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# **news release**

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Attention: News Editors and Education Reporters

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## **Commonwealth Honours for Open University's Distance Learning Materials**

A series of short courses that have given more than 10,000 people a stepping stone into higher education won international recognition for the Open University today.

The Open University has received a prestigious Commonwealth of Learning Award, for its innovative *Openings* programme, at the Pan Commonwealth Conference in New Zealand.

Chris Baker, Director of the Centre for Widening Participation, accepted the award for Excellence in Distance Education Materials on behalf of the Open University.

"For the *Openings* programme to be recognised internationally is a great honour, as well as an incentive to continue to produce course materials that are innovative, of the highest quality and that allow more people, from disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to further their education," says Mr Baker.

The *Openings* programme consists of a series of short, flexible courses designed to give students, particularly from under represented groups, an experience of OU study.

"The latest course, *Understanding Children*, was considered by the panel making the award. The intention in this, as in all *Openings* courses, is to bridge the divide between further and higher education and to give students clear pathways for their future development.

"The course materials are designed in such a way that they teach students how to study, and encourage students how to reflect on this, at the same time as dealing with the academic content of the chosen subject," says Mr Baker.

An evaluation of the courses has shown that *Openings* has been extremely successful in attracting students with very little previous educational experience and enabling them to succeed where in the past they would simply not have considered study or might have fallen at the first hurdle.

“The uniqueness of the student/tutor relationship (each student is allocated a personal tutor and receives two and a half hours of one-to-one tuition via the telephone during the 20 week course) along with the interactive activities in the course materials which draw upon different media (text, audio and visual) means that students from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities are catered for and given the chance to flourish,” he says.

Mr Baker was presented with the award during the Commonwealth of Learning’s Excellence in Distance Education Awards Banquet.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) recognises and honours excellence in distance education through its biennial awards programme. Originated in 1999 in conjunction with COL's tenth anniversary, achievement awards have been received by only ten institutions leading up to today’s awards presentation in New Zealand.

The Excellence in Distance Education Awards Banquet takes place during the third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, which has the theme of "Building Learning Communities for Our Millennium: Reaching Wider Audiences through Innovative Approaches". The forum is being held in Dunedin, New Zealand, from 4 to 8 July 2004. It is co-hosted by The Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ), The New Zealand Department of Education and COL, in collaboration with the Commonwealth's open and distance learning professional associations - members of the Federation of Commonwealth Open and Distance Learning Associations.