

## **PodMag 04 12 2015**

### **Karen Foley:**

Hi and welcome to the December PodMag, the audio news magazine for Social Sciences & Psychology at the Open University. Well Christmas and the New Year nearly are here and I hope therefore all of you it's been a good year.

This time of year can bring about a lot of mixed emotions and different kinds of concerns. So we've made it a slightly different kind of PodMag for you this time.

I talked to Joe Smith about the Climate Change Summit and he's involved with some really exciting projects around climate change. I also spoke to Alan Shipman about the implications of the recent statement made by the Chancellor and how this affects things for OU students.

Then Catriona Havard talked about consumer identity something that maybe resonates with us all at this time of year. And that'll be very interesting for those of you who are studying DD102. And on that note I spoke to one of the module Chairs, Georgina Blakeley about how she recommends student approach studying over the festive period.

So in the first of our news items let's see what Alan Shipman has to say about the latest budget statement.

Hi Alan. Now, in late November the Chancellor made some announcements about public spending and I wondered if you could tell our listeners about the significance of those.

### **Alan Shipman:**

Well Chancellor George Osborne was delivering both his annual Autumn Statement and his five year public Spending Review. So there was something in here for everyone. But he addressed various issues relating specifically to the situation of part-time students. So what we saw specifically there was there is going to be a reintroduction of Maintenance Loans for part-time students from 2018 to '19. This could benefit 150,000 people by 2020. And there will be more Tuition Fee loans for students aged 19 to 23 which could benefit up to 40,000.

For people studying STEM subjects, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, the current rules that prevent you from getting financial assistance when you already have a degree are going to be relaxed from 2017 to 18. The Student Opportunity Fund which is for students from less advantaged circumstances will carry on under the tutelage of the Higher Education Funding Council in England. And it will be retargeted towards institutions which make the most effective contribution.

And for people planning postgraduate study there's currently an age limit of 30 on that. This will be raised to 60 from 2016 if you're studying at least half time on a postgraduate course.

So some good news there for students and the necessity of studying was really underlined by other figures in the Autumn Statement showing that two thirds of the jobs created since 2010 are in the high skilled category.

**Karen Foley:**

And what about those students, I've heard a lot of students who've said, oh I've been caught in this gap and that gap with all of the funding changes. What else can they look forward to in terms of the budget statements, in terms of economics, what's happening in the current climate as a result of these statements as well?

**Alan Shipman:**

The way the Spending Review was also showing how the Chancellor intends to manage the economy over the next five years. His slogan is that it's going to be lower benefit and lower tax. So what we saw hitting the headlines was he withdrew the cut in Tax Credits which was going to be his major welfare saving. He was able to do that because his revenue forecast would improve. But actually we are seeing plans to withdraw the wider social security safety net which a lot of people in work are drawing on.

And we're going to see when the Universal Credit comes in to replace some Tax Credits. There will be cuts there. There will be some clawing back of housing benefit. There will be some withdrawal of disability benefits as more people are helped back in to work.

So we saw a subtle way of transferring the government's costs back to individuals through taxes, back to business through the additional minimum, well, now the Living Wage which was significantly higher from next year. And these are really ways the government tries to spend less by getting us to spend a little bit more but with the promise that there is some targeting of benefits for people who need them.

**Karen Foley:**

Well thank you very much Alan. That's really useful.

**Alan Shipman:**

Thank you.

**Karen Foley:**

There's been a lot of work being done by academics in Social Science & Psychology and far too much to include here. But in brief Umut Erel has secured an ESRC grant to do research on Migrant Mothers. And Dave Humphreys, the current Social Sciences Programme Director, has been selected for an Open University teaching award. He's been given the award for excellence and innovation reflecting his achievements across a number of modules he's been involved with over the years. Most recently DST206, Environment Sharing a Dynamic Planet.

And the environment is a very topical issue right now. So I asked Joe Smith what he had to say about it all.

**Joe Smith:**

I'm leading a project called Stories of Change at the moment. And we're trying to loosen up the public and political conversation about energy by reminding everyone that humanities life with energy, its relationship with energy over time, has always been changeable. So we're really trying to invite people to look at decarbonisation as something that's not just achievable but something that also might bring substantial benefits.

We're working with a pretty extraordinary mixture of partners ranging from policy figures through to business and pressure groups. But also we've got puppeteers, animators and poets in the mix. And actually it's the artists involved that I think are going to do most to help us loosen up the public conversation and attract attention to the idea of decarbonisation bringing plenty of benefits to society as well as challenges.

I've been working for a long time to try to support better quality of conversation between specialists and the media on environmental change issues particularly climate change. I've been working with broadcasters in the last year to help them think about other ways they might approach these questions. However, I'll take no credit at all for my favourite recent programme which is the Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall assault on waste. And I think the programme on food waste has brilliantly shown how actually addressing some of the big environmental issues of the day will not just reduce our impact on the natural world it actually has the potential to really make quality of life a whole lot better.

I'm going to be spending the next two weeks at the climate talks in Paris. The formal name of that meeting is The United Nations Conference of the Parties 21. Now there's a big difference for me in the atmosphere surrounding these talks compared to the last ones I went to in Copenhagen in 2009. Where I have to say I was not optimistic at all in the run up and my expectations were confirmed.

This time around the French government who are hosting the talks have really managed expectations down which I think is helpful, there's less hype around. But also the politics is much more positive in the run up. So I think all told the conditions are so much better than they were going in to Copenhagen five years ago. But I don't think there's any room for complacency.

**Karen Foley:**

Well that's most of our news. Do keep up-to-date with us on Twitter @OUSocSci and of course the Faculty Facebook page.

