

# Teaching About Religions of South Asian Origin at the Open University:

## a Reflection on the Scope and Limitations of Flexible Learning

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**Gwilym Beckerlegge**

Department of Religious Studies  
Open University

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**H**ow distinctive is the Open University's (OU) style of teaching today (see, for example, Alles 2007:25)? When created, the OU's policy of open access and reliance on flexible learning

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(formerly referred to within the OU as ‘distance learning’) made it stand out to such an extent from other British universities that some conservative voices questioned whether it was indeed a ‘university’. That battle for recognition has long been fought and won, but in the intervening period other universities have become more accepting of mature students, part-time students, and students with entry qualifications other than A-levels, and more involved in various aspects of distance learning. Like other universities, moreover, the OU, in spite of its mission, fails to realise fully its aspirations in terms of attracting students from the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups and, in certain areas, recruiting a diverse body of staff.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there are grounds for arguing that the OU’s mission and consequently its style of teaching remain distinctive.

Where other universities have become more involved in forms of distance learning, such initiatives have been relatively modest, often involving specialist courses and thus relatively small numbers of students, many of whom are likely to be experienced students and competent in the use of ICT.<sup>2</sup> The OU’s level 1 introductory Arts and Humanities module, Arts Past and Present, continues to attract in excess of 7,000 students per annum. Volume remains a distinctive feature of the OU’s work and handling it constitutes our major pedagogical and pastoral challenge, not least supporting students unfamiliar with the use of personal computers, as the OU moves more online with blended forms of tuition (face-to-face and online).<sup>3</sup> Within large cohorts of students, it hardly needs to be said that the diversity of students’ backgrounds, aspirations and needs will far exceed those

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<sup>1</sup> The Religious Studies level 2 module *Introducing Religions* recruits, relative to other Arts modules, a significantly higher proportion of students from ethnic minorities.

<sup>2</sup> To return to the issue of widening student access, and leaving aside questions about deficiencies in the OU’s curriculum and manner of delivery, its very scale and the success that the OU has enjoyed might suggest that flexible forms of study and open entry have not proved sufficient in themselves to address the intransigent problems of access to higher education in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> The speed at which the OU has adopted changing forms of technology to assist in the delivery of its courses, for example, from live transmission on the BBC to video and then DVD, and now increasingly from print to online digital formats, has always been governed by its access policy rather than its technological capacity at any one time.

found in the smaller groups that typically pass through other universities. Also, the OU continues to rely on its own published study packs (sometimes including items co-published with external publishing houses). These were originally designed as part of its mission to widen access so that, for example, the disabled or remote student would not be disadvantaged. We now distinguish informally between ‘OU classic’ and ‘OU lite’ packs—the former containing, in addition to study blocks, specially produced films, audio-tapes, illustrations booklets etc, while the latter might be a more basic wrap-around pack of a study guide built on existing, published texts produced outside the OU. Finally, the OU’s modules are designed for part-time students and its systems are designed to support them. OU students can take on the workload of full-time students simply by registering for more modules in a year, but part-time study is primarily what we do, rather than adjusting provision designed for a majority of full-time students.

## Religious Studies within the context of the OU

The Religious Studies (RS) department is located in the Faculty of Arts. In the early years of the OU, appointments to the section that would become the RS department were largely in religious history, and consistent with Faculty’s inter-disciplinary focus at that time on Victorian Britain, which was reflected in the level 1 introductory module (then called the Arts ‘foundation course’). In later versions (1970s/early 80s) of this introductory module, Ninian Smart contributed a unit on the study of religions and John Ferguson offered case studies on West African religions, before the focus reverted again to the mid Victorian period. The department continues its involvement in inter-disciplinary studies, to which the Arts Faculty remains committed. (For the most recent example and one that relates to a South Asian religious tradition, see Waterhouse with Richards, 2010). RS also offers a series of specialist modules at levels 2 and 3 (honours level) that enables students to follow a route leading effectively to a joint honours degree in Humanities with named subjects. Unlike the pattern commonly found in other British universities, all current RS undergraduate modules carry 60 credits, and are equivalent to an entire year’s workload of a part-time student—a recommended minimum of 16 hrs study time per

