

PodMag 01 07 08 2015 demo

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag. I'm Karen Foley and this is our summer edition which covers July and August. It's a time when many of us are taking a break from our studies and also many of us are trying to fit study into time when the schools are out and others are trying to take a break.

So in this edition we wanted to look at some of these issues, managing stress, your expectations of yourself, studying for exams and being part of an OU community.

So I interviewed Troy Cooper about stress following her recent Social Science Facebook discussion about this theme. Catriona Havard about studying for exams and then I go to an Open University Psychological Society, DE100 Overview Day where I meet some students and also a tutor.

But first let's have an update on the news.

Firstly I'm delighted to announce that we have a date for the Social Sciences Student Connections Conference. It is 25th and 26th September and you can see the website: connections.kmi.open.ac.uk to find out more. We're also having a competition whereby students can get involved. So make sure that you've liked the Social Sciences Facebook page as well as the Connections website where we're announcing how that will all happen.

But it's a brilliant event that we're planning. It's an entirely online conference where you can chat and engage with the great programme that we're lining up. I'll be talking about things like how you can make the most of your time gaining work experience, updating your CV, engaging with the community you want to navigate towards if you're studying for a change in career. And plus we'll be hearing from a range of academics and services like the Library and Career Service.

In other news we've had more graduation ceremonies recently in the regions and nations. These really are an amazing experience and we'd like to congratulate all of the Social Science graduates who succeeded in gaining their qualifications. And we hope that you've savoured that moment at a degree ceremony.

The degree ceremonies are also a time where the OU presents honorary awards to people who've made outstanding contributions. And one such award went to the Chief Economist of the Bank of England last year, Andrew Haldane. In fact he recently visited the Open University and had a chance to meet with the Dean and several members of the Economics Department to hear about the faculty's work. Apparently he particularly

enjoyed hearing about the development of the Personal Finance Curriculum including the very successful DB123 and DB234 modules. And also about some of the cutting edge teaching that has gone in to the new Level 2 Economics module DD209, Running the Economy.

Ian Roberto and Jonquil also joined Andy for a round table discussion with local business leaders on the future of the monetary policy in the UK.

The OU's new Vice-Chancellor, Peter Horrocks has been very busy on the political front, lobbying about the importance of part-time education. He argues that since there has been an increase in university fees the part-time education market has been the main area that has suffered, in particular because many students who are studying with distance learning providers like the OU already have some form of qualification but perhaps not the right one for them.

He says that the OU is one of the greatest social mobility engines in the country and he wants Parliament to undo a rule which was introduced by the last Labour government that stops people from accessing further student loans if they're already studying for a qualification at the same level as the one that they hold.

This is all part of the Part-time Matters Campaign. And you can find out more about this on the OU's Facebook page, Twitter account and of course by looking at the news on your OU home page.

Finally, I'd like to plug the new search tool that the Library have recently launched. If you're an OU student, tutor or member of staff you can access thousands of publications for free using the OU Library. And the new search tool makes it even easier to do.

OK so let's turn to our first interview. And I'm speaking with Troy Cooper about stress. She recently introduced this topic as one of the Friday Thinker questions on the faculty's Facebook page and it generated an awful lot of interest.

Right, so I'm here with Troy Cooper who's our Associate Dean for Student Experience. So Troy you did a Friday Thinker for us recently on the faculty Facebook page and you were talking about stress. Can you tell us what came up with that? It's a very hot topic right now.

Troy Cooper:

Yes it was a very hot topic and it's quite clear that a lot of our students experience a considerable amount of stress in balancing their studies with the OU and the rest of their lives. But they also had a great deal of wisdom to offer about how they deal with that and what kinds of strategies they employ to manage all those projects alongside their studies for their degree.

Karen Foley:

But academically then can you tell us sort of how we structure those ideas of stress and what's going on there?

Troy Cooper:

Well we tend to have a common sense idea that stress is quite a negative thing and people don't want to be under stress. But in fact stress is basically just physiological and psychological arousal. And when you use the word arousal you realise actually that could be quite a good thing in certain circumstances.

The issue with stress is when stress starts to link to distress which is a level of stress that is unpleasant and produces effects that people find difficult to cope with and also that just feel very unpleasant and very bad for them.

Karen Foley:

And of course with the OU we do exams. We have TMA's and things that I guess evoke quite a lot of stress for people. So what sort of advice for students then in those sorts of situations where stress can lead to distress?