Well I mentioned earlier on that Christmas was a rather different time of year. We often feel very pressured in to consuming and our behaviour can be shaped in a number of ways by various factors. It can often make us think then about the extent to which we want to collude with this behaviour and how much free choice we really have in the matter.

So I spoke to Psychologist, Catriona Havard about this.

So Catriona you've written a chapter for DD102 about Consumer Identities. And I was talking to a group of my students about this coming up to Christmas and we were thinking about how there's so much pressure on consumers to find the perfect present and the perfect gift and collude with this whole idea of being a consumer around this time of year. What are your thoughts on that?

**Catriona Havard:**

Yes that's right. You're right, it's this time of year, we're all trying to get the perfect gift. We want the gift to be something that's personal. You know, something that the gift receiver will really, really enjoy. And it's really difficult to do that. And of course we're bombarded with advertising telling us what we should be buying for our loved ones.

So what I thought this year was really interesting is that although there's been a huge increase in the amount of advertising for Black Friday there's been this backlash on social media of people sort of telling us to boycott buying things on Black Friday. You know, don't go to the shops. Don't become a consumer and buy in to this sort of branding and, you know, all the advertising that we're being bombarded with.

However, although there was a decrease in sales in the shops there was actually an increase in sales online. So it's strange that this boycotting that went online in social media actually still increased consumption online rather than in the shops.

**Karen Foley:**

I saw a lot of messages on my Facebook feed certainly where there were lots of sales, massive discounts, you couldn't be tempted but to sort of click on a few as you were sitting there boycotting Black Friday. What do you think that says then in terms of advertisers' conceptions about you know who we are, our identity as consumers? Are we really that gullible in the sense that we just have to be considered consumers but we feel that we have some choice on how we, you know, enact that identity?

**Catriona Havard:**

That's a really good point. I think one of the problems that we have is we are, as you said, we're bombarded with these adverts everywhere and one of the things that we're really worried about is missing out, you know. We see these deals and especially when they say things like, you know, offer ends at midnight. Somehow you feel actually, you

know what, I'm going to miss out if I don't get it, you know. And I won't be able to get this perfect gift for this person unless I quickly go and get it.

**Karen Foley:**

So part of identity I guess you're talking about ideas about being the perfect consumer and also about advertising and that sort of colluding with our needs to really sort of be able to act on that. In terms of then you were saying, well I was talking about Facebook and how that can then sort of come in to people's feeds. What does that say about our identity? I mean Facebook is a place where we enact our identity a lot of the time. So to have all these adverts coming in to that, these targeted, often, adverts coming in to that. How do you think that sort of impacts on people's freedom of choice?

**Catriona Havard:**

That's a really good point. As you said it's targeting adverts. I mean Google and Facebook they're able to take information about what we put in to the Internet. So what do we Google search? Often, you know, if you're buying something from Amazon or something like that you then see adverts for very similar, if not almost the same products that appear somehow in your Facebook page or when you're just searching from Google.

It's as if there is this identity that's actually been formed almost by Google and Facebook. They're almost creating an identity for you by collecting all this information about what you're buying.

**Karen Foley:**

So it's almost enacting our identity for us.

**Catriona Havard:**

Yeah.

**Karen Foley:**

Our construction of it and then feeding it. We don't stand a chance do we? Well thank you very much, that's been really useful.

In addition to our consuming many of us also see Christmas as a time to catch up on things. And of course many people have studying to do. Yet there can be instances where our expectations of ourselves can sometimes be a little unrealistic.

So I asked Georgina Blakeley who co-Chairs DD102 about her recommendations for students.

Hi Georgina, so you're Chair of DD102 and for that module for the Joe presentation and like many other modules students have TMA's due in early January. Now often we think that Christmas is a great time, we'll get all our work done. But we know from experience

that often isn't the case. So what advice can you give our students about planning their TMA's and dealing with the whole Christmas festivities in the December period?

**Georgina Blakeley:**

The first thing I would say is be realistic. You always think you're going to have loads of time over Christmas. That you're going to be able to catch up perhaps if you've got a little behind. But you're probably not going to be able to do any of that.

Most modules will have a two week break over the Christmas period and that's intentional because we know you'll have so many other things going on with your families, with work things. Christmas is just such a busy time.

So I would say don't plan really to get very much done at all during those two weeks. Take it as it's planned. So in other words you have a two week break. Then, come January, you'll feel a lot fresher. What you need to do is to talk to your tutor and say, well OK what can I get away with missing out. What do I really need to focus on and try and pick up from there.

**Karen Foley:**

I know a lot of students like writing lists especially in line with the study planner and rightly so choosing some tasks that are essential or more important than others for them. How would you say they could that use tool to maybe plan their study for January so that they can park things over the Christmas period so they can have that mental break? Would it be a good idea to say thinking about some of the tasks so that when they do come at it afresh they can then get in to it and get stuck in and prioritise that way?

**Georgina Blakeley:**

Yeah. Perhaps one thing that students could do before they take their two week break is just take stock of where they are. Are they up to date? Are there things that they need to catch up on when they come back? And maybe make a little list of the things that you must do your first week back after Christmas.

But again, don't worry most students by this point will be feeling quite tired. They'll have done about twelve weeks of study and they perhaps haven't done this kind of thing for a long time. So mentally and emotionally you're probably going to feel that you need a rest. So do take that rest and then, come January, you know, the important thing is to talk to someone whether it's other students in your group, perhaps your tutor or even the Student Support Team. And just say, well this is how far I've got to. I've got a TMA coming up. I'm not sure what to do. Can you help me please? And your tutor will be a great source of advice for that.

**Karen Foley:**

Lovely. Well thank you very much Georgina. That's all really useful.

**Gorgina Blakeley:**

Thank you.

Well that's all we have time for in this edition. Have a great festive break and we'll be back in the New Year.

Bye for now.