

The PodMag – April 2017

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag the audio news magazine from the Faculty of Arts & Social Science at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and we have some exciting live events to tell you about and that is the focus of this edition.

After our news section I interview Alan Shipman who tells us about the 'Brexiting, How, When and Why Now?' event that is on 3rd May. I then interviewed Chris Williams about the showcase event and that's on 16th May, a fantastic opportunity to find out about the new modules from the faculty. Andreas Vossler has been involved in many of these events before and he fills us in on why they're so useful and what his module team are hoping to get out of the showcase.

But firstly, the news.

Child of Our Time has made another appearance on BBC 1 in early April. Since 2000 the BBC has followed the lives of 25 children all across the UK to find out what makes us who we are. In these programmes we catch up with the children who are now 16. The OU have produced a free booklet that can be sent to you and there's also content in connection with the series and around the subject matter on OpenLearn. The details for those are in the transcript.

In other news FAS have a new Senior Library Manager, Selena Killick. I asked her what students and staff will find most useful about her new role.

Selena, you've just taken on a new role of Senior Library Services Manager for the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. Can you tell us about your role?

Selena Killick:

I can indeed Karen. Thank you very much for the introduction. I'm very excited to be working with the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. We help the students in the faculty through running a series of online training sessions on library skills such as help to find information for their assignments. Or referencing skills which are accessible via the library website. And they're run all year round.

However, we also provide help at the point of need. So if they're struggling feel free to come along to our library website to access our web chat 24/7.

Karen Foley:

What sorts of sessions do you run for students?

Selena Killick:

Well the sessions we run in the evenings and at weekends are primarily around finding information that they will need for their assignments. And they're live online by our librarians. And they'll talk them through the various different information resources and content that we have in the online library.

Our library is very different to most libraries. People don't walk in and pick a book up off a shelf, they go to a web page and access our quality resources that they can trust. And we're here to help them with that.

Karen Foley:

And you also do brilliant sessions on things like referencing and digital literacy which I know students really appreciate. But tell us how you're going to work with the academics in the faculty?

Selena Killick:

Well we already work very well with them but we're going to continue to work in partnership with the academics to ensure the students get the best learning experience. So the librarians go to the learning design workshops to ensure that library skills and content are embedded in to the curriculum at the correct point for the students.

But also we are here to offer interventions for modules in presentation at the point of need. We had a great success last year after one module reached out to us because their students were really struggling with referencing. And we embedded a live training session with the librarian in an evening and the problems were resolved really quickly. The students were able to reference confidently in effectively going forward.

Karen Foley:

Thank you, Selena. Enjoy the new role, I know the library are a great bunch to work with and I'm sure you'll enjoy working with the faculty too.

Selena Killick:

Thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

And now to our live events. First we focus on the event on 3rd May which is about Brexit. These events are all hosted on the student hub live website. They're open access and participants engage with the studio in an online interface that includes a livestream video, chat and interactive tools.

Alan Shipman is one of the organisers for this event and I asked him to fill us in.

Alan Shipman you've been one of our lead planning our Brexit discussion on 3rd May. What's in store for everybody?

Alan Shipman:

Well in the space of about two and a half hours we're planning to run five sessions on five of the key themes that have emerged really around the debate on Brexit and where it's going to lead us.

We'll start with a session on what is the European Union and exactly what was it trying to do. Why did Britain in the end object to that? And then we go in to a session on the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, where does this Brexit decision leave them given that in the case of Scotland and Northern Ireland they didn't actually want to leave.

And after that we have a session on the European identity and the social justice implications of the European project, what it was trying to do and again what's happened with this difference in thinking of the UK. And where will we go in terms of Europe's borders, its social justice, its sense of European identity now that this exit has taken place.

We have a session on the environment because a lot of environmental policy for decades now has been shaped largely by the European Union. So clearly when the UK leaves it will be setting its own agenda and looking differently at its environmental priorities. And there's the inevitable session on the economy in business because that's shaped a lot of the European debates. And there are, as is well known, varying predictions on the economic impact of Britain leaving, whether it will prosper or have serious problems as a result.

Karen Foley:

Gosh, that's a lot to cover in such a short space of time. And of course this is just one of the conversations of many that are happening within the Open University and about Brexit more broadly. What sort of topics do you think are going to come up in conversation from students who are going to be participating in the chat?

Alan Shipman:

Students are free to raise anything and to a certain extent the advantage of this exercise is that we don't pre-judge students' interests. Everyone has experience of this. Everyone's got a view. And we would encourage people to come up with questions and ideas either related to those themes or other themes which people might feel are being under represented here.

