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Obituary of Uwe Grimm, Professor of Mathematics



It is with great sadness that we announce the sudden and unexpected death of Professor Uwe Grimm, last week. It has come as a great shock to everyone who worked with him and knew him. He was both an outstanding academic and a wonderful person.

Uwe was a Professor of Mathematics in the School of Mathematics & Statistics and Associate Lecturer. He joined The Open University in 2000 having previously studied at the University of Bonn in Germany, where he completed a doctorate degree in Physics, and worked as a post-doctoral researcher in Melbourne, Amsterdam, and Chemnitz.

He held several leadership roles at the OU, including Associate Dean for Research and Head of the School of Mathematics and Statistics. He returned to his substantive role as Professor of Mathematics in 2018 to concentrate on research and teaching.

His wide-ranging research interests included mathematical physics, statistical mechanics, combinatorics and mathematical biology. His main area of research was aperiodic order. So passionate was he about this subject he created the aperiodic order research group at the OU which secured more than £500k in funding over the last five years.

He also played a significant role in the OU's growing international reputation as experts in aperiodic order research, a legacy that is testament to his passion and enthusiasm, including being considered by many as a world expert in quasicrystals.

He took great pride in communicating his area of research to all audiences, engaging everyone with verve and vigour making him incredibly memorable. With Dr Reem Yassawi he developed the topic of aperiodic tilings for MSc students at the OU. Additionally, for younger enthusiasts they created a masterclass on mathematical tilings and patterns for the Royal Institution. Most recently he and Charlotte Webb hosted a well-received event at the Edinburgh Science Festival on his work on aperiodic tilings.

He was always thinking about alternative ways to engage audiences and in 2015 Uwe and Katie Chicot put together a team from the School of Maths & Stats to take part in the BBC game show Beat the Brain hosted by John Craven and Josie Lawrence (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFqneahP2lg>) winning the title “weapons of maths instruction.”

He had a strong academic philosophy that centred around being in contact with, and engaging, students. Because of this he was an AL for most of the time he was at the OU tutoring hundreds of students and meeting many more at residential schools. He was a mentor to many colleagues in the School and supervised many PhDs and post-doctoral researchers.

Andrey Umerski, Head of the School of Maths & Stats said “Uwe was an all-round academic and will be sorely missed. He leaves a large, Uwe shaped hole in the School. I think I speak for everyone when I say he will be greatly missed, not just as an academic colleague but also as a friend.”

Professor Nick Braithwaite, Executive Dean of the STEM Faculty said, “Uwe was a highly respected mathematical scientist and will be greatly missed around the world by the many students and professional researchers whose lives he had touched. He was a generous, caring energetic person, very much part of the community in Maths & Stats, in STEM and in the OU.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Tim Blackman said, “The OU has lost one of its finest professors and a wonderful person, struck down far too early in his life. We will remember Uwe for his cheerfulness, endless curiosity and above all passion for the OU, and will miss him greatly”.

Past colleagues have also been sharing their sadness at this news including emeritus professor David Brannan, Head of the Pure Mathematics Department 1979-96, and Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Computing 1996-2006 said, “He was a really nice fellow, who always stopped to talk to me when I went onto campus after retirement. He was 100% trustworthy. Did what you asked, suggested good ideas, and helped everyone he could. Salt of the earth.

“He was a superb team member of the Deanery, making sensible contributions in every area in a selfless way, just wanting to do the best for the organisation, its staff and its students, I could not speak highly enough of him – as a fine mathematical physicist, as a colleague, as a Sub-Dean, as a Head of Department, and as a friend.”

Uwe excelled at everything he turned his hand to. He was a very talented musician playing the piano and the organ and was also an aspiring juggler. He will be fondly remembered for his love of music, especially at residential schools when the evening entertainment began, he would be the first on the dance floor and the last to leave.

He is survived by his wife Katharina and two sons, Jasper and Moritz.