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**KAREN FOLEY:** Hi, and welcome back to Student Connections.

Well, I hope you've had a good, little break and enjoyed some of those videos. And I hope they've given you lots of useful advice about where to go, and then where to go after that.

And I'm now joined in the studio, at our fabulous new set with Richard Heffernan. And Richard is going to be talking to us about a new module that he's developed, DD211. We have a lot of these codes in the module, but it's Understanding Politics.

And throughout this conference, we're going to be hearing from lots of various different departments about things. So Richard, welcome.

**RICHARD** Hi.

**HEFFERNAN:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** Hi. Would you like to tell us then about this module that you've been developing? And I'm going to show these books because they're particularly lovely. *Understanding Politics-- Ideas and Institutions in the Modern World*. How's it all gone?

**RICHARD** Never judge a book by its cover. But I suspect it's probably better than having a brown paper bag. Well, the course is D-D-2-1-1, or DD211 as we tend to call it. Most people in the OU refer to modules by their numerical prefix. Understanding Politics-- Ideas and Institutions in the Modern World. It's a new second-level course, but also a Stage 1 core course in the PPE degree, the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics degree. So it replaces an old politics course, which was DD203, which has come to an end. Last presentation, last exam was taken by students last week. And this course comes on stream on the 3rd of October. So a week tomorrow. And it's already up for students who have registered for the course.

But as I say, it's a core politics, second-level course, designed to pull students out of first-level study, to help them make the transition to second-level study, and then to propel them into various other courses related to PPE, or international studies, or the Open degree in terms of third-level study by engaging with kind of a core politics curriculum which is presented in the 30 weeks of the course.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. So it's got four key questions-- what is politics, who does politics, where, and how? Can you tell us then-- I mean, obviously starting a brand new module, you've got a lot to go on and a lot of pathways to fit into. What was your thinking then when you were sort of looking at, how can we teach this? How can we engage our students in this? And what really matters? How did you arrive then at those four themes?

**RICHARD HEFFERNAN:** Well, we have a national curriculum, a series of benchmarks that is expected of a politics and international studies degree. So there's certain things that students need to know in order to progress and to develop a set of skills relating to the study of politics. But also, to the engagement with social science more generally. And so in many ways-- so we have a lot of pathways that we have to follow.

We had a small module team that's been working for two years making this with our colleagues in LTS and elsewhere in the university. And so it's very much a collective endeavour. And essentially, we want to ask big questions, which is, what is politics, how do we define it, who does it, and where do they do it, and what are the impacts. So that takes us into the study of personalities and politics. That takes in the study of political concepts, ideas such as freedom, equality, power, and sovereignty. Then, where does politics take place?

Well, in a narrow view, it's everywhere. In a broad view, it's almost everywhere. And so we look at institutions. So we do a block which I had particular responsibility for, which is looking at-- comparing and contrasting the study of politics in the United States and United Kingdom. So it's essentially asking very, very big questions, but using specific examples to engage with them. And to encourage students to see themselves as political actors, whatever their politics are. And to give them a kind of toolbox that they can then use to navigate through the course, to understand politics as a theoretical academic practise, but also something that has meaning and impact on their lives in a day-to-day basis.

It's almost from soup to nuts in a 30-week journey in which we can't do everything. Because you could spend 30 years-- I've studied politics for 40 years and professionally for 25. And I've still got lots to learn. So you can't do everything. So it's giving you a basic grounding and raising issues and concerns, providing you with knowledge that you can then use in other modules in the PPE and in the International Studies degree and in the Open degree as you progress your way through the Open University to come out the other end as a graduate.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So you're combining an awful lot there. You've mentioned some of those various frameworks

that you need to comply with in terms of what you're doing. And you've also mentioned that people may be combining this, and that it may not be people who are just interested in politics that may end up studying this module.

I know when people start with the Open University-- and we've got a lot of social science students here who are new, so they might be doing some of our introductory models, like DD102, Introduction to the Social Sciences where they start looking at various social science concepts and disciplines. What would you say to students then in terms of those who may not be so hardcore into the politics?

