Endsleigh-UCU Life Changers Awards 2007

UCU University and College Union

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Introduction

by **Sally Hunt** and **Paul Mackney**, joint general secretaries, UCU

The Endsleigh-UCU Life changers awards show what we in further and higher education are capable of. The twenty-six nominees each encapsulate the difference that education can make to people's lives.

We will show you talent nurtured; opportunities seized; and barriers overcome. We will even show you education as redemption—as the way forward to a very different life.

You will meet Life Changers who are imaginative, original and willing to challenge orthodoxies—they exemplify all that is best about post-compulsory education.

The Life Changers campaign says that education is about more than what can be measured, tied down or reported on.

One nominee sees her role as producing 'confident, questioning people who are able to take a broader view' and her views are echoed in different ways by all our Life Changers.

Achieving this creates countless positive benefits for society and policy makers need to think harder about creating an environment that helps rather than impedes the Life Changers.

We need better funding of course, but we also need to be allowed to do the jobs we love, and to be trusted to deliver.

There will be many nominees in future years as we build this campaign but it all started here. Thank you to Endsleigh Insurance whose committed support for Life Changers has made it possible and also to Thompsons Solicitors for their generous assistance. Thank you too, to the staff and students who nominated. Most of all thank you to the nominees. We are very proud to represent you and all your colleagues in UCU.

Sally Hunt **Paul Mackney**

UCU joint general secretaries

Dr Janine Talley

Sally Wilcox, Carol Hakins and Jim Addison

Professor Dick Hobbs

Pat Wilkinson

Dr Janine Talley

Open University

It was an unexpected phone conversation. 'I got a call from a new student in my group, Terry Rush-Morgan, saying: 'Hi, I'm one of your students, and I'm going to send you my assignment. And when you get it, I don't want you to think that I'm insulting you and that I haven't put any time into it. What you're going to get is probably a page of block capitals.'

It was 1998, just after the start of Dr Janine Talley's Open University Health and Disease course for that year. 'I said that I wouldn't be offended by anything that someone sent in,' Dr Talley recalls. 'I told him to do what he could and I'd have a look at it.

'And lo and behold, something like that arrived. It was something I had not seen before, with unusual features such as letters out of order in the words. I'd met Terry at tutorials, and he was the most stunningly vivacious, enthusiastic and bright person. None of it matched.'

Terry had worked as a carer for many years, and at the time worked as a healthcare assistant in a mental health unit in Bolton. By now in his mid-forties, he knew that spelling wasn't his strong point. 'I'd always gone through school being told 'You're thick', comments on my school report like 'Your writing is atrocious and your spelling is worse'. I had that all through school,' he says.

Dr Talley immediately spotted the signs of dyslexia. 'He'd been written off and nobody had ever thought about it by the sounds of it. I thought, why on earth has nobody ever bothered to look into this or pick this up?'

She arranged for Terry to see a specialist who could make a diagnosis. 'A while later I got this call from Terry. 'Janine! Janine! Janine! I'm dyslexic!' And I said, 'Fantastic!' Because actually, a reason had been discovered for why he wasn't meeting his potential. His whole world changed as a result, because he was then able to do some things to improve his performance.'

'If I hadn't had Janine physically help me to get assessed for dyslexia, I probably would have failed the first year and then dropped out,' says Terry. Instead, he was able to complete the year, and subsequently his degree.

Dr Talley, who has worked at the OU for nearly 20 years, sees Terry's case as part of its core mission. 'The Open University's philosophy is about removing barriers to access. Some cases might be about time, illness, a family commitment. A lot of what you do is helping people get through practically. You use your knowledge and your skills in the system to enable people to keep going.'

But even where there are no personal barriers at play, Dr Talley says that courses she has taught, which relate to health and health promotion, are about transforming people's perceptions.

> ***'My children do not see their disabilities as a barrier to success. That is a direct result of Janine inspiring me.'***

'A lot of health workers feel terrible pressure to make people's lives better and they can't always do it. One woman was almost despairing when she started the course, but by the end was incredibly liberated because she didn't feel responsible for how people's lives were. The reality is that it's not her job to change people.'

Dr Talley started teaching at the OU after taking a course there herself. She says she went into teaching to help other people fulfil their potential.

'Personal transformation doesn't come about in isolation. It comes about through your interactions with other people.

'I've achieved what I have because somewhere along the way, some people have believed in me. Things like getting a PhD, I got through that because of somebody's belief in me. It's so important to believe in people, and to believe that they can be everything they can be. It's wonderful to enable people to do that.'

She still keeps in contact with Terry, even swapping knitting patterns. Terry now lectures at Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, teaching Health and Social Care from level one to foundation degree.

'The belief I got off Janine has totally inspired me to want to help others who are in a position like me. The people on foundation degrees often haven't had the educational chances, as I didn't. It's really inspired me to support them.'

All of Terry's six children have dyslexia or dyspraxia. 'One of the reasons I wanted to succeed and get some education behind me was to inspire them to do the same. Now my children do not see their disabilities as a barrier to academic success. That is a direct result of Janine inspiring me, and I can now do that for my kids.

'I can't explain how much difference Janine has made to my life.'

Sally Wilcox, Carol Hakins and Jim Addison

Colchester Institute

Access courses give real meaning to the ideas of lifelong learning and equal opportunities. They give a second and, in some cases, a first chance to adults without previous academic qualifications to return to study and gain the necessary skills and knowledge to enter higher education and training.

Colchester Institute has had an Access course for over 20 years, surviving sometimes the turbulent changes in policy and the constant pressure on budgets. For one of its tutors, Sally Wilcox, it's not just surviving that's important. It's the fact that despite the pressure to make their courses more and more vocational, they've maintained their academic content and they are still a pathway to higher education for many students. As she says, 'at the end of their courses, students who have studied on the Colchester Institute Access course achieve very good results indeed; most achieve good honours degree and some first class honours'.

For Sally, the impact of national policies on local people makes the Access course vital. As she says, 'the survival of our Access course is particularly important since, in the absence of A-Level courses and following cuts in the budget and courses in adult education centres, we provide one of the very few opportunities for adults in the local area to progress to higher education and training'.

There's little doubt that the course has a huge impact on the local students. Plaudits for the course are many but as one recalls, 'I have wanted to be a midwife for as long as I can remember and it has been a long and winding road that has got me where I am now. I am a single parent of four children. I left school with one O-Level. When I eventually plucked up courage to do the Access course, I found out that I am not as thick as I thought—I was off!'

> ***'The course has given me my life back. I once again have my confidence.'***

Why has the course been so successful? For Sally, it's down to the strengths of the team. 'All our team are not only excellent classroom teachers, they're also skilled in providing advice, guidance and support to their students, many of whom who have very difficult home backgrounds and whose previous educational experiences have not been particularly positive'. More than anything, she says, 'they are committed to the principles of equal opportunities and work hard to make this a reality for their students, rather than empty rhetoric'.

Crucially, the course has also enjoyed the backing of the college management. Sally identifies the support given by Jim Addison, the Director of Development and Quality, as essential to the survival of the course.

Courses like this are the living proof that with motivated students and supportive tutors, people from disadvantaged backgrounds can change their lives, exceeding their expectations and those of their family and friends. As one former student neatly summarises, 'This course has given me my life back. I once again have my confidence'.

Left to right: Carol Hakins, Jim Addison and Sally Wilcox

Professor Dick Hobbs

London School of Economics

Tea boy, labourer, dustman, roadsweeper...academic. It's not the average career path, but it worked for Dick Hobbs.

'I came from a very working class background in East London, and failed my 11-plus. After several years of working in really low level jobs—I did anything to make a few bob—I decided to go to night school.

'I didn't know how to write an essay or indeed a sentence, but a teacher called Tony Goldman took me on. He taught me to read, taught me to write properly, showed some interest in me. He seemed to feel I might have something to offer from my background.'

Twenty years on, and Dick had become Professor Hobbs, lecturing in sociology at the University of Durham, via teacher training college, a masters at the LSE, a PhD at Surrey and a first job at Oxford.

Slowly but surely, over the 1990s, Professor Hobbs helped build up a group of working class sociology students at Durham. One of those was Rob Hornsby. He struggled badly in his first year at Durham, failing four out of five exams.

'It's a huge transitional process,' explains Hornsby, 'coming from a working class background and finding yourself deposited in something that is intrinsically a middle class establishment.

'Second year, I took one of Dick's modules. I enjoyed his lecturing style, he was open and approachable. Dick always looked out for hard-working students who didn't have the financial or cultural support in which to engage fully with higher education.'

'Those working class students who had maybe been knocked back by education previously, they seemed to come to me and to a few other colleagues,' says Professor Hobbs. 'They largely came from similar backgrounds to my own, and they felt comfortable with me and I felt comfortable with them.'

Hornsby says Professor Hobbs went out of his way to drive forward students who showed potential. 'He gave up a lot of time, he mentored, he found people work, promoted them for research jobs. Dick realised how higher education could be life enhancing for those working class students who came through, because he came from a working class background himself.'

At this point it is easy to reach for well-worn clichés about working class heroes, turning students and academics into raggrd trousered philanthropists fighting The System in pursuit of The Cause. But Professor Hobbs has no time for such dreamy-eyed notions.

