Welcome

Welcome to this semester’s edition of Link. A special welcome goes out to the parents of all new first year students, some of whom we had the pleasure of meeting at our Parents’ receptions at the start of Orientation week. Once again, we had a superb response to our invitation and were delighted to see so many people taking the opportunity to meet University staff and fellow parents.

I hope you will enjoy reading our selection of news, and trust that your sons and daughters have an enjoyable and successful time here at St Andrews.

Sandra Doherty
Alumni Assistant

Elaine Cartwright
Alumni Relations Officer

St Andrews Top Scottish University

The University of St Andrews has been named as the runner-up for The Sunday Times UK University of the Year award in The Sunday Times University Guide 2007, and again tops the Guide’s league table of Scottish universities.

The Sunday Times’ ranking completes a highly successful year for the University, St Andrews having come top in Scotland and among the top five UK institutions in the 2007 guides produced by The Guardian, The Times and the online Good University Guide.

St Andrews was also named top mainstream university in the UK in the National Student Survey (NSS) 2007. The NSS is an annual evaluation of how satisfied students are with the quality of their higher education experience. This year it canvassed the opinions of 177,000 final-year students at 148 institutions, which included eight Scottish universities. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with elements such as teaching, assessment, academic support and personal development.

Dr Brian Lang, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, said: “Our staff can be exceptionally proud of the fact that we have featured consistently so close to the top of national league tables throughout 2007. The Sunday Times Guide offers another very important endorsement of their commitment to high quality teaching and research. The challenge for St Andrews and Scottish higher education is to sustain this level of performance in the years ahead.”

New Team of Student Representatives

Following the annual election by the student body, this year’s sabbatical student officers have taken up their posts.

Tom d’Ardenne, Students’ Association President, is the first President to be re-elected for a second term of office. Tom graduated with a degree in Modern History in 2006. He is responsible for the external image of the Association, representing St Andrews students to the media and to the University’s Senior Management. He works closely with the Principal’s Office and, alongside the Director of Representation, has a seat on the University’s governing body. Tom’s goals for this year include acquiring theatrical space and raising funds for the re-development of the Students’ Union.

Steve Savage, Director of Representation, graduated in June with a degree in Mathematics. Steve’s main responsibilities involve representing student interests to the University and beyond, primarily in the areas of accommodation, education, welfare, equal opportunities and on environmental and ethical issues.

Jenny Mackay, who is the new Director of Student Development and Activities, graduated in June with a degree in Geography and Social Anthropology. She works closely with the sub-committees of the Students’ Services Committee, all 106 student societies and with the Careers Centre. Jenny aims to ensure that every student is aware of the rich variety of societies, committees, clubs and events with which they can become involved.

Rich Robinson, Director of Events and Services, graduated in June with a degree in Computer Science and Mathematics. His responsibilities include the Orientation Week line-up, graduation ball and all other events hosted by the Students’ Association. He hopes to improve the general atmosphere in the Students’ Union and believes a key priority will be developing current facilities to ensure that students’ requirements are met.

The elected team are pictured from left to right: Steve, Tom, Jenny and Rich.
Reversing the Signs of Alzheimer’s Disease

Researchers in the University’s School of Biology have developed man-made compounds capable of blocking a nerve cell interaction known to lead to the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Senior Lecturer Dr Frank Gunn-Moore and his team, in collaboration with researchers in the US, have successfully reversed a sign for the progression of the disease and prevented the death of brain cells. This subsequently leads to improved memory and learning ability that was already damaged.

Alzheimer’s, which affects around half a million people in the UK, is linked to the build up of amyloid protein, which eventually forms ‘senile plaques’. The amyloid protein inflicts damage by interacting with an enzyme called ABAD (Amyloid Beta Alcohol Dehydrogenase) and releasing toxic substances, which kill brain cells.

