

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the November PodMag, our audio news magazine from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University. I'm Karen Foley and in this edition I'll be talking to Steve Tombs to get an update about what's new in Criminology and Graham Pike is talking about a new Level 3 Psychology module. And finally Richard Nurse in the Library is involved with an interesting project that looks at student engagement and library resources.

But first as usual let's take a look at some of the headline faculty news.

Firstly there's a new OU Channel 4 series called Chasing Perfection that starts on Sunday 15th November. It's a series of two documentaries authored by one of the world's most successful athletes Michael Johnson. The series was commissioned by the Open Media Unit so if you're interested in sports psychology and you'd like to know more you can visit OpenLearn, the OU's free learning website to see how athletes strive for perfection. You can also read Michael Johnson's 20 Principles for Developing Champions. See extra video footage and work out which sport you're most likely to be suited to and use techniques from Sports Psychology to tackle your own everyday goals. The link to this is in the transcript.

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/chasingperfection>

This year's ESRC, Economic & Social Research Council Festival of Social Science is taking place from 7th to 14th November. And Jacqui Gabb and John Dixon will be speaking there from the faculty.

Also Parvati Raghuram has received an ESRC grant that will look at the role of women in the IT sector. What's interesting here is that she'll be bringing two significant but separate fields of academic research together, that of gender issues and IT with gender issues and skills migration.

And Gerry Mooney has another piece in The Conversation this time about Social Housing and Glasgow's Red Road flats, again the link to this in the transcript.

<http://theconversation.com/demolishing-iconic-tower-blocks-is-an-attack-on-whole-idea-of-social-housing-48918>

And there's a brand new OU prospectus that is now available. There are lots of new qualifications and modules and it's the best place to find out more about what's on offer.

<https://www.open.ac.uk/request/prospectus?catcode=ZATZAD>

So over now to the first of our interviews. I'm speaking with Steve Tombs about some of the changes in his department and I'm also interested in the department blog.

Hi Steve, thanks for talking to me today. So you're the new head of department for Social Policy & Criminology.

Steve Tombs:

I am.

Karen Foley:

Can you tell us about how the department is expanding? What's going on?

Steve Tombs:

Well it's a really exciting time for the department in fact. About a year ago the Open University made the decision to invest in criminology as a subject area. And that's had several consequences. Over the last year, for example or this calendar year we've employed four new colleagues, four younger members of staff. And we're in the process of interviewing for two more, a Lecturer and a Senior Lecturer in Criminology.

So that's great. You're got people often at the start of their careers, they bring in fresh ideas, they've got energy, they've got enthusiasm and of course they bring specialisms in areas of criminology that we don't have.

Karen Foley:

So aside from getting obviously new members of department you're also looking at new modules and there's lots happening in terms of production. Can you tell our audience little bit about some of that?

Steve Tombs:

There's an awful lot happening. We've got new modules but essentially we're creating two new qualifications from scratch. The first to come online will be next October, October 2016 and that's an MA in Crime and Justice. And that MA has got a particular focus on harms at a global level, conflicts, issues around security and insecurity, eco crimes such as pollution and deforestation. So of course it does many of the things that are a standard criminology programme does and has to do but we believe that has an innovative edge in terms of postgraduate curriculum.

And then almost at the starting point we have a process where we're creating an undergraduate degree in Criminology, a BA Honours in Criminology. And that should be up and running by October 2017. And again on that degree we cover many of the core concepts, methods, perspectives in Criminology but we also think that we're in a position to develop an innovative curriculum. So we'll be covering areas such as corporate crimes, state crimes, state harms, issues around migration, rights, justice, child sexual abuse and so on.

And historically the Open University's brand of Criminology has been very rooted in broader social science. So it kind of does the criminology bit but it also draws from politics, economics, social policy, sociology. And it draws upon key social scientific concepts like power, violence, gender, sexuality, the state and also of those will be central to our new programme.

There's an awful lot going on. There's a lot of work to do but it's fun and it's a pretty dynamic place to be right now Karen.

Karen Foley:

You've got this department blog and your contribution has been one of the latest ones. Why have you got a department blog and what's the point of blogging as an academic way of communicating ideas?

Steve Tombs:

The blog is really part of an initiative around a new research centre that social policy and Criminology staff are involved in, also with colleagues in Psychology. And the research centre or the research organisation is called the Harm and Evidence Research Collaborative. And a blog seemed like one of the things that we could do to engage new audiences. We're all researchers. We all write books. We all write journal articles. And of course that's quite right that we do that. And the blog is of course academic but it's written in an often punchier way, it's a shorter piece of writing of course. And essentially we're speaking to a much wider audience than those people who would read academic books and journal articles.

