

Welcome - what is SSGS? – 15 June 2021

KAREN FOLEY: Good afternoon everybody, and welcome to the Student Hub Live Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Showcase, which is all about exploring the social and the global. My name's Karen Foley. I'm a lecturer here at the OU.

And I recognise some familiar faces. Some of you may be new to Student Hub Live. So let me just explain very briefly how it all works. So this is a chat show. It's our space at the OU for showing and telling you things about our curriculum and many other areas like study skills, workshops, et cetera.

But today we're going to be focusing on some of the exciting new undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. And we've got a packed programme. Whether you're into economics or politics, there really is something here for everybody.

So, do stay tuned. Drop in and out. And you can talk to the lovely Damon who's on our hot desk, and Marie and Lizzie who are on our chat desk from the faculty, also. They're going to be collating and answering your questions, and bringing those to my guests today.

So we've also got some widgets or interactive polls we'd like you to fill in throughout the sessions. That's to get your thoughts on ideas that we're going to be talking about. So you should be able to see a map that lets us know where you are in the country, how you're feeling, what you're studying, et cetera.

Those are fairly self-explanatory. But some of the word clouds, which is where we ask for three words, they need three things. But you don't have to put three things in. A full stop or a dot would suffice, otherwise, your results won't submit. And when you do use those tools, you'll be able to see what everybody else at home thinks, also. So do join in.

There's a little pin button on the chat if you'd like to pause anything and look for later. Very often, we'll share links. You're very welcome to do so. But let me introduce you to Damon who's going to be bringing your thoughts to our panel today. Damon, how are you? And what a lovely parrot, I must say, you have in the background there.

DAMON MILLER: Thank you very much. Yes, this is my inflatable parrot. We had a birthday party a couple of weeks ago, and we had a - it was pirate themed. So everyone came dressed up. And this one sat on my shoulder all the way through. So, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Good, and it's, it's here to stay. So tell me Damon, how's everyone at home?

DAMON MILLER: OK, they're doing OK. I think everyone is, is warm. The sun is out. I think everyone's excited to, to get started. It's, it's all looking good. It's looking busy in the, in the chat box already. So yeah, I think everyone's raring to go.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, and well done being indoors on such a lovely sunny day. Although, it's probably quite sensible to take a bit of a, a rest from the sun. We've got people in from Kent, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire, the Scottish borders, Leeds, and of course, good old Milton Keynes. I'm

in West Wales. And it's lovely and sunny here today, as well. And doesn't it make just such a difference.

Well, let's move on because we have a really packed programme. And to start today's session, I'm joined by the Head of School, Shonil Bhagwat. Now he works closely with the school management team, consisting of eight of the different schools - disciplines in the area. And he's also involved in sustainable agriculture, food security and many other subject areas as well.

We've also got Matt Staples who, amongst other things, is the director of teaching. He does a lot of curriculum development, as well. If you've studied DD102, U116 or DD103, you might recognise his name. He is interested in politics, politics of food, which I think will go down very well with everybody here today, and French foreign policy, which may be not so much. But the food, I think, for sure, is a good start.

And Martin Higginson is an academic in the Economics department, and is working currently as the director of student support. So welcome. I wonder if we could start this session by focusing on one of the global challenges that the disciplines within the School of Social Sciences could collectively address. So Shonil, let me start with you.

SHONIL BHAGWAT: Karen, I would pick food security as one of the challenges that SSGS disciplines could address. Food security is about having reliable, sufficient access to affordable and nutritious food. And a large majority of people in the world are food secure. But there is also a large number who are not food insecure.

And that's really the major challenge in the world. It's a massively complex challenge, because food is really the bottom line of everything that we do. And as a challenge, it's not just about production of food, it's also about distribution. It's also about different practices around consumption of food. And so taken together, eight disciplines within SSGS are very well-equipped to address a challenge like food security.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, thank you Shonil. That's wonderful. And Beverley, a popular Student Hub Live guest has just finished D116. So that's really good to see you here today Beverley.

Food's a really interesting thing Shonil, and thanks for bringing up those issues. That's something we've been talking about a lot. Martin, I wonder if, as an economist, you can, sort of, shed some light, