

correspondence

Genetics at the OU

SIR,—Since our veracity, objectivity and judgment have been called in question in a letter signed by Professor Pentz (April 8, page 479), which contests the criticism which we made of the genetics course now offered by the Open University, we hope you will allow us to put the record straight.

Much of the letter is polemical in the worst sense ("gratuitous insult", "prejudice", "mere opinion"). It also distorts our letter to mean what it does not say, namely, that we were attacking *all* Open University courses. In fact, we explicitly and specifically criticise the genetics course only.

The charges of falsehood made against us turn on the technicality of what constitutes "the Consultative Committee". The full Committee consisted of two members of the OU Course Team engaged in writing the course (Professors Rose and Jones), Dr C. Butler as Director of the Nuffield Foundation (subsequently replaced by the new Director, John Maddox), Professor H. Kornberg as a Trustee of the Foundation and five geneticists not involved in the writing of the course (Professors Jinks, Lewis, Pritchard, Sang and Dr Kacser). A sixth geneticist, Professor Bodmer, who was initially a member, later resigned.

It was these five geneticists who were actively engaged in meetings with the course team. In many sessions they made some far reaching criticisms and suggestions, including the proposal to reduce the coverage of the course radically (Consultative Committee meeting of October 20, 1975), but these were largely ignored. Professor Rose was the only member of the course team who attended all meetings. How much of our comments reached the rest we have no means of knowing. Eventually, and in despair, the five felt compelled to write a report to the Foundation who had appointed them.

This, quite properly, was confidential and could not have included any member of the course team. All other members received a copy. The debating point that they were not the full Committee, appears to have been introduced to conceal the reality of the situation. In a final attempt to improve the course, the Chairman of the Committee and the Director of the Foundation had a meeting with Professor Rose where the substance of our suggestions was discussed with him. The most important ones had, of course, been previously discussed in Committee. None of our major suggestions were accepted by Professor Rose.

The charge of "prejudice" turns out to be that the considered opinions of five geneticists with many years of teaching experience and great interest in teaching methods are set against the reports of some students that Units 1 and 2 were "OK", "very interesting" or "very easy". We are happy to leave this charge to the judgment of our colleagues.

We have gladly given of our time and experience for an enterprise which, at the outset, appeared to us both academically and socially important. In all our endeavours we had, and continue to have, only the welfare of potential students in mind. Because of this we must re-iterate that the students are ill served by the course as it stands. It is too long, too advanced and too detailed for second level part-time students and is inadequately prepared for non-OU Institutions. It would have been irresponsible to have brushed this opinion under the carpet even if our actions caused embarrassment to a member of the OU staff. Furthermore a venture which has absorbed a very large amount of money from a charity and, as we are now informed, an even larger amount of public money, should not be immune from informed criticism. There is nothing sacred about a Genetics Course—even an Open

University course—which is being actively promoted for sale to Universities at large.

Yours faithfully,

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Science and the media in Canada

SIR,—In reading David Spurgeon's account of science and the mass media in Canada (February 5, page 353), I was interested in noting the abrupt injection of subjectivity in the otherwise quite objective summary, represented by the rather plaintive "how would they know?" comment, referring to popular scepticism of newspaper science articles.

I could cite many cases of science reporting in Canadian newspapers, and personal contacts with reporters, where the clear objective has been to overdramatise science stories, frequently through exaggeration, on the admitted grounds of necessity to catch the readers' eyes. Perhaps this is more acute in the case of environmental sciences (one reporter from a large daily wanted a concoction of disgusting material prepared to be photographed as an example of pollution in the Great Lakes).

Consequently, although I share Mr Spurgeon's dismay at the apparently poor job we are doing in informing Canadians of scientific matters, I must express some relief to learn of our sceptical public.

Yours faithfully,

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Competition 7

A PRESENT day headline for Charles Darwin's achievement might read "British scientist finds life's secret on tropical island".

A prize of £10 is offered for the best modern headline for any scien-

tific achievement past or present. Inflated claims or deceptive packaging are welcome. The closing date for entries is June 8.

Competition 6 required a rhyming couplet to help familiarise an SI unit. M. Hammerton of Newcastle receives honourable mention for a McGonagall verse, as does P. A. Mohr of Cambridge, Mass., for his brave

efforts to keep the Imperial system alive:

The 3,000 metres steeplechase
Is a two miles less one-and-a-twelfth
furlongs race.

But the clear winner was John Gribbin of Brighton with:

A Pascal of pressure on top of your
head
Is the same push that butter exerts
on sliced bread.