

The Open Programme and the benefits of a multidisciplinary degree

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN: Hi. And welcome back to the student hub live. Well, we've had a philosophy cafe. We've had a philosopher chatting with you. Sean, how's it all gone?

SEAN: It's been extremely interesting as I thought it would be. To the first question, is this thing's having value always or ever dependent on our valuing it? Initially it is often as a resounding no is a perfectly intuitive response. How could something be valuable if there's no one to value it or if no one values it?

We then talked about scenarios in which perhaps there was no one left or no thing to value anything in a post extinction or whatever. And then moved onto-- [INAUDIBLE] questions of the environment, which is very relevant in talk about ethics of the environment, philosophy of the environment. Is the environment have intrinsic value? Is it just valuable for its own sake? Or is it valuable because of its value to us because we value it and do things with it?

Then talked about questions of sort of people that sort of had no value-- didn't value their own lives and maybe weren't such valuable to anybody else's. Are they of any value at all? Would it matter if they died? That kind of stirred things up a bit.

And what was really interesting there is, your initial reaction to question is, well, no. Things can't have value if we don't value them. But you think about some hard cases and think, look, does the person just mentioned, do we really think there's no value?

We haven't answered that conclusively, but I think people have been really thinking about it. And that's the main thing, thinking hard. I know I'll think about as I go home on the train. There you go. Oh, ended up talking about Katie Hopkins for a bit. I don't know how she got in.

[LAUGHTER]

I'll leave it there.

KAREN: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Sean, and to the philosophy department for that matter. And are these the sorts of questions that students can expect on an exam?

SEAN: Of versions of such, yes. They would probably be more focused on course material, in particular thinkers or particularly bits of the course that they've done. But yeah. They would. I doubt they would be quite that broad. But the same topics, yes. For sure. Yeah.

KAREN: Wonderful. Well, excellent. Well, thank you for that. I imagine we'll have some new philosophers. OK. So next I have my invitation for high tea with the open programme. And I welcome Peter and Liz.

Thank you so much for bringing me food. We've been talking about food all day. And indeed, yesterday when we had to go off there because people watching the great British bake-off. So I'm delighted with this. Tell us what you got.

PETER: Well, there's a range of rather nice little fancy cakes at the top, like croissants, and yes. There's some pastries. And I like the sandwiches at the bottom. They look particularly interesting.

KAREN: Because I did wonder if we were having interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary sandwiches.

PETER: They are pretty multidisciplinary in that there are a range of different fillings. And so you can combine your fillings. You can have the same filling, or you could have different fillings. You could alternate your fillings.

KAREN: Lovely. Well, thank you, Peter. You're the director of the open programme. I'm going to serve us tea. And Liz you've come to talk about multi and interdisciplinary study as well with the open program. What's your interest in all of this aside from the fabulous tea?

LIZ: OK. Well, actually, primarily it's a selfish one, a vested interest one, because I did a combined honours degree many, many years ago. So I've always been into interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. And I'm also responsible for the access programme in the university. So we have the cross disciplinary modules combining subjects.

So we've got the maths and science module. We've got the arts and languages module. We've got people work in society. And we put them together in that particular way because we wanted students to be able to study a cognate area of skills, which would help them making their choices about what they went on to study at level one.

And having the open programme in the university is just amazing. There's nowhere else does anything like that. There's nothing like it in the UK. And it just offers so many opportunities to people to combine different areas of study, to put their own sandwiches together, if you like.

And so I think there's ham and cheese and lettuce here. Some of them have only got ham and cheese. Some of them got ham and cheese and lettuce.

KAREN: So is it milk first or tea first. That is a debate.

PETER: I think level one is milk. So you have to have the milk.

KAREN: Milk first.

LIZ: Yes. Milk first. Thank you, Karen.

KAREN: So Peter, tell us. We We've been talking about languages and things, and tagging on languages to things. What are some of the things that students study then when they're doing an open degree?

PETER: Well, I think you can do your open degree in a number of different ways. So first of all, you can study subjects which are very different from each other or you can study subjects which are similar to each other, but maybe don't fit in with a particular order for a main degree. So it's a real flexible opportunity.

And as Liz says, it's a unique opportunity within the UK because-- and this is the interesting bit. You can only really have that kind of flexibility if you have a distance taught courses. Face-to-face courses, you always have problems with timetabling and trying to mix and match things. There's always going to be combinations you can't do. But within the Open University, you can literally do any combinations that you want of particular subjects.