So there will be plenty of scope to engage with our academic participants in those sessions and also to raise other issues which relate to those that haven't been directly covered elsewhere.

Karen Foley:

We did one of these sessions just days after the result of the referendum and there was so much discussion on the chat that was also fed back in to the studio. What was really remarkable was the extent to which students who may be studying for one discipline still had opinions about such a variety of things that impacted on them in their everyday life. And it was really apparent that people were, you know, arguing like social scientists, like academics, you know, really trying to support points with evidence and make claims that were often very varied.

So how important is that dialogue, that sense of being able to contribute to an academic community? About things that you may be expert in or you may just have a lay opinion in?

Alan Shipman:

Well the role of experts obviously became controversial during the Brexit campaign. And our hope is that experts and those who've got a good grounding in the social sciences are at an advantage in pronouncing on these issues. But I suppose the point was made very clearly there that everyone has a valid input to this. We are talking about policy issues that affect people's lives and the people whose lives are affected are as entitled to their view as the experts who design policies around them.

And obviously our students we hope are gaining a voice within the arts and the social sciences and finding that with the understanding they gain they can actually articulate a view and support it with their own reasoning and their own evidence. And this sort of event certainly encourages people to do that.

Karen Foley:

So in the spirit of interdisciplinarity you're taking part in the economic session obviously. But what other area do you think you're most likely to contribute to in a chat?

Alan Shipman:

That again is hard to predict. When it comes to adjacent disciplines of the political sciences, sociology, social policy I suppose economists have a view on that but it's very often a rather slanted view. And it's only when they're confronted with people in other disciplines with other perspectives that they realise the economic approach might not be the one that actually chimes with people. Might not be the one that actually works. And I suppose that there has been an element of the European project being economically driven and running in to political objection and social objections, things that the clever economist hadn't always thought of.

So I think rather than thinking about what else can economists intrude in to it's very much a case of hearing the economists view and then confronting them with other aspects from social sciences which have rather different conclusions sometimes on what's good and what the public will tolerate.

Karen Foley:

Thank you Alan Shipman.

The second event is on 16th May and this is a FAS showcase. Chris Williams tells us more...

Chris could you tell us about the showcase event that the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences are doing on 16th May? What's it all about?

Chris Williams:

It's a chance for the Chairs of the modules, the lead academics to tell you, the students, about what's in these new modules and how they're taught. And it's a chance for you, the students, to ask them questions which they can then answer.

Karen Foley:

Now these are live interactive events so what is the value of being able to hook up in real time and connect with some of these academics and talk about some of these modules. What's in that for students?

Chris Williams:

The ability to get your questions answered quickly and in a quick turnaround. You might read the module description and think I'm not entirely sure what that means, that thing. Well, ask the person who wrote it. They'll tell you.

Karen Foley:

And we've challenged the module teams to think about an engaging way to present the key aspects of their module in quite a short session. And it's going to be very visual. Now what's the appeal of that for students?

Chris Williams:

I always think it's a lot easier to remember things when you've got an image as well as just some text or an abstract concept. So, you know, if you can attach a face, a voice, to a module then you've got some idea, you've got a bit more idea about where they're coming from and the module team and it's easier to take anything in to account if you can attach it to a person.

Karen Foley:

And why is it important then to see who is presenting these modules?

Chris Williams:

Well, two reasons. I think the first is it's really good to get a taste of the enthusiasm that these people have for their subjects. But also the second reason is you might find out exactly what bits they're really in to and then you can find out what's the subject, why is this person really in to that aspect of this particular module? What's the bit that's going to be really front and centre in it? You know, is it the sort of thing I want to study.

Karen Foley:

We can't mention all of the modules that are going to be covered in this showcase but broadly speaking what sorts of things can students expect to learn about?

Chris Williams:

Well, we're going to be covering modules from Level 2 all the way to Masters level. And we're going to be looking at psychology, history of Wales, creative writing and so we're going around hopefully social sciences and the arts bits of FASS.

Karen Foley:

And these are all new modules that are being created. Now some students will be lucky enough to be able to be selecting one of these. And so I can see how that will be very helpful. But what about students who maybe aren't in a position to be making a course choice for whatever reason? Why should they come along?

Chris Williams:

I think it's always handy just to sort of lift your eyes up from your book from time to time and look left and right and see what else is going on alongside you. You never know, you might be surprised and think, I didn't have any plans to study this but I do now. It sounds really interesting.

