

## **PodMag 22 12 2014**

### ***The PodMag***

#### **Karen Foley:**

Hi and welcome to the PodMag. I'm Karen Foley and welcome to all our regular listeners and if you're new a big warm welcome to you too. The PodMag is our news audio programme all about the Social Sciences Faculty and about our Student Connections Projects. Our website is [Connections.kmi.open.ac.uk](http://Connections.kmi.open.ac.uk) which you can go to, to see everything that we're doing at the moment.

So it's nearly Christmas which is a time of great excitement, joy and for some people sadness and a whole host of emotions going on around this time of year. And we're going to have a little break from the PodMag for a couple of weeks while we eat lots and lots of mince pies.

But thanks for all your emails over the last week. I'm really glad you enjoyed the last episode of the PodMag so I've put another notice up because we had loads more people wanting to come along for interviews. So today we're going to be doing a lot more interviews, a lot more news to tide you over the Christmas period.

Right, and in the news this week, well, book news first. We have a new book from one of our colleagues called *The Open University: A History*. Now this is a fascinating book I've just bought and it goes through all of the history of the Open University – 'The University of the Air'. It's a must read for staff and students both past and present and I've invited the author Dan Weinbren to have an interview with us later. So hopefully fingers crossed he'll come and join us.

And the next item of the news this week is a piece of news from the Psychology Department. Now did you know that you can get involved with doing research at the Open University? Yeah, we've got some very, very active researchers and we have a Cognitive Psychology Panel for students to get involved with. Now we're going to have the link on the website so you can go and register. We've got over 1,250 participants and anybody at all can sign up to join. You don't need to be an OU student but you do need to be 18 or over. So you can get involved with loads of research initiatives like learning and memory and there's one coming up by Andreas Vossler which is all about Internet infidelity and perceptions of how we perceive infidelity online and in real life. So very, very interesting.

So get involved with that if you're at all interested in being in our participant panel.

And the final item of news this week is don't forget to check out the Faculty Facebook page. This week we're focusing on a tradition here at the Open University which is where everybody decorates their doors for Christmas. So we're going to be putting up

lots of pictures of doors and why don't you put up a picture as well on the Facebook page about how you've decorated your study space. It would be great to see what you've got going on there at home.

Great, well that's all the news we've got time for today. Coming up next we've got an interview with Dan about The Open University: A History.

So come in Dan. Come and sit down and tell us what's been going on.

**Dan Weinbren:**

Well it's a history book and it's got four parts and the first part is about the creation of the Open University in the 1960s. It developed out of an interest in using systems to support liberation through learning. And then parts two and three about the periods from 1969 when it opened till 1989 and then the periods since 1990.

Each of those parts I looked first at the structures of the university such as the agreement with the BBC, the impact of government policies, the role of the Open University overseas. Then I looked at the development of the teaching and use of radio and telephones and television and the Internet to support learning.

And finally there was a part 4 about the people who are central to the Open University, the students.

So I set up a website and invited students to tell me their stories. I recorded interviews with staff and I explored the pleasures and disasters which result as part of studying through the OU.

**Karen Foley:**

And aside from getting all that excellent content what was it actually like for you writing this book?

**Dan Weinbren:**

Well I've grown up with the Open University. I first heard about it in the 1970's when my mum who left school at age 15 began her journey towards an Open University degree by studying the entry level Mathematics Module.

I got my first job at the OU in 1986. And since then I've been an OU student, have worked full-time at the OU since 1999. And my wife is a PhD from the Open University where she's a Lecturer and our kids attended the OU nursery. So there's a delight to kind of nosey around and gain a better understanding of an institution which is part of my family.

**Karen Foley:**

And so what was the most interesting thing then that you found out as part of that whole research process?

**Dan Weinbren:**

Well I knew that the Open University transforms lives but I think it does more than that. Students tend to want to use their studies to do better for themselves. Some of them build knowledge together and end up helping the wider society. And I have found it particularly interesting that despite the fact that the IRA tried to kill the OU Vice-Chancellor the OU went in to prisons in Northern Ireland and taught prisoners.

And many of those students went on to hold positions of authority in a variety of community and political organisations in Northern Ireland and make a significant contribution to the peace process.

**Karen Foley:**

Dan, can you just tell us the name of your book as well and how people might be able to get hold of it?

**Dan Weinbren:**

It's called The Open University: A History. And I hope you can get hold of it through OUSA, the Open University Students Association.

**Karen Foley:**

Brilliant. So people can just go on the website and it should be available there or I guess in good bookshops. But it would be very interesting for anyone who's studying with the Open University or like you say, who has an idea about the history of the institution.

**Dan Weinbren:**

Yeah. I'm recommending you buy it from OUSA because it's cheaper than buying it through Amazon or through the publishers, Manchester University Press.

