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## British International School Riyadh

### Open University raises fees to £5,000 a year

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The OU will still be cheaper than many other universities, but will it price older or casual learners out of the market?

Open University student Barbara Yates began her course when she stopped work to look after her mother. Photograph: Frank Baron for the Guardian

The [Open University](#) may long ago have shaken off the image of kipper-tied lecturers presenting physics primers on late-night BBC2, but it has retained a warmly regarded reputation with the public as being the place for later-in-life education – whether it's for a change of career, or correcting the educational omissions of a misspent youth.

But that reputation may be set to change, following the OU's announcement of its new fees structure for [students](#) in England from September 2012. The price of a full-time degree (120 credits) will rise from about £1,400 to an average of £5,000 a year, with a part-time degree (60 credits) coming in at £2,500, where previously it had been around £700. Fees for those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are still being discussed.

The £5,000 may be a bargain when compared with the new fees of many other universities, but will it be a step too far for those who want to learn for fun or gently dip a toe back into education? Self-confessed hobby learner Kash Farooq, a software developer, is pursuing a BSc in natural sciences, having started his learning casually with a course on fossils and natural history. Farooq already had a maths degree, but he wanted to broaden his reading and, simply, to learn. "A few years ago, someone at work was doing an Open University degree," he says. "I tried a module and got hooked; that was in 2007. I did an astronomy module and since then I have been concentrating on astronomy."

Farooq, along with other English OU students, will pay fees at the current rate as long as his study is unbroken and he finishes his qualification by 2017. But he believes young undergraduates taking advantage of the low fees, and thus lower student debt, will make up a significant proportion of the intake in the near future.

"I wouldn't have started if these prices were active five years ago," he says. "If another university popped up doing distance learning at distance prices I would look at that."

The average age of the OU's students has been sliding slowly downwards over the years, currently standing at 31 for new undergraduates. That trend looks set to continue as students seek out bargains and their parents fret over living costs. But the OU's vice-chancellor, Martin Bean, is adamant that the new fees structure need not change either the reputation or the balance of the student body.

"We have about 6,000 full-time students with us now, but we will stay true to our aim, which is to remain open to as many people as we can," says Bean. "The vast majority of Open University students will continue to be part-time and working, with the average age being what it is now."

He believes the OU's mission to deliver quality university-standard education to all will not be compromised, even after the 84% cut to aggregate teaching grants that he says forced the price hike.

"One of the things we make clear is that at the higher price point we have to be able to justify the value to the students, whether they are part of the loan programme or not," he says. "If those students see it as a higher price point than they are willing to pay, then obviously they will not invest. But we also have a lot of other options for those people to engage with [higher education](#)."

Those options include the online OU resources [OpenLearn](#) and [iTunes U](#), which offer free course materials, although they lack the affirmation of marking or the chance to gain credit as part of a qualification. The casual learner, initially put off by fees but enthused enough by their studies to continue, will start from scratch when applying for a degree course.

Full-time carer Barbara Yates started her OU degree in 2008, when switching from employment to looking after her mother. Returning from a trip to Indochina, she wanted to learn more about the socioeconomic problems that the area faces.

"I thought I would see how I got on and just got really into it," she says. "I made the decision to do the degree, but the advice was to start with a level-one course, which was Introduction to Social Sciences, and that really whetted my appetite."

The International Studies degree is Yates's first. She is unsure whether she would have undertaken the course had the new fees been in place, even with the chance to get a student loan. "I don't know if I would do it at £15,000; that is a huge amount of money," she says. "I am a full-time carer, so I am using savings as an investment for myself so I have not stopped completely and am still moving on. The sad thing is that in future a lot of people like me will decide not to take a course, I think."

Next year's intake will show whether OU staff are to be overwhelmed by applications from young undergraduates in search of a bargain; disappointed by a fall-off in the 9% of students aged over 50; or simply enjoy business as usual.

Martin Bean will be keeping a keen eye on the numbers. "The entire sector of learning is going through an incredible period of uncertainty," he says. "We have always charged fees and have always marketed ourselves on that basis. So we have very good systems in place and will absolutely be monitoring what happens and making sure we remain a quality institution, so respected in British society."