

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the September PodMag, the audio news magazine from Arts & Social Sciences at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and in this edition I'm talking to Georgina Blakeley, Alison Green and Nicky Harlow.

For many students it's time to start studying in early October, whether you are studying for the first time or beginning a new module we often have ideas about things we're going to do. Sometimes its ideas about what good studying should look like, or perhaps its things that we've struggled with and are determined to do differently.

Like many resolutions these can be tricky to identify and stick with, so I challenged Georgina Blakeley to give us her top five tips. Keeping it manageable and realistic, she came back with four and this is what they were.

Georgina Blakeley I wanted to ask you about students approaching module start. We all think ok, new module, new start, let's do something different. And I've had a lot of these ideas in my time some of which I have and haven't completed. I wonder if you could give us some of the most common tips or things that you've heard from students about things that they might do differently that they have a chance of doing this module start.

Georgina Blakeley:

Well I think it's all too easy to fall in to the trap of just thinking, yes this time I'm going to be more organised, I'm not going to procrastinate, I'm going to get things done, and none of those things then happen by week 3 and you feel that you've failed and that then kind of then takes its toll. So I've been thinking about this and what advice I would kind of give either to myself as a student or to other students out there. And I've come up with the following.

The first one is to not compare yourself to anybody else. And by that I mean it's all too easy, particularly with forums and Facebook, to think everybody else is more confident, everybody else is getting far higher scores than you are, everybody else is far ahead in the module. And I think you have to remember that the only person you're competing against is yourself, yeah? And you will have your own goals so stick to those. That goal might simply be getting five more marks than you did last time.

Or if you're a new student you haven't studied for 20 years it might simply be finishing your assignment and getting it in on time. And I think you really have to kind of hold on to that sense of who you are and compete against your own self, not what you think everybody else is going. Nobody gets 80's or 90's all the time. And if you're starting off, in a sense the mark is not important. I know it feels like it's the most important thing but it really isn't. And a big achievement for one student might simply be posting on the forum, because you're filled with lack of confidence and you're scared to put yourself out there, and what are people going to say, and you might have put something that you think

is really silly, but actually doing that for the first time is a huge sense of achievement, as big as getting a 90 or an 80 or whatever marks you happen to be getting.

Karen Foley:

That's great advice Georgina. What is your next tip?

Georgina Blakeley:

Something that tutors say all the time and it's very easy to say and much harder to do, and that is to engage really positively, really constructively with the feedback that your tutor will give you on every assignment. It's human nature that the first thing that you do is look at the mark, and then you're either absolutely ecstatic or totally disappointed. So OK, look at the mark, that's fine, then go away and think about it, you know, make yourself a cup of tea, a cup of coffee, and then come back and look at the feedback.

And you really need to set aside time to do this, you can't just skim it and do it in ten minutes. And sit down, take notes. What does your tutor say that was good? What did you do well? Because there will be things in there even if you got a low mark that you actually did well. Make a list of those. Then make a list of the areas that you need to work on. And perhaps pick one or two of those just to focus on for your next TMA.

And I think if you start to do that and really think of it as your tutor trying to help you, you know, they're not out to make you feel small, they're not out to be really hypercritical. They really want you to pass. So if you look at it in that way I think it's much more helpful than thinking, oh dear I've done so many things wrong what am I going to do. And don't think oh, you know, there's ten things that I need to work on. That's really hard to do. Think realistically and think, well OK I'll work on these two for the next TMA and see if I get these much better. See if my tutor notices and says, oh yes there is an improvement there, and then pick the next two, yeah. So tiny steps forward.

Karen Foley:

Lovely. What's your third tip?

Georgina Blakeley:

Learn to ask others for help and that may generally be your tutor, that's often your first port of call. But it could also be other students and that might entail going on the forum and having the confidence to ask those questions. There is no such thing as a silly question, all questions are valid.

Karen Foley:

So what do you mean by help then?

Georgina Blakeley:

It could be support with finding things. It could be support with understanding a particular concept or particular study materials that you're struggling with. It could be technical help, any kind of sort of help. People learn in different ways and they require different types of support so what works for one student might not necessarily work for another. But I think what most students have in common is that they feel that if they're asking for support, if they're asking for help, it's almost like asking for a favour. Or they're asking for special support that's not been given to other students.

It's not like that at all. All students at some point in their studies, no matter how successful they've been will need some kind of support. And that's part of being a student.

Karen Foley:

What is your final piece of advice?