KAREN: So how does it all work then? Because we've had a lot of questions. And if you have a question, you can ask us in the chat. How does it all work in terms of levels? Can people just pick what they want?

PETER: I particularly brought my LEGO along with me. So I'll just move my tea out of the way. Maybe move that. So I've just been thinking about how you'd start with your level one study. So if your eight kind of module pieces, your first 60-credit module, and then you do another 60-credit module, you've then completed your level one.

LIZ: That's your milk, isn't it?

PETER: Yes. And that might, in a single subject, that would all be red. So I would do another 30-point course and then another 30-point course. So that gives me my level two and my level three. So that's what it looks like if you're studying a single subject. But if you're say, doing two subjects, then you might study your 60 credits of each subject first.

So that gives you a level one with say, your music and physics or whatever. And then you might decide, I'm going to do a bit more physics and a bit more music. And then I might finish off with my level three, take some 30-credit modules, and so build up my two subjects but studying them in orders that suit me.

KAREN: Brilliant.

PETER: And I think the other thing we're doing is actually to say I'm an expert in this. I work in this area. I've got a lot of experience, say, in a particular subject. So I don't need to study it at level one.

So what I'm going to do is I'll do something like languages at level one because that would be useful for me for my business, and maybe doing some business studies. And then think, right now is the point where I need to specialise. So I'm going to maybe do the subjects that I want to do.

KAREN: It's all very simple.

PETER: In theory it is.

KAREN: Well, you don't mention the difficulty when you get a prospectus in deciding what to actually study because there are so many more modules there.

PETER: If you're studying two subjects, then we give you advisory roots. So you can study a particular level one module. And then there's the level two module, level three module that follow on from it in a coherent way. So we can give you advice about studying on two subjects.

I think it gets a bit more complicated if, for example, at level two you decided to take a third subject. That might give you a bit of a tricky choices to make. But then it's just a question of looking through what's available at that level and choosing that particular module that matches your needs, either your interests or your kind of work needs.

KAREN: Do have some food, it's delicious. Liz, you mentioned wanting to become a mermaid earlier as part of your career progression.

LIZ: You were listening.

KAREN: I was. I was, because I'm too interested in becoming a mermaid. I was going to ask, what sort of modules you might be most interested in studying should you start doing something like an open degree. And I also wanted to ask, because I know you've got an interest in how people learn and how people start doing things, because of course you are involved with access modules, which is basically the roots to higher education for a lot of people.

So Peter, you've mentioned that some people might have maybe studied science at school. And then they do languages. And then they might pick science up later on. And Liz, I wanted to ask you aside from what you would do, how students might envisage that study journey when they may feel anxious about things, knowing when they're at a sort of appropriate level of skill?

LIZ: Well, you've thrown me completely on what I might study to be a mermaid. I think I'm going to go and have a look at the prospectus.

PETER: Oceanography.

LIZ: Oceanography, definitely, yes. And something, well, my main driver was being able to comb long hair a lot, but I don't think there's any modules on that.

KAREN: It is important.

LIZ: Yes. Of course. But in terms of knowing when you're ready, I think what Peter's just talked about is really interesting because what we do in access is we give them, people, the building blocks. So have you used this colour, Peter?

PETER: Not yet. No.

LIZ: We could actually, I can't. I'm not sure if this will balance, but it should actually balance. So you can actually have your basic access module there, which will build up your skills and your confidence and help you to decide what subjects you want to study.

So if you're doing the people work in society, you might think, well, I've quite enjoyed the law, but I also enjoyed some of the psychology. So I think I might try to do a little bit of law

and psychology. So you might come along at your next level and do a-- oops-- psychology module. Oh, it's OK. It's just me that's incompetent.

KAREN: We're used to playing with Duplo.

[LAUGHTER]

You, clearly are doing other things.

LIZ: Yes, clearly. So then I think I might try and combine some law and psychology there. And then that might be the degree that I want to complete. The other thing I was thinking about while Peter was talking is, that if you have actually done some study elsewhere and you've got maybe a higher national certificate, or maybe you've done the first year of a degree somewhere else, you can actually come in with that credit and you can say, OK. Actually, I've got that qualification.

