correspondence

Genetics at the OU

SIR,—The letter by Kacser *et al.* (April 1, page 386) concerning the Joint Universities Genetics Course, raises issues on which formal consultations between the Open University and the Nuffield Foundation are taking place. It contains statements that are false, misleading and prejudicial to Open University students and it is my duty to comment.

Firstly it should be understood that the grant from the foundation is less than half of the costs of production of a half-credit second-level course, the rest being met by the Open University. Nuffield support, whilst generous, was essentially given to carry through a project devised and planned by the participating universities.

We have always had draft material assessed for its academic validity by independent experts before final publication; the genetics course is no exception; all its units have been independently assessed and developmentally tested with volunteer student panels.

Relatively late in the planning of the course, the Nuffield Foundation proposed, and collaborating universities agreed on, a Consultative Committee to aid in course development. The Committee's unanimously agreed rôle was "to advise and comment on the general course outline, aims and objectives" and "to provide a group of geneticists willing to serve as academic referees for particular detailed portions of the course". It had neither control of nor responsibility for the course or the use made of it in individual institutions. In the main this is how the committee has interpreted its rôle and this has been of great assistance to the course team. Inter-university collaboration is a delicate and difficult plant to nurture, and it is a pity that the harmony between different universities reflected in the work of the team has not carried through to all the members of the consultative committee.

Kacser *et al.* state that "the Committee informed the Foundation that it was dissatisfied with the outcome of the previous three years' work and asked that the course should not be published, or even used by Open University students, without further consideration, restructuring and amendment". This is untrue. A docu-

ment signed by some members of the Committee (whose membership is incorrectly given in the letter), which was neither seen nor discussed at any meeting of the committee, and whose very existence was unknown to some of its members, was passed to the Director of the Nuffield Foundation.

Kacser *et al.* imply that the committee thought that the length and depth of the course was far beyond the capacities of the intended students. They state (as if they had only just discovered the fact) that for Open University students the study time for the average "Unit" is 12 hours, and that this work must be completed, on average, in a week. All this is, of course, perfectly true. But they then go on to assert that "it was the Committee's considered opinion" (though the Committee has never considered such an opinion) "that this is an impossible task if understanding at a University level is aimed at".

This workload is normal for all Open University courses. If the opinion of Kacser *et al.* is correct, the fact that many thousand students have successfully performed this "impossible task" over the past five years could only mean that these students did not achieve "understanding at a University level". This is a gratuitous insult to students and graduates and a grave reflection on our academic staff and external examiners.

Further, as Kacser *et al.* know full well, developmental testing of the course's components has continued this year with actual students. To pronounce upon the alleged difficulty and overloading of the course in advance of the completion of this evaluation seems to indicate prejudice rather than a spirit of objective criticism. To do so publicly seems to me to be irresponsible. Based on the first returns we have had from students, the average times taken to study Units 1 and 2 were 7 hours and 10 hours respectively, 99% of students reported on Unit 1 as being "OK" to "Very Interesting" and 98% found it "OK" to "Very Easy" to understand. The comparable figures for Unit 2 were 78% in each case. It would be premature to generalise from the first two units, but the facts so far contradict Kacser *et al.*'s mere opinion. I am confident that when the evaluation of the remaining Units—and the examiners' assessment of students' performance—has been completed, Kacser

et al. will be shown to have been wrong.

Kacser *et al.* further suggest that the use of this course by other institutions "has not been seriously considered". Quite the contrary: the other participating universities have, I believe, already made plans to use sections of it in their own teaching programmes and several other institutions have already let us know of their plans to do the same. It is also misleading to claim that an "obvious deficiency" of the course is that it has no "practical manual". At an early stage the team discussed practical work and decided that because of the widely differing circumstances of the different institutions that might use the course, no attempt should be made at present to prepare a manual except for OU students.

Kacser *et al.* assert that "the Consultative Committee jointly with the Nuffield Foundation suggested a number of changes which would have gone some way to meet these criticisms, but they were not accepted by Professor Rose". This is false in one respect and misleading in another. At no time has the "Consultative Committee jointly with the Nuffield Foundation" suggested these changes. Of course, in the design and development of the course, comments from members of the committee have been submitted to the team; many of these were accepted, with appreciation. The statement misleadingly suggests that acceptance or otherwise of comments was the prerogative of Professor Rose. In fact, all such decisions were taken by the full course team.

I very much regret the inaccuracy and tone of the letter, and wish to reiterate my belief that this course is academically and educationally on a par with other second-level Open University science courses, the value and success of which is already well established. Because of the wide interest in the subject and the way in which the course is constructed, the course will be of use in many other teaching contexts than the Open University.

Yours faithfully,

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