**Karen Foley:**

Excellent, yes. Good old OUSA. Student discounts we like those for everyone. So that's a fantastic tip.

Well thank you very much for coming in to see us and I'll look forward to reading your book.

**Dan Weinbren:**

Thank you.

**Karen Foley:**

Well that was very interesting. Now from one book to lots and lots of books. In fact lots and lots of modules. I've invited Alison Green who is the Associate Dean for Curriculum to come and talk to us about what's new in psychology.

Now Alison you're our Associate Dean for Curriculum in Psychology. And you have had a very, very difficult job because basically you're overhauling most of the psychology programme. New modules coming, you know, massive work going on in the Faculty. So can you tell us then what's exciting for students about all of these changes?

**Alison Green:**

What is exciting I think is for the first time we're giving students real choice. A real choice in terms of enabling them to specialise in some areas of psychology that are really interesting and topical. And for me that's been the most important thing. It's been freeing up the curriculum.

What we'd had previously with the old qualification was a curriculum that was very good and it delivered. But because we had so much we had to cram so much in to that curriculum and the things that we had to do was distributed in not very efficient ways. So the job of overhauling it was, as you say, it was a massive headache. And I'm very glad I've done it. I'm very glad that we've had a successful outcome. And, you know, we've been commended by the BPS for innovation in curriculum design which is great. That's a great feather in our cap.

And I think that's a really good thing for students, you know, that the work that we've done has been acknowledged so that they've got something that's current, it's topical. And the new qualifications which are in counselling psychology and forensic psychology and in social psychology they really speak to our research strengths.

And I think as an institution it's really important that we can evidence and we can show that, you know, that our teaching really is informed by research. And that's been sort of a main theme, if you like, in developing the new curriculum.

So, you know, we're all really pleased, you know, with the new curriculum that we have. And I always say students vote with their feet. And, you know, we have been, you know, really excited in terms of seeing, you know, how students have really warmed to these new qualifications. And, you know, they're all sort of, you know, flying off the shelves in a sense.

**Karen Foley:**

And like you say it's really important that students get a lot of choice in terms of how they're doing things because one of the things with the Open University is that often, you know, people associate doing Psychology with the OU is distance learning but actually you can get very applied can't you, doing research projects and the way that those are changing at third level, for example, offer students the chance to actually

finish their qualifications with some real things that they can then go on and take forward to their Masters.

**Alison Green:**

That's right. What we've done with the new curriculum is design it in such a way so that we really have put the emphasis on design. So the modules will take students through the process of learning to become an independent researcher. And they acquire a whole load of skills that are relevant to being, you know, young researchers if you like, or novice researchers and then they become more skilled.

But we've also looked at the vocational aspects as much as we possibly can too. And what we try and do with students is, you know, is clearly identify where they're acquiring what we call the transferable skills or skills that are relevant to the workplace and we build on them progressively. So there really has been a really strong emphasis on design throughout that new curriculum.

And we've tried to look at innovations too in how we deliver the curriculum. So I mean in a sense it's kind of what we're associated with but it's a very antiquated kind of term now. Because, you know, we're not distant at all. You know, we have, you know we have forums with, you know, tutors involved in those and students within their groups talking to each other. And that's really, you know, that's really how we communicate nowadays, you know, it's practically, you know, all online in some way. You know, we do our shopping online. We do Internet dating online, you know, you name it.

So a lot of what we do is online anyway. And what we're trying to do is bring to students new ideas in how we teach and how we teach methods and some of those more difficult areas which are in areas like statistics and so forth which are notoriously difficult and they can be very dry. If you're in an institution and you're in a lecture and you have a textbook it's a really dry way of teaching. But if you're actually online and, you know, you're being talked through a tutorial and you're seeing some worked examples and so forth it kind of brings it to life a bit more, we think.

**Karen Foley:**

Yeah, no absolutely. And I know D100 has gone down very well. And like you say the way that those sorts of more drier subjects are interspersed in a very exciting content give students a sort of structured way of learning so that they can cover all those bits while still having fun. So that's great.

Well, thank you very much for coming in Alison and we'll see you soon.

**Alison Green:**

OK, thanks Karen.

**Karen Foley:**

Great. And our final interview for this week is Jacqueline Baxter. With the schools breaking up and time to reflect on things Jacqueline's going to talk to us a little bit about some of the issues involved with inspections and the role of governors in particular.

Thanks for coming in Jacqueline. You're a Lecturer in Social Policy here at the Open University. And you've just done a Friday Thinker on the Faculty Facebook page. Now can you tell us what you did this about?

**Jacqueline Baxter:**

Well as you probably know Ofsted's now responsible for policing British values in schools. And the question I was asking was first of all, is the government right in defining the British values. And secondly is it right that Ofsted should be policing them?