But generally I think one of the good experiences of being part of a university community is the ability to pick up interesting bits of other people's programmes and qualifications as well concentrating on just your own.

Karen Foley:

And in terms of the future then is this sort of thing going to be part of the way that the faculty presents modules to students?

Chris Williams:

Yes. The plan is that around this time of year, around May every year there will be this kind of showcase event timed at a good time for you to make decisions about what you're going to be studying come October.

Karen Foley:

So this is one way of finding out about these new modules that are being created but OpenLearn also has a variety of material. Tell us about what's there.

Chris Williams:

Yes. Well every single module that's produced has a companion course on OpenLearn. And although I've got to reveal that on one of the programmes the MA Philosophy the OpenLearn course isn't quite ready yet. But all the others, I think, are up there already. And so you can go from the arts and social sciences pages on OpenLearn and you can have a look at the topics you are interested in. And you should be able to see a taster course, a little standalone bit, which reflects the content of each one of the modules that we're putting out except the Philosophy MA which should be out in June.

Karen Foley:

Excellent. Chris Williams thank you very much.

Chris Williams:

Thanks Karen.

Karen Foley:

Thank you.

Finally, Andreas Vossler has been a panellist at many student hub live events and his module team are preparing their session. He tells us why these events are so useful.

Andreas Vossler you're part of the DD310 module team preparing to take part in the showcase event. Now this event is obviously important to showcase all of the new modules but it has a particular relevance to your team. Why is that?

Andreas Vossler:

Oh yeah, I mean the showcase event is a really great opportunity for our module team. And that is because ... I mean it offers the possibility to get in to a dialogue with our future students. So students who will study our module or generally Psychology students and that's something we've done from the very beginning of the module production. So we were really interested to hear from our future students whilst we are producing a module what they think about, you know, how we produce a module. What they think about potential assessment types we're going to use on the module.

And we did set up a website called 'The Mad or Bad' website. And that included a forum as well. And that was to be able to, you know, have the dialogue with our students and ask them questions. Like, for example, what kind of assessment types are set. So would they prefer an EMA at the end of the module or an exam. So we got some really interesting feedback from students.

So that's a tradition if you want. We want to continue that dialogue with our students and especially a few months before the first module presentation I think it's really important when you present the module content and what we've done to hear from students how they feel about it, what kind of discussions it kind of triggers. So that will help us then to, you know, think about tutorials and day schools we have to organise together with the ALs.

So it's a really important input we get from students.

Karen Foley:

So you've obviously developed the module in consultation with students but just before it's about to start what sorts of questions are you expecting them to be raising here and now?

Andreas Vossler:

Oh I think it will be interesting to see what kind of questions will come. But I would expect a whole range of different questions. Because I think we will have not only psychology students on DD310 but other students from other qualifications. Forensic criminology qualifications and other students.

So considering that I think there will be questions probably about, for example, employability skills. So what is in the module for people who are thinking about a career either in a forensic setting or in a therapeutic setting. Or is there some content in the module that will help them to prepare themselves for that kind career or inform them about different career pathways, for example.

Then there might be questions about what kind of method teaching are we doing. What kind of statistical skills do the students need. And I can already say that statistics and kind of method skills are covered in the core psychology module. Our module is relatively free of any methods training. So it's really a module that can be studied not only by psychology students but also students from other qualifications without any or too much prior knowledge about methods or statistics or anything like that.

Karen Foley:

The other thing that students might want to ask about is how they might prepare for study that covers quite sensitive and difficult topics which your module does. Would this be a good opportunity for them to spend some time thinking about that?

Andreas Vossler:

Yes. So DD310 really covers some really sensitive topics. Some also very hotly debated topics. And I think the showcase event is a good opportunity to get kind of a flavour, for students to get a flavour and some insight in to those topics so that they are able to prepare themselves for studying DD310. So that might be, for example, if they feel that some of the topics might be quite distressing for them if they studied those issues then it might be to look how can they support themselves or how can they organise support around them to study the module. Or it could be if someone feels they're really in a difficult place at the moment that they might not feel it's the right time to study the module.

Karen Foley:

So it's really all about enabling the students to make an informed choice?

Andreas Vossler:

Yeah, I think that's a very important thing, to make an informed choice.

Karen Foley:

Thank you Andreas Vossler for your time.

Karen Foley:

That's all we have time for in this edition. Join us next month when I speak to three academics who are developing the new MA in Philosophy.

Bye for now and thanks for listening.