So I'd like to start at level two. And I'd like to start making my choices. And it doesn't have to be in the same subject there provided of course there's no prerequisite. So you're not trying to take a module that needs to have reached a specific level in maths or whatever.

And you can then carry on studying in different subject areas. So I'm getting quite used to this now. I'm making it fit. So you can build up your degree on top of something else that you might have done.

PETER: And that's a particularly important role for the Open Programme and students who have studied elsewhere and for whatever reason, decided the subject is not for them, and they then want to move to a different subject, being able to join the Open Programme, and study with the OU, but studying different subjects at this level is a real opportunity for them. They can really complete. The other way it works is, I might-- I decided I want to do--

KAREN: I'm also loving this LEGO [INAUDIBLE].

PETER: Me, I haven't had a play with this for a long time.

KAREN: It's quite mesmerising. I'm not eating quite as much as I planned because it's so interesting.

PETER: But I might have decided to do a kind of single honours degree so I'd done my level one module, both of them. And I'm doing my level two. And then for some reason I decide I don't want to do it anymore, either it's not what I expected, or maybe I've had a career change and I suddenly need to study in a different area.

So I would no longer study that single honours. But I could move into the Open Programme and now take up this other study. And maybe-- the yellow one-- I'm going to knock over one of the teas in a minute aren't I?

Maybe just carry on a little bit about that other one. So it's the flexibility of it. And it's not something that you have to plan for well in advance. You can make it suit your life and the things that are going on in your life and the changes that happen in your life.

LIZ: So can I ask something, Peter? Because some people might be thinking, well, isn't there a rule that says you've got to do all your level one before you do your level two? So how does that work for combined honours-- for open degree students? Do they have to do a whole lot of level one first?

PETER: You have to do a level one first to really develop those level one skills. And then you move onto level two to develop your level two skills. But within that level, then you can choose the modules. I think you need to make sure you choose the right modules.

Going into doing kind of really complex third level mathematics, having never done mathematics before, you might struggle a bit. So I think you do have to think-- it's not as if it's oh, I can do anything I want. You do need to look at the kinds of background, the kind of prerequisites of knowledge that you need. But a lot of people have lots of kind of knowledge that they've gained from informal activities or whatever that help them feed into those higher level modules.

KAREN: Well, Helen says that we need a module on LEGO building from the OU. But there are serious questions too. HJ and Helen.

HJ: Well, I'm really interested in hearing about what subjects other people are interested in pursuing as part of their degrees. Amy's got a really nice path I think set out for herself. She said she's starting in art. But she also wants to do a statistics module and perhaps Latin with a definite eye on the classical mythology module at level three. So that sounds really interesting.

HELEN: It does. Yeah. And Simon is also on the open degree. And he's intending to do the philosophy, second level philosophy, A222 and then A333, another philosophy one. And then he's going to psychology and social science, because basically he wants to build his own degree, a peace studies degree, which the OU doesn't do. But he's building it himself.

And actually, he has a follow on question really. He has the option of changing to a named degree, the philosophy and psychology degree rather than being on an open degree. And he can't decide whether or not to go for it. Do you think it will make a difference in the future? So it's exactly the same modules. It's just having a different name on the certificate. Might it matter one day?

PETER: I think that's something that we need to think about. But you don't need to make that decision now. You can always move from one kind of qualification to another if necessary. So keeping your options open, staying in the Open Programme. Then if it matches that name degree, and having that title associated with it is important. You can always move to that later, providing you've got the right set of modules.

KAREN: So when would people need to decide then? They can keep studying until the end, is it?

PETER: Pretty much. Really towards the very end. I mean, even I've know when people have completed 360 credits, they've changed the qualification. So you can do it quite late. But I think you need to plan, obviously the modules you're going to study.

It's interesting because there was another student who was studying for-- wanted to do a peace studies masters. And they looked at the curriculum for the masters and identified the various areas they would need to study undergraduate level, took the open programme, and then picked those particular modules specifically to prepare them for the master's degree.

KAREN: Well the fight that ensued between psychology and social sciences, and philosophy, was quite interesting beforehand. And there's no getting away from the fact that we have these different colours. And I wanted to ask about this because we've been talking about how different disciplines study in different ways and how people might be used to studying in one way, and then all of a sudden find something and another.

How would students experience this if you're going from one faculty or discipline to another, who do things differently, who may structure things differently? How do students experience that and is that a good thing?