You've talked about institutions, and how politics relates to so many aspects of lives. How would that appeal to students?

**RICHARD  
HEFFERNAN:**

Well, one of the remit the module team was given when we began to make it two years ago was that this take students out of first-level study. And which in the OU, many students will have done them watching or following this broadcast. We'll see that it's a very, very social science, broad-based interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary approach to the study of social sciences generally. And that's important.

But at the second level, you're doing politics having done it a little at the first level. You're doing it a lot. And so we very much-- the first block, which is what is politics, a four-week teaching block with one TMA. This is designed very, very simply to get you into second-level study by presenting it to you in the ways in which students will be used to engaging with it having done first-level study.

So we presuppose no pre-existing knowledge of politics as an academic study. Although, people will have-- as individuals, we all have opinions about politics. We're all electors or non-electors. We're all supportive of the political process or alienated from it or apathetic about it. So everyone will come to it with a notion of their appreciation of politics.

And what the module does, particularly in its first block, is to ask you to engage with big questions relating to how you study politics, and how you make sense of it. And so the toolkit is there. And students will develop that as they work through the module, looking first in block 1 at what is politics.

The second block is political concepts, where we take three big concepts-- freedom, equality, power and sovereignty. And we look at how these develop, who argues about them, how you

understand them and what impacts they have.

Block 3 then looks at political ideologies, which looks at how concepts, such as freedom, influences your life as a person. Because an ideology is a way in which concepts are made real and influence public policy. And there we look at conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. We look at feminism, and then we take a case study of welfare politics in the UK to try to operationalise how ideologies actually impact you and who argues what.

The third block-- or the fourth block, excuse me, is political institutions, which looks at the very great differences between a political system such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which are similar but also different. One is a federal presidential system, the other is a unitary parliamentary system. These are very different. We look at how we understand them, what models exist to make sense of them, and so on.

And then the fifth and final substantive teaching block is global politics, which looks at how the national is related to the international, how the local interacts with the global.

And we look at globalisation. We take a case study of regional organisation, the European Union being our case study. And then we look at how international governance around the United Nations, around the notion of social justice, and around the real and present threat of terrorism links us all together in an evermore independent world.

And then we have five weeks to prepare students for an exam, which they will take, which may frighten them. But we have five weeks in which they study how to do exams, and how to progress out of the course successfully, which I'm sure they will.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Fantastic. That sounds jam-packed with loads and loads of exciting content. That's a really thorough description of everything.

I wanted to touch on a couple of things you said, because some of our students out there may not be doing politics. And I wanted to talk about this jump between levels 1 to 2. And also, thinking about how people might experience studying this module in particular. We've been talking beforehand about assessments, about various projects that people might do. So what's different then in terms of going from level 1 to level 2? And how are you including that in the sort of teaching side of things?

**RICHARD HEFFERNAN:** Well, it's a graduated jump. You don't just go bang-bang in from level 1 to level 2. What you do is you're introduced into the study of level 2 academic work carefully and slowly.

So for example, as I say, there are five substantive blocks. You do four weeks substantive teaching and a TMA. So there are five TMAs related to each block. TMA01 introduces you to the study very simply and very carefully. And you write short answers of variety of forms of assessment that students will see when they begin the course or module as we must call it.

And none of the assessment is designed to trick you, to trip you up, to phase you, or to frighten you. It's there to assist you in your progression. So it's not an obstacle, it's a resource. A TMA is a resource that helps you make sense of the material you're engaging with and allows you to provide an answer with which your tutor and the module team will engage.

And there's forums available. There's already a Facebook page up and running that the students have set up themselves as they do. And so there's a variety. You're not alone, folks. If you study the course, you're not alone. You have the assistance of your tutor, and of others, and of peers.

And it's just gradually building things. You know, little acorns grow into big oaks. They don't suddenly just appear. And so our objective in terms of the assessment side of this module is to provide it-- as I say, make it a resource, not an obstacle. Make it fun insofar as assessments can be fun. Make them not kind of dangerous or off-putting. And to train you how to engage at second-level study.