'The important thing in dealing with students like this is not to patronise them, and not to make special allowances. The key thing is to give them the confidence that they've got something to say, that their experiences of life are important.

'Often they bring something to higher education that established academics can only read about.'

> ***'I was told by these important people that my life experience, my class background, was not to restrict me, and that I might have something to say that other people didn't know about.'***

It is a message that was drummed into him when he was finding his own feet, not only by Tony Goldman, but also by David Hooper at Teacher Training College, David Downes at LSE and Nigel Fielding at Surrey. 'I was told by these important people that my life experience, my class back-ground, was not to restrict me, and that I might have something to say that other people didn't know about.

'Some working class students can undervalue their own worth, but it's not true. They bring with them their experience of their community, of their family, their work, and that's quite important.'

Professor Hobbs recently moved on from Durham, and is now head of sociology at LSE and a renowned ethnographic researcher. He warns that growing class sizes make it harder to build the personal relationships that allow academics to spot which stu-dents need more support. 'I think it's easy for those students to slip through the net. It is more difficult to get to know students. There is a distancing, and that is a great shame.'

Rob Hornsby is now Dr Hornsby, working as an academic at York. He has no doubt about Professor Hobbs' influence. 'He has made such an impact on the lives of those that I know.

'If I hadn't met Dick in the second year as an undergraduate, I would have failed my degree. I doubt I would have got through to the spring term of my second year. He fundamentally altered my life.'

Pat Wilkinson
University of Bradford

It was hard enough already. Alex Kemp was brought up in children's homes and had neither finished school nor gone to college. Most of the universities he applied to stuck to rigid admissions criteria, and he was getting no financial support from his family.

So, having finally won a place to study Social Work at Bradford University, Alex was devastated to find himself the victim of homophobic abuse.

'I had quite a traumatic first six to twelve months on the course,' Alex recalls. 'A group of students didn't like the fact that they were living with someone who was gay. They were scratching 'queer' and 'faggot' on the hall of residence door.'

Pat Wilkinson was the head of Alex's department. He had spoken to her when he was applying for the course, and found her sensitive to the problems that care leavers faced. So when the bullies struck, Alex turned to Pat for help.

Pat helped him get a move to another hall, and supported him as his abusers were taken through the university disciplinary system. 'She basically had an individual with no experience of university life and with quite high needs. Most of the work was advocacy with the tutors, with other departments, and generally going over and above her call of duty to support my situation.'

A social work practitioner before entering academia, Pat knows the importance of resolving such problems quickly. 'The key is assessing when someone needs a great deal of your time, because often it's just that moment, and you have to drop things and prioritise particular needs.

'For the majority of students coming to university it is a life changing event, and the decisions they make then, particularly if they are involved in any sort of crisis, are really important. Confidence can be made or broken only too easily.'

Alex's confidence was made. He pulled through his difficulties to get a first in his first year assessment. Looking to return to his home town, he secured a transfer to Manchester University on the strength of his grades.

He has no hesitation in giving Pat the credit: 'There's no way that I would have been able to get past month two of the course, never mind go on to get a first in my first year, without Pat.'

Alex was ultimately a success story, but Pat was keen to ensure there would be no repeat of the trauma he suffered.

In the wake of Alex's case, she raised the university's anti-homophobia policies with senior managers, and helped persuade them to establish a formal Sexual Orientation and Respect Group, which works to ensure that discrimination issues are taken seriously.

Pat is aware that students facing personal difficulties represent a big responsibility for those in her role. 'I think we as academics aren't always mindful of the power we have in terms of enabling students or possibly going the other way and damaging students.

'On the Social Work course, because students are often required to look at themselves, their feelings and their backgrounds in a searching way, the tutors on that course have to be well equipped and sensitive in picking up on particular issues.'

> ***'We aim to produce confident questioning people who are able to take a broader view in relation to the world and their place within it.'***

Bradford's Social Work degree seeks to help redress a national shortage of professionally trained social workers: ironically, the people charged with looking out for the kind of children in care that Alex himself once was.

'The aim is to produce people who are competent as workers as soon as they graduate,' says Pat. 'That's a hefty responsibility. You have to work with students in a slightly different way, because you're constantly assessing their ability to practice with vulnerable people as well as looking at their academic work.'

But despite the vocational nature of the course, Pat is keen to place the course in the context of the wider role of higher education. 'We aim to produce confident, questioning people who are able to take a broader view in relation to the world and their place within it. Confidence is one of the key things that I hope comes out in relation to the programme.'

Alex certainly gained confidence—so much so, that last year he was elected as the National Union of Students' Disabled Students Officer. It was a move he says was inspired by his time at Bradford: 'I would have dropped out had it not been for the support provided by Pat, and I know that many students don't have those people and those structures at university to support them, and they often drop out.

'It gave me an indication of what many students without a Pat Wilkinson go through.'

Jane Challenger Gillitt

Professor William Beinart

Jim Bradley

Dr Hazel Cox

Jane Hadcock and Katherine Chisnell

Dr Rehan ul-Haq

Tessa Hall

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Arthur Keefe

Dr Kevin McCarron

Dr David Middleton

Leo Murphy

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Dr Tony Stead

Chris Beaumont

Jane Challenger Gillitt

University of Brighton

When Jane Challenger Gillitt studied at university, giving students practical support was not always top of the academic agenda.

'In the past, when I first went to university, there was a much more traditional kind of approach from academics: "You get off and do it yourself, and we will occasionally allow you a few minutes of our time, you undergraduates!"

But it is Jane and others like her who have filled the shoes of the grand professors of old, and she has a very different attitude to supporting students. 'I think there has been more of a realisation that one of our purposes is to teach, and in order to do a good job of that, you have to be available to help students.'

> ***'She saw something that I didn't, something that I had to offer, and she nurtured it.'***

Jane is now a senior lecturer in the School of Computing, Mathematical and Information Sciences at the University of Brighton. A post-92 university, she points to its strong widening participation agenda and high enrolment from the local area contributing to an 'egalitarian' admissions strategy. But this needs an open-door policy towards students in order to give them the necessary support.

'We are very student-centred,' says Jane. 'We are approachable from the very beginning, so that if they feel stressed or in need of help, they know they can get help from us. The help and guidance we give them at the beginning, where they see their personal tutor every week, helps to support students who may not be from families with a tradition of going into higher education.'

Jane is responsible for implementing this approach, working with the School's student support and welfare tutor, who acts as a referral service for students. Strong retention figures in a difficult subject area suggest the strategy is working.

Her enthusiasm for the role is clear. 'It's a responsibility that I'm really happy to have,' she says. 'I like the students at the beginning and I like them at the end. They're very fresh and enthusiastic, and as long as we can foster that enthusiasm and channel it, and not allow it to wither by indifference, then hopefully we can give them a really good start and they can take off on their own from there.

'I'm sure many staff don't actually remember when they first went away from home and how it felt, because it's not all a great adventure. Sometimes it's absolutely terrifying. There are so many challenges. It's not just the academic side, it's the social side, and the practical side. And it can be really daunting for them. You need to realise they are vulnerable and in need of support.'

Gary McQuade was one student who benefited from Jane's willingness to help. He started a course in Computing and Information Systems in 2000 as a mature student. 'I went into a class of younger people who were fresh out of A-Levels and had a better grasp of some of the subject matter. I found it rather intimidating, just trying to stay afloat, and Jane was a good source of support.

'No matter what the subject was, even if it was something she wasn't an expert in, she would always take the time to find the information and then come back to you. She would never give you the answer. She would try and empower you to do it yourself, purely by allowing you to look at it from different angles and perspectives, or by taking a step back.'

Jane explains her approach. 'The problems really boil down to straightforward things like time management, and also getting down to doing it. I think a lot of students find it difficult to get started. Once they have started, then other things will flow.'

A former Samaritan, she takes minor concerns from students in her stride. 'Well, the more minor the better really, because then you can deal with it easily, can't you? We are not counsellors, but we are here to help them find out how they can help themselves.'

The time and effort Jane invested in Gary paid off. He graduated in 2004, and is now working for an oil company in Aberdeen. 'Jane gave me the confidence to do a lot of different things. She made me realise the value of what I had to offer and the way that I expressed myself. She saw something that I didn't, something that I had to offer, and she nurtured it and helped me to refine it.'

'Well, that's what we're here for,' says Jane.

Professor William Beinart

University of Oxford

Professor William Beinart knows only too well the importance of academia. He was a student at the University of Cape Town in the late 1960s, a university gripped by anti-apartheid activism, and saw his academic activities as being part of the movement for social change. 'I got absorbed in history because I felt we hadn't been able to understand fully the history of our country, and that would help enormously in trying to explore avenues for political change,' says Professor Beinart. 'We were really trying to find out more about African history, the African experience, and trying to build bridges.'

> ***'He takes risks with people who come across as interesting, probably not the kind of people the more staid echelons of academic society would have taken on.'***

Like many of his contemporaries, he moved to Britain to discover the heritage that apartheid covered up. After apartheid fell, Professor Beinart stayed in Britain to become one of the foremost authorities on African history.

He is now leading Oxford University's new School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, and is Rhodes Professor of Race Relations. But he has not let success go to his head.

Dr Lotte Hughes undertook a DPhil in Modern History at Oxford from 1998-2002. Professor Beinart was her supervisor. 'He is modest and self-effacing, and very patient with students, allowing us to develop at our own pace and in our own time,' she says.