week.<sup>4</sup>

The RS department as it is currently constituted has eight full-time members of staff and three colleagues on fixed and fractional contracts. Of these, three work almost entirely on religious traditions of South Asian origin (or South Asian traditions within Islam),<sup>5</sup> although with different levels of engagement with the presence of these traditions in South Asia and their transplantation to other regions,<sup>6</sup> including diasporic settings such as Britain. We have been able to augment our resources when it comes to course production through the use of academic consultants (for example, the authors of texts we use), and particularly in the production of audio resources.<sup>7</sup> We face the familiar problem of a relatively narrow staffing base imposing limits on the development of our curriculum. Having said that, we are all expected to leave our comfort zones and contribute to widening the curriculum when this is feasible.

A huge advantage of the scale of the OU student body for subjects like RS is that they have a chance of viability. For example, the three specialist courses currently offered by the RS department each typically recruit between approximately 350-500 students per annum. The largest of these is *Introducing Religions* (level 2), and that recruits a little under 500 students per annum at present. Its predecessors recruited far better than this, and we are uncertain whether this dip

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<sup>4</sup> Offering a plethora of 10 and 15 credits modules to a more fragmented student population would not be cost effective within the OU's operation. Also, although student preferences do change, many students have found building a 360 credits degree by combining 60 credits modules easier to manage on a part-time basis. The OU more generally does offer modules with different ratings, and Arts is in the process of re-introducing some level 1 30 credits modules with a view to strengthening student progression to level 2.

<sup>5</sup> The question of whether Islam should be considered together with 'religions of South Asian origin' was raised at the PRS conference. An understanding of the context of South Asia was central to our recent and very popular course *Islam in the West: the Politics of Co-existence*, which ran from 2007 until 2010. See Herbert (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For example, our course materials have included case studies of Soka Gakkai (Waterhouse, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Examples of this are audio discussions with Damien Keown, Kim Knott, and Eleanor Nesbitt, authors respectively of the volumes on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism in the OUP *Very Short Introduction* series, which were adopted as set books in 2006.

mirrors current levels of interest in the study of religions, or more varied options within the OU Arts curriculum and the HE sector nationally.<sup>8</sup> A downside of the volume factor is that our recruitment levels are not judged against those that would usually be applied in other universities. Future recruitment to our recently introduced MA will cease after 2013, although it has recruited about 40 students per annum to date, a figure that would be a source of rejoicing in many universities, rather than grounds for closure.

In the remainder of this article, I shall refer exclusively to the experience of teaching about religious traditions of South Asian origin within the context of the OU's Religious Studies programme.<sup>9</sup> I shall begin by outlining our various courses because this is the medium, in the absence of departmental or campus based study, through which our students primarily experience their university. This is the RS department's 'teaching', which is mediated and enriched by part-time tutors to whom OU students are allocated.

## The OU RS curriculum

A significant turning point in the development of the curriculum, which would have major implications for the future direction of the department and its staffing, came in 1978 with the launch of Man's Religious Quest (which soon became The Religious Quest!). This was a wide-ranging level 2 module on religions past and present, including units on the Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh traditions, which was produced largely by consultants. RS staffing at that time was limited to three (not yet a formal department) and, during the production of the module, a visiting fellow (John Hinnells). It followed the, by then, increasingly familiar OU format of units, a substantial reader, linked TV and radio broadcasts (later put on tape), and set books. The production of Man's

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<sup>8</sup> The three current specialist RS modules to which this article refers all achieve very high ratings, in the region of 93% on average, in student satisfaction ratings. The relevant data is regularly and independently gathered and analysed by the university's Institute of Educational Technology.

<sup>9</sup> For a fairly recent overview of the RS department at the OU, see Beckerlegge (2005). Details of the department's current staffing and courses are available on the departmental website, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/religious-studies/index.shtml>

Religious Quest and its potential outreach were regarded as sufficiently significant for Religion to review its materials (Mews and Pye, 1979). The reviewers' judgement suggested materials of an uneven quality and the reviewers, although supportive, drew attention to the module's lack of coherence, a point to which I shall return later. Man's Religious Quest, which recruited very strongly and sometimes in excess of 1,000 students in some years, was later turned into a shortened version (The Religious Quest), which ran until 1992. It was subsequently revised and presented again (World Religions) from 1998 with new supporting materials, films and books, when it continued to recruit in the region of 650 students per annum. We have continued to incorporate in our most recent RS level 2 module two features of these earlier modules, which were less commonly found in comparable courses in other universities at that time; namely, a section on village practice and belief in our coverage of the Hindu tradition, and extended treatment of the Sikh tradition.