Georgina Blakeley:

I couldn't resist this one. It's don't procrastinate. We all do it and we know that we're doing it. So yes, you know, you go on Facebook and see what people are doing. Go on the forum, have a chat. But if you've really got a chapter to read then going on the forum isn't going to help you to read the chapter necessarily. You're still going to have to sit down there and do the hard work.

So recognise when you're doing it and perhaps say, well OK I'll go on the forum for ten minutes when I've read this section.

Karen Foley:

And I guess that again is why having these goals and quantifiable and achievable goals would really help people focus. That's brilliant advice, thank you so much Georgina Blakeley.

Georgina Blakeley:

No worry, it's a pleasure.

Karen Foley:

If you have some tips or thoughts on what Georgina had to say let us know by emailing: podmag@open.ac.uk

In our next interview we focus on the faculty merger between Arts & Social Sciences that forms part of the academic restructure of the Open University. I asked Alison Green about how this might have a positive impact on curriculum, research and what this means for our students.

Alison Green in your new role you are now the Associate Dean for Curriculum, Qualifications and Partnerships of the new super faculty the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. This is a massive, massive job with so much opportunity and scope. Can you tell us firstly what you're most excited about in terms of this faculty merger?

Alison Green:

I think for me the most exciting thing is around the opportunities that this affords us in terms of looking at new ways of working together, and those new ways of working together and how they might bring forward new ideas more rapidly, which we can then translate in to curriculum.

Karen Foley:

So can you give us an example then of something that you're working on?

Alison Green:

Right. The one that I'm most excited about at the moment is it's an opportunity we're exploring in the creative industries. And the creative industries has really captured the imagination publicly, politically, I think because it's booming. I mean we've always had in the UK, we've always had a reputation for being ...the UK. London it's about design. And it's fantastic for me I think to see, you know, how this translates in terms of jobs because that's what we're studying for by and large, to get jobs, for employment opportunities. So 1.9M jobs which is a growth of 20% in the past five years.

And for me the most exciting opportunity in my role looking after a vast amount of curriculum, a huge product portfolio, is thinking about how we can develop that and bring people together. And the most exciting stimulating discussions I think I've had at the OU in recent years have been around creative industries, because everyone has an interest in that. We can all tell a story about something that we can do that contribute to that.

Karen Foley:

And of course there's so many subject disciplines that would be relevant that could add a different perspective on that. Can you tell me then with this new merger and with more interdisciplinary work going on at the university, how some of those conversations are flowing?

Alison Green:

I'm starting the conversations informally because I think it's really important to have people in groups and with brainstorm ideas and we don't constrain thinking. We just about what, well what can we do in this space. And at the same time I'm having more formal discussions with our marketing team – in fact I've just come out of one – looking at exactly where the opportunity might be.

So that's thinking about, well what do students actually want to ... you know which areas are booming and what kinds of qualifications are they, you know, are they telling us that they actually want to study. So, for example, ones of interest are design so I'll be having conversations very soon with colleagues over in the STEM Faculty around design.

But interestingly people want to think about qualifications that enable them to do things like film studies but also become managers. So another really interesting idea is around managing festivals, and that sounds like such a cool thing to do and yet there are some roles in that and people are now developing qualifications specifically geared towards that kind of activity.

Karen Foley:

You're looking I guess right at the start of qualifications that will come out in may be five, ten, however many years, may be even sooner at the rate the Open University is going.

Alison Green:

We really want to push forward on this scene. So this is a sort of watch this space at the moment. So we haven't got the green light yet but this is currently where my thinking is. I think this is one of the most exciting things that I'll be doing in the next couple of years actually.

Karen Foley:

And you did a great job with Psychology and overhauling that curriculum, which has massively changed and we're seeing now new things like Psychology and Criminology coming together. So what can our students look forward to now in terms of more of an interdisciplinary focus from the OU?

Alison Green:

Right at this moment I think what we're looking at are qualifications that bring together different subjects. So we've done a little bit of that. We've got Philosophy, Politics, Economics which has been a really good example where we've brought together three disciplines. It's a classic combination and it's proving hugely popular with the students. And we have a new qualification in History and Politics which has just launched.

So what we're doing is bringing together qualifications. But I think what we need to do is go a little bit further so rather than just bring together modules, we're actually thinking about working in more in to disciplinary teams. I mean we do a lot of this already in our Stage I curriculum, and we're looking at ways in which we can do a little more of that because it's what we're known for. We've always been known for being cutting edge in terms of our interdisciplinary curriculum.