And the thing is, it's like boiling a frog in a saucepan. If you put the frog in a boiling water, it will scream and shout and try to get out. If you put a frog-- I've not tried it myself though. I don't--

I was going to say.

--advise you doing it. But if you want to boil a frog, the way to do it quietly is you put it in cold water, put it on a hob, and just set it going. And then it gradually boil to death without knowing it. So when you study at second level, you will be boiled to death without knowing it, because you'll be gradually-- if you were a frog which, you're not. You will gradually be beginning your skill set, developing your knowledge. And your TMA05 will be fundamentally different from your TMA01. And in doing that, you will progress through the module. That's the way we've designed it to help you study the material that we want you to engage with.

**KAREN FOLEY:** I think it's really important to sort of communicate as well to students that the meticulous aspect of planning a new module where, like you say, there is this trajectory to getting to the

end of a level 2, being able to then have different skills that you started with. And it's not just that clear jump. And how that assessment is so well-planned to fit into all these other constraints that you have.

But I'd like to go to the social media desk because we've got some new politics students and I'd like to hear what you're saying. And Harley Jack and Rachel, how are things there?

**RACHEL:**

Yeah, we've got some politics students here. We've got others that are interested in the PPE and also in the philosophy side of things. And a very special shout out to Helen who is studying the two DD211 module, which is absolutely fantastic. We've got quite a few questions coming through.

Exam is new for some students. And a lot of students are saying, is this an online exam or do you go to a centre?

**RICHARD**

**HEFFERNAN:**

You will go to a centre and you will sit it formally. It's a three-hour exam in two parts. You will answer three questions. You have an hour for each of the questions. The first part is a short answer. You answer three questions, 20 minutes per question.

And again, the exam is designed to provide you with a showcase to demonstrate your knowledge. It's not designed to trip you up or to frighten you in any way.

And for those who do take exams for the first time, particularly Open University students, they find them daunting and frightening. One of my good friends is an OU graduate. And when she took her first exam, she was terrified. And this is a confident, bright person. So it happens to everyone.

So we prepare you. The block 6, which is a 3-week block, is a synthesis block where we revisit and review and retake materials you'll have engaged with between blocks 1 and block 5. And then you have two weeks to prepare in terms of formal revision, and then the exam will take place some weeks after that. One or two weeks. So you have a lot of time to prepare.

And of course, the great thing about exams is that you're preparing them from week one, you just don't realise it because it's a long way away. So doing your TMAs, going to your tutorials, engaging with the material, you're working towards your exam then. The only difference being you have to write it in real time at a centre, which is a skill in itself, when we don't write even checks anymore as people. But we're not there to trip you up, to confuse you or frighten you. We want the exam to be, as all forms of assessment, to be a resource, not an obstacle to help

you progress.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. No, that's so reassuring because I think students often think the exam's there to trip them up. And it's very nice to hear you say that you, as a module chair, want people to do well, and want to be able to assess them. And it's just another form of doing so. HJ and Rachel, what else is happening?

**HJ:** Well, there is a lot of politics students. And I actually just finished my PPE myself, which is fantastic. And I think the great thing about politics is that it's something that affects every part of our lives. There's nothing that seems to be untouched by it. So it is fascinating to look at. And I do think it's an exciting subject.

And when the exams come, I absolutely hate exams. But the good thing about it is that there's usually lots of options of different questions you can choose. If there's a particular area that you're interested in in politics, you can actually focus the exam that way rather than just go something that you're a bit nervous about. Play to your strengths because everyone has their strengths with these things.

**RICHARD** Straight from the horse's mouth.

**HEFFERNAN:**

**HJ:** Yeah. But the new module, I had a look at it. And it does look fantastic. I'm slightly jealous of all the new guys who are going to be doing it.

**RACHEL:** Those books are just out of reach as well, aren't they?

**HJ:** I know. Just too far. I'd just be reading in a corner somewhere if I had the chance. But you talked about the new module covers a comparison between US forms of governance and our form of governance in the UK. And some people were wondering why we do a lot of these comparisons between different systems and what we get out of it as students, as scholars, as social sciences, and what we use that for as well, those comparisons?