Troy Cooper:

Well it was really interesting that a lot of people had clearly heard of mindfulness. And mindfulness is about trying to, when you're feeling you've got stressful thoughts about your workload levels or what you haven't accomplished or what you've yet to do. Trying to break in to those and stop them as they circle round in your head by say, focusing on where you are at the moment, what you're seeing, what you're smelling, how you're feeling or thinking about something pleasant. A lot of people would talk about thinking about some of the benefits in their lives, about their children or their husbands or particular areas of work that were satisfying. Or even the holiday that they were going to go on. So that there were ways of just stopping what's called Rumination which is essentially about worry and worry often connects to stress. Breaking in to those cycles of thoughts that are just endless about what you haven't done, what you haven't got, what you've yet to do and that are focused quite somewhere else beyond the present.

Karen Foley:

So how would you sort of say that people can manage those two things may be when they're studying. May be when they are thinking I haven't done so well in that last TMA, I really want to get this sort of grade. How could they be present then in that moment when they're trying to manage that stress and anxiety of may be trying to perform well?

Troy Cooper:

It sounds trite but the first thing they can do is remember that actually because they're studying, they're in a module, they're studying for a degree they are accomplishing a huge amount. So they've got an immediate win just being where they are. But the

second thing is to think about what they enjoy doing in their studies. So they might have to do an assignment at the moment on a particular module and the assignment itself is producing a lot of stress. But think about how you could make that assignment interesting, what would be fun to do. How you could apply it to your life? What examples you could do. Trying to use what you're working on and applying it to your own life and that might well help with lowering you're levels of stress. Around having to do something that essentially you might not think you want to do.

Karen Foley:

How would then, you know ... Say someone's doing, you know, SPSS or they're doing some statistics or, you know, we do so many sort of mathematical things that I know so many students don't necessarily enjoy as much as the interesting content. How could people may be get that sort of shift then of their studying and thinking, oh I'm not really enjoying this as much as I could do? What sort of advice would you give those students?

Troy Cooper:

Everyday there are newspaper stories that involve statistics. Some report would suggest something is bad for you, something is good for people. And they could apply their statistical knowledge in those contexts and just unpick it.

But the other thing they could do is just acknowledge it. You don't like statistics, it's not your bag. Be in control of that. Acknowledge it fully. Do whatever's necessary and whatever is good enough to get through and get a good enough grade and then move on. You don't have to be perfect at everything. And that's one thing about stress is that people allow themselves, forgive themselves in a sense for not being good at everything.

Karen Foley:

How do you think students who may be sort of want to go away and that but don't necessarily have the time or the commitment to do things, you know, can sort of get that good enough ideas about what they want to achieve in the next academic year?

Troy Cooper:

Well for one thing I think talking to other students is a very good idea. And the big push at the moment is you probably know is to get students talking to other students in a variety of contexts in a university. And probably also talk to your nearest and dearest about it because don't forget they don't know very much about your studies and they don't know what you're doing but what they will know is that you have certain hopes for it but they won't know exactly what those hopes are.

Karen Foley:

And what if you talk to everyone and they all seem to be doing a lot better than you, what then?

Troy Cooper:

If you feel like that then I think what you need to focus on is that the people often who are doing the best may speak the loudest but they're drowning out the rest of the world who are doing as well as they can but it won't be the best. And in some sense there is a great deal of value in people who aren't the best coming forward and saying, but I'm doing this well and I'm enjoying it and I will get my qualification at the end. And rebalancing essentially the standards that everybody applies otherwise everybody aspires to be the best and of course they can't be.

Karen Foley:

No, exactly for a variety of reasons. Oh thank you so much Troy. There's some really advice there. I think really the take home messages are sort of try and focus on being in the present then and being mindful about your goals, your expectations and what you can realistically achieve in your studies. And as you say, seeking out other students and other people to share that with.

Troy Cooper:

And remembering that you're doing this also because you want to satisfy yourself. You want to have enjoyment. It's not just about the marks. It's not just about how well you do in comparison to other people.

Karen Foley:

Yeah, no exactly. All in it for yourself. Well thank you very much that's been really useful. Thank you Troy.

Troy Cooper:

OK thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

Thanks for talking to us Troy, that's given us a lot of food for thought.

We now turn to a very real source of stress for many students, exams. And this next piece is aimed for those students who have exams in October and will be busy revising over the summer.

I'm speaking to a member of the Psychology Department about this, Catriona Havard.

Great, hi Catriona, how are you?

Catriona Havard:

I'm good thanks Karen, How are you?

Karen Foley:

I'm good thank you, enjoying this lovely weather. What have you been up to lately?

Catriona Havard:

Well I've been doing some marking, script marking for DD303. What we do is we tend to double mark them so we have two different markers marking all the exams. And then actually sometimes if there's a discrepancy we have a third marker who then has to go and decide.