In 1993, the department launched The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, a 30 credits module, written largely in-house with limited use of consultants. The materials produced for this module have been used extensively in other universities (Parsons, 1993, 1994; Wolffe, 1993), but it never recruited as well as we had hoped. It came out at a time when 30 credits modules were less popular. At much the same time, we also extended an existing module on Religion in Victorian Britain and included a study of the presence of religions of South Asian origin and Islam in Victorian Britain (Beckerlegge, 1997).

In 1998, the Faculty launched a new level 1 introductory module (Introduction to the Humanities), which was organised to show-case the disciplines represented in the Arts Faculty. This included an introduction to the study of religions, and a linked case study 'Looking for Hinduism in Calcutta' (Beckerlegge, 1998). These was supported by two films, 'What is Religion?' shot in Liverpool, and 'Looking for Hinduism in Calcutta', which was filmed around the celebration of Durga Puja in that city.<sup>10</sup> This went down well with tutors who had

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<sup>10</sup> We are hoping to be able to provide open access to archived film and audio material relating to the study of South Asian religious traditions, although plans for this are still at an early stage.

some background and interest in RS and, I think, with students wishing to continue in the RS line, but less so with tutors and students whose interests were centred on European history and literature. Since the consolidation of the teaching of South Asian religious traditions within the RS curriculum during the late 1990s, the current, major Arts level 1 introductory module has re-adopted a more thematic, and less disciplinary, framework. RS makes several contributions to its different blocks, including a study of the Dalai Lama in the initial block on 'Reputations' (Waterhouse, 2008).

The replacement of our level 2 module in 2006 with *Introducing Religions* illustrates the changing style of OU study packs, moving towards a more compact format, which is attractive to students who might have to study while on the move and grab time for study as and when they can. The design of this course has also been very much informed by lessons learnt from teaching *Man's Religious Quest*, and its accumulated revised versions. The lack of coherence identified by *Religion's* reviewers of this module was in part a consequence of it having been produced largely by consultant academics who were not wholly immersed in the internal course production process. For example, attention to addressing specified themes is more likely to waver when the authors are not working constantly as a team. Similarly, when selecting set books we have found that individual volumes often address the declared themes of the series to different degrees and can vary quite dramatically in style and format, even though part of a series. This preoccupation with uniformity might sound almost to run against the individuality of academic insight and argument, but for students working remotely and in a more isolated manner, any idiosyncrasy in the teaching materials can be potentially disruptive. It can cost time as a student wrestles with the unfamiliar. It can prove highly frustrating when a text fails to address a stated theme or provides such a limited treatment of it as to make it impossible for the student to use it as a starting point from which to develop a discussion. When planning *Introducing Religions*, we adopted a 'template' design in order to maximise consistency of coverage throughout, and sought a series of set books that combined authoritative scholarship with a reliable series format.

*Introducing Religions* is a wrap-round study pack, a mixture of 'OU classic' and 'OU lite', which uses the *OUP Very Short*

*Introduction* (VSI) series, but with substantial study guides and audio and DVD material produced by the department. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions were covered in existing volumes in the VSI series, and we were fortunate that Eleanor Nesbitt (and OUP) agreed to produce an additional VSI volume to cover the Sikh tradition, for which we produced a study guide (Beattie, 2006). Introducing Religions also makes some connections to religious communities of South Asian descent in Britain, as does our MA foundation module. Mindful of the needs of British RE teachers, we try as a general principle to ensure that the six religions widely taught in schools are covered throughout our programme. In concentrating our resources on enriching the set books with additional commentary and readings and particularly through the production of audio-visual resources, we have been able to create a DVD that includes extensive visual material on Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism, with sections on India and the UK. We do not routinely assess students' oral skills through presentations. Attendance at face-to-face study sessions with tutors is optional in the OU because a mandatory requirement could constitute a barrier to study for the disabled, shift-workers, and others. We are able, however, via the DVD, to set assignments that require students to examine iconography and other aspects of material culture. Website analysis now provides a further alternative basis for assessment.<sup>11</sup>

