

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, our monthly news audio magazine from the Open University's Faculty of Social Sciences. I'm Karen Foley. And in this February episode I'll be interviewing Katy Wheeler about her involvement in another famous podcast Thinking Allowed, Martin Thirkettle about a fantastic Brainwave App that he's been involved with. And Richard Heffernan who has been involved with a programme that launches in early February called Inside The Commons. Plus we'll get an update on the Careers Forum with Eddie Tanner.

But first we'll do the news.

So first thing news from Student Connections. The conference has been postponed and we'll be announcing a new date very shortly. So do stay in touch with the PodMag and we'll keep you updated on all of that.

We'll also be launching more Activate sessions and these are online workshops where we're going to approach them in a slightly different way. Initially we're going to focus on helping with study skills and things but they're still all about connecting with others. So again listen to the PodMag to keep updated and we hope that you'll join us there.

Right, so in our first news item I'm going to tell you about an exciting event that's happening on OpenLearn. From 23rd January, so already happening, over the next 100 days on Twitter and in OpenLearn you can join the Open University as they're re-playing key events from the 1979 elections.

Now I've got a bit of a piece about that so I'm going to read it to you because it's quite atmospheric and this goes back all the way to 1979. "It's General Election year but as polling day gets closer the nation is reeling. A referendum result raising questions about the very idea of a united kingdom. Terrorism getting ever closer to home, rows about which parties gets how much air time and claims that Liberals are anything but. And in the opinion polls an opposition leader whose popularity lags behind that of their party faces suggestions that they don't look like they'd make a credible Prime Minister.

Sound familiar? Well that was the political landscape that shaped the 1979 election. But for all the parallels between 1979 and 2015 there are as many differences. In 1979 the UK was in the grip of industrial disputes suffering under the weight of rising interest rates and the housing crisis was caused by people who could afford to buy choosing to remain renting.

And of course it was the Conservatives sat on the opposition benches nervously wondering if the relative unpopularity of Margaret Thatcher would keep them out of power.”

So if you're in to politics get involved with this. That is on OpenLearn and it's called 79 Rewind. And if you like the idea of additional materials in the next episode of the PodMag I'm going to be telling you all about a new MOOC that's launching in March which is called Inequality in Personal Finance the Baby Boom Legacy.

In other news Hackney as Home, Melissa Butcher's research project is coming to an end in March. Daniel Conway has a new book on British Born Immigrants in South Africa. And finally the Open University has done really well in the recent REF Results and I'm going to talk to you Associate Dean for Research, Jacqui Gabb and the others who've been involved in the March edition where we'll talk more about why good results impact on the quality of teaching.

So first we're going to interview Martin Thirkettle about a new Brainwave App. It's a free App that tests how your brain performs at different times of the day. You can download it and play five games that will then tell you whether you're a night owl or an early bird. Developed with Darren Langdridge and Graham Pike, Martin will update us on this exciting new App.

Martin thanks for talking to me today.

Martin Thirkettle:

That's quite OK.

Karen Foley:

Can you tell us about how the idea came about to develop this App and who has been involved?

Martin Thirkettle:

Sure. Well interestingly enough this App is actually a collaboration between the charitable arm of Reed Employment Ltd and the Open University. The idea I think actually started in a conversation between Sir Alec Reed and Michael Bean our outgoing VC.

They had the idea of testing when people are performing well during the day and obviously that then got passed down to the relevant of experts, which is obviously the Psychology Department and myself, Graham and Darren.

Karen Foley:

We've seen students interacting with it and it appears to be very well received and there's a lot of interest from students in understanding when they're most alert. But can

you tell us if students say work shifts or they aren't able to make the most of these rhythms then how worthwhile is it actually knowing?

Martin Thirkettle:

Well one of the most interesting things that the Apps looking to study and reveal is the difference between the way you think you might be performing and the way that you are actually performing. So we all have ideas that we think that we're a morning type or you think you're particularly good in the evening, so we might not have any way of actually objectively testing that. And that's what this App allows you to do.

So the App begins with a standard survey where you can fill in your beliefs about how you're going to perform in different parts of the day. But then you get to do five mini games which are different facets of mental ability and by performing them at different times of the day you can see that your ability actually changes in the way that you think it does.

Karen Foley:

So it's all I guess about being mindful and making the most of your most natural ways of studying. And the Psychology Department you mentioned are analysing the data. Can you tell us what you're hoping to find out?

