

PodMag May 2016

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, the audio news magazine from Social Science at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and in this May edition we're taking a special look at End of Module Assessment. Many students will be working on their final piece of assessment if they started in October and so I've asked DD102 module Chair Georgina Blakeley for some advice.

I also spoke to Helen Clough from Library Services about where students can look for additional help with referencing. And finally we're including some student contributions from a session that Jacqueline Baxter did with a group of students who were thinking about final assessments.

But first I'll fill you in on a few pieces of news.

Well last month it was Charter Day. This is a big thing for the OU and each year since we've got the Royal Charter in 1969 we celebrate this event. Charter Day though was invented a couple of years ago to mark this annual anniversary of the formal founding of the OU.

Now universities don't need a Charter to operate but it's important to us because the Charter, a document made under a seal granted by the Crown for the creation of an organisation, was set up by the Labour government and it made it difficult for the next government which turned out to be Tory in 1970 to get rid of the OU.

So Charter is all about defence but it's also about unity. It created a single legal entity from an otherwise disembodied university with many parts to the student body. It's also about educational wellbeing of the community generally. Not just students but the OU are involved with television, radio, Future Learn, MOOC's and so on.

One of the MOOC's from Social Sciences Challenging Wealth in Income Inequality started on 25th April. And that's a four week free online course and its three hours a week.

Recently we dedicated an issue of the PodMag to the new Geography Matters Project and please do check out the qualification website to see the new assets that are there for you.

Finally, I'd like to pay a tribute to Doreen Massey, socialist, feminist, engaged geographer, an influential public intellectual who died during the night on March 11th aged 72. Her academic base was the Open University to which she was strongly loyal because of its openness and accessibility to those who wanted to learn.

Doreen Massey had a steady flow of books things like *For Space*, *The Anatomy of Job Loss and Space*, *Place and Gender*. She also made contribution to the books of others such as Huw Beynon's *Digging Deeper*, a collection on the politics of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike. And she worked alongside others such as David Harvey to establish geography as the intellectual source of a powerful integrated critique of predatory capitalism and the age of climate change and a corporate driven global market.

She is very much missed by her friends and colleagues. And Geography are organising an event alongside the Royal Society of Geographers in September to pay tribute to Doreen.

So now we move on to the first of our interviews. And I asked DD102 Module Chair Georgina Blakeley her advice for students with upcoming TMA's and exams.

Hi Georgina Blakeley. You're the Chair for DD201 and I wanted to talk to you about EMA's because a lot of students are going to be looking at doing assessment in the month of May and this will be out in early May so there'll either be well advanced or in a state of reasonable or maybe sheer panic.

So I wanted to ask you firstly for those students who don't know what's the difference between an EMA and a TMA? They look quite similar but how are they different?

Georgina Blakeley:

Most modules will have an EMA and that may take the form of either some kind of essay or an exam. And they tend to differ from earlier assignments in two key ways. First of all they tend to require students to look back over the module as a whole. So rather than assess you on just one block they're asking you to take the module in its kind of comprehensive view and perhaps to draw on materials from one or more blocks.

The second key difference is that the EMA will generally be marked not by the tutor who has previously marked your assignments and provided you with feedback. Rather they'll be marked by another tutor on the same module.

Karen Foley:

So in terms of that side of things then what advice would you give to students if it's not their normal tutor marking their work what things should they bear in mind other than the obvious which is addressing the set question. Are there any tips you could give students?

Georgina Blakeley:

Yes. This really applies for all assignments but particularly for the EMA. The first thing that I would say is to read the student notes. By this stage of the module we really, really want students to pass. The module team wants you to pass, your tutors want you to pass so we're not looking to set trick questions. We're not looking to trip you up. So use the student notes because they really are an essential guide as to what the module team is looking for in answering the EMA question or in doing the exam.

So there'll be plenty of tips in there, plenty of clues as to what materials you should be using and how to approach the actual question or exam that you're being asked to do.

And the second thing I would say is make sure you speak to your tutor. Your tutor may well be one of the markers who's not perhaps marking your assignment but certainly will be doing the marking on the module for the EMA. So they're going to know what the question or the exam requires too. So speak to your tutor if you've got any doubts at all about what the EMA question or the exam is asking you to do.

And I guess the final piece of advice for the EMA is that if you can attend a tutorial whether that's face-to-face or online or a day school because most modules will have a specific session geared to helping students do the EMA.

Karen Foley:

Some of our students, not many, but some will be doing exams so of course with the EMA it's a seen aspect whereas for exams there may or may not be a seen question. But exams are a very different sort of set up and often are associated with a little bit more panic like the EMA. So what advice could you give to students who may be having an exam or may be needing to cram things in right now?

