

PodMag 03 09 2015 demo 2

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the September PodMag, the news audio magazine from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University. I'm Karen Foley and I'm here in the studio with Harley-Jack and we'd like to tell you all about the Social Sciences conference that is taking place on 25th and 26th September.

So HJ you and Rachel are managing our Social Media Desk but before I ask you how all that works let's talk about the programme.

Harley-Jack:

Well it's looking fantastic so far Karen. There's plenty of students at any level to enjoy. I think that sessions like changes in the Psychology programme and the new postgraduate modules will be definitely interesting to find out more about.

Karen Foley:

Yes and they're also running Q&A sessions, having the Library and Careers update us on what they can offer in terms of student supports. And later in the PodMag we'll be hearing about some of the other sessions that are being planned.

So tell us how the Social Media Desk and how the conference all works.

Harley-Jack:

Well there's lots of great sessions with the library, career service, our famous quiz and some great discussions. The full programme is on the website. But while the sessions are going on you can use the live chat and let us know your thoughts, comments and questions. Rachel and I will be on the Social Media Desk in the studio to put your thoughts and questions from the live chat and other social media such as Twitter to the studio panels live.

The chat is a fantastic way to join in and it's just like a dialogue and people have such interesting things to contribute.

Karen Foley:

Yeah the chat really is great. What I love is some of those parallel conversations that go on and that people are so willing to share ideas and their experiences.

So I hope that's given you an idea about what the conference is all about. Do check out the website for the programme to find out more.

Now another person who has been critical to the conference organisation is Alison Kirkbright. And I'm going to ask her all about why the faculty is putting these events on and what people can expect.

Right, so Alison Kirkbright you are Senior Manager Teaching & Learning. And you're heavily involved in planning the Student Connections Conference. Can you tell our listeners why the faculty are doing this a second time round.

Alison Kirkbright:

It was such a great success the first time. There was a real buzz in the faculty and with the students and everything and we just would like it to become a regular feature of the one things that we offer our students. Helping students to connect with the academics and the academics really love it too.

Karen Foley:

And we're in the early stages of developing the programme at the moment. But we've got some really exciting slots lined up. Can you tell us what you're most looking forward to?

Alison Kirkbright:

I'm really looking forward to some of the Big Conversations that will involve sort of several academics debating topics of interest such as, Is Public Spending a Drain on the Economy. It would be like our equivalent of Question Time I think. And the students can contribute to that chat too and, you know, send in their questions. And the Wheel of Ologies of course, I'm always looking forward to things like that.

Karen Foley:

And aside from a lot of these discussions we've also got some great study skills and life skills sessions. Things like about setting realistic expectations and upskilling. Can you tell us what you're hoping that the students can achieve from attending some of those sessions?

Alison Kirkbright:

I think that they'll be able to do it in a more relaxed atmosphere. They can take time out of their day and just look at some of these things that may be they see as peripheral actually to their overall studies. But actually just having some of these library skills and how to enhance some of their study skills are really important things and can really sort of help improve their overall results.

Karen Foley:

Yeah. So taking time out to both reflect on individual studies and also be inspired by what other people are doing in the faculty I guess is the main aim of the programme we've lined up so far isn't it?

Alison Kirkbright:

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's a really well balanced programme this year actually. I'm really excited about it.

Karen Foley:

Fantastic, excellent. Well we will look forward to seeing you then at the conference and thanks for that.

Alison Kirkbright:

Yeah, thank you.

Karen Foley:

So between HJ and Alison I hope this gives you some idea about the events. Now we mentioned before that we're having some debates and discussions. And I'm going to go and talk to Jonquil Lowe who is orchestrating the Friday evening discussion.

So I'm with Jonquil Lowe from our Economics Department. Now Jonquil you've got a Big Conversation discussion happening at the conference which is, Is Public Spending a Drain on the Economy or the Hallmark of an Advanced Society.

Now the government have recently had a legislation that says that they want to have a surplus in normal times by 2020. And I wanted to ask you in your opinion is the role of government to actually generate a surplus or is it a better idea for them to be spending enough that can provide everyone with what they need at that time?

Jonquil Lowe:

Well I think you can see here the ideology of the Conservative government coming out while at a household level, yes it might make a lot of sense to run a surplus. And is that the role of government? The role of government is to bring in the revenues that we need to provide the range of services that we as a society want and feel that we can't provide for ourselves at the individual level.

Karen Foley:

So I guess your argument is that they should be providing just enough to be enabling the services that we as a society need and not actually generating additional monies that aren't being used for anything sensible.

Jonquil Lowe:

Well I think that's right. What they've actually said is that when they move in to surplus, well they hope they're going to move in to surplus in 2020. They will then use at least some of that money for tax cuts. May be that's really not the best use. It's debatable whether that would be needed to pay off yet more government debt because the austerity cuts in the run up to 2020 will already be bringing that debt down. And of

course if the economy is growing, which we hope it will continue growing, that also reduces the level of debt as a proportion of what we are producing as a country.

So it almost seems a luxury for the government to have this surplus but a government is not a household. So really, you know, why would you collect money? You would collect money in order to provide schools and roads... a health service. To provide benefits for people who can't do that for themselves.

So really this is not an economic question, it's an ideological question. It's, what do we, as a country, want? What do we want our State to provide?

Karen Foley:

I mean that's a very, very broad and theoretical question. How have individuals been reacting to that sort of idea, you know, it seems so removed I guess from their day-to-day life?

Jonquil Lowe:

Well I think more and more people are feeling that economics actually isn't removed from their day-to-day life at all. And especially, you know, when we're seeing massive cuts on the way for working families. Sorry I sound like the government there don't I? 'Hardworking families!'.

But a lot of the focus of the welfare cuts is now on Tax Credits, the top ups to low pay that people get while they're in work. And the government is saying, well that's OK because we're bringing in the new living wage, it will be up to industry, employers to pay people what they are losing in benefits. But actually if you look at the data the people who are losing the benefits are often very different people from who would benefit from what's essentially an increase in the National Minimum Wage. So a lot of families are going to find themselves less well off.

So this is not some kind of abstract debate. This is very much a debate about people's everyday lives, their everyday financial wellbeing.

Karen Foley:

And what are you expecting that some of the audience at home when you've got this debate happening at the Students Connections Conference, what are you expecting some of the issues that people might raise might be?

Jonquil Lower:

Well I think there may well be quite a lot of anger at the way austerity is being borne to a large extent by people who perhaps are the least able to bear these kind of cuts. There may be questions about why the government at the time of austerity is doing things like, for example, taking more houses out of the Inheritance Tax net. I mean lovely if we can afford it as a country, but surely not the most pressing issue at this particular time.

Karen Foley:

So lots of things I guess that touch on different people's nerve points in terms of how the government's plans are affecting their pocket at the end of the day.

Jonquil Lowe:

I think so and just a general sense of equality and fairness. And, you know, this comes back to whether, you know, whether public spending is just a burden or whether it's actually a sign of being a civilised society. You know, that we recognise people who need help and are willing to support them through those times. I mean, sure, get them back in to work. That's probably going to be the most solid financial security for most people. But everybody is at risk of, at times, going through periods when events conspire and they can't support themselves and that surely is when we look to have those government safety nets in place.

Karen Foley:

Absolutely. What are you looking forward to most then in terms of participating at the conference?

Jonquil Lowe:

Oh well definitely getting the questions from the students and just interacting with them. I took part in the last conference and it was fantastic, you know, the kind of questions and debate the students came up with were really, really great issues. So looking forward to that very much indeed.

Karen Foley:

Well you've certainly got a good question there that I think will get everyone thinking. So thank you very much Jonquil. I look forward to seeing you then.

Jonquil Lowe:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

So I hope that gives you a flavour about some of the discussions we'll be having. And finally I'm off to the library.

The library sessions are some of the best at these conferences, I think because they have so much support and resources to offer students. So I'm going to see Helen Clough to find out what they're planning.

So Helen tell me why are the library so keen to be involved with these types of events?

Helen Clough:

Well it's a fantastic way of interacting with our students. We don't get the opportunity to do it very often because, of course, our students are distance learners so they don't come in to the building and we can't grab them while they're there. So this is a great way of increasing our visibility and making sure that students are just aware of what a fantastic online library we have.

Karen Foley:

So I know that these are very early conversations about plans for what you're actually going to do at the Students Connections Conference but can you tell us about some of the ideas that you've had so far?

Helen Clough:

Well we've had an initial brainstorm and we'd really like to get across both the content and the skills. So we'd like to run a couple of sessions. And one focusing on the fantastic range of content that we have and we're highlighting some key resources for students in the Social Sciences.

And then we're hoping to also cover skills. And get an academic to talk about the skills that you can learn for engaging with the online library. And in particular we've talked a bit about digital identities.

Karen Foley:

Your library sessions are always so crammed packed with information and are so useful so I'm really looking forward to those. But just to finish with, what one thing do you think that students should take advantage of from the library?

Helen Clough:

I think the Help Desk. Because we have a 24/7 webchat service - so we are available when students are actually studying - and often times when students phone us they say, oh I've been struggling trying to find this particular resource for a couple of hours now. And I think, oh if you'd only called the Help Desk, you know, ten minutes in to your struggle and we would have been able to help you. So we are there to help. And, yes so call the Help Desk when you need anything from the library.

Karen Foley:

And how do students find those details?

Helen Clough:

The contact details are on every webpage of the library website.

Karen Foley:

OK so access that from student home. Go on to the library section and they can find you from there. Well that's brilliant Helen, thank you so much. And I'm really looking forward to your events at the conference.

Helen Clough:

Great thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

Well that is all we have time for in this episode. Do take a look at the faculty Facebook page and the website: connections.kmi.open.ac.uk to find out more. And of course our Twitter handle @OUSocSci.

And I hope to see you at the event on 25th and 26th September. That's all for now. See you there.