Martin Thirkettle:

Sure, sure. Well the most interesting thing, hopefully about the App, will be just the sheer volume of people that we are going to be able to study. And as you said the App has been quite successful already but please do download it if you haven't already. Because what we're hoping to get is a data sample of really thousands and thousands of users. And if we do that then hopefully what we can do is find out, despite all these different users being vastly different people, different places, using different devices hopefully we can see how the different mental abilities that we test are varying through the day.

Karen Foley:

That sounds fantastic. And how are you going to update people about this? When are you expecting to have something publishable?

Martin Thirkettle:

We're estimating after about six months will probably be a good point at which to draw all the data down and see what we have. And I think it's after that point that's when the number crunching can happen. And further on in the future that's when papers will start flowing hopefully.

Karen Foley:

Excellent. Well I've downloaded the App and I know lots of people who have as well and they've been really enjoying playing with it. So Martin Thirkettle thanks very much for updating us. And if you haven't already don't forget to download the Brainwave App.

In late January we see the return of the Open University's partnership with Thinking Allowed which is a Radio 4 programme where presenter Laurie Taylor explores the latest research in to how society works and discusses current ideas on how we live today. You can also subscribe to this as a Podcast and the website includes all the previous additions. It's well worth a look.

Now the nominated academic from the Open University is Katy Wheeler and the Media Fellow is Geoff Andrews. And I'm going to interview Katy to find out a little bit more.

Hi Katy, thanks for coming in.

Katy Wheeler:

That's fine, hello.

Karen Foley:

Hello. So can you tell our listeners a little bit about what being a nominated academic actually involves.

Katy Wheeler:

OK. So it basically involves being involved in editorial meetings with the producers of Thinking Allowed. So they run on a three week schedule and they will send us through the lists of things that will be on the show. And we have a discussion around that suggesting potential people who might be good to talk around those issues. And that's basically what it involves.

Karen Foley:

Fantastic. So you've got to be mindful of everything that's going on in the faculty and who could talk about what?

Katy Wheeler:

Absolutely, yes.

Karen Foley:

Brilliant. Are you enjoying it?

Katy Wheeler:

I am enjoying it. It's a really interesting opportunity, not something I necessarily thought I would be doing working at the Open University.

Karen Foley:

New things, brilliant, alright.

Now these podcasts they've been described as being useful for the dissemination and discussion of faculty work. Now can you tell us a bit more about how you've experienced that process?

Katy Wheeler:

OK. So what that involves is being able to suggest things that we are doing in the faculty as ideas for the show. So obviously if the faculty is doing a huge range of research and it's covering a lot of different disciplines, so that's what I as a nominated academic are hopefully involved in doing, suggesting ideas for the show.

Karen Foley:

Because the REF results have come up really positive for the Open University. There's so much primary research that sometimes I don't think people are aware of as they look through their module books and see, you know, a lot of the authors of these chapters are writing amazing new books, doing incredible talks and doing so many things. I think it's really nice to be able to bring that to the foreground of what other universities are doing as well.

Katy Wheeler:

Absolutely. The Open University, you know, has been proven to have very high quality social science research and I think that's just fabulous. And perhaps people don't really realise that we are a research intensive university and if we can showcase that on the BBC then, you know, that's great.

Karen Foley:

Yeah OK, final question. I've noticed that you've been doing the Social Sciences Friday Thinker page. You've done a couple of these recently and you did one the other week. And so I wanted to know if you could tell us a bit about how you found that?

Katy Wheeler:

I always look forward to doing the Friday Thinker. When the list comes round and says, you know, do you want to sign up for it, I'm always there to sign up because I think it's a really lovely opportunity to get to actually meet some of the students and have a dialogue and to engage with them, to hear about what they think about some of the questions that perhaps we ponder about.

The one we did last week was actually thinking about the Thinking Allowed episode. And we'd asked the people to listen to the podcast. It was Sasha Roseneil's research that was featured on Laurie Taylor's discussion on Thinking Allowed. And some people shared some really quite personal stories which I thought was very brave. And it was really very interesting.

Karen Foley:

Yeah, I know. It can give you a different take on things can't it? And, you know, it's really nice because I think those Friday Thinkers are something that everybody can engage with to some level. Everyone's got a story to tell or some experience of something and very often those insights can really sort of prod you in a different direction don't they?

Katy Wheeler:

Absolutely. I mean people have, you know, they're coming from all over the UK and possibly beyond and they've got their own experiences. They're, you know, at different stages in their life course, that everyone's got something that they can offer. And that's one of the wonderful things about social sciences in that everyone has, you know, a relevant experience that they can bring forward.

Karen Foley:

Well thank you very much Katy Wheeler for coming in and talking to us. I'm certainly looking forward to Thinking Allowed and I'm sure our listeners are too.