And while apartheid is sepia now, Professor Beinart maintains a pioneering style. 'He takes risks with people who come across as interesting, probably not the kind of people some of the more staid echelons of academic society would have taken on,' says Dr Hughes.

'I'd been a journalist for 20 plus years,' she adds. 'I didn't know how to go about doing a doctorate, whether my ideas were sound or off the wall. He could easily have said that he wasn't interested, but he took me under his wing.'

Professor Beinart takes a close interest in his students' research. 'These are students who are making big decisions about the direction of their life. It's important for me to ensure they can reach their full potential, and I think in order to do that you need to engage, you can't just say 'that's a good idea' and let them go off and do it.'

'He'd have his students round for dinner at regular intervals,' says Dr Hughes. 'It's all part of coming together informally to chat about the work you're doing. I think that's all part of the willingness to cross those kinds of boundaries.

'He could see that if pushed, I could reinvent myself as a historian,' says Dr Hughes. And sure enough, she is now following in his footsteps, researching African history. 'He encouraged me to follow my heart and my head and switch careers.'

Terry Hoad, President of Oxford UCU said, 'We are delighted at William Beinart's nomination. His determined support for the public face of his subject is matched in equal measure by his patient nurturing of emerging scholars within it. Students and colleagues alike will acknowledge that this recognition is richly deserved.'

Inspiring Students

Jane Challenger Gillitt

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Chris Beaumont

Jim Bradley

University of Stirling

For Jim Bradley, education means not standing on top of a telephone line in the pouring rain for the last twenty years. Or worse, not standing in the dole queue wishing he still was.

'I was subject to the vagaries of privatisation,' says Jim. 'I thought the writing might be on the wall, and so I had to get out. I had nowhere else to go as a telephone engineer.'

More than two decades on, and Jim is Access Programme Director at Stirling University, working on widening participation and outreach programmes with schools and the local community. His prospects transformed after he left his manual work to study at the LSE in 1984.

'I felt that because I had a degree, I could start to pick and choose and build a career. Before it was a job, this was now a career. You can take it in different directions, you can stick with particular pieces of work you enjoy.'

Jim went into teaching, first with the TUC and then later Falkirk College, before joining Stirling primarily to work on their access courses. 'I thought that if I could do this and it's made such a difference to my life, then I wanted to enable other people to do the same thing.' His approach is to raise access students' self confidence before building their academic skills.

Stirling mature student Yvonne Gilfillan is certainly a fan. She had held a highly paid job before her fortunes took a downturn, and she was thinking of returning to education. She spoke to Jim. 'When you have a negative experience, it really does affect your self confidence. But when Jim explained what his background was, and the sense of satisfaction he received at university, that was enough for me. He has to be the most passionate, enthusiastic, motivating educational person I have ever met.'

> ***'Jim has to be the most passionate, enthusiastic, motivating educational person I have ever met.'***

Jim has a missionary zeal to persuade non-traditional students to enter university. 'I know what it's given me,' he says, 'and I just want to give them the same opportunity that I had. If I've already experienced it myself, if I can't let you see how exciting learning can be, then as far as I'm concerned, who else is going to do it?'

Inspired by Jim, Yvonne is now mentoring students at colleges who want to enter university. She says Jim goes out of his way to encourage all students. 'I know students who have really struggled, and Jim has made a difference to them just by taking time out to speak to them and put things into perspective.'

She recalls how he went out of his way to develop personal learning support for a student with photographic memory. 'That kind of thing really is above and beyond what many lecturers and tutors would do.'

'We've got a tutor who I taught in a community centre about nine years ago,' says Jim. 'She had no qualifications, went to college, got her degree, and now she's a tutor. It's just really rewarding to see people doing that.'

Dr Hazel Cox

University of Sussex

Hazel Cox remembers the exact date last year. In fact, she remembers the time.

'Friday March 10th 2006. It was lunchtime; I think I've still got the email somewhere. It was 1 o'clock. We had no idea at all and we were just called in.'

It was a hastily convened meeting, but a devastating one. Professor Alasdair Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Sussex University, told academics in the Chemistry department that the university was shutting it down.

'I remember staring with tears rolling down,' says Dr Cox. She, like her colleagues, had worked relentlessly to keep the department running for years in the face of budget cuts. 'To find out after all that hard work, I was really sad.'

The story of what followed is well documented. The campaign to save Chemistry was unprecedented in scale and success. Leading scientists from around the world expressed outrage at the plans. MPs attacked the university's handling of the department. Students and staff united in protests that forced the university to back down.

'They thought we'd be small and tiny and just go away,' Dr Cox says with a hint of mischief, 'but little did they know that we're all quite feisty and passionate.'

Dr Cox was a member of the 'A-Team', a group of five Chemistry staff members tasked with organising the campaign, led by Dr Gerry Lawless, who was head of the department and she is quick to pass credit for the campaign's success to others—to Dr Lawless and the A-Team, to Students' Union president Roger Hilton, to UCU branch official Jim Guild, to the Chemistry students themselves.

But others stress that Dr Cox's role was vital. 'She activated virtually the entire student body and whole groups of people outside the university to save the department,' says Jim. 'She was the lynchpin, the central energy bolt that pulled the department together.'

> ***'Look, it's quantum mechanics and I know it's difficult, but I swear to god you're gonna love it.'***

Dr Cox organised the students as they embarked on a breathless campaign. Liz Atkinson, one of the Chemistry students, identifies Dr Cox as key. 'Hazel was central to the entire thing. She was staying incredibly late everyday, she was just our hero. There were two or three members of the department that were on the same level, but Hazel was our immediate liaison. She was the one we were all running up to, giving hugs to. She's free with the hugs!'

That she should have worked so hard to save the department says much of her passion, both for her subject and her students. 'She is an evangelist for chemistry as a subject,' says Jim.

'It is an enabling science,' says Dr Cox, as if to confirm Jim's comments. 'It is something where, for example, a chemist can synthesise a drug and potentially heal millions.

'It's amazing. You can take two elements from the periodic table and combine them to make anything from a polymer to a quantum dot. There's just so much you can do.'

Her evangelism transmits itself to her students. Liz says: 'She's just so enthusiastic about her subject. She's sort of bouncing around going: 'Look, it's quantum mechanics and I know it's difficult, but I swear to god you're gonna love it.' And by the end of it, you really do. Her lectures are never dull.

'It's an absolute privilege to teach these students,' Dr Cox says. 'I enjoy doing my research and feeling that I can advance knowledge, but the most rewarding part is being able to teach students, and empowering them to become the young people that they want to be.'

And thanks to her efforts in helping to save the department, she won't have to stop for a while yet.

Inspiring Students

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Colchester Adult Community College

Katherine Chisnell is clear about the value of the ESOL classes that she and Jane Hadcock teach at Colchester Adult Community College.

'I'm amazed everyday when I listen to people's stories,' she says. 'I've got Arab Jewish Muslims who've been persecuted. And they're the people you feel really passionate about. They need to learn, they want to learn, they want to do something good.

'Or equally, there are people who've done very good jobs in their country, but because they can't speak English, they can't do the same jobs here. I've got a Polish lawyer, and here he's cleaning in a hospital. That's the sort of person we want to get up through the system so he can get his qualifications and have a really good job here.'

Katherine and Jane both encounter students who have fled deprivation and persecution to get to Britain. Katherine recalls how a passing comment by her about Amnesty International turned into a two-hour citizenship lesson after she realised none of her students had heard of it.

'There are people from Kosovo, China, Vietnam, and they've not even heard of Amnesty. They don't have human rights. The history that they've learnt is different to the real history,' Katherine explains.

> ***'I've got a Polish lawyer, and here he's cleaning in a hospital. That's the sort of person we want to get up through the system.'***

It is little wonder, then, that they have been so active in lobbying against the government's plans to charge students for ESOL classes. First, Jane persuaded the local county council to abandon plans to move ESOL from its current curriculum area within Literacy and into Languages, which would have meant that ESOL students could have been charged. Then, after the government announced its proposals to cut funding, Jane and Katherine, backed by UCU at national level, swung into gear. They took a petition from students to persuade local MP Bob Russell to lobby the prime minister, while Jane questioned higher education minister Bill Rammell at a lobby of parliament.

'Most of our students are mid-course,' says Jane. 'If they're suddenly required to pay, it may be that they can't continue, so they're cut off mid-course.'

Jane points to problems defining who is an ESOL student and who is not, since many British passport holders study ESOL. 'There are Bangladeshi women who come to me and they speak like anybody else around us, but they've got a literacy problem. You can't define an ESOL learner as someone being British or not British'

'It's a real shame,' says Katherine, 'because at the moment a lot of my students really want to get on and achieve full accreditation so they can work or go on to the next level. And at the moment they're doing that. I have students writing to me saying they've now got a job.

'At the moment they're all mixing with first language speakers and wanting to get out and get a job or meet new people,' she adds. 'If they're then suddenly landed with a having to pay for their courses, they're just going to stay within their community.'

Dr Rehan ul-Haq

University of Birmingham

Dr Rehan ul-Haq teaches some of Britain's most promising business students at the University of Birmingham, young men and women who have every chance of making it to the very top. So it makes sense to keep their eyes focused on the bigger picture every now and then.