Course renewal has been accompanied by a degree of rationalisation, as the Faculty has reviewed the balance of provision at levels 2 and 3. We are now working on one new 3<sup>rd</sup> level module to replace our two current 3<sup>rd</sup> level modules by 2013. It is clear, however, that whatever the strengths, distinctiveness and appeal of the new course, its advent will mark a reduction in choice and flexibility for RS students at the OU, and, therefore, probably the number of students overall who will study our modules. The two current third level modules consciously reflect the two dominant strands of interest within the department; namely, the multi-disciplinary exploration of recent and contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> In general, the forms of assessment we use in RS remain heavily dependent on the essay format. This is partly because the outcome of the assessment has to be something that can be submitted (now electronically as a general rule) within a remote environment and does not assume attendance at group face-to-face or online study sessions. These considerations do limit our options, although the Faculty has introduced a course in 2011 in which online group-work will be assessed.



manifestations of religion and spirituality (Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change, produced in 2002), and religious history (Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Co-existence, produced in 2005). The former conforms to the 'OU classic' style (see above), with co-published volumes of case studies grouped around themes, such as religion and social transformations and belief beyond boundaries. South Asian traditions are represented in case studies of popular Hindu devotional pictures (Beckerlegge, 2001), Buddhism in Britain (Waterhouse, 2001a), and Buddhist responses to environmental concerns (Waterhouse, 2001b). These studies are supported by film material on British Hindu centres (Bhaktivedanta Manor near Watford, the Swaminarayan Mandir at Neasden, and the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre at Bourne End), and on 'Buddhism in Britain' (New Kadampa Tradition, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and Soka Gakkai). The latter, Religion in History, is 'OU lite' in style, and its treatment of South Asian traditions is limited, apart from relatively brief comparative references, to one case study on the Hindu Renaissance and notions of universal religion (Beckerlegge, 2005), linked to an audio discussion with William Radice of SOAS.

The new course is regarded as a 'flagship' course for the department and thus is closer to 'OU classic' in style, although compact and with a reduced provision for new film material. Increasingly, we are expected to direct our students to resources available on the Internet, but by their nature these cannot match the tailor-made and integrated film resources that were formerly central to OU study packs. This pressure is likely to increase during a period of financial stringency. The planning of the new course is at an early stage and 'controversy' is likely to be its unifying theme. It will follow the format of offering linked case studies within a teaching narrative. These will include studies drawn from the Hindu tradition and Islam in South Asia. The budget for this module is considerable, reflecting the multi-media nature of its design, predicted student volume over its life, and the OU's insistence on quality in the production of the study pack. We typically allow about three years for the production of a module, which is a highly time-consuming team effort, involving academics, specialist librarians, IT support, the publishing department, and a commissioned audio-visual production company etc. There are rarely modules produced by one individual in the Faculty's curriculum, unlike the

typical provision of specialist courses for senior undergraduates in other universities. This is largely because the complexity and costs of the course production process would make it impracticable to attempt in this way to accommodate the interests of individual academics within the curriculum. This significant commitment of financial and human resources explains why we have relatively few modules on offer at any one time and why they have to run for several years, with supplementary updating, to pay for their production. Although not every member of the department participates in the production of each module or to an equal degree, the ambitious nature of these multimedia projects would make most members of OU staff keen to play a full role in module production—our ‘teaching’.

As this overview has shown, religions of South Asian origin feature in our curriculum as:

- major elements, given equal coverage as 3 of 6 traditions covered in our introductory 2nd level module
- case studies in our more specialist 3rd level modules
- more sporadically as limited case studies in inter-disciplinary modules, depending inevitably on the focus of these courses and indeed current Faculty interests.

## Achievements and pitfalls

Having outlined the place of religions of South Asian origin within our modules, in the final part of this paper I shall highlight what I can consider to be some of the successes/advantages of our approach and some of its weaknesses in relation to teaching about religions of South Asian origin. As you will see, many of these factors stem from the same distinctive features and strategic advantages that the OU is able to exploit, which I mentioned at the outset.