Katy Wheeler:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

And our next interview is with Richard Heffernan. Now Richard has been involved with a new programme that's being released on 3rd February on BBC 2 called Inside The Commons.

Richard, thank you for talking to me today. Could you tell us a little bit about the programme?

Richard Heffernan:

Well it's a BBC programme produced by Atlantic Productions with the OU as a co-producer. And it's quite an extraordinary, interesting programme. It's an observational documentary that goes behind the scenes of The House of Commons. And shows British Parliament in ways it's never been seen before. The filmmakers have the most extraordinary access. I mean they had little hand held cameras everywhere. They went in to almost every nook and cranny of the towers of Westminster trying over a year to see what Parliament does and see how it operates.

It's not just about members of Parliament although members of Parliament play an important part in the programme but it's about the people who make The Commons what it is. So it follows the clerks and the managers, the administrators and the electricians. And the people who keep the building running and keep it ticking over in good order.

As I say an observational documentary. It doesn't try to draw conclusions. It just points cameras at things and asks MP's questions and follows several of them through their working week. And over a course of a year demonstrating what is Parliament and what it does. And trying to show people, show citizens what those that they elect to Parliament do in their name.

Karen Foley:

That sounds fascinating. So what did it actually tell us then about The House of Commons?

Richard Heffernan:

Well in that regard it reminds us that The House of Common in our parliamentary democracy has two functions.

The first is that it supplies and supports the government. That is the government, the Prime Minister and the frontbench and ministers emerge from the Parliamentary majority. But we also see that the second function of The Commons is that it needs to check and balance the government to hold it to account, to ask it questions, to have it explain itself and justify what it does.

And so MP's who come in all shapes and sizes, all 650 of them are very different human beings, all different individuals are divided in to government and opposition. And some are loyal and some are critical of their parties and their party leaders. But ultimately we see how the dual function supplying and supporting and checking and balancing comes in to conflict as The Commons goes about its weekly work over the course of the year that the documentary makers followed it.

It's quite extraordinary and Michael Cockerell who fronts the programme and who is the driving force behind the programme is an experienced person who's been watching Parliament for over 40 years I guess, and he guides the viewer through it. So it's about the building as much as about the MP's and about Parliament as much as about politics.

Karen Foley:

And so what was your role then in the process?

Richard Heffernan:

Oh well my role as the OU's link was an academic adviser. And I emphasise that I advise not decide although I'll take whatever credit I can get for a wonderful programme. Essentially I was there representing the Open University because we have an interest in making a good programme. And helping what was really a brilliant bunch of filmmakers in any way I could. And it was a very interesting experience for me as a citizen watching how a programme that I would be watching anyway if I was not involved in it eagerly to see how it was made.

And of course the difficulty is, is you're having to compress in to four hour long programmes the work of a year. So there was a great deal of effort that had to go in to kind of honing the material to making selections about what it is should be shown because you can't show everything in four one hour episodes.

Karen Foley:

Richard Heffernan thank you so much. That's Inside The Commons. Don't forget to look out for it on BBC 2. Absolutely fantastic programme. I'm looking forward to that myself. Thank you Richard.

Richard Heffernan:

A pleasure.

Karen Foley:

And finally we have Eddie Tanner here from the Careers Advisory Services and he's going to tell us about a forum for Social Sciences. Eddie welcome.

Eddie Tanner:

Hi Karen.

Karen Foley:

So can you tell our listeners when it is, where it is and why they should get involved?

Eddie Tanner:

Yes the Social Sciences Careers Forum is running from Monday the 9th until Friday 20th February. It's taking place on the Social Science qualification websites. And it's for all Social Science students with the exception of Psychologists and Counselling who will have their own forum running in April.

Karen Foley:

And what sort of things can students expect to gain from going to this forum?

Eddie Tanner:

They can ask any career related question really. So, for example, what can I do with a Social Sciences degree? Or perhaps I want to go on to be a school teacher, how do I go about doing that? Anything at all. Nothing is too basic or too complex.

Karen Foley:

Brilliant. So qualifications website, the chance to get your questions answered about your career are always something worth investing in especially at the early stages.

Thank you very much Eddie.

Eddie Tanner:

Thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

And that is all we have time for today. So don't forget check out your qualification websites for information about the Student Connections project. Get in touch with us and let us know your news. Why don't you email us at PodMag@open.ac.uk And don't forget to Like the Social Sciences Faculty Facebook page and take part in the Friday Thinker which is each Friday.

And if you like this you may also like the Social Sciences Audio Drama, The Student Life.

That's all from me. Bye for now and thanks for listening.