'I remind them that Bill Gates was 19 when he sat at Harvard and then decided to drop out and set up Microsoft, and I remind them that the head of the UN was once sat in an undergraduate classroom. And I say to them that whatever they're learning now is just a foundation for something.'

> ***'My key driving point is to engage with the students' learning rather than my teaching.'***

Dr ul-Haq, who worked as a corporate banker in the City of London during the 1980s before moving into academia, is known by his students for his engaging style of lecturing. Mark Morris was studying for an Engineering degree when he took Dr ul-Haq's module in Strategic Management in 2003. Mark freely admits he knew little about the subject when he started the module.

'He was very energetic,' says Mark, 'because he really tried to teach the subject and give examples that we could understand, from a technological point of view. He really tried to make the class a bit more dynamic. It wasn't so much like a typical lecture, it was much more like a tutorial'.

'He'd try and give an analogy of the way decisions were being a made in a company. He'd break it down in terms of how a microprocessor would handle things like that and give us examples like that. So from our point of view, we could think, that's how a computer works, and that's how management works. They were the kind of things that we could see, that we could understand.'

Dr ul-Haq, whose research focuses on the evolution of banking alliances, makes no secret of his intention to break free from the traditional didactic lecture style. 'This year I'm not using any overheads, no PowerPoint slides. What I do is take the ideas and the concepts which are in the reading and apply them in real time in front of the class, with class participation'.

'There have been times when I've just gone and sat quietly at the back after asking them a few questions, and a couple of students have led an hour long session. My style is one of showing that one has to make judgements. My key driving point is to engage with the students' learning rather than my teaching,' adds Dr ul-Haq.

Former students also point to his pastoral care. Dr ul-Haq was Michelle Stott's dissertation tutor for her MSc in Marketing when she ran into personal difficulties. 'I was close to just giving up and leaving the course,' says Michelle. 'He was absolutely brilliant. He invested so much time to make sure I didn't leave. It was just that backbone of someone to talk to when I was finding the course quite tough.'

'I had his personal mobile that I could call at any time of the day. Even if I emailed him on a Sunday, he'd give me a call back and ask if I was ok. He was always there. He just really cares about his students and he invests a lot of time,' she adds.

Dr ul-Haq explains: 'When I come into university I assume it's a teaching day. And therefore if a student wants to approach me during lunch we'll sit down and have a chat. Students turn up and ask me about careers, job applications, life in general. There are students who call me up five years later asking for advice'.

'One of my students spent two hours with me discussing three jobs and three potential careers. And we spent two hours on a whiteboard analysing where these careers could take him, what the alternatives could be, how they fitted in with the lifestyle, his ambitions and goals, and his skillset.'

Mark testifies to Dr ul-Haq's enthusiasm for engaging students in discussion. 'You'd go in there thinking, I just want a quick chat about this bit I don't understand, and suddenly he'd be able to expand to a point you wouldn't think possible, and you see there's a lot more to not just what he was lecturing about, but the relevance it had to the real world'.

'I've not come across that many lecturers who take the time to get that across, what the material actually means in a context in which you'd want to understand it, in the real world.'

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Jim Bradley

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Tessa Hall

Plymouth College of Art & Design

When Tessa hall joined Plymouth College of Art and Design ten years ago, she was the sum total of their support service for students with disabilities.

'I was just told to help students basically,' she remembers. 'Very few students knew about the service, and some didn't have the confidence to ask.'

Initially working a half week, it would have been easy to have muddled through for a couple of years before heading off for greener grass, but Tessa was determined to build meaningful provision for supporting students.

A decade on, and the results are extraordinary. Her team identifies students' learning difficulties and support needs with specialists in dyslexia and dyspraxia, mental health issues, physical disabilities, visual and hearing impairment, autism, Irlen Syndrome, and many other conditions.

'Tessa basically built a team of people over the last ten years from nothing, because there was no provision in the college before her, or support for learners of any kind,' says Clare Brown, a member of Tessa's team. 'She's done an amazing thing off her own back. It's a huge thing in the college now.'

Every student is now assessed by members of the team when they start at the college, and any learning support needs are identified and put in place. A third of the further education students entering the college are identified by Tessa as having dyslexia. The result is a unique provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

'What our department has done is increase the access to those subjects to students with learning difficulties and with disabilities, by providing the right kind of support,' says Tessa.

Clare adds: 'We've had students on the BA courses who can't read or write who have been going into higher education because of the provision that we can deliver for them. They probably wouldn't be accepted anywhere else.'

Tessa's official title is Learning Development and Disability Advisor after the department was restructured last summer. She had been running the whole team by herself, but the workload proved impractical with the expansion of their activities. Her commitment to the cause remains undimmed.

> ***'We've had students on the BA courses who can't read or write who have been going into higher education because of the provision that we can deliver for them.'***

'She just puts herself out for people outside the norms,' says Clare. 'She's available on the phone throughout the holidays—she'll take three quarters of a day holiday just so she can be at the college to see a student at a certain time.'

The impact on students is evident. Clare mentions one man who had lived in sheltered accommodation because of his learning difficulties, before achieving a print qualification from the college. He is now working for local print firms.

'Students will come in at the beginning very timid and not really wanting to talk about their learning difficulties.

'They can be here for five years sometimes, doing a series of qualifications, so over that period of time you'll see them improving in confidence,' Tessa says.

Carolyn Harries

Coleg Sir Gar

No one doubts the importance of having a good teacher. But while it is all very well wanting good teachers, someone has to teach them first. How teachers communicate is crucial to children becoming engaged in learning.

Step forward Carolyn Harries, Education Section Leader at Welsh further education college Coleg Sir Gar. Since moving into teaching education, she has become a passionate advocate of teaching styles that can inspire a classroom.

'I have a passion for helping people to understand how other people learn,' she says. 'I believe that learning has to be centred with the student. Knowledge can be passed on, but it has to be assimilated, and I advocate teaching methods that really help students to assimilate the knowledge rather than just transfer it.'

> ***'The only way that I can continue to be passionate about teaching is to develop myself so that I can pass it on to my learners.'***

Carolyn encourages her trainee teachers to adopt a style known as constructivism. It might sound like jargon, but there is a point to it, allowing students to construct an understanding of a subject for themselves, through group work, discussion and problem solving, rather than simply being handed information.

'In our society knowledge is changing quickly, and in 20 years the knowledge you've gained is out of date, so we can't teach the knowledge today. I'm passionate about encouraging teachers to find innovative ways of helping their students to really engage in their own learning, so they can become autonomous learners, and not simply be spoonfed year after year whenever they have to learn something new.'

Carolyn was not always an academic. She started out working in retail as a shop assistant, rising through the ranks. Only when her marriage split up did she pursue a more solid career, taking a degree and teaching business-related subjects. But then the chance arose to teach education.

'When I got the opportunity to move into the education area, I jumped at it. I felt it would really give me the opportunity to help individuals to develop other people.'

'Carolyn has always been very keen on the philosophies of education,' says Judith Williams, a colleague at Coleg Sir Gar. 'The PGCE is a very difficult course to run —in a class, you might have people with PhDs, people from the community, professional tradespeople who have high practical skills but may be attempting academic work after a long time, so lessons must be differentiated to accommodate the variety of students.

'She is a very good counselor,' adds Judith. 'Many people will go to Carolyn, as her pastoral care is very strong. She is also a stalwart of the trade union branch. She's very supportive of her colleagues and students, and very rarely moans about anything.'

Carolyn has helped to establish a staff development programme at Coleg Sir Gar, allowing her to pass on her methods to her colleagues as well as her trainee teachers. And she continues to study the art of teaching.

'I wanted to find out about the best way people could learn. I've read a lot, I go to as many conferences as I can, and I've continued to learn myself. The only way that I can continue to be passionate about teaching is to develop myself so that I can pass it on to my learners.'

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Arthur Keefe

It was hardly the most auspicious of academic track records. Maggie Jager had failed her 11-plus, went to secondary modern, and never made much headway academically. It was the 1960s, and people like her were termed a 'school failure'.

'Expectations were not high, and my own expectations weren't high of myself,' she recalls.

Over a number of years, Maggie went into social work, and entered Bristol Polytechnic in 1975 to do her social work training. 'It was with a great deal of trepidation because I hadn't been in full time education for many years by then, and was very worried about getting through it.'

Arthur Keefe was her tutor. Slowly but surely, he restored her confidence. 'He did it over time, a sort of chipping away. He was my tutor for two years, so it was him continually saying how much he believed I could do it, even if I didn't believe it myself,' says Maggie.

'I must have been voicing how I thought the others were probably much better than I was at the job, and he said: 'Well, I can tell you this. You may well find there are other people that have done better than you in essays and are better on the course academically, but I know who I want to be walking up the garden path as my social worker.' He gave me confidence in the job I was going to do as well as the confidence to continue with education.'

Slowly but surely, Arthur gently coaxed Maggie to realise that despite her bad experiences, she actually enjoyed education. 'At the end of the course, he said, 'well, have you enjoyed these two years?' And I had. And he said, 'well, why not continue?'

'I think he was aware that I still felt the stigma of being marked as a school failure. Looking back now, I believe it was the school that failed me, but I certainly felt a failure at the time.'

