

PodMag March 2016

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, the audio news magazine from the Social Sciences at the Open University. This is the March 2016 edition and I'm Karen Foley.

In this edition we're focusing on launching a new Geography Initiative called Geography Matters. And I'll be interviewing Gillian Rose, Nick Bingham and Michael Pryke to find out more about that.

But first let's have a roundup of the news.

The 8th March is International Women's Day so it's quite fitting to feature this next project. Parvati Raghuram from the Department of Geography and Clem Herman have been awarded an ESRC grant focusing on gender, skilled migration and IT, a comparative study of India and the UK.

It's a really exciting project because the researchers will be comparing two very different settings, the UK which has a very low participation of women working in the IT sector and India which has a much higher proportion of women workers.

They'll be using a multidisciplinary approach and are interested in understanding the experiences of women IT workers in India and the UK to see what the UK can learn from the Indian case.

But secondly they'll be exploring the insights that men and women workers have from moving between the UK and India and who have experiences of both cultures. They're looking at gender norms, best practices and skilled migration. I'll be interviewing Parvati about this in a later edition so we can find out more.

In the media our Social Science academics are working with the BBC on some new productions that will be released this spring. These include Breaking into Britain and The Making of the Modern Mind so do watch out for those.

And on the radio on BBC 4 don't forget that there's the new series of Thinking Allowed. And the faculty have two new MOOC's starting shortly. Inequality starts in April and the Forensic Psychology MOOC starts on 21st March.

You can hear Graham Pike talking about the Forensic Psychology MOOC in the January edition of the PodMag and he and the team have lined up a great range of activities that are going to be on the faculty Facebook page including live chat with people like Lin Anderson and various other academics in the department. So do keep an eye out for

those and try and participate if you can. But both of these MOOC's are really interesting and they're a great way to broaden your learning so do check those out if you have time.

And also look out for Jonquil Lowe and Alan Shipman's commentaries on the Budget Statement when it happens in March.

Well that's all the news we have time for but don't forget to keep up-to-date with us @OUSocSci and the Social Sciences Facebook page where we also have our weekly discussions on the Friday Thinker.

In the first of our interviews today I'm going to be talking about Geography Matters. And to find out all about this exciting project I'm going to speak to Gillian Rose who is a Professor in Geography at the Open University.

Gillian thanks for joining me. Now this Geography Matters Initiative is something that you and your colleagues are working on and it's all about geography and environmental studies and about developing an academic community. So could you tell us what is it that you're doing?

Gillian Rose:

Well what we're trying to do is make the Environmental Studies qualification site a lot more interesting and maybe even fun for students going to it. There's obviously a lot of really useful information on qualification sites already. But what we felt we could also do is make it a place where if you're taking a Geography module or an Environmental Studies module you could go there and you could find some new up-to-date, hopefully interesting material that will add something a little bit extra to the course materials that you're already working through.

Karen Foley:

So Gillian you've got a whole range of multimedia activities planned then for this location. Can you tell us a bit about them?

Gillian Rose:

Well what we're hoping to do is put up a range of different assets. So there'll be things like audio podcasts. We've got a great little video, one of the first things to go up. We could have some short blog posty kind of essays and some longer pieces so a whole variety of different things going up there.

And as I say they'll each be engaging with something kind of a bit fresh, a bit different. And we're hoping that through the forum, for example, module forums or a qualifications website forum students will be able to say what they think about these things. They'll be able to get conversations going. Sometimes there will be one of the

faculty's Friday Thinkers, who will be the same person who produced the Geography Matters asset. So you can get a discussion and reactions going through that.

So we're hoping to get some feedback and engagement from students as well as them just coming and visiting the site, reading and looking and listening to what we've been doing.

Karen Foley:

So a lot of people have been involved in creating this project within the department. Can you tell us about how you've been doing that?

Gillian Rose:

It's been a very fun process actually. We spent a lot of time designing module materials so we hope that they'll be robust and that they will last. But of course one of the issues with that then is that as new events, new things happen, you know, crises emerge in the world it's sometimes a little difficult to make the bridge between the module materials that were may be written two, three, five, sometimes even eight years, you know, before these events happened. But nonetheless there's ideas and concepts in the module materials that can really help us make sense of these things happening right now.

So we did a lot of brainstorming around what's happening in the world right now that the module materials students might be looking at can shed some extra light on, I guess. So we've got a mix of current events type issues. So the video I mentioned is a great example of that I think.