Georgina Blakeley:

Well I think the first thing to say is be realistic and by that I mean you can't go back and look at all the study materials that you've looked at over the sort of past 30 weeks or so of the module. So there are a number of short cuts that you can take to do that looking back over the material. So, for example, use the Conclusions, use the Summaries. Don't look at the chapters as a whole. Be selective. Look back at your previous assignments and particularly the tutor feedback on those. And look back at your own notes because by doing that you've already kind of got a process of selection of what is going to be the most important material for you to concentrate on when it comes to revision.

And the second thing that I would say there is that when you're looking at these Summaries, Conclusion, your own notes, your own assignments do so actively. So read them with a view to underlining, taking notes yet again so you end up with a summarised, abridged version of all the materials that you've looked at.

Karen Foley:

I've had a lot of students getting the past papers from the OUSA shop and going through those questions. How useful would you say that is?

Georgina Blakeley:

I think it's good just to kind of see what type of questions there are but I would say don't put too much store on those because your exam will be specific to that presentation of the module. So look at them for a feel of the kind of questions that you might be asked but don't spend a lot of time answering those questions and doing model answers. Because I think if you do that and you get your own exam paper that has different questions then it might suddenly throw you.

So I think the thing to do is to really concentrate on using the study materials, the Conclusions and the Summaries and use those as a guide as to what you need to revise.

Karen Foley:

And some students might be feeling very anxious about this. Who should they go to? What support is there that the OU can offer people either for an EMA or for an exam if students are feeling a bit panicky about things?

Georgina Blakeley:

Yeah. And it's understandable. I think everybody feels nervous about exams. I mean I think if I had to do an exam today I would feel equally nervous. Some nerves are good because they can kind of help you to perform on the day but if you think you're getting too nervous and too stressed then obviously your tutor is always the first port of call for support. But there's also an array of other support too, so for example you can ring the OU Student Support Team and they will advise you and provide advice on how to help you.

And of course there are plenty of exam techniques on the Study for Skills website at the OU as well. So they're worth a look at too. There's lots of different resources there that might help students.

Karen Foley:

Wonderful, Georgina Blakeley thank you very much. I hope you found that useful.

Our next brief interview is with Helen from the Library Services and I asked her about that age old issue of referencing.

Helen Clough thank you for talking to me today. Now I wanted to ask you about referencing. It's something that students can sometimes meet with anxiety but it's something that's really fundamental. So fundamental in fact that in some modules and some assignments you cannot get past a certain mark without following a good referencing format.

So can you tell us broadly why is referencing important?

Helen Clough:

Well it is important and in academic assignments you reference the ideas of other people that you have referred to. And this is so that people can find the material that you've referred to and it's also broadly to do with plagiarism as well. Just to check that you are acknowledging the work of others.

Karen Foley:

So students would often be referencing I guess chapter authors or online materials from the module?

Helen Clough:

They can be referencing anything. We have produced a guide to using the OU Harvard style referencing which is the one that's most commonly used in the university. And in that guide we have about 30 or 40 different reference types. Anything from websites going in module materials, to things like patents, email conversations, wiki's, blogs, Tweets, so that guide gives a lot of practical examples and guidance.

Karen Foley:

And where can students get that?

Helen Clough:

There's a link to it from the home page of the Library website and also if your module uses the OU Harvard guide then it will often be in the assessment guidance on the module website.

Karen Foley:

Perfect. But broadly there there's two types of referencing aren't there? There's an In Text Reference and an End Reference. How important is it to grasp those ideas?

Helen Clough:

So there's two steps to doing the OU Harvard referencing, there's the In Text citation so when you actually refer to the idea or material while you're writing your assignment you would then pause and put in brackets the author's surname and the date. And there are also other ways of doing it and you can find those in the guide.

And then at the end of your work you need to put the full reference in a reference list and formatted in the correct style and listed alphabetically.

Karen Foley:

And for students who may need a bit of help with this, I know the Library offer various forms of support. Can you tell us briefly what those are?

Helen Clough:

Yes. So the main support is in the guide but also if students have any problems at any point they can contact the Library help desk and the contact details are on every page of the Library website. And we can certainly give you help on referencing.

Karen Foley:

Thank you very much Helen Clough.

And finally we have a piece with Jacqueline Baxter who talked to some students about their tips for other students.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Hi, I'm Jacqueline Baxter and I'm an academic in Social Sciences. And I'm talking to Ben, Kelly and Androulla about their experiences of tackling OU exams and EMA's.

Ben when you last did your exam how did it feel in the run up to it and what kind of things did you do to make it a bit easier?

Ben:

Well exams can be a nervous time but I think with the right preparation you can get through it. So I try to revise often, in short bursts. Chunk the material up that I looked at in the module across the course of the year, and try and give myself as much time as possible to do my revision.

Jacqueline Baxter:

So make yourself plenty of time, really carve out a chunk of time to be able to do that. Androulla any tips?