### Size of student body

We are able to introduce students to the study of South Asian religions in relatively large numbers, and this must surely be beneficial for society as a whole, fostering as it does a more informed, wider interest in matters South Asian, and, more specifically, for the support of RE

teachers.<sup>12</sup> Our reliance upon the case study approach, however, means that these case studies are embedded in much wider thematic or period based modules, and thus may not coincide with the student's main interest. The location of these case studies in these broader settings also suggests that we shall be unlikely to satisfy, and thus to attract, students who wish to pursue a specialist route in South Asian studies and to be members of an academic community (department or institution) bound together by this common interest.

### Openness

The size of our student body is directly linked to our 'open' entry policy. Significantly, this 'openness' also applies to entry at modules at levels 1-3 (we do not deal in 'years' as students may move up and down between levels as they wish, as long as they meet the requirements of their chosen degree). In fact, Arts, and many other, OU students tend to favour breadth of study, and while some will gravitate towards a single honours route, where this is available, many prefer to balance two or more subjects during their progress towards a degree, or simply go for 'pick and mix'. Thus, many, conceivably even the majority of, students taking a particular module might not have followed the subject strand in which the module is located. Consequently, many will not have followed a route of progression from RS level 2 into RS level 3. This does create problems for the consolidation of knowledge and the internalisation of the technical terms associated with the study of South Asian religions. Many of our students, who do not participate on a daily basis in an academic community with a common interest in South Asian studies, struggle with this. This problem, of course, is exacerbated by the structure of our modules, which requires students to move between diverse regional and historical case studies. In the past we have produced pronunciation audio guides, but students have not found these very user-friendly. They do value aids such as glossaries and timelines. Based on our experience with a large and diverse student intake, we no longer use diacritical marks and tend to use the anglicised forms for common Indic terms and names. As texts books follow dif-

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<sup>12</sup> The department was awarded the 2002 Shap Working Party's annual prize for its contribution through its courses to the teaching and study of World Religions.

ferent conventions in this respect, and these differences might be evident in the set books adopted for a study pack, even providing a glossary for less confident students, who are not immersed in the study of South Asia and do not have access to a tutor who specialises in South Asian religions, can be quite a challenge.

So, in theory, a current student could encounter, for example, Hinduism at level 2 and then cover more specialised case studies on popular Hindu iconography and on the Hindu Renaissance at a higher level, and then proceed to the MA and complete case studies on religion and the state in India and on the construction of Hindu identity in Britain—this would be the ideal pattern. Yet many students will dip into our offerings, rather than working progressively through the levels, building on the case studies, because following the RS strand is not their main or sole interest. Another problem relating to progression, which I shall deal with here, is that a student's year of entry (and the number of years taken to complete the degree) will govern what modules are on offer at any one time. As noted above, costs of production limit the range of modules on offer at any one time. Modules are approved for a specified length of time and are routinely withdrawn at the end of this term as part of our quality assurance process. OU departments do not as a rule replace modules simply with an updated version in the same area/on the same topic. The extended nature of curriculum development with its periodic design of new modules leads us to balance some continuity with change.

### **The 60 credits module**

The substantial module has huge advantages in that a case study contained within it can be explored in some detail and at some depth. This does mean, however, that the typical part-time OU student will only take one such module in any given academic year. This makes for a rather rigid pathway, offering students limited choice between modules, and thus any flexibility and optional pathways have to be built into the modules and reflected in their assessment. In trying to ensure that students do have options within the module, we have used forms of assessment that offer a choice of tasks on different traditions, or tasks that leave the student to provide relevant examples. The route chosen by individual students consequently might not always favour

the South Asian elements and can allow students simply to seek out what is most familiar. We have also faced problems when attempting to cover what some students might regard as the ‘drier’ aspects of methodology and historiographical debates. Our response to this problem is to drip-feed such problems into the case studies in order to highlight specific problems of method. An OU student studying alone and wishing to get to grips, say, with the study of Buddhism, might well have limited patience, if confronted, say, with an extended introductory block on problems of method or orientalism. In other universities, where the student’s year is broken into modules of 15-20 credits, a course on method can be taken alongside, for example, a course on a specific tradition, and such a pattern of study can be mutually illuminating.