Karen Foley:

Alison Green thank you so much.

Finally we're going to take a look at what makes a good essay. Nicky Harlow is an Arts tutor and a writer herself. So I asked her how essays are marked and also what advice she has for students as a writer.

Nicky Harlow thank you for talking to me today and I'm very glad you've managed to come into the studio because you're an English Associate Lecturer. And you must mark a lot of essays, and I have a question which is, how do you know an essay is good?

Nicky Harlow:

Well for a start the very simple one is to show that you've read the question. I want the question read and answered. And I would like it to have some sort of flow to it and I would like it to be a coherent and cogent argument that follows through to the end.

Karen Foley:

Right. So you're reading a lot of these things. Is there a difference between a coherent essay, is one better than another? There must be different grading criteria's here that you're giving to students?

Nicky Harlow:

Very much so. I mean in the sort of lower grades you would still expect a student to engage with the material, you would still expect the student to provide references and in-text citations. But for the higher grades, for the B and for the pinnacle of an A you would expect something more. You would expect something in the writing style a more professional writing style. You'd expect more flow. You would expect the student to have evidently set parameters for themselves to show a focus in their arguments.

Karen Foley:

OK. So say students are writing an essay then and they're selecting from the range of I guess recommended sections of the module that they've been referred to in their TMA guidance. Is there a right or wrong way of approaching an essay? Can you get a brilliant essay that uses say, fewer pieces of evidence or more pieces of evidence, or is there one piece of evidence that you think, oh without that you can't get it right? How important is that evidence in generating the essay?

Nicky Harlow:

Well often there is a piece of evidence that you will absolutely need but evidence is vital. But sometimes you don't need to cram it in to your essay, you don't need to shoe horn. It must feel natural. That you've made a point and this evidence is illustrating that point and that's all. You don't need to overdo it, you don't need loads of examples for one particular argument, you just need one. And it needs to be well explained. So sometimes less is more.

Karen Foley:

Now you've just done a really useful session on student help live and you've explained note taking and essay writing. And some questions that students had was the difference between Level 1 and 2 in terms of essay writing and what they were doing differently. Can you sum up what you think are the main difference is going from Level 1 to Level 2, what's different in essay writing?

Nicky Harlow:

I think in Level 2 there is a deeper level of analysis and it will be evident in essays. And I also think in Level 1 you will be more involved in explaining your terms in them, defining the different vocabulary that you're given for your subject. So it's more about showing a basic level of understanding. In Level 2 you'll be going up and you will be looking in more detail at different concepts.

Karen Foley:

And what about the process and content words, are they different at different levels?

Nicky Harlow:

I think they are, yes. Because process and content in Level 1 will be involved in your glossary. It will be involved in just getting to grips with your subject. In Level 2 you'll be hit with much deeper analytical terms and you'll be going in to research at a different level.

Karen Foley:

OK. So this sounds a bit scary maybe for students if they're thinking this deeper level and these different analytical terms. Can you learn this?

Nicky Harlow:

You can. Essay writing is a skill like any other and it has tools in that skill, and as you go up through your studies you will learn them. And they'll be present in the learning outcomes of each module.

Karen Foley:

And what about for Level 3 where you really need to evaluate, you're perhaps writing longer essays. What advice could you give students who might be going to Level 3 where they are dealing with, you know, both complexity as well as increased length?

Nicky Harlow:

Level 3 the biggest thing that you'll be demonstrating is that you are becoming an independent learner. So you will be going out and doing your own research. You'll be finding your own examples and your own evidence. You will show a very strong understanding of what you're trying to achieve, of all the basic concepts but apart from that you'll be going off on your own trajectory. You'll be finding the things that you're interested in.

Karen Foley:

I asked Georgina Blakeley what advice she would give to students who were thinking about doing something differently next time. What would your one tip be for students who might be thinking about doing essay writing differently next time?

Nicky Harlow:

Make sure you read the question. I will never stop saying it. My daughter goes to a tutor and her company is called RTQ, and it's the most common mistake always. Read the question!

Karen Foley:

Excellent, Nicky Harlow thank you so much for your advice.

Nicky Harlow:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

Well that is all we have time for in this edition. I hope you've enjoyed it. Let us know your thoughts and if you have some news or something you'd like to be interviewed about, particularly if you're a student please email: podmag@open.ac.uk. The next edition will be out in early October.

Bye for now.