> ***'He was the first person that expressed that belief and that faith that I could do much more than I thought I could.'***

Maggie took Arthur's advice and continued with her studies. After finishing her social work training, she took an undergraduate degree at the Open University. Which was followed by an MA. Duly followed by an MSc. And sure enough, this autumn she plans to start her PhD.

'Because of his support and encouragement and belief in me, I've not looked back,' says Maggie. 'There was nothing actually preventing me from learning. Nobody before had expressed any belief in my ability and faith that I could do things. He was the first person that expressed that belief and that faith that I could do much more than I thought I could.'

Dr Kevin McCarron

Roehampton University

As silences go, this was a pretty awkward one. Dr Kevin McCarron had asked his English Literature class to tell him a key historical theme behind *Little Women*. And he wasn't getting an answer.

So he waited. And waited. For a full twenty minutes of complete and utter silence, as his students sat unable to conjure an answer between them.

Bernie Mitchell was one of the silent students. 'No one in the class knew, or had even thought about it. Kevin wouldn't give the answer away. He stuck it out until someone came up with an idea.'

Finally, after twenty minutes of silence, one of his students proffered a guess and the class was back up and running. 'I did hold my nerve!' remembers Dr McCarron. 'This was the culmination of weeks of frustration on my part. My job is to facilitate a discussion about the book that they originate. I insist on starting with what they think.'

> ***'I put them on the spot, I don't let them off the hook, I make them think for themselves and I make them give me a response.'***

It may be an unusual approach to academia, but it works. His classes, at Roehampton University, are regularly oversubscribed. Bernie is an enthusiast. 'I'd go into a lecture for a nap but I'd come out feeling energised, because he'd got me asking questions about myself, the book, society. In one two-hour lecture, he'll cover so many things by making you do it.'

'I put them on the spot, I don't let them off the hook, I make them think for themselves and I make them give me a response,' explains Dr McCarron. 'It's not my job to tell them things, it's my job to make them want to debate and think. A mind that starts to think about *Little Women* is a mind that's going to start thinking about politics and ecology and so on.'

So he's not trying to be the students' friend? 'Not in the slightest, no,' Dr McCarron says emphatically. 'I am pretty good at decosifying class relationships. I don't want the class to be a place where we sit and comfort one another with how well we're doing.'

So what inspired this demanding approach? Boarding school? Military service? Nothing of the sort, in fact. Dr McCarron didn't even go to university until he was 30. He left school in his native New Zealand at 17 with no qualifications. Feeling on the periphery, he travelled the world, finding work as a roadie for rock bands and a theatre technician. Only when he wanted to settle down and raise a family did he finally enter university, pursuing it all the way to an academic career.

'When I worked for rock bands, one of the things I realised was that you don't get a good night without attention to detail,' says Dr McCarron, who worked for artists as big as Queen and Bruce Springsteen. 'You've got to do the publicising, you've got to have the right sound, the right lights and so on. You can't get 5,000 people turning up to see Queen if sloppiness lies behind the road crew's attitude.'

It's a lesson that he takes into his lectures. 'This is what I'm trying to instil in them, that it's not just about speculative recreations of literature. Hand in hand with that go obligations to nailing down the details.

'I'm ruthless on grammar, on syntax, on referencing, on bibliographies. You can't offer me a clever interpretation of a literary text, and then offer me a bibliography that doesn't follow any known rules. That essay's not going to do well.'

Nor does Dr McCarron neglect the details in his parallel career as a stand-up comedian. Having decided to 'give that a go' in 1998, he and a business partner now run Laughing Horse Comedy, a chain of small comedy clubs. 'Writing jokes is hard work. They've got to be good, and you've got to remember them.

'People expect me to be quite funny in seminars. On the contrary—I take stand-up comedy very seriously. It's the work ethic, in both fields. They're both work; they need to be taken seriously.'

As for Bernie, he for one was sparked into a change of attitude by Dr McCarron's classes. 'He instilled confidence in me—genuine confidence, not just get-by confidence. So now I'm doing an MA in Religion and Literature, and I'm aiming to teach English Literature to students in Argentina. He's given me my own convictions through the way he taught and the questions he asked me.'

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Dr David Middleton

Open University

Penny Evans was at breaking point. A mature student looking after a very ill family member, who required round the clock treatment, these commitments were making her Open University degree untenable. She contacted her tutor, Dr Dave Middleton.

'I said that I didn't think I would be able to carry on,' remembers Penny. 'And he said: "Stick with it, you've got enough points to get through your assessed work for this module, just keep going and try and get to the exam." And he encouraged me and he pushed me.'

The encouragement paid off for Penny, who made it through her degree with Dr Middleton's consistent support. 'Any time I was wondering where to go next and what do, I would air it with him.'

Dr Middleton finds that handling mature students' personal issues can involve a careful balancing act. 'They want to be judged as students in their own right. So I'm always clear that when we're in tutorials, they're one of the group, and whatever personal issues are coming with them, it's not for me to tell that to everybody else.'

Dr Middleton is used to challenges. He came from a working class estate, and was the first member of his family to go to university. He entered higher education late, following a number of years campaigning on social justice issues in his hometown of Milton Keynes.

Academia was a way for him to contribute to society. 'I wanted to work with people. I'd gone into academia as a mature student myself, I just felt I wanted to give something back.'

'I don't get the impression that it's a 9-5 job with him,' says Penny. 'He would actually turn up to a Saturday lecture with an electric kettle, a box of the best chocolate biscuits, and lots of paper cups. And he would go round us all with a pad of paper and ask who wanted tea and who wanted coffee.

> ***'Dave Middleton was there all the way through my undergraduate years and my early masters. He was a great teacher.'***

'He was writing these course books, he was studying part-time, he had a family, and he was in charge of several tutors and associate lecturers, but the man still had time to get a box of biscuits.'

Dr Middleton says he is just putting students at ease. 'I think you should be as comfortable in a tutorial as you would be at home, so I just try and replicate that. I feel that if you've made the effort to get there on a Saturday morning and it's cold and wet, then you should get a reward for that.'

The reward for Penny has been far more than just tea and biscuits, however. 'Not only am I doing a full time PhD now,' she says, 'but I'm lecturing in Politics and I'm working as a research assistant. And Dave Middleton was there all the way through my undergraduate years and my early masters. He was a great teacher.'

Leo Murphy
Omagh College

Within education, there is always great discussion about how to teach and how to research. Papers are published, conferences are held and committees are convened in order to argue over the fine details of how to do it best.

But how do you convince someone to completely change their life?

Part of it is spotting the moment. Sharon Loane was a mature student at Omagh College in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s. A senior manager in a textiles factory, she had started a degree in Business and Management to get a promotion, but then the sector started offshoring its work elsewhere.

'The whole sector was going into decline,' says her tutor Leo Murphy, 'and I encouraged her to take a big leap of faith and go back into university full time.'

Leo suggested Sharon study for a PhD as a route into an academic career. She says: 'His notion was, widen your horizons, higher education is about the wider world. It's not just about getting an increment at work.'

But part of it was also gentle—or maybe firm—persuasion, as Leo recalls. 'Her first thoughts were to just do a masters, and I said: 'No, you won't do a masters. You're sitting with a first class honours degree, you're strong enough to do a research PhD.' And she kind of went 'What? A PhD is for professors. I'm not a professor. I'm just a girl who worked her way up a factory and did her degree.' But I have confidence in a number of years I'll see her name and it'll have the word 'professor' typed against it.'

Ambition for others also helps. 'Leo wouldn't settle for good enough,' says Sharon. 'He would challenge you to do the best you could in coursework and exams, and then once you've got a bit of success he would challenge you to keep building on that. Leo saw the bigger picture a lot of the time with students.'

And then, there's having the courage of your convictions, as Leo willingly attests. 'You're almost asking, 'am I giving someone the right advice here?' But if you're a football scout, and you see this really talented person coming through, then you're not satisfied until you've seen if they can make it at the very top league. It's a bit like that.'

> ***'I suppose what I was doing was saying, 'You can do it'. And at the end of the day, I think going on allowed her to blossom.'***

Sharon decided to take the leap of faith and changed her career. Having graduated in 2000, she completed her PhD at the University of Ulster in 2005, and now lectures to her own students.

'Leo Murphy was influential in changing my entire life,' she says. 'The life of an academic is very different to the life of a manager in industry. In some ways you work just as hard, but you do it on your own terms and in the things you're interested in. They're like chalk and cheese.'

Leo has no doubt the gamble paid off. 'I suppose what I was doing with her was saying, 'You can do it'. And at the end of the day, I think going on allowed her to blossom.'

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Paul Sander

University of Wales Institute Cardiff

Sometimes, lives can be made and broken in an instant. Jo Finn was reaching the end of her psychology degree at UWIC in 2004. It was nearing deadline day to hand in her dissertation, and knowing she was in with a chance of getting a first, she spent the whole weekend with practically no sleep, working on it.

And then, just before the deadline, disaster struck.

'I was going to hand it in when my fiancé made some sarcastic comment to me that just made me break down,' remembers Jo. 'I was feeling kind of emotional at the time. And I decided to just throw my dissertation down. I just left it there and walked out.

