photographer. ‘Most IT folk have a natural affinity with buttons and settings,’ he says. ‘I also find that attention to detail – essential in IT – has been an important factor in shaping my photographic style.’ For Kate, however, it is not only technical proficiency that is fostered by IT but also creative thinking: ‘There are incredibly innovative things going on in the world of educational technology, e-research, software and hardware development. It takes creative people to come up with new ideas, so it’s not surprising to find artistic people in IT jobs. It’s how technology continues to progress.’

Artweeks at OUCS is at 13 Banbury Road from 11:30am to 1.30pm until 18 May. Details at www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/publicity/artweeks
Imagine a kind of research superstore, shelves brimming with health and lifestyle data gathered from half a million people, where health researchers could just pop into their shopping basket the various bits of information they’d like to analyse. Unlikely? Not any more. On 30 March the UK Biobank opened up its data showcase, revealing to research teams worldwide – and, indeed, the general public – the summary results of a four-year data-gathering exercise conducted with the altruistic cooperation of 500,000 randomly selected UK participants.

That the UK Biobank exists is due in no small part to Oxford University staff. The idea that the UK should construct a large-cohort resource that would provide data that was much more detailed than biobanks elsewhere was supported and funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council. Efforts to get the £62m project up and running gained momentum when Professor Sir Rory Collins, BHF Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology and co-director of Oxford’s renowned Clinical Trial Service Unit (CTSU), was appointed as Chief Executive and Principal Investigator in 2005.

‘Oxford’s many world-leading medical researchers have provided invaluable input into the kind of data we should collect and are well represented on our steering and assessment panels, but an absolutely crucial area where Biobank needed expertise was in IT,’ he explains. ‘In CTSU, the IT staff have developed huge expertise in constructing the software needed to handle data for very large medical studies, such as the Million Women Study. For Biobank, they’ve had to design ways of doing everything from sending out appointments to collecting data and assessing it, and devising ways of distributing encrypted anonymised data to researchers.’

Potential participants aged 40–69 years were selected from NHS records and invited to attend one of 22 regional assessment centres (of which Oxford was one) for a two-hour session collecting data via touchscreen questions and interviews with health professionals. Measurements were taken of volunteers’ height, weight, body fat, hand grip strength, bone density, lung function and blood pressure, plus information about medical histories and lifestyles. Memory, diet, early life factors and psychosocial events (e.g. how people see family and friends) were also recorded, and samples of blood, urine and saliva collected. The last 100,000 participants also had hearing, fitness and eye tests, creating the biggest eye study ever.

‘We currently hold about 600 million separate pieces of information, where an item could be something simple like a person’s weight or a 3D scan of their retina,’ says Dr Alan Young, Director of Information Science for CTSU and systems architect for UK Biobank. ‘That’s about 20 Terabytes of data: it would fill 30,000 CDs – a pile 36 metres high.’ The project pioneered the use of touchscreens for collecting data and great effort went into making them user friendly. ‘I used to lurk in the Co-op behind the RI, watching people using the new self-service touch tills,’ admits Alan.

Any bona fide researcher can now apply for detailed data, to be used for health-related research in the public interest. Keeping a close eye on things is Dr Naomi Allen, UK Biobank’s senior epidemiologist. ‘We have to make sure all the data collected are available to everyone in a clear, anonymised way,’ she says. ‘Although researchers can ask for whatever they want, it’s important to scientifically maximise the best use of Biobank, especially when we give out depletable samples for investigation. I also encourage people to think about forming a consortium if they have similar interests.’

Biobank will be linked to other medical records and as time passes and participants succumb to conditions such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia or arthritis, researchers will be able to probe these snapshot data to try to understand causes, identify predictors, and develop preventative measures and treatments. In the meantime, ‘enhancement’ data such as emailed diet questionnaires are being collected from some participants and a pilot study will shortly ask volunteers to wear wristwatch-style accelerometers for a week, to log how they move about. Funding is also currently being sought for brain and body imaging of 100,000 participants.

More information at www.ukbiobank.ac.uk

UK Biobank opens for business

Sally Croft reveals Oxford’s pivotal role in a ground-breaking new resource for health research

Above: The blood, saliva and urine samples held at the UK Biobank storage facilities in Stockport will, alongside millions of pieces of medical data, allow researchers to study over the coming decades how the complex interplay of genes, lifestyle and environment affects our risk of disease
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Why am I here?

Colin Ryde
Director of Administration and Finance, Department of Chemistry

Tell us a bit about the Chemistry Department
The Department of Chemistry has over 1,600 staff, students and visitors working in four buildings on either side of South Parks Road, and has led innovations in science such as the lithium battery, electrochemistry solutions for roadside drug testing, and (collaborating with colleagues in medicine) a use-at-home kit for measuring insulin levels in people with diabetes. Last year the ‘Chemistry in the Garden’ exhibition at the University Botanic Gardens brought home to me how fascinating chemistry is.

So what exactly does your job entail?
I lead a professional team that provides for the non-academic administrative needs of Chemistry, covering finance, estates, facilities, human resources and some aspects of IT. I support the Chairman of Chemistry and the heads of the three academic sections as Chemistry’s Administrator and serve as a member of Chemistry’s Management Board, helping to run one of the largest chemistry departments in the world.

Any unusual challenges?
Oxford Chemistry often hosts VIP visitors such as senior UK or overseas government officials, which can result in a very different working day.

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
When I was very young, I wanted to be a train driver. When that began to sound rather uncool as a teenager, I wanted to be a musician or a journalist – I still dabble with both as hobbies.

What actually was your first job, and how did you get from there to here?
My first job on leaving college was as an administration trainee, training to be a hospital manager. I then spent a brief spell in the Chief Executive section of a local authority before joining Southampton University’s Institute of Sound and Vibration Research as a deputy administrator.

What was your last live cultural event? And your favourite musicians?
A visit to the theatre to see The Real Inspector Hound – featuring another senior Oxford administrator in the cast. My favourite musicians are usually drummers: John Bonham, Buddy Ritch or Keith Moon.

What’s your favourite website?
Sky Sports news.

If you could go anywhere, do anything on your day off, what would it be? And who (famous or otherwise) would you take with you?
Simple really – just play football or cricket with my youngest son.

Finally, what’s the most unexpected thing you’ve found yourself doing?
There are so many: having to deal with the unexpected is an important part of the job. Two examples that come to mind are: calling the RSPCA to remove a parrot that had flown into an office and landed on a lecturer’s head; and having the cast of Lewis using my office as an unofficial ‘Green Room’ between takes while I was still trying to work.

Viewfinder

Where’s this remarkable roof structure? Answer on p4.