And what it does is take the war in Syria, there are huge amounts of discussion and debate. But what it thinks about particularly is the effect of the war on the environment there and the way that a lot of seeds, particularly grass seeds that have actually got a lot of genetic resource for our wheat supply. How they're being decimated by the war.

And there's an amazing link between some of the plant research that was going on in Syria before the conflict. And an international seed bank in northern Norway. So Oliver Zanetti who's done the video makes this fantastic connection between northern Norway and Syria thinking about some of the environmental consequences of the war there.

So that's just one example of how we're trying to look at, as I say, current events and bring the OU's geographical imagination to bear on it.

Karen Foley:

So Gillian some of these assets are going to be things that are very topical and others are going to be things that are relating to the module materials. How is this going to work for students currently studying Environmental Studies and will it give them an idea

then about what they could go on to do because there's lots of new modules and lots of new things in production I hear.

Gillian Rose:

Absolutely, yeah. Now that's another one of the things that we're hoping Geography Matters will be able to do. So each of the items is going to make some reference to a Geography or an Environmental Studies module. And we're hoping that'll give students a little bit of a feel of what other modules are like. The kind of things that they're interested in. The things that students will learn if they decide to take those modules.

So we're hoping that Geography Matters might also be a way of helping students make choices about what other modules they want to go on to study in the future.

Karen Foley:

And of course these things permeate so many areas about everyday life and some students studying Environmental Studies they'll have a qualification website hub. And of course the idea with these qualification sites is that they're a place for people in between modules and throughout their modules to connect with people with similar attitudes. And that's where this is going to be located and we'll include the link for that in this transcript.

But for other students who may be studying the Social Sciences or even something completely different who may be interested, how can they then access and engage with this community and to what extent really is what they have to say valuable to this whole academic discussion?

Gillian Rose:

I think one of the things that I love about geography in particular as a discipline is that you can do pretty much anything in geography because it's interested in places. Places, landscapes and of course everything takes place in a particular location and that often makes a real difference to the way things work.

So I think geography should appeal to kind of everyone really and it's absolutely the case that everyone no matter what you're studying, what you're interested in, please you're very welcome. Come along to the Environmental Studies qualification website. Read the materials, listen to our podcast, watch our videos and get involved in forum discussions if you feel like it.

Other assets we've got planned. We have quite a long essay by an enthusiast for a 19th century Russian anarchist who's often thought of as one of the founding fathers of geography as a discipline. He's a guy called Peter Kropotkin. So that might appeal to historians or to political theorists interested in anarchism as a theory.

Another example I could mention, the asset that I'm designing is interested in digital technologies and particularly how digital infrastructure shape the way that some cities are organising themselves now and being managed and so on. That might appeal to people doing design studies, urban studies, maybe even people in computing or science studies. So we're hopefully going to make these assets as appealing to as wide a range of audiences as possible.

Karen Foley:

So anyone who's an OU student at the minute can access the site. And of course there's loads of material on OpenLearn for people who aren't yet OU students who might be interested in some of these also. But I guess your take home message is that anybody can come and be involved, can experience and enjoy these assets and can contribute to what seems like it would be a really lively and topical discussion.

Excellent. Well I look forward to hearing how that's going and finding out more in due course. But I just wanted to finish by asking you a little bit about something that you are doing because I hear that you're commencing a post at the University of Pretoria as an Andrew Mellon Project Distinguished Scholar. So can you tell us what are you guys looking forward to about that?

Gillian Rose:

Well right now, actually what I'm most looking forward to is the fact it's 28, 30 degrees in Pretoria so I'm looking forward to a little bit of sunshine and some warm weather.

More seriously as part of my academic research for decades now actually I've looked at various kinds of issues in terms of the way that cities work. But the cities I've looked at and done research projects in have all been in the UK. In fact most have been in England, London, Milton Keynes, Bedford. So I've been basing my understanding of cities on actually a very small and particular group of them. And in fact urban theory in general does that. A lot of urban theory is based, although it thinks it talks about the city, actually it's usually talking about London, Paris, New York, Berlin.

So what I'm really, really looking forward to actually is going to a place which has such a very different history in terms of the way its cities have been organised and structured.

So obviously during Apartheid South African cities were divided. They were segregated very clearly on grounds of racial categories. But since Apartheid I understand that there's a very complicated legacy still of those segregations that were put in place under the Apartheid regime but also a lot of new developments. There's an emerging kind of new black middle class that's changing the way in which cities look and are structured.