> ***'Behind every one of those marks is a real person in a real situation.'***

'It's hard to explain now, it was so stupid. But at the time, when I'd had so little sleep and it meant so much and I'd worked so hard on it, just that one comment that came out of his mouth made me think, right, that's it, I've had enough. When I returned from my walk I realised how stupid I'd been, especially when I saw my dad's face drop when I told him what I'd done.'

Jo didn't know what to do. She wasn't going to do anything, as she felt there was nothing that could be done. Her parents persuaded her to email the course leader, Paul Sander, explaining what had happened.

'She was lucky I was reading my emails that weekend! It was so out of character. She always handed her work in, she always did everything to the best of her ability, she could even be too diligent. So I knew something had gone wrong.'

Jo was not optimistic. 'I was terrified. But he said, "bring your dissertation to me, and we'll sort this out." So I sent it to him and he got it in and everything was fine. He could have just said, "well, it's tough luck, there's nothing I can do", but he actually went out of his way to help me and that's how my dissertation got handed in.'

Three years of hard work could have disappeared in a moment, but Paul is a believer in flexibility. 'I don't think you should have this completely inflexible, completely dogmatic approach that if something was due in by a certain time, regardless of the circumstances, you're never ever going to budge on that.'

Jo had previously delayed entry to her course by a year due to family difficulties. 'If you understand the sorts of difficulties Jo had been coping with, the fact that she had contacted me, and was prepared to get the work to me straight away, puts the whole thing in a completely different perspective,' says Paul.

'Somebody has to be there to fight the students' corner,' he adds. 'I think exam boards can be cold, because they're not actually dealing with individuals. They're dealing with statistics, they're dealing with marks on a paper, but behind every one of those marks is a real person in a real situation.'

Paul also works as an academic advisor, giving support to any students who need help in their studies, be it through dyslexia, language problems, or a lack of confidence. Jo was not unique in seeking his assistance. 'There are many students like her who I help in a variety of different ways,' says Paul.

Jo got a first in her degree, and is now training to be a teacher. 'If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have got my degree. He had such an impact on my future, because without that I wouldn't have been able to get on the

PGCE course. Who knows what I would have been doing now? That one incident just had such a huge effect.

'I was terrified but it was Paul who made it possible for me.'

Dr Tony Stead

Royal Holloway

As programme director for the science foundation year at Royal Holloway, Dr Stead's job is all about enabling people to expand their horizons. His students are by definition entering uncharted territory.

'They haven't done science before, or they have uncon- ventional educational back-grounds, or they're mature students returning to education,' says Dr Stead.

The science foundation degree is for students who wish to study science but have no recent relevant qualifications. On completing the foundation year, they can then undertake a specialist science degree.

'There's a variety of people, really quite a mixed bag,' says Dr Stead. 'I can recall retired teachers who, having taught an arts subject for years, decided they wanted to do a degree in geology—a complete turnaround. One lady was a model, got to her late twenties and decided that had a limited lifetime as a career. She was concerned about ecology and so moved into the environmental side of things.'

Other students are having a second crack at education, after missing out first time round.

'When she graduated, the smile on her face was so rewarding. For me, that's a success story.'

'Something went seriously wrong when they were 18, or maybe they came from a school which didn't encourage higher education. They've gone into a job, mixed with others and suddenly realised they've got a passion for conserving organisms or doing some good in the medical field.'

Dr Stead recalls a mature student who, after studying on the science foundation year, gained a first in Physics and is presently studying for a PhD in the US. 'He came in at 24, clearly academically very bright, and for some reason didn't realise it at 18.'

Dr Stead is keen to be approachable to students in difficulty. Fatmata Tarawalie was a mature student with a failed marriage. 'I had a child to bring up on my own,' she says. 'At one time I just felt, I can't cope, I can't go on. Dr Stead just made me aware that I'm not alone, that I can make it, and gave me some information on seeking further help.

'I felt throughout my course he was one teacher I could always go to. Whenever you are down or you think you can't go on, he motivates you and makes sure you don't give up.'

With Dr Stead's encouragement, Tarawalie made it through. 'When she graduated, the smile on her face was so rewarding,' he says. 'For me, that's a success story.'

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Chris Beaumont

Chris Beaumont

Liverpool Hope University

Sometimes, academics can have a crucial impact on someone's life without even knowing it. Chris Beaumont can't recall that one of his students, Gail Shackley, almost pulled the plug on her Open University course. Understandable, given that it was back in 1990. But Gail remembers it clearly.

'I had been at home with pre-school children for a number of years, and I had lost all confidence in myself. I was just vegetating at home. The Open University was meant to open doors for me, but I just couldn't see how I was going to get through it. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work, it was just really difficult getting any sort of routine going.

'Chris saw potential in me that I just couldn't see. He never stopped being supportive and encouraging. Halfway through the year I could have given up so easily, but he worked around it, and pulled out all the stops. If I hadn't got through that first year, and it was all thanks to Chris, I would not have carried on the degree.'

Gail pulled through her difficult first year of study, and after taking a break to return to full-time work, graduated last year.

Chris now teaches at Liverpool Hope University, and is also Deputy Director of the Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, a collaboration across three universities designed to improve student writing, especially for assessment. But he is still keen to continue teaching at the Open University.

'It was a really stimulating environment,' says Chris. 'Because the students come from a huge range of backgrounds, you could have squaddies, you could have housewives who wanted alternative careers, you could get retired people who were doing it for interest. It gave me a huge appreciation of the sort of difference that education could make.'

> ***'There's no way I was going to achieve anything. I look back now and I can't believe how lacking in confidence I was then.'***

For Gail, the difference has been huge. She is hoping her degree will now secure her a change of career. 'If I'd given up the Open University, I'd have carried on with very low self esteem, and I can't imagine that I would ever have changed. There's no way I was going to achieve anything. I look back now and I can't believe how lacking in confidence I was then, because it's certainly not the me of today.'

Joe Baden
Goldsmiths

'I had a geezer recently who just kept on saying, 'I've got really low self-esteem.' And I said to him: 'I used to have low self-esteem. Do you know why? Because I was a wanker. I was fucking horrible. I didn't like myself and nor did anyone else.''

If you want to join Joe Baden's Open Book project, kindly leave your excuses at the door. They don't work. If this project to bring offenders into education is about one thing, it is taking responsibility for your actions.

'We ask for no special favours,' says Joe. 'Everyone in the project has to take responsibility for who they are, where they've been, what they've done, so that they can take responsibility for their futures. If you've done something wrong, you've done something wrong. The reasons don't justify doing something wrong.'

> ***'Everyone in the project has to take responsibility for who they are, where they've been, what they've done, so that they can take responsibility for their futures.'***

Joe's wrong thing was affray. After his conviction he went to an education centre, albeit only to reduce his imminent sentence. But his experience there aroused an interest in learning. He eventually secured a place at Goldsmiths College in London.

'I felt more intimidated going to university than I did the first time I walked onto a prison wing. I knew how to carry myself on a prison wing; I didn't know how to carry myself at university. I'd go to a seminar and concentrate so hard on getting the confidence to say something that by the time I did, they were talking about something completely different.'

Nearly a decade on from graduating and Joe is still at Goldsmiths, coordinating the Open Book project. Open Book provides a support network for offenders, people with mental health issues, substance abusers and others to access further and higher education. Open Book now has 116 people on its books at a number of colleges and universities.

'Here at Goldsmiths the project has just grown and grown, from a very small project run by one person to a very large network of people,' says Derfel Owen, who works for Goldsmiths Students' Union. 'Joe is a hundred million percent committed to the project, because he's seen first hand the positive outcomes of being involved.'

'People become really comfortable with themselves, confident and contented, and drop all the shit,' says Joe. Four of the 15 departmental student awards at Goldsmiths last year went to Open Book students.

The key to the project's success is its avoidance of patronising paternalism. Joe is a working class man from working class Bermondsey and makes no apologies for it. 'We came at it from a very working class perspective. There's been a raft of work that's been done on widening participation, and yet it doesn't seem to be changing much. I remember participating in that sort of research when I was on probation, and really playing along with it. 'Deprivation and all that stuff, you wouldn't believe the poverty'. And all that crap. We deconstructed the whole thing and started again.'

The result is a project that involves talks in prisons and addiction agencies about experiences before and after education and a six week taster course of university life. It has weekly drop-in sessions where students can seek each other's support, plus social events during the week. Next on the project's to-do list is careers advice.

Joe isn't trying to change people. He says education gives people a chance to reflect on who they really are. 'I certainly wasn't the person I was trying to be. I know that now. I think it's just a case of becoming the person you should have been in the first place, having the freedom not to be racist, and to turn round and say there's nothing wrong with me because I don't like violence.'

Joe describes his work as 24/7—visiting prisons, talking to organisations, trying to expand the project. He helped organise a recent Open Book Conference where representatives from universities around the country expressed an interest in setting up similar projects.

'There's so much we're trying to do, it's incredible,' says Joe. 'I think we're trying to change the world, really. People have become so evangelistic about it. It's almost becoming like a political movement in some respects.

'There's a real belief among the project that the only way you're ever going to achieve social change is through education. It's the only sort of revolution that isn't based on violence, that isn't based on resentment.'

And it's one of the few solutions to deprivation right now that isn't based on excuses.

Jackie Edwards

De Montfort University

Jackie Edwards had thought it would be easy to go back to work after raising a family. 'I had been a stay-at-home mother for ten years, before that I was a board level PA. I thought it'd be a doddle to get a job, but it wasn't—I didn't even get replies to my application letters.'