Dr Gunn-Moore’s research initially focussed on developing the three-dimensional shape of ABAD and understanding how amyloid attaches itself to the structure. As Dr Gunn-Moore has explained, “Alzheimer’s sufferers produce too much amyloid and ABAD in their brains. Based on our knowledge of ABAD, we produced an inhibitor that can prevent amyloid attaching to it in a living model”.

The Alzheimer’s Research Trust, who helped fund the research, has awarded the St Andrews team a further grant to develop the research over the next three years. Having shown that it is possible to reverse some of the signs associated with the disease, the work is now being continued to attempt to refine the inhibitor into a potential drug. The research holds a possible key for the treatment of Alzheimer’s disease, particularly in its early stages.

Scotland’s Heritage on the Edge

St Andrews researchers, seeking to preserve the country’s striking and varied coastal scenery, recently called on adults and children to capture the coastline on camera before it is irreversibly damaged by rising tides and worsening storms. Around 1,000 photos were received, illustrating coastlines the length and breadth of Scotland.

A national photographic exhibition, organised by the charity SCAPE (Scottish Coastal Archaeology and the Problem of Erosion) and showcasing award-winning images from the ‘Capturing the Coastline’ competition, was launched in September by Emeritus Professor Christopher Smout, Historiographer Royal in Scotland and Chairman of SCAPE, in the presence of Minister for the Environment, Michael Russell MSP and world-renowned photographer Colin Prior.

Winning entries will now tour mainland Scotland and the islands over a year-long period, starting with the National Trust for Scotland Headquarters in Edinburgh and then visiting a range of other Scottish venues including the Gateway at the University of St Andrews and the Scottish Parliament.

Professor Smout commented, “These lovely pictures show what the coast means to us. It is tragic that so much of the archaeology, which can tell us how our ancestors lived in this environment, is now at serious risk of destruction from increasing storms and sea-level change. The archaeological sites are like a book that is being torn away page by page unread - it’s our heritage that is eroding and SCAPE’s task is to get public support for recording and excavation before we lose it completely”.

Michael Russell added “I have spent most of my life living in sight of the sea and, for me, Scotland’s coastline is infinitely varied, endlessly fascinating, in all conditions and weathers, yet also now, in many places, fragile and at risk. Celebrating it means also expressing concern for its future and motivating each and every one of us to ensure we play a part in protecting, preserving and promoting it.”

St Andrews Tops Poll of Scotland’s ‘Green’ Universities

The University of St Andrews has been rated one of the greenest universities in Scotland. St Andrews and Edinburgh share joint top place in the Times Higher Education Supplement ‘green league’. The institutions also share joint eighth place in the UK.

National student organisation ‘People and Planet’ commended St Andrews for its carbon emissions, recycling rates and energy consumed from renewable resources. The green league table points to a variety of factors including the University’s full-time environmental staff, comprehensive environmental audit, green travel plan and Fairtrade status.

Delighted that the University’s efforts to improve its environmental performance have been recognised, Roddy Yarr, Environment and Energy Manager, commented, “Our aim will continue to be to further integrate environment and sustainability issues within the University’s operations. Next year, we aim to improve on our ranking further”.

Credit: Tom Dawson, SCAPE
**Students Rewarded for Creative Writing**

Students at the University have been awarded cash prizes totalling £1,000 for skills in creative writing. Students were invited to submit essays of 1,000 words describing their learning experiences in a ‘creative, succinct and meaningful way’. The Student Essay Competition is one of several initiatives by SALTIRE (St Andrews Learning and Teaching: Innovation, Review and Enhancement), whose mission is to promote excellence in learning and teaching at the University.

Director of Learning and Teaching Development Dr Colin Mason, who developed and organised the competition, said: “The competition provides an intriguing, indirect route for students to give feedback on their experiences of learning and teaching at St Andrews and their own individual approaches to studying.”

Rebecca Austin, a Classics student now in her third year of study, won first prize for her essay, “Audio Video Disco: An Interactive Guide to the Study of Classics”, for which she also shared an additional award for the most creative essay title with Lisa Vega for her essay, “The Write Stuff”. Runners-up Federico Luzzi, Martin Conaghan and Richard Sowerby shared second prize.