Karen Foley:

Gosh I bet our students didn't know about how much care and attention goes in to all the exams and things. So what advice? I know a lot of our students have been studying for the exams now coming up in September, October time. What advice would you give them about like performing well? So that's it's nice for a script marker to be able to award all those marks?

Catriona Havard:

Well obviously if they can write as neatly as possible which I can understand is not always easy when you're under lots of pressure. But when you're actually revising as well one of the things, that in fact I did when I was a student, was to make mind maps. So put all that key information on a kind of mind map and may be even make it like a big poster. And you can put it up somewhere in your house and just try and learn all of the things that are on that. So that when you're sitting the exam you can shut your eyes and almost see it as if it was in front of you again. And that's really useful for remembering sort of key concepts and names and dates and things like that.

The other thing as well is to just try and write in your words as much as possible. So even though you might feel tempted to just re-read the books and the chapters the way that you'll really kind of consolidate all that information is to re-write things in your own words. Perhaps even have a practice at writing a short essay, you know, almost think well if I was given this question what kind of response would I write to it. And have a go at how much can you actually write in 30 minutes, you might be surprised at how little it is. In which case you have to think about what is the crucial information that I need to put in my sort of essay or in my answer that I want the marker to see.

Karen Foley:

Yeah. I know exactly because so many times people have these really methodical approaches to TMA's and they can include so much in there and then you get to an exam and often people think, how am I going to get all that in. So what would you say to people? I mean how many things would you say you're seeing in a good essay? About how many points or paragraphs? And what do people really need to bear in mind that they should really try as a minimum to get in there?

Catriona Havard:

Have a think about what are the key points. If as well you feel under time pressure make a plan, you know. Sometimes just sitting and spending a few minutes before you start

writing the answer to the question, if you make a plan of what are the key things you want to put in to that answer then, for example, if you do panic and you run out of time at least a marker can look back and think, well actually they did know that, they did just obviously didn't have time to put that information in.

So making a plan and also sometimes just making a plan puts you at ease because you think, well actually I can answer this question, you know, before you just go ahead and start writing it.

Karen Foley:

And what would you say then for students who do feel that sort of sense of pressure in the exam? What would be your top tips for how to de-stress in the exam, either building up or in the exam?

Catriona Havard:

I think for revision, and this is my own personal experience as well, is that I found that I could only concentrate for a certain length of time. So I'd have to block my time and then I would have to reward myself. It might just be having a cup of coffee. It might be getting up and going for a walk, you know, sort of breaking up my time, you know, Because I couldn't sit and study for hours and hours because I knew that after sort of 40 minutes it just wasn't going in any more.

I think when you're actually in the exam is just taking your time.

Karen Foley:

How important would you say the structure side of things is as well in terms of being in the exam? Sometimes people can find it quite useful to start thinking about, you know, having an introduction and conclusion and a lot of students write the introduction last. So in terms of an exam and you've got this big plan there, what sort of would you say to put them at ease when they're starting to actually then write from the plan to the essay?

Catriona Havard:

I think it's finding out about what works for you. I personally when I was doing it I wrote my plan and because I had quite a good plan I was able to then just sit and write my introduction, write the main body of my text and then write the conclusion. But you might find that that doesn't work for you. So, I mean if you are one of those people that that suits you better then may be start a bit lower down the page or something like that so that you're not then having to think, gosh how am I going to get this in to these three lines, you know.

Karen Foley:

And I guess if you lose a few lines or have a few lines expanded in the script the exam marker's not going to care as long as it's clear and they can read it and they know that you know what you're talking about.

Catriona Havard:

Yeah. That's it.

Karen Foley:

Ah brilliant advice. Well thank you I'm sure our students will really appreciate that Catriona. Thanks a lot. Take care.

Catriona Havard:

Thank you. Bye.

Karen Foley:

Bye. Well I hope that this has given students some really useful advice.

And lastly for this addition of the PodMag I went along to an Open University Psychological Society event recently at the University of Warwick. OUPS as they're called are a charity to support OU students studying psychology. And they run a range of events that many students find are really valuable.

At this particular weekend there was an annual conference about learning difficulties, some research methods workshops and a DE100 Overview event. Now if you're a DE100 student you can get free membership to the society, so do check out the website, OUPS.org.uk if you want to find out more.

But I spoke to some students and a tutor there while we were having a coffee break and this is what they said.

Right well I'm at the DE100 OUPS event and I talked to some students and I've got with me Elise at the moment. So Elise how are you enjoying this weekend?

Elise:

I'm enjoying it very well actually.

Karen Foley:

Good and so, like the whole idea about coming to these things is being part of a community. Is that important to you as a student?