Realising that it was probably due to a lack of formal IT qualifications, Jackie signed up for De Montfort University's Women's Access to Information Technology (WAIT) course, which was set up in 1989 to redress the shortage of women entering IT. But far from returning to work as a secretary, she enjoyed the one-year course so much that after completing it in 1997, she started teaching part time on the course, eventually becoming the Year Manager and Course Promoter.

Jackie says most participants just want to improve their lives. Many are stay-at-home mothers, unable to secure a good job because of the need to drop their children off at school at nine and pick them up at three. 'A lot of these people are thinking: 'I'd really love to get a decent job.''

Over time, Jackie realised that the WAIT course could reach an even wider audience. So in 2005/6 she teamed up with the LeicestHerDay Trust, a local charity with a large network of partner organisations, and secured funding from the European Social Fund to hold unique community events known as Women's Days and to run an outreach programme.

'I would book a venue, pay for a mailshot and invite all the local residents to drop in and see if there was anything they could do to change their lives. We brought in all the agencies to do with finding a job, finding a course, and getting children looked after. As a result of these events there are people now studying and working who had previously been on benefits.'

As founding chair of the LeicestHerDay Trust, Maureen Milgram Forrest worked closely with Jackie. 'Jackie took the women that we delivered to her through these events and there are now women studying IT at De Montfort who would never previously have entertained going to university. She got them going, and now a lot of them are progressing to degree programmes'.

LeicestHerDay was so impressed by Jackie that they appointed her as a trustee. 'She's got good ideas and she's able to execute them,' adds Maureen. 'She's got her feet on the ground and she's gone from strength to strength.'

It is too early to formally measure the success of the Women's Day strategy, but the early signs are positive and De Montfort is now upgrading WAIT to a Computing year zero degree.

> ***'Here I am now ten years on, a senior lecturer at a university. The WAIT course completely changed my life.'***

Jackie says the key to WAIT's recent recruiting success is fun and information packed outreach sessions. 'Unlike many computing courses that involve going through a textbook and joining the dots, we ran outreach sessions in local neighbourhoods doing fun stuff, for example IT and Mehndi for Asian women. Or in schools with young mums we did cooking and IT. We got them to go online and look for smoothie recipes, and almost by accident they started using a computer.'

Jackie has also developed a relationship with the local Job Centre to ensure that students on Jobseekers Allowance have the support they need to finish the course without worrying about the impact on their benefits.

Despite the overall success, there is still work to be done as there can still be some barriers to participation, including the lack of affordable childcare.

'The WAIT course has certainly had an impact as it nears its second decade,' Jackie added. 'We have some great examples. One student who took the course alongside me was a single mother, doing part-time cleaning and waitressing. She went on to get a first degree and now runs an IT department. Another went from being a leisure centre receptionist to a well paid role as a Business Analyst for Fujitsu.'

'I was expecting to go back and be a secretary,' says Jackie, 'but here I am now ten years on, a senior lecturer at a university, the WAIT course completely changed my life—and I am one of many who have benefited from it!'

Alwyn Pugh
University of Glamorgan

Here's a challenge: how do you teach the experts?

Alwyn Pugh had to find a way to do just that. 'We needed to design a course for health professionals working at a high level in their practice. And that presents certain problems: what do you teach them? Who is competent to assess them, because they work at such a high and specialised level? We anticipated that we'd have people on the course who might be the only people doing their specific job.'

> ***'It's on the cutting edge of educational theory and practice. Everyone has to participate. No one can take a back seat.'***

It was the late 1990s, and Alwyn was leading a team of University of Glamorgan academics trying to design a course for top clinical practitioners. 'We had a particular situation that we had to develop a course for,' he says. 'At that time, there was a lot of development of new roles within nursing. So we had to look at something different in order to serve that purpose.'

The result was the MSc in Clinical Practice, based on the innovative method of Cooperative Inquiry. The technique places students and tutors in a position where no one knows the answer to a problem. The students—all of them leading nurses, midwives and health visitors—must work together and combine their shared experiences to discover the best solution for the group.

'Everyone learns together,' says Alwyn's colleague Dr Allyson Lipp. 'The tutors and students form a cooperative inquiry group and learn together. So it's on the cutting edge of educational theory and practice.

'Everyone has to participate. No one can take a back seat. It's an active way of learning and it relies on the clinicians within their own clinical practice to draw on their own experiences to learn.'

A form of action research, Cooperative Inquiry has rarely if ever been applied to a teaching course. Nearly ten years after the Clinical Practice MSc was introduced, it remains a unique course in its approach, but its completion rate of around 95% suggests it is a successful one.

'Alwyn has changed the lives of so many clinicians,' says Dr Lipp. 'These are people who are bowed under the weight of all the NHS worries and the trials and tribulations of caring for sick people, but they were able to rise above that and examine exactly what they are doing in practice and why they are doing it.

'They learn individually,' she adds. 'They learn about themselves. Reflection is a big part of the course because to look in great detail at an element of your practice requires a lot of reflection. So they gain a lot of insight into their own ways of working.'

Maybe you can't teach the experts. But that doesn't mean the experts can't teach each other.

Cheryl Alexander

University of York

When Cheryl Alexander arrived at York University as a Chemistry undergraduate in 1999, she was used to encountering barriers.

'I had grown up as a disabled person finding that people would often take the attitude that if you don't like it, there's the door. In a way, I expected there to be problems.'

She wasn't wrong. She came across a number of problems as a wheelchair user within her department: the width of some laboratory doors was too narrow for a wheelchair; other doors were too heavy to open; the fume cupboards were inaccessible to a wheelchair user.

Cheryl invited her course supervisor, Paul Walton, to go on a tour of the department. She pointed out the problems. 'It became palpably clear that there were issues to deal with,' he says.

Paul was impressed by Cheryl's desire to avoid confrontation. 'Rather than taking an antagonistic attitude towards us, she was extremely positive in working with us to make adjustments.'

'I don't think confrontation really gets you anywhere,' says Cheryl. 'I wanted to help, really.'

Cheryl got elected as the Students' Union's Access Officer and conducted an audit of the entire campus, which unearthed significant access problems. 'Some classrooms had some steps down into them and very steep, death-defying ramps. There were quite a few places that didn't have lifts.' The university responded, installing more lifts and making new buildings compliant with new disability laws.

For many years Cheryl had never expected to go to university. 'Until I was about 15 I didn't even know what university was. It was quite a low educational achievement background. There weren't books in my house. My whole life's ambition had been to join the Royal Navy. That's what you do in my family, you turn 16 and you join the Forces.'

But aged 12, Cheryl was struck down by a virus. Her naval dream was dead. Having been on crutches since 15, cheryl began to use a wheelchair at 18. At 14, she had left home due to difficult family circumstances, and moved in with one of her friends.

'They had books and had been to university, so that's where I got the idea. And my teachers at school, one in particular, told me I could go to university. It sounded like a good idea.' When her younger brother also left home, Cheryl put him through college and university.

Cheryl is now training to become a teacher herself. 'It took me a while, but once I'd seen that education was my way out of the rough life, I felt it would be great if I could make someone else see that it doesn't matter where you come from, it doesn't matter what start you've been given in life; education can really change things for you.'

> ***'It doesn't matter where you come from, it doesn't matter what start you've been given in life; education can really change things for you.'***

Tracey Bessant

University of Gloucestershire

Ask a group of university leavers what they did during their undergraduate years, and certain phrases are likely to appear: 'debating society', 'rugby team', 'library', 'beer'.

Ask the same of Tracey Bessant, studying Community Development at the University of Gloucestershire, and the phrases could be slightly different. 'Affordable housing', 'government report, 'House of Lords'.

'Tracey is a stupendous student and citizen,' says tutor James Derounian. 'Not only has she made the best of her higher education experience, but she has been involved in community planning in her own village.'

> ***'It's given me confidence in my academic ability that I never had before. It's allowed me to pursue a career that I want to do.'***

Tracey is indeed involved in creating the parish plan for the village of Gretton, in Gloucestershire. But that's not all. She wrote an analysis with James Derounian on the usage of church land for affordable housing which was mentioned in a government commissioned report. She is also working for the county council on how to allow parents to take more control of local schools.

'She is extraordinarily insightful, meticulous, very pleasant to work with, and highly creative,' says James.

Tracey never went to university first time round, instead finding a job with an insurance firm after completing her A-Levels, but after a number of years her ambitions changed.

'I had a career break after having my son, and I decided that I wanted to do a job that gave something back to society, rather than working for an insurance company and making lots of money for shareholders,' says Tracey.

'I have a really strong belief in social justice. If I think there's something that is not fair, or not just, and I see that I can actually do something about it, then I would endeavour to do that.'

She entered university in 1998, and is set to complete her degree this year, having taken time out to give birth to her daughter. She is heading for a first in her degree, but initially she found the experience intimidating. 'I was daunted by the whole prospect of even doing one assignment. When we were first given an assignment to do 2,000 words, I just thought, how on earth am I going to write 2,000 words?'

Part of her degree required her to carry out an independent study. She chose to focus on whether church land could be used for affordable housing. The Goodman Commission on rural affordable housing got wind of her report and referred to it in its findings. The Church of England also requested a copy. The matter was even raised in the House of Lords.