Androulla:

Yeah. Similar to Ben really obviously it's a nervous time and something important for your studies. So have a revision timetable, look at past exam papers, look at different topics and themes that flow through the material and try to focus on that really.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Kelly doing the EMA must be a little bit different to doing an exam. What strategies do you have for planning for your EMA?

Kelly:

Basically you need to make sure that you're aware of the EMA deadline. It's always a good idea to revisit the learning outcomes and make sure that, you know, your answers do satisfy each of those. And also if you've got any queries at all then do address those with your tutor quite early on.

Jacqueline Baxter:

How do you feel on the day of the exam?

Ben:

Well I think if you've prepared well enough in advance that can be quite reassuring. And I think there are certain things you can do beforehand. Simple things such as make sure you know where the exam location is. Make sure you've got a place where you can park. Double-check the time. So things just to reassure yourself so you don't have any additional stress on the day.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Does that mean sometimes actually going physically to the exam venue the day before?

Ben:

You could do. If you're particularly anxious about that, about the location and you could do some tests by yourself so you know exactly where it is.

Androulla:

For me I would, again similar, make sure I know the timings and the venue. On the day of the exam I wouldn't revise I would leave my revision the night before so to me it feels that whatever I've retained previously that's all I'm going to retain so I wouldn't add extra pressure on myself on the day. I would try and be as calm as possible. Get to the venue early. Have all my things with me, my water, my pens, pencils and just be as prepared as possible.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Do you tend to talk to other students as the EMA is coming up Kelly?

Kelly:

Most definitely. Fortunately for myself I did make friends along the module so I was able to swap emails and, you know, we sort of ask each other questions and bounce ideas off one another. And also there's the use of the forum which is, you know, particularly helpful as well.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Kelly:

I found the forums a bit nerve racking at first but once you get going I mean they're really useful to have there. You can bounce ideas off the other students and obviously receive support from them as well. And then you get like a whole host of answers which you sort of can, you know, review and go through. And also your tutor will be reviewing the forum whilst the module is ongoing.

Jacqueline Baxter:

What about for exams? Do forums help in exam revision?

Androulla:

I found them really useful because you could get different tips from different students, things that you might not have thought of. Things like flash cards that wasn't something I thought of initially but when I saw another student use them I thought that would be a good idea. And it's also good to see that you're not alone and a lot of people can get nervous and stressed so you can give guidance, receive support as well. So for me very useful, yeah.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Really useful indeed.

Ben:

I think similar to Androulla, I think I got some good tips for revision from there, for example, looking at learning outcomes as a place to start organising your revision. But in the same way as Kelly said about support is that you realise you're part of a community of students, you're not the only person who's going through it at that time.

Jacqueline Baxter:

So they sound as if they're really useful to break that sense of isolation and to help with those pre EMA and exam nerves.

Ben, Kelly and Androulla:

Yeah.

Jacqueline Baxter:

What about the role of the tutor Ben? What does your tutor do to help you before the exam?

Ben:

I think your tutor can offer quite a lot of guidance because obviously they would have been through this situation many times. So sometimes tutors will offer a practical session to support students in exam preparation. But otherwise if you want to contact your tutor on a one-to-one basis then I'm sure they'll be happy to help you out in any way they can.

Kelly:

For me my tutor was helpful in that we had a revision tutorial a few weeks before the exam so that was good to prepare all of us. It was good to be able to meet other students who were in the same boat. And obviously talk through ideas and different strategies of how they're planning and what they're focusing on and it's good to keep in contact with your tutor and students I think.

Jacqueline Baxter:

Absolutely. And one last question if you were talking to a new student to the OU who'd never been through this before what tips would you give to them?

Ben:

Prepare a revision plan if you can. Give yourself enough time to revise and you probably know more than you think, so don't be put off.

Jacqueline Baxter:

By that last minute feeling of, oh dear I know nothing, yeah, yeah. OK a really good tip.

Kelly:

I would suggest just, you know, having regular liaison with your tutor. Don't be afraid to ask questions as silly as they may seem they've probably heard it before and can sort of, you know, put your mind at ease. Revisit your notes and just highlight any areas which you think may come up within your EMA.

Androulla:

I would always get past exam papers from previous presentations. Always speak to my tutor. Make sure you read through the assessment guidance. Keep in touch with students on the forums and stay focused.

Kelly:

You're learning about something you want to do and you're working towards that degree.

Jacqueline Baxter:

That's a lovely note to end on. Thank you all very much and good luck with your exams and the EMA's.

Karen Foley:

Unfortunately that's all we have time for in this edition of the PodMag. Remember to tune in to Radio 4's Thinking Allowed and our Friday Thinker, which is on each week on the Faculty Facebook page, you can also follow @OUSocSci. Until next month good luck for those of you with EMA's and exams and I hope that you found this edition useful.