

## **PodMag February 2017**

### ***The PodMag***

#### **Karen Foley:**

Hi, I'm Karen Foley and welcome to the PodMag, the news audio magazine from the Faculty of Arts & Social Science at the Open University.

In this February edition we're focusing on OU students, in particular the Students Association. We take a look at some of the ways that students can be involved in policy and feedback and also talk about some of the ways that you can get involved if you're an OU student.

First though the news. If you haven't already recently take a look at the OpenLearn website which has recently been improved. It's easier to use with a simplified structure to make finding content relevant to your interests easy. And there's also a section to Discover Skills for Study. Also course extracts are now presented in a style that is similar to the material you'll see on your module websites.

To give you a flavour there are two courses that you might want to explore when you visit OpenLearn. There's a course exploring Virginia Woolf's last novel 'Between the Acts'. It's six hours in length and you and it uses extracts from her book to consider how she writes about time, memory and identity. Woolf's work can be perceived as difficult to understand and in tackling some of these aspects you'll get an insight in to why this is considered to be the case and also improve your skills reading dense poetic prose analytically.

If politics and environment are more your thing Land Grab is an eight hour course. Land acquisition or land grab as it is often called offers important lessons about the way that environmental problems are entangled with economic and political issues at an increasingly global scale. The issue illustrates how everyday issues such as food prices are caught up in complex connections that link different places, different people and their livelihoods across the globe.

These are both free courses as is all of the content on OpenLearn. The links to these are in the transcript but do check out the new search function to find something to suit your interests or to supplement your learning.

And finally Exodus: Our Journey to Europe which is an OU BBC production won the prestigious best documentary series award at the Broadcasting Awards. The academics who worked on the programme are Marie Gillespie, Umut Erel and Victoria Canning and the media fellow was Sue Hemmings. Sadly the programme is not currently on the iPlayer but there are a lot of good resources on OpenLearn and the link to those is in the transcript.

Now let's take a look at what OU students have to say about the Students Association. First, I talked to Cath Brown about why societies are important.

**Cath Brown:**

Well I think one the main reasons is they give students a chance to meet other students who've got the same sort of interests. We all know that OU study can be quite isolating at times and so having the chance to socialise with others, get more involved, pursue something that you're really, really interested in is great. And the fact you can get on the committee, you can have experience organising events... so it can actually build your CV as well.

We've got a huge range of societies as well. We've got special faculty based societies, for example, within FASS is the psychology society. We've got a whole lot of general interest ones such as the opera and ballet, central region arts club, music. And we've got some that are completely different such as bell ringing, mountaineering and so on.

**Karen Foley:**

You're the faculty representative for STEM but the Students Association are moving towards faculty reputation and I hear that there's a vacancy for FASS.

**Cath Brown:**

There certainly is, yes. Unfortunately the lovely rep. who was elected in June had to, for personal circumstances, resign. So we're having bi-elections in April. So we're really, really keen to get some good students standing for the role.

**Karen Foley:**

So tell us what makes a good faculty representative then?

**Cath Brown:**

Well first and foremost you've got to want to talk to people, fact-to-face, online, etc. A lot of my role... the students come to me with a particular issue, or they'd like some more information and so I need to be ready and willing to talk to them. I also find myself talking to central academic staff, perhaps a student has forwarded me a query about a module or assessment strategy or something and I can find that out for them or raise a concern. And you have to work with others as well.

In the Students Association we have a team called the Central Executive Committee and that includes people like me, faculty representatives, area based representatives and association officers from the President and Deputy President. To the specialist VPs for communication, student support, equal opportunities, etc. and we work together on things. We're a really good team.

So if you want to be a faculty rep you need to be prepared to communicate with students, enjoy communication with students, happy to learn, happy to develop your knowledge and work with others in a team.

**Karen Foley:**

And I know the one question that all OU students would want to know is how much time does it take?

**Cath Brown:**

It's very, very variable because you really can play it as you wish. I mean, for example, in my case because I'm a bit, a bit over the top like that perhaps, I end up on quite a lot of different working groups. I'm on a working group for the university about the development of a new online tutorial package and a couple of other things. A working group within the Students Association about election review and how we get people more involved at a grass roots level. But you don't have to do all of those things. You can just focus on your faculty role.