So to date we've had tens of thousands of hits and we know that we've got a readership in 122 countries so it's really reaching a global audience. It's fantastic.

Karen Foley:

And your latest blog then, you wrote about the VW case. What prompted you to write about that?

Steve Tombs:

Well my work is around corporate crime and corporate harm and listeners may remember that in the middle of September the Environment & Protection Agency in the United States revealed that it had uncovered nearly 500,000 Volkswagen cars to which a

piece of software had been fitted. And essentially what the software did was it lowered the recordable levels of emissions of certain toxic pollutants when the car was being tested before it went on to the road.

When it got on to the road though, the EPA found that the emissions of the toxic pollutants were 40 times those that were found in testing. So it just seemed to me like a classic case unfolding. And of course there will be more details which unfold about Volkswagen and I suspect also about the car industry in general.

Karen Foley:

OK so plenty more to blog about in the future. Well Steve thank you very much for talking to me today.

Steve Tombs:

My pleasure, thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

Well there are lots of exciting things happening there but other departments also have great plans in the pipeline. There are lots of new modules in production and I'm going to speak with Graham Pike about one of those from Psychology.

OK so Graham, thank you for talking to me today about the new module DD310. Tell us what's it all about?

Graham Pike:

Hi Karen, it's a pleasure to talk about DD310. Well first of all although we call it DD310 the proper title is Counselling and Forensic Psychology: Investigating Crime and Therapy. It's a new Level 3 module in Psychology which is coming out in the autumn of 2017. It's going to be part of our Forensic & Counselling qualifications. It's a very interesting module because it brings together forensic psychology and counselling and those two things don't usually go together.

So we're looking at therapeutic prisons. We're looking at work with offenders and conducting therapy in prisons and we're looking at areas of counselling, working with sex offenders, looking at sexual offences and looking at a very kind of broad gambit of counselling but particularly concentrating on that overlap between counselling and forensic psychology.

And I should just say we are also making sure we do kind of cover the standard things. So we'll be looking at cognitive behavioural therapy. We'll be looking at mindfulness in terms of counselling. And we will be looking at offenders in prisons.

The main thing we're doing to look at the intersection is picking really interesting people who do really interesting work in that intersection and getting them to write material

and kind of looking at what they do. The thing I think I'm most fascinated by is we're hoping to do work, and we've got an author who works at Britain's only democratic therapeutic prison. This is Her Majesty's Prison at Grendon. So this is somewhere where long serving prisoners choose to go to and, you know, it's a standard prison, you know, they're still locked up but they undergo group therapy whilst they're there.

And it's democratic because they actually get to choose who works where and who does what job. It's just an incredible place. It's such a different take on the Criminal Justice System. It's a really very fascinating thing.

Karen Foley:

So what's your take? We were talking a bit earlier about how, you know, that the module team's take is not that people are bad lock them up necessarily but it's about understanding people, may be their motivations and this, that and the other. How might students then perceive some of the stuff that you're teaching?

Graham Pike:

One of the things we want to do is kind of debunk the myth that you often see in print media and on television that people commit crimes either because they're mad or bad. This portrayal of offenders had somehow been different to the rest of the population. And, you know, if you give that any thought whatsoever you just realise it's not true.

So I think one of the things what we're hoping to do is to look at research that's been done around mad or bad identities, look how criminality is effected by things such as gender and by race and by class. And look at, you know, why is it that some people end up, you know, being classified as offenders and some don't.

And, you know, when you start to think about who ends up in prisons and who don't you instantly see that this can't be a mad or bad thing, this is a, you know, a particular construction of criminality that exists currently, you know, in the West.

Karen Foley:

And of course, you know, like you say, there's you know, people who are perpetrators or offenders and of course victims. And a lot of people have been subject to some sort of crime along the way. Studying it you must have a lot of ethical considerations to look at when you're putting this module together. Can you tell our students about that?

Graham Pike:

I think this is true across a lot of psychology, perhaps particularly in counselling forensic, that if you're studying psychology you're going to be put in to positions where you're talking about things that might make you uncomfortable, that you might have a personal experience or a family member might have experienced. And, you know, you're kind of tackling it in a way that you might not talk about, you know, if you're down the pub or, you know, over dinner. But, you know, it's a very important part of

psychology that we get to grips with all elements of how the mind works and of human behaviour.

And obviously, you know, therapy and counselling and crime and the Criminal Justice System are a big part of that. So it's very important we tackle them. We'll be very mindful of those sensitivities when we're writing, in producing material. And obviously, you know, at the OU we have a lot of experience of running tutorials and engaging the students. So we'll just be very mindful of that throughout.