Tracey credits her tutors for the turnaround from intimidated beginner to freelancing researcher. 'I had brilliant staff at university. James is just fantastic at encouraging me to follow these mad ideas,' she says.

And she doesn't regret going to university for a moment. 'It's just given me so much confidence in my academic ability that I never had before. It's allowed me to pursue a career that I want to do.'

Patrick Bryden

Goldsmiths

After a quarter of a century hooked on alcohol and using Class A drugs, it wasn't easy for Patrick Bryden to walk into a university.

'I can remember the first couple of months I was at college. I would have people coming round, and I was just like: 'Look, I don't want you to drink round here and I don't want you to use round here.' And the response was: 'Who the fuck do you think you are? God?'

> ***'The people that we've got are not into war stories anymore. They're getting on with their lives.'***

'And you could see their point—two months later and suddenly you're not their friend. That's hard. But it has to be done.'

Patrick is one of the many ex-offenders and addicts who have managed to turn their lives around with the help of the Open Book project, which helps support people from marginalised backgrounds entering higher education. He first encountered the project when he left rehab and attended a workshop by Open Book coordinator and fellow nominee Joe Baden (see page 21).

'The thing about rehab is it's a necessary period of navel gazing,' says Patrick. 'But there still remains the idea that there's something you want to do with your life. You don't want to just stare at the wall. You actually need to pick up the pieces of your life and engage with it. And education just seemed to be the perfect thing for that.'

Open Book helped Patrick to enter Goldsmiths College to study History in 2002. At 45, he was much older than most students there, and was leaving behind his past. 'It was very good having Open Book students there. All of us have come from very similar marginalised places.

'I was only seven months sober and clean. It's a steep learning curve, relating to people who are different from you. I've had a very different life.'

Most Open Book students have had markedly different lives to their university peers —crime, jail, drink, drugs, mental health issues. One was once clinically dead through a heroin overdose, before being revived and later cleaning up. But Patrick warns not to expect boasts in the bar.

'There are people who have got amazing stories of the kind of stuff that have gone on in their lives, but what's concerning them is that they may not meet an essay deadline. And I just think that's wonderful. The people that we've got are not into war stories anymore. They're getting on with their lives.

'We tend to want to get away from being stuck in ourselves and look elsewhere and look at the world around us, and look to the next essay deadline,' he adds.

Having got a top 2.1 in his undergraduate degree, Patrick is now in the second year of an MA, and wants to go into academia. 'I think it's always good to be able to think, but I think right at the moment, I and everybody else need to think very clearly and inquire very much about the current historical situation—ecological crisis, function creep towards totalitarianism in this country, globalisation, the internal contradictions of capitalism.'

One common feature among those who have got through university supported by Open Book is that they return to help the project after they leave, even once they have found a job. Patrick helps out as a mentor to other students involved in the project.

'I'm a bit of conduit to other agencies where people have got specific problems, about housing or whatever it is that is getting in the way of their academic work. I connect with people via Open Book, find out what they want to do, find out where they're at, and wherever they're at, move them to where they want to be.'

Patrick firmly believes that assisting as a mentor is important to help inform his academic study. 'It isn't possible simply to pursue academia without having some kind of context, some kind of way of engaging in the real day-to-day world with real people in real trouble. Otherwise you just lose contact and you have no feeling for or idea of what the point of the academia is.

'And it's just a question of giving something back. Open Book's given a lot to me, so it's necessary for me to give back.'

After five years supporting and being supported by Open Book, Patrick can see the impact it has on him and others who have gone through it. 'If people are really interested and really want to learn, it's surprising how rapidly they learn basic sentence structure, and then a year later they're considering really quite sophisticated ideas. That's what the fun of it is.'

Debbie Hollingsworth

Ruskin College

When Debbie Hollingsworth was asked to give a speech commemorating former Prime Minister James Callaghan's 'great education debate' at Ruskin College 30 years on, it carried special resonance for her.

Callaghan had sought to frame education as not just about getting a job, but developing people's confidence and life skills, and Debbie was just the kind of student Sunny Jim had had in mind in his 1976 landmark address.

Debbie left school at 17 with few qualifications, and never thought about going to university. She worked in the retail sector, before joining the Metropolitan Police, first as a traffic warden, and then as a staff trainer. There, she got involved in the local trade union. 'I really enjoyed trade union work, the advocacy side of it. I like the idea of representing people and getting them the right terms and conditions.

'I started getting into trade union courses, and I just really enjoyed them. I liked what I was learning, so I did as many of the union courses as I could. Then I started delivering some of the courses myself.'

It was this trade union work that finally took Debbie into higher education. Initially pursuing a career in union activism, she en-rolled for a Certificate of Higher Education in Labour Relations at Ruskin College.

It was supposed to be a brief sojourn into academic study, but one thing led to another, and she took a diploma in Social Change. This convinced her to change direction completely, and she started a BA in Social Work.

'I really enjoyed studying, so in my mind I hadn't finished. I'd started to turn away from just purely representing workers, because the diploma opened up a whole new world of things outside the Met. There was a lot going on in the world that I wanted to know more about, and maybe go into a career to help a bigger selection of people. I think I just grew.'

Professor Audrey Mullender, Principal of Ruskin College, points to Debbie's willingness to help other students. 'She is very aware of when people have got issues in their lives. One student had experienced a very difficult incident and needed practical assistance and emotional support to carry on with her studies, and Debbie was the one who gave her that, without being asked, without question, without any limit placed on the time that she put in. She was just there for that person as much as they needed, whilst also maintaining her own studies.'

Debbie is passionate about the role she can play supporting others. 'I feel I can represent people that can't or don't want to, and it's safe for me because I'm not in that situation. I just feel that I need to do it, and I enjoy the buzz that you get afterwards if you get a good result.'

> ***'I believe in what the college stands for, and I want other people to have what I've had.'***

Debbie is passionate about the role she can play sup-porting others. 'I feel I can represent people that can't represent themselves, and it's safe for me because I'm not in that situation. I just feel that I need to do it, and I enjoy the buzz that you get afterwards if you get a good result.

'I do remember my school reports mentioning that I was the champion of the underdog, which I don't think they meant as a compliment! But I always seemed to be trying to get somebody out of trouble, sticking up for people.'

Professor Mullender, Principal of Ruskin, sees a variety of factors motivating Debbie's campaigning. 'She's a political person, a socialist and a feminist. She is very much driven by concern for all those around her. She's also training to be a social worker, so she combines the personal, the political and the professional awareness of people around her.'

But far from being a festering revolutionary trying to bring her own establishment to its knees, Debbie feels great affinity for her college, so much so that she regularly helps promote it to prospective students. 'I believe in what the college stands for, and I want other people to have what I've had. It is all about giving people that second opportunity at going back to education. You see people come and go from all walks of life with a load of life experiences attached to them, and they change in that period of time.'

Debbie herself has broadened her horizons in her time in higher education. 'Coming here has opened my eyes up to world issues and social issues. It's just increased my outlook on life and my knowledge of what's going on in the world.'

Mr Callaghan couldn't have said it better himself.

Joanne Rosa Kenny

University of Liverpool

When it comes to getting lucky, Jo Kenny has form. A mother in her thirties, she had just finished work—as a hotel chambermaid in Crewe—and gone into town. It started raining.

'I popped into a careers office purely to get out of the rain,' says Jo. 'And so as not to appear too obvious I was looking at the boards. And then a lady came over to me, straight out of the blue, and said that it was my turn for an interview at two o'clock.

'And it just happened from there. I didn't really want to say it wasn't me. I did all these tests and she said she'd enrol me for an access course at the local college. I was feeling a bit guilty by this stage, so I said that it wasn't really me. And she said it didn't matter because the person that was supposed to come hadn't turned up.'

Jo had left school at 15 and never went to university, but never totally lost hope. 'I knew I wanted something more. I knew it was out there somewhere but I just didn't know how to get it. And it seemed as if this had sort of fallen in my lap. It was too good an opportunity to miss.'

Jo may have got a lucky break getting into college, but since then she's been running on judgement. She secured a place studying Archaeology at Liverpool University, did a masters degree, and is now planning her PhD. Her husband, a former fireman, is also now taking an access course, and they both hope to become archaeologists, researching and travelling together.

Jo's tutor, Dr Alan Greaves, says university has transformed her. 'She's more confident than she used to be. That's been a huge change. It's about her feeling that she's as worthwhile as the next person. And she is, she's such an incredible person.

'She's the soul and the conscience of the department. As academics we don't often see from the students' point of view, but she'll say, "This is how it makes me feel when this or that happens".'

Jo has boundless enthusiasm for her subject. 'I'd always wanted to do archaeology. It has always fascinated me. There were so many questions I had, even as a child: what's inside it, what's underneath it, how does it work? It's never left me.

> ***'One of the biggest things that's changed is not being content with what other people say you have to have. If it's not want you want, you can change it.'***

'I really enjoyed the life and the opportunities. Because we travelled on field trips and excavations, the adventure was phenomenal.'

Jo explains the impact university has had on her. 'It changed how I think about my life, how I think about other people's lives, and how other people think about me.

'One of the biggest things that's changed is not being content with what other people say you have to have. If it's not what you want, you can change it.'

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