### The published course materials

Leaving aside the merits of individual academics’ contributions, the OU published study pack brings huge benefits and scope for a structured integration of teaching material. The use of ‘activities’, for example, can direct students to consult readings from primary and secondary sources, possibly linked to interview material or film material on a related festival, ritual, a building such as a gurdwara and contextualise these within a given locality. The teaching of South Asian religions is immeasurably enriched by the integration of high quality film and audio material, in almost all cases commissioned and produced for that purpose. Control over the process enables us to be very specific about locations (within the constraints of funding) and to provide convenient access to visual material on manifestations of the same tradition both in South Asia and in the diaspora. For those without first-hand experience of the region of South Asia, this visual material may constitute something of a ‘virtual field trip’. One example of this is the 1 hour film made in 1978 in the village of Soyepur near Varanasi. We revisited this village in 2005 and have made a film for our current Introducing Religions module, which includes a ‘then and now’ segment on this one village, catching up on the histories of some of those interviewed back in the 1970s, changes in village practices and values, and changes in employment and the local economy affected by the village’s proximity to Varanasi. Both films were made with the assistance of Joseph Elder

(University of Wisconsin) and his research team. Another example is ‘Sikh Identity’, which was made in Amritsar in 1995 for Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change. It explores different understandings of what it means to be a Sikh, and includes reflections on the events of the decade prior to 1995 in Panjab. Apart from the programmatic, integrated nature of our course materials, we are able to support these, as mentioned above, with chronologies, glossaries, links to relevant internet sites, and access to e-books, online reference works and data bases, and e-journals. Now that the tipping point has been reached in ownership of, or at least access to, personal computers, we are increasingly able to lead out from the core study pack through our electronic library and into the resources on the web.

I no longer feel apologetic when faced with the criticism that the published study pack and linked reader acts as a straight-jacket. In my experience, most undergraduate students in other universities follow core reading lists or increasingly rely, as library resources are squeezed, on readers produced by module tutors. Our students in the past have had less experience of independently locating and evaluating primary and secondary source material, but have not been confronted by empty library shelves when preparing assignments! The earlier access-based argument for reliance on the study pack has now been overtaken by the popular use of the Internet, and this will require a sea-change in the attitudes of some of our students to their studies. Our current and future students will be expected to gather and evaluate material more autonomously as we now take on the task of encouraging them to make full use routinely of our electronic library.

## Conclusion

To say that we offer ‘tasters’ of the relatively specialised field of South Asian religions within the context of the ‘open’ nature of the OU degree would be to do less than justice to what we offer, although this will be true of the experience of those students who simply dip in and out of the RS programme. For students who follow the RS route and pick up cognate modules, substantial introductions to Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism occupy equal prominence in our introductory module’s treatment of six religions. When the case studies in higher

level modules are added to this, students are able to build on this introductory module in a coherent manner. Thus, currently students have an opportunity to look more closely at forms of Buddhism now practised in India, Britain and Europe, the Hindu tradition since the 19th century, and our work on Islam is now increasingly linked to South Asia.

In this article, I have tried to show that many of the opportunities we have in the OU bring with them significant pedagogical challenges. The very investment made by the OU in the quality of its study packs limits the range and flexibility of the curriculum. Many of the challenges built into the OU form of delivery, which I have identified above, arguably present more difficult hurdles in the teaching about South Asian religions. This is partly because the majority of our students have little if any prior knowledge of this area, and partly because the very nature of our open, flexible learning approach does not require students to remain within one line of study and thus to consolidate on a year-by-year basis.

As the reviewers of our first substantial venture into the study of religions noted in Religion, 'It is not usual for university teaching courses to be subject to public review...' (Mews and Pye 1979:116). The 'routine' teaching of the OU is very much a public matter through virtue of its publication and relative accessibility. This has given us an opportunity to grapple with the pedagogic implications of the power of our outreach. As this article has illustrated, some of the lessons we have learnt through this experience have been quite prosaic, but of considerable value in trying to improve our teaching of religions of South Asian origin for a large and very diverse body of students.

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