Elise:

I think it is important as a student to connect with other people and meet different types of people. And to not feel so isolated.

Karen Foley:

Yeah and alone. And is this the first sort of thing you've come to?

Elise:

Apart from the day schools on my course this is the first weekend away that I've come to.

Karen Foley:

So what plan are you going to do for doing something different next year then for academic study? What are you going to do that's different?

Elise:

I think I'm going plan my time a lot better. I think I've learnt from this year as it's getting academically harder I think I need to put more hours in of getting a plan together.

Karen Foley:

Exactly, perfect. Alright well thank you very much. That's wonderful.

Elise:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

And Kimberley you're here also doing DE100 aren't you?

Kimberley:

Yes.

Karen Foley:

So what is important to you in terms of the community?

Kimberley:

It's just feeling part of it and not so out of your depth when you're kind of learning a new subject and you've come in to new education, you've not done it for a lot of years. And having other experiences with other people and not feeling quite so isolated.

Karen Foley:

What sort of would your ideal be in terms of being part of a community? Is that meeting up at weekends or online? Or how do you plan to stay in touch with all these new people that you're connecting with?

Kimberley:

Yeah, probably coming to the OUPS weekends to be honest. We've already said that we'll come back probably year after year and just come to at least one each year. And obviously when we go on to the next courses, probably come to those weekends.

Karen Foley:

And what one thing are you going to do differently that you didn't do last year that you wish you'd done? How are you going to plan your study better?

Kimberley:

I did try to do the planning of it because it was my first year, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. And I thought I'd done pretty well but I didn't. It sort of got out of control towards the end so I really want to start giving myself more time to study and to absorb everything that I need to absorb.

Karen Foley:

What's your warning sign then? You know like you say sort of gets towards the end it gets a bit like more fraught than at the beginning.

Kimberley:

Yeah.

Karen Foley:

What would your warning sign be that things may be slipping?

Kimberley:

When I feel under pressure I feel stressed and I kind of have a melt down and I could feel myself getting that way. And I thought really next time. And I knew that last year that I was, well when we'd just finished this year that I needed to do that next time because I don't want to put myself in to that position, get myself in a stressful situation and not be able to absorb the work or be able to put as much in that I wanted to, so.

Karen Foley:

Yeah, brilliant, alright. Well thank you very much enjoy the rest of the weekend.

Kimberley:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

Great so I'm interviewing Janet Simpson. Now you're a tutor for the Open University and I wanted to ask you what advice would you give to students at the start of the academic year to get the most out of their tutor?

Janet Simpson:

I would advise students to contact their tutor quite early on. I send out a letter to my students and I think most tutors do too. So therefore once you receive that letter from your tutor I would encourage students to respond to that letter.

Karen Foley:

And what sort of things did they tell you then? What's useful for you to know?

Janet Simpson:

It's quite useful to just know a little bit about what they've studied before. And because even though we have a record of the courses that students have studied with the Open University it's quite nice to know if they've got any additional requirements. Because even though we're informed about that it's just quite nice to hear it from the student's perspective. And to be able to have a chat about that even if it's just via email.

Karen Foley:

And what advice would you give to students who maybe feel anxious about getting in touch with their tutor?

Janet Simpson:

What I would do is if a student hadn't got in contact with me I would contact them. I'd probably, you know, give them a quick phone just to see that everything was OK. But most tutors, well all tutors hopefully, are approachable, so I would encourage students that if they've not heard from their tutor, it's probably for a perfectly you know logical reason, and just you know, just take the plunge and drop them an email.

Karen Foley:

Lastly I wanted to ask you, because it's summertime now, and a lot of students are doing exams or you know getting towards the end of a module and may be starting a new one. What advice would you give them about managing their stress levels over the summer?

Janet Simpson:

I think that it's quite important that students are organised and they manage their time effectively. And I think they need to schedule in their OU study in the same way as they would schedule in any other, you know, essential task because it is essential if you've committed to study.

So therefore I'd encourage them to be organised and I think that that helps reduce the stress levels. And obviously if you feel that you're really suffering or not coping then do contact your tutor for a chat because sometimes it helps to have somebody else put it in perspective for you.

Karen Foley:

Brilliant, excellent advice. Well thank you very much Janet that was wonderful.

Janet Simpson:

Thank you Karen.

Karen Foley:

OK great. Well I certainly agree that connections and meeting up with others can be really helpful for some people. And if that's you make sure that you check out the Student Connections website: connections.kmi.open.ac.uk to find out how you can connect with the faculty.

So until the next edition enjoy the summer and I hope you've enjoyed listening. Bye for now.