And Johannesburg in particular I've been reading various things that claim that it's not just the capital of South Africa but it's actually the capital of Africa itself. Because there are so many different communities of migrants from other places in Africa who are each

making a kind of particular contribution again to the way that the city works and functions.

So what I think I'm most looking forward to is just learning more about cities that have got a pretty different history from the ones that I'm most used to.

Karen Foley:

Thanks Gillian. That all sounds really interesting. I'm looking forward to hearing how it's going and to finding out more myself.

But now let's talk to Nick Bingham who is the Lead of the Environmental Studies qualification programme. To find out exactly how Environmental Studies are contributing to Geography Matters.

Now Nick you're very interested in Environmental Studies and so are many students. However, not all of them are studying Geography or Environmental Studies. So can you tell us a little bit about the subject? I mean what is it about the environment that appeals to so many people?

Nick Bingham:

OK. Well obviously environmental issues are posing multiple challenges to people and ecosystems across the planet. And a lot of people currently studying the qualification are very motivated by that in terms of the urgency of the situation, wanting to find out more about it, wanting to do something about it. More than that I think there's a growing appreciation that being able to respond to these kind of challenges as well depends on appreciating the complex interconnections between their societal and their biophysical components. The political and the ecological, for example, or the economic and the geological.

So the OU's Environmental Studies degree and diploma bring these interconnections front and centre. We can start from there. And we offer a distinctive social sciences led but still interdisciplinary take on environmental issues.

But as well as that, as well as the content of the modules and the qualifications increasingly people are realising that the combination of that broad based social science teaching and the ability to work between social sciences and natural sciences that Environmental Studies offers is extremely valued by employers. Not just in the obviously environmental field. So there are lots of reasons to study the newly refreshed degree.

Karen Foley:

And can you tell us a little bit about how we actually are teaching Environmental Studies. I mean like you say are so topical, so interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary that must leave a lot of things to combine. How then do students experience this in their learning?

Nick Bingham:

Throughout the Environmental Studies qualifications we use case studies to develop what we call an environmental imagination. What we mean by that is a combination of knowledges, skills and concepts that together will help students make sense of any environmental issue that they come across either inside or outside the modules.

What the Geography Matters Initiative gives us is the opportunity to show students how they might put this environmental imagination or way of thinking to work in relation to topical matters of concern of various kinds. And I guess also to see how we academics put our own environmental or geographical imaginations to work which we hope might be interesting too.

Karen Foley:

So it's all about a way of studying things with there being so many multidisciplinary and even interdisciplinary things going on. That must be quite complex and I guess part of this Geography Matters is finding a way of actually investigating some of those issues. But for students who may not be studying Environmental Studies but have an interest in it what use would their say be on these forums? I mean what benefit is there in them participating?

Nick Bingham:

The Geography Matters Initiative is designed not to be exclusive in any sense to what you're studying, to what your background is. And certainly we'd invite students from all kinds of backgrounds studying all sorts of subjects and qualifications to come and have a look. Participate, don't be shy. Bring your perspective, you know, what motivates a lot of people's interest in these issues whether it's academically or as citizens is that they've got a concern that they're not quite sure how to think about or what to think about because as you say these are very complex issues.

So come along. Use your example, whether it's your concern about local waste, global warming, GM food, whatever it is we're going to be touching on lots of different kinds of issues and we value all sorts of different opinions. This is about a conversation, different conversations, getting people involved and taking different things on board.

Karen Foley:

Now geography as we know is very, very varied so I've been asking the others about various projects that they're working on. Now can I ask about this Bee Keeping Practice Project that you are currently bidding for some funding on?

Nick Bingham:

I am. I'm currently developing some research that explores responses to the bee crisis which as people probably know has seen a dramatic decline in the health of bee populations over the last decade or so.

What I'm interested in is how some bee keepers have been modifying their bee keeping practices in response to the bee crisis in order to improve bees' chances of survival. So they've been experimenting with different kinds of hives, reducing pesticide use, less emphasis on getting high honey yields and so on and so forth. Now what interests me about these experiments as a social scientist, as a geographer, as an environmental geographer is both what works and what doesn't work for the bees obviously but more generally also what we might learn from them and these experiments and from the bee keepers more generally, in terms of reinventing our relationships with our environments. How can we better care for environmental matters of concern?

Karen Foley:

Excellent. That sounds really useful and hopefully will result in a lot more honey. Thank you very much Nick Bingham.