Karen Foley:

Although I think, you know, again you're doing some very innovative things in this module. And one of the things that you mentioned to me the other day was that you were doing something different in terms of how you're looking at AL and student engagement. So it's more a sense of whilst your mindful constructing it you're also going to be taking on board some of the feedback when you've got the module and presentation. Can you tell us about how you're going to do that?

Graham Pike:

Yeah. We've just started last month making the module. And we've kicked off with a learning design workshop that was run at the Open University here. There were academics and people who know about technology enhanced learning and pedagogy, etc. And one thing they said is, you know, it's important that, you know, you engage with your students when you're designing that, well how do we do that? And nobody had an answer.

So we've come up with one. So we're running a project which we think is the first time it's ever been done at the Open University. We've set up a website which is DD310.madbad.org and you can go there and as the course progresses, as it's made, we'll keep that website updated. So there's already a couple of blogs there about the work we've done already.

And as well as telling our students and AL's how things are going, kind of on a, you know, a weekly, monthly basis, we've also set up a forum there so that we can get feedback from them. And if anybody's got any good ideas or wants to tell us about something they can use that forum. So the forum will have threads around topics, around assessment. There are polls there where you can go and vote for, you know, you want to have this element in your course and may be not that one.

So throughout the course we're going to be using that website to disseminate information about how production is going but also to get views from students and AL's.

Karen Foley:

Excellent, that's brilliant. We'll include that link on the transcript. Well Graham Pike that's fantastic, thank you very much for talking to me today.

Graham Pike:

Thank you Karen.

<http://dd310.madornbad.org/>

Karen Foley:

Well I know that there are lots of students out there who'll be very interested in the developments from Psychology and Criminology and Social Policy. And we'll be updating you with news from other areas of the faculty in the next edition of the PodMag.

But for now we turn to another area of the Open University, the Library. We all know that the Library is a great source of information and they're also able to assist in the development of literacy skills. But they're also interested in knowing more about the role of the Library in terms of student engagement.

At brick universities one of the most common measures of engagement is students' activity in the Library. But of course that's problematic at the Open University. So I asked Richard Nurse how this could be applied to a distance learning institution.

So I'm with Richard now who is the Library Services Manager: Digital Services Development. Hi Richard.

Richard Nurse:

Hello.

Karen Foley:

So you're working on the Library Data Project. And this is all about whether there is a similar relationship between the use of library services and students' grades.

Richard Nurse:

Sure. So we know that at Huddersfield University, for example, they make use of loans of books that students were taking out of the Library. They also had information around the visits to the Library. But clearly as a distance learning university students rarely visit the OU so we don't have those sources of data.

So one of the things that we've been trying to look at is to see whether the data that we do have which is mainly around online library usage is actually going to be able to be useful for us to be able to find the same sorts of correlations that Huddersfield and other universities, both in the US and in Australia, have been able to find.

Karen Foley:

OK. I mean you must have a hunch though that there was some sort of similar relationship. So what's the plan in terms of how you're researching this?

Richard Nurse:

So it's about trying to turn that hunch in to something a bit more definite. It's trying to understand whether we have the same sort of correlation that we found elsewhere. So we're trying to look at the data that we've got and we've got data from largely student engagement with online library resources. We're trying then to organise that and structure that and see what other data that we need to get to be able to answer some questions. Is there a direct relationship between student success? Or is there a relationship between student retention and their use of the library resources? What sort of level of statistical correlation do we have?

But then to do a bit more detailed work with some cohort studies and some more qualitative studies. So we will then engage with students, maybe through diary studies and get students involved in looking in real detail what the value is of the library content and the library skills activities.

Karen Foley:

When you've got this data then how is this going to ultimately impact and benefit students and I guess also you're looking at how this can feed in to the university in terms of we're teaching. What are your ambitions for that side of things?

Richard Nurse:

We want to understand what the relationship is between what we're putting in to modules in terms of access to the library resources and access to library skills and what value does it have. What's the impact down the line? So with that evidence we have a stronger case to be able to go, and when we're talking to modules and when we're talking to students to say, you know, the value of this particular activity is that you'll have these sorts of impacts and actually will allow us to be able to target things much more effectively rather than being, you know, having a hunch that there is a correlation but not really being sure 100% whether that correlation exists.

Karen Foley:

Well thank you very much Richard that sounds like a really interesting project. I look forward to hearing all about it in due course.

Richard Nurse:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

And that unfortunately is all we have time for. I hope that you've enjoyed our interviews and don't forget that you can connect with the faculty by liking the Facebook page.

We have a Friday Thinker activity each week there which is a lot of fun and you can also follow us on Twitter @OUSocSci.

And that's all from me, Karen Foley, bye for now and thanks for listening.