**RICHARD** Yeah, it's a very interesting question. I mean, I suppose the most simplest answer is, what does one know of Rome that only Rome knows? So comparing and contrasting-- how do you know someone's tall unless you compare and contrast them with a shorter person?

It's a way in which you make measurements and judgments. And because the breadth-- I mean, in an ideal world you would compare 26 countries, but we just don't have time and

facility to do that. And I'm not familiar with the politics of Argentina, for example. So I know a great deal about the US and the UK. And they're very different, but similar.

So you can understand, for example, every country has a chief executive, the head of the government. In the US, it's the president. In the UK, it's the prime minister. But how they get the job, the powers they have to do the job, the responsibility they discharge in doing the jobs, the way they're removed from the job are fundamentally different. Fundamentally different. And so comparing and contrasting the two provides you with, A, a knowledge base, a skill set about what they are and how they're different, which is helpful. And it applies to all presidents and prime ministers with institutional differences according to the particular country.

It also provides you with a skill set of how you make comparisons, what is leadership in a modern world, and things like that. So in that regard, the choice is arbitrary. It probably reflects my skill set as a political scientist because those are the two countries I study.

I don't know anything about Russia, for example. I'd need to take a course on Russia before I was able to write a course on Russia. But it is a big subject that students will know about. And of course, most people are familiar with the British prime minister if they're students from the UK. And familiar with the US, even if they're not citizens of that country. So it's a means of comparison in which you can then understand something about each. And we provide a great deal of detail about the positions of both in terms of the overall political systems.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Thank you very much. So this looked great. And I'm sure that a lot of new students are going to really enjoy it. And it will be interesting to see how the new module progresses. Tell me, as module chair then, you obviously have a group of expecting students. You're launching this next week. Tell us a bit about what you do then. How are you going to adjust things? What's the process then for tweaking various things along the way? How does that all work?

**RICHARD HEFFERNAN:** Well, we've just spent two years producing the module, which is quite painstaking responsibility. There are only a few academics-- the ones that the students will encounter through the module. And of course, our technical colleagues in LTS who help us make the module. And we've got the assistance of various group of people outside of the university who contribute either in terms of audio interviews or visual interviews and things like that.

So now it's in production. We will be following the students through it. They will have their associate lecturers, their tutors, who will be their Sherpas guiding them through, marking their



TMA's. And then the staff tutors in the regions will be troubleshooting problems that individual students have.

And of course, we want to see what works and what doesn't work. Now, it's very difficult to make in-presentation changes. But if something doesn't work, then we can change it and alter it and simplify it, or make it more difficult if it's too simple. So we're eager to find out how students engage with the material.

If you build it, they will come. And having built it, we'll have to try to make some changes if it's not fit for purpose. But that's a gradual process because we envisage that-- the reason we do so much work in terms of getting the module up and running is that it's got to be fit for purpose in 10 years with various tweaks. And of course, we can do that now. Because one of the problems of the study of politics is that it's endlessly changing. It's like trying to take a photograph of an animal in motion.

For example, one little asset, which I made a year ago, talks about the coalition government in the UK. Well, we don't have a coalition government anymore. So we had to tweak that.

If David Cameron ceases to be prime minister and falls under a bus in the next period, the course will have to be changed to reflect that in some way. So we're always looking to update and refresh materials, but you can't do that on a daily, or weekly, or monthly basis. You do it in time and within presentations. But we're fairly convinced that we've future-proofed it as much as we can. Unless of course, an asteroid hits the Earth and Bruce Willis isn't available to come to our rescue, then we'll have to think about how we would factor that into the presentation of the module. But we may have more important things to worry about if that is the case, god forbid.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. Well, thank you very much, Richard Heffernan. That's been really insightful. Really good explanation of the module about studying politics, about levels 2 and that jump from level 1. About exam skills. Loads and loads of contents in there. That's been fantastic. So I'm sure students will really have benefited a lot from that.

We're now going to have a short video break. We talk about how politics involves leadership often. And here we have a very unlikely leader, Russell Brand. And then I'll be joining you back in five minutes, where we'll be talking psychology with Allison and Rose. See you in five.

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