They're expected to come to meetings in Milton Keynes four times a year and they're over the weekend and obviously all expenses are paid. And I have to say they're great fun as well as being business, they really are. I've just come back from one, it's been wonderful.

**Karen Foley:**

So how do people find out more then if they're interested in applying for this position?

**Cath Brown:**

Well in the first instance the best bet would be to get in touch with the Students Association office. So if you go to the Students Association website and you'll find an email link there. Alternatively they'd be very, very welcome to ask me as well. I mean you can get hold of me on my university email which is: [cath.brown@open.ac.uk](mailto:cath.brown@open.ac.uk)

**Karen Foley:**

Lovely. And we'll include both of your links for your email and the Students Association office in the transcript. Kath thanks so much for talking to me today.

**Cath Brown:**

It's a pleasure, thank you.

**Karen Foley:**

Next we hear from Stephanie Stubbins. Steph, OU students sometimes say they feel isolated and alone. How can being involved with the OU Students Association help?

**Stephanie:**

Building the OU student community is what the Vice President community role is all about. Engaging and enabling students to connect with each other, supporting and facilitating meet ups whether online or face-to-face. Becoming part of a community can be so important when you have times when you're struggling with your studies. All OU students are automatically members of the OU Students Association. Representative and volunteers of the association are then as a listening ear, community support and to take feedback from the student voice to the Open University.

**Karen Foley:**

So what sort of things can students do to get involved?

**Stephanie:**

Well students can get involved with Students Association in many ways. Such as joining or starting a society which are affiliated to the Students Association. They may be linked to OU specific courses or based on an interest or a hobby. OU students can be found almost everywhere. Getting together to share the highs and lows of studies, sharing study tips or simply having fun. If there isn't a meet up in your area the association can support you in setting up a new meet up. The association runs live Facebook events which include activities during freshers' which welcome students in to the wider student community.

There are also many opportunities to volunteer from being online forum moderator to helping at a degree ceremony or you could write for your OU students magazine. One new way to get involved as a volunteer is becoming a radio host for the association's new radio show Studio.

**Karen Foley:**

That sounds really exciting. So where can students go then to find out more about these opportunities?

**Stephanie:**

You can find out more about the OU Students Association by going to our freshers page on our website. We can also be found on social media through Twitter, Facebook and there's also regional groups on Facebook which you can find by searching.

**Karen Foley:**

And we'll put all of the links to those in the transcript so you can find out more by checking that out. Steph Stubbins thank you so much.

**Stephanie:**

Thank you for having me.

**Karen Foley:**

Finally, Cinomen McGuigan tells us about the Write Club and about how students are supporting other students.

Cinomen, you're the deputy chair of the Write Club which is a really exciting peer-to-peer support for any OU student interested in reading and writing. Can you tell us about what the group do?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

Write Club are the creative writing society for past and present Open University students. We're affiliated to the OU Students Association and we will be turning two in a few days. We offer, what we offer mostly is peer-to-peer support. We are there to give feedback and critique and general chit chat to other people that are doing the same thing. A lot of us are writing for competitions or just for the fun of it really and you just want to be able to share that with other people that know the journey you're going through.

**Karen Foley:**

So what sort of things could people contribute in terms of the writing? Are you specific to genres or disciplines?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

No. Right Club accepts all things. We have a prose forum, we have a poetry forum, we have a novel support forum. But we are open to any kind of writing. It doesn't have to be fiction, it can be non-fiction. It can be technical writing. It can be anything because we're made up from across faculties. Not all of us have done the creative writing modules. Not all of us are strictly within the arts. We have members from the Sciences, from Humanities, from Law, we have everything. So no matter what you're trying to write about there will be people that have worked in those fields within the club that can give you better feedback than just making it up yourself. So it gives you access to a whole range of people that can make your writing tighter.