Three of the prize winners, Rebecca, Federico and Lisa (Front row, L-R) are pictured here with SALTIRE staff Frank Quinaulit, June Knowles and Colin Mason (Back row L-R).

**Treasures from Special Collections**

The University Library is hosting an exhibition featuring some of the earliest treasures from its Special Collections. The Special Collections Department is home to the Library’s manuscripts and rare printed books, as well as its extensive photographic collections and the University muniments or institutional archive.

The items on display include some of the earliest and most significant material held within the Collections. There are wonderful examples of printing, beautifully illustrated pages in both manuscript and print, and facsimile and copies of items too large or fragile to include in their original form. Amongst the exhibits are a Greek papyrus from the 2nd century AD, the oldest printed book in the Library and an illuminated manuscript. There are also some of the exciting new accessions recently acquired by the Library.

The Department plays a vital role in the Library’s support for teaching and research within the University. It is also an important centre for historical studies in the wider academic community and a public resource centre.

The exhibition, which is open to the public, and is free of charge, will run until 19 December 2007 on level 2 of the Library.

**FC Barcelona Say ‘Gracias’**

Deputy Principal Keith Brown was presented with a commemorative plaque from FC Barcelona on their last day of training at the University in July. The team spent an entire week in St Andrews, basing their pre-season training camp at the University’s sports fields. During their time here, players and management praised the facilities and hard work undertaken by staff in preparation of the visit.

Hundreds of spectators, including international media, tourists, locals and University staff and students, gathered during training sessions to catch sight of some of the best football players in the world.

Professor Brown is pictured with Brazilian star player Ronaldinho.
**Orangutan Charades**

According to research at the University’s School of Psychology, orangutans communicate as if they were playing charades. When using gestures to get their points across, orangutans rely on the same basic strategy that humans follow when playing the popular game and intentionally modify or repeat hand, or other signals, based on the success or failure of their first attempt.

Professor Richard Byrne of the School of Psychology said, “We were surprised that the orangutans’ responses so clearly signalled their assessment of the audience’s comprehension. Looking at the tapes of the animal’s responses, you can easily work out whether the orangutan thinks it has been fully, partially, or not understood, without seeing what went before”.

“This means that, in effect, they are passing information back to the audience about how well they are doing in understanding them, hence our ‘charades’ analogy. In playing the game, you want primarily to convey your meaning non-verbally, as does the orangutan, but secondarily to help the team get your meaning by giving them hints as to how well they are doing.”

To find out whether orangutans intentionally communicate with people through gestures, a skill earlier attributed to chimpanzees, PhD student Erica Cartmill and Professor Byrne presented six orangutans in Jersey and Twycross Zoos with situations in which one tempting and one not-so-tempting food item had to be reached with human help. However, to test the orangutans’ strategy, there was a catch. Rather than play along all the time, the experimenter sometimes purposefully misunderstood the orangutan’s requests, providing them with only half of the delicious treat in some cases and, in others, handing over the less pleasant alternative instead.

“The response showed that the orangutan had intended a particular result, anticipated getting it, and kept trying until it got the result,” Erica Cartmill explained. “The orangutans made a clear distinction between total misunderstanding, when they tended to give up on the signals they had used already, and use new, but equivalent ones to get the idea across, and partial misunderstanding, when they tended to repeat the signals that had already partially worked, keeping at it with vigour. The result was that understanding could be achieved more quickly.” The findings are published in *Current Biology* (2 August 2007).

The researchers concluded that the orangutans’ charades-like strategy is one way to construct shared meaning from learned or ritualised signals in the absence of language. Further investigation of communication among apes may therefore provide insight into the pre-linguistic devices that helped construct the very earliest forms of hominid language.

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Information for families of current students can be found at: www.st-andrews.ac.uk/parents

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