Nick Bingham:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

Well thank you for filling us in on all of that Nick.

We're now going to speak to Michael Pryke who is the Head of Department of Geography at the Open University to find out more about teaching and why these sorts of things are so appealing to students.

Michael Pryke is the Head of Department of Geography and he's also involved in developing the Geography Matters Initiative. So thanks for joining me today Michael. I wonder if you could start by telling our listeners a little bit about the department. What's happening and what's involved in geography?

Michael Pryke:

Geography at the OU I guess is quite different from a lot of geography departments in conventional universities. In conventional universities you would have a department that combined human geography and physical geography. Here at the OU we focus mainly on human geography. So what you would have in terms of the teaching materials are a human geography/social sciences take on some of the big issues, the big challenges facing the world today, ranging from climate change through to migration.

But there are other areas of our teaching and our research that some people might find quite odd to find in a geography department. There are colleagues, for example, doing work on power. There are people doing work on finance. There are people doing work on visualisation software and visual methods as well as those who are more directly involved in issues to do with climate change.

Karen Foley:

And the Geography Matters Initiative sounds really exciting. But can you tell us why activities like this are so important to students?

Michael Pryke:

I think one of the main drivers behind this initiative was to provide students following the Environmental Studies qualification with a sense of being part of an academic community. So that they would have a set of resources that would help them see firstly the relevance of some of the ideas that they would come across in the modules making up the Environmental Studies qualification.

But also to be able to drop in to a series of conversations that are about the research interests of colleagues within the geography department. So, for example, in some of the contributions to Geography Matters coming up you will find material on the nature of borders and migration issues confronting Europe currently.

You will find stuff on seeds. You will find stuff on the bees that aren't immediately pertinent to some of the issues and questions that will be coming your way in the Environmental Studies qualification. But they are there to give you a sense of being part of the university community which is about pushing around ideas and showing the relevance of ideas to issues current in the world outside.

Karen Foley:

And of course many of those aspects you've talked about they're so embedded in the social sciences. You'll find them in psychology, you know, general social sciences modules, politics, economics, etc. So this campaign would have quite a broad appeal then to a lot of students. At the moment though can you tell us who can access it and what your plans are for the future?

Michael Pryke:

Immediately our focus is to provide a set of resources for those students following the Environmental Studies qualification. It'll be accessible more broadly by OU students. And in the longer run the idea is to make the sets of resources, the sets of conversations, these various assets from social podcasts through to short videos. Make all that available to the wider community. Showing the relevance of a geographical imagination to some of these major issues and the interconnected nature of these issues as well. So migration links to urbanisation leads to climate change, all that sort of stuff.

Karen Foley:

Finally I just wanted to ask a little bit about something that you're up to. Because I hear that you are also involved in a project and your latest one is on the Thames Water Financialisation that'll be used by the Mexican government for teaching purposes to

make a podcast. Can you tell us why are the Mexican government so interested in Thames Water?

Michael Pryke:

I think the interest that came our way from the Mexican government stems from some work that a colleague of mine, John Allen and I did on the privatisation and then Financialisation of Thames Water. That was something that was published in the Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society. And it was picked up by an academic at the Autonomous National University of Mexico. And why they were interested in this particular paper is because they are looking to ways to privatise water in Mexico. And so they're wanting to draw on lessons from around the world.

Karen Foley:

And is it a good idea then?

Michael Pryke:

I think what we discovered in relation to Thames Water is that the way in which the introduction of private finance was conducted meant that it's become a better deal for investors and private financiers than it has for Londoners.

Karen Foley:

Thank you Michael Pryke that's been really useful. Thank you.

Michael Pryke:

OK, thank you.

Karen Foley:

Well thank you very much Michael Pryke. That's been really interesting and I can see how this would be of real use to students. And don't forget that if you are interested in Environmental Studies there's plenty of material on OpenLearn that anybody can access completely free of charge.

And if you are registered on the Environmental Studies qualification do check out that qualification website where you can find out more about this project as it emerges.

Well unfortunately that's all we've got time for in this March edition of PodMag. I hope you've enjoyed finding out about Geography Matters and about how you can get involved. Don't forget to follow us on the faculty Facebook page and also on Twitter @OUSocSci. And if you've got anything that you'd like to feature in future issues of the PodMag do email me: PodMag@open.ac.uk

Karen Foley, that's all for now and I'll look forward to speaking with you again in the April edition. Bye for now, have a good month.