PETER: I think it is a good thing. I think that it can be a shock moving from one faculty to the next. The one that students always complain about is referencing, the way that things are referenced in one subject, they move to another subject, they use the same referencing method and they get into trouble for it. So understanding some of the kind of innate differences between the kind of-- the actual subjects and the way they're studied is important.

I think a lot of the basic skills are similar, but there are some specific kind of skills and way things are done in different disciplines, which means you do have to kind of learn and differentiate what's needed. But I also think that the discourse you develop within one subject, when you go to another subject and you apply that discourse, then you are adding something extra to that subject and something that perhaps isn't generally developed. And so it gives you an opportunity to add value to that subject, your assignments, etc. because you've got a different background.

KAREN: I mean, Liz, you're in a wonderful position because in the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships, you're dealing with so many different areas of the University as well as all the different faculties. How do you experience this?

LIZ: Well, that is interesting. And I experienced this in the institution I worked in before as well. There's almost a sense of demarcation or boundaries between disciplines. They're not real. And they're not real.

They're, I guess, created in some sense. And breaking down those barriers is a really useful thing to be able to do. I looked at the study of maths and compared that to the study of music, for example. And if you look at those two subjects, actually understanding maths is a really good way of helping you to read music. And being able to write music is a really good way to help you to understand maths.

So actually, those things go together really well. I think you can-- I used to work with some sociologists and psychologists who worked with computer scientists in creating the human computer interfaces. So things like a cash machine, you could have the technologist come along and they could build a thing that worked to dispense cash. But it might not necessarily have the user focus that a sociologist or a psychologist could bring along to it to say what the design should look like. So actually there's lots of benefits from studying across different subjects and bringing those together.

KAREN: Lovely. And there's some chat on the social media desk. Let's just see what they're-- have some food, guys.

SPEAKER 1: Yeah. There's lots of stuff going on. So if we have missed something, because it is going quite fast, just email us at studenthub@open.ac.uk and we'd love to get back to about all your questions. Oh, I'll just have a look where I saved it. Oh, and [INAUDIBLE] has a very specific question.

So if you email that to us at the email address, studenthub@open.ac.uk, we would be more than happy to get back to you on that. But we had a little bit-- got onto postgraduate a little. But Daniel just wants to know, does the OU do Ph.D. Level courses.

PETER: The OU does do PhDs, mainly by research. So I have PhD Students working for me in chemistry who come here to work in our laboratories and to do research. I think there is a PhD In education, isn't there?

LIZ: There is. There is an EdD, education doctorate, which is taught to some extent, although the student has to have some kind of research focus. And mainly it's in the fields of education. So I'm supervising one student who is looking at the ways in which he can improve retention in his college in the Middle East. And that's really interesting. But it's very much a supported approach to a doctorate study. It's good.

KAREN: Because, of course, I think sometimes students forget that this is an active university, a research based university where there is a lot of research going on and there are lots of options. And, of course, postgraduates, there are various qualifications that are being developed, particularly in the social sciences. Those are undergoing a massive revamp. So do check those out because it is interesting to see what's on offer.

PETER: One of things that I was going to pick up on, kind of interdisciplinary study, is the way that the language is used across different subjects. And that's one of the most difficult parts is actually learning the language of subject A and learning the language of subject B and understanding that even just some of the simple carrier words are used in a very different way in those two subjects. And making sure you're swapping correctly between the two is sometimes a challenge.

KAREN: We just need to-- oh, sorry.

LIZ: I used to get caught in the crossfire between some of the sociologists and the computer scientists. And they'd each accuse each other not speaking English because they didn't have a common language. That's quite challenging.

PETER: Even within science, I can use the word, primary, in lots of different ways. In chemistry it means one thing. In earth sciences it means another. And it's just language and the way we use it and understanding it.

KAREN: Well tea breaks always end too soon. And this is one of the-- we've hardly eaten a thing. But we need to have a short break now because we're back in a minute. Thank you very much Peter Taylor. That's been really interesting.

And if we haven't covered those questions, please do email us, studenthub@open.ac.uk, and we will get back to you on that. And Liz Marr, thank you for becoming a part of this fabulous session as well. We're now going to have a short break. And we're going to watch a kiwi fruit experiment. And then we're doing our science demonstration, which I'm really looking forward to. So we will see you in about five minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]