**Karen Foley:**

Very topical conversation going on right now about all of that. And in your blog you've been writing a lot about school governors and their role in this whole process. Can you tell us a bit about that?

**Jacqueline Baxter:**

Yes. Well, I mean there are 300,000 school governors in England which makes it quite a unique system of governing schools. And they now have far more responsibilities in most cases because the LEAs no longer have the money to support them. And often if they're based in an Academy they don't have any contact with the LEA anyway.

So governors are really feeling the changes in the structure of education in England. And their responsibilities have grown and now of course they're right in the firing line for policing British values too. So that's quite an interesting thing, you know, for them to do.

**Karen Foley:**

Yeah. Because you're very involved in this area and also obviously in Social Science in a sort of academic context. Can you tell us then about what you're sort of researching in those areas and how you're sort of, I guess, bringing that sort of academic side combined with this very practical side of things together?

**Jacqueline Baxter:**

Yes. Well at the moment my most recent project is looking at how governors make sense of the work that they have to do. So it's taking from a theory on sense making and identity, how they form their identities and particularly in areas of high deprivation as well. Because we do know that it's more difficult to govern in those areas than it is in kind of leafier suburbs.

So what I've been looking at in association with the key governor, which is a company that supports governors. They provide a question answering service. So taking their data I've been looking at what kind of questions governors are asking in areas of high

deprivation and are these very different from the questions that governors are asking in the kind of leafier suburbs type of thing.

And then I've been out doing interviews in the field talking to governors that are working in these very demanding and challenging circumstances and seeing what their thoughts are. How they're making sense.

So to bring it all together with the questions that governors ask and then actually talking to governors in the field and saying, well, you know, what do you feel that you're there for now because you've got such an enormous role. Why do you do this very demanding job? And of course they're volunteers so they do it for free. And what are they getting out of it, you know, what do they feel that their core function is?

Because going back to kind of inspection which is my other field of research, you know, in inspection Ofsted are asking an awful lot of governors now. So it's very interesting to peel all that away and say to governors, OK well what do you think you're here for? And what difference do you feel that you're having particularly in these very challenging schools in areas of high deprivation?

**Karen Foley:**

I imagine there are very, very different but equally sort of pressing issues irrespective of the sort of type of work that these governors are doing. What are hoping to do then with your findings?

**Jacqueline Baxter:**

Well at the moment the inspection regime doesn't really take any account of context. So schools in leafy suburbs are judged under the exactly same criteria as schools in tough circumstances. So I'm hoping that the information that I gather will tell us a bit more about why people do the job in the first place. Because I hope that that's going to help with recruitment of governors for these areas, for these tough areas.

And also perhaps tell us a little bit more about the contextual challenges that there are in these areas as well. And how the inspectorate actually go about considering that when they're doing their inspections. Because there has been quite a lot recently, you know, from heads that are saying, well actually we are a school in very, very tough circumstances. And, you know, it seems that sometimes that's not taken in to account because we're judged in the same way.

It's a tough line. I mean it's a very, very tough line for the inspectorate because, you know, you get to the stage where you can't lower your expectations just because a school is working in challenging circumstances otherwise you fail the students in that school. But you must somehow have to take account of that otherwise it becomes very tough indeed I think.

**Karen Foley:**

No, some real issues there and great again to see that being tackled and applied in a way that, you know, we're giving back something to the community.

Well thank you so much Jacqueline for coming in and seeing me and talking to our listeners about your exciting work. And we'll put a link up to your blog and your website page on the PodMag website. So thank you very much.

**Jacqueline Baxter:**

Thanks a lot.

**Karen Foley:**

Well again we've had some fantastic interviews on this week's PodMag. So thank you very much to all our guests for coming and playing a part. And don't forget that if you'd like to feedback on anything you've heard email us at [PodMag@open.ac.uk](mailto:PodMag@open.ac.uk)

So we're just going to give you some dates for the diary. Now we're having a little break over Christmas but we'll be back with Activate sessions on 5<sup>th</sup> January, those are from 8 to 9 at night on OU Live. So just click the link from the website to come and join us, a chance to chat and talk about various issues in the Social Sciences and how you can get involved in the Student Connections Conference.

Our next PodMag we'll also be out in January and of course the dates for the conference itself is 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> March next year.

And do keep in touch with everything. As we have more news we'll be posting it on the website which is [Connections.kmi.open.ac.uk](http://Connections.kmi.open.ac.uk)

And also don't forget to listen to our other audio, This Student Life and find out what our students are doing over the Christmas period.

Well I'm off everybody. Have a great Christmas and a very, very Happy New Year. I really hope you can get involved with the Faculty Facebook page between now and then and don't forget to check out the website for all the latest news and things over the festive period.

Bye for now and see you in the New Year.

***The PodMag***