**Karen Foley:**

So why is it then so invaluable to have the support from your peer group?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

When you do the creative writing modules with the Open University one of the main things that they push and is really important to do well is peer support, it's peer feedback. So you get blind to seeing what's wrong with your own pieces. You've read them and read them and read them and by the time you're on the 18<sup>th</sup> draft you're reading what you think is there and not what's actually there.

So what we do is we offer fresh eyes on those pieces. If you put a piece of work up in the shared forum and say, I need you to look at this for general story, I need you to look at this first grammar checking, I need you to look at this because I feel that there's

something wrong but I don't know what it is. And then if you get a dozen people that come along and they all say, well actually the ending's a bit rubbish, you could tighten that up. Then you know that that's where you need to focus on that story. And you wouldn't have seen that yourself because you do get blind to what you're reading.

**Karen Foley:**

So is this then for people who are wanting to have work published or could it be for people who are just writing for the enjoyment factor?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

We just cover all range of that spectrum. We have people that are writing for fun. They literally just write little haikus for fun, they're not trying to take it further. They just want to write because they enjoy it but they still want it to be the best piece it can be.

And then at the other end we have people that are currently in negotiations with editors and looking for illustrators for their particular work. They're actually at the point where we're looking at what's called beta reading which I'm sure a lot of you will be aware of. But if you're not it's where you're reading it through a pretty much finished piece to look for the gaping plot hole and story bits are missing. Or where you've got a plot that just vanishes into thin air and hasn't been resolved properly. So we do offer all stages of feedback.

**Karen Foley:**

It must be quite useful to both be able to take and also give feedback on other things. That must be quite helpful in terms of developing your own critical stance?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

I really feel that critiquing somebody else's work makes you see your own work differently. Because you notice in other people's works the things that you do too. Like my biggest issue is comma usage. Comma splicing. I am terrible, terrible, terrible with commas. I'm slightly obsessive about other people's comma usage too. So we learn from that and you learn from good writing. And you learn from helping others make their writing the best it can be. Because you then apply those things to your own writing.

**Karen Foley:**

So tell us then how it all physically works. You've mentioned that you're a closed group.

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

We have the Facebook group for the day-to-day jaunty surface stuff where we just chat. But for the actual pieces of work it is the closed forum. You put your piece on to the forum and you tell people what level of feedback you're looking for, whether you're new and it's just for fun or whether this is in-depth feedback you're looking for because

you are looking to submit it. So we do have a feedback key so people can say exactly what level they're looking for.

**Karen Foley:**

So how do people actually connect with you and what does membership to the group look like?

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

What we would say for the most people they find us via Twitter or through Facebook. And both of those places in our description it will tell you how to get in touch with us. It would be via email or by application to the group on Facebook where we will ask you for further information to validate the fact that you are an OU student and you do have access to student home. And then we'll send you out information about how to access the forums, how to share work, where we share work.

And you get access to a twice yearly magazine.

**Karen Foley:**

Cin, thank you. It sounds like there's an awful lot going on and it sounds like a really supportive and useful tool not only for you but also for a lot of OU students.

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

I really feel it's one of the best things that I did as an OU student was connect with other people that share my interest and we have access to this great little community.

**Karen Foley:**

All the best with Cin, it sounds brilliant.

**Cinomen McGuigan:**

Thank you.

**Karen Foley:**

That is all we have time for now for in this edition. Keep in touch with us on Facebook and Twitter and if there's something you'd like to include then please email us: [podmag@open.ac.uk](mailto:podmag@open.ac.uk)

Until the March edition have a great month and thanks for listening.

OpenLearn Virginia Woolf - <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/exploring-virginia-woolfs-between-the-acts/content-section-0>

OpenLearn Land Grab - <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/nature-environment/land-grab-environmental-issue/content-section-0>

Exodus -

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/people-politics-law/politics-policy-people/the-making-exodus-our-journey-europe-interviews-keo-films>

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/people-politics-law/politics-policy-people/discussion-hub-exodus-our-journey-europe>

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/tv-radio-events/tv/exodus-our-journey-europe>

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/international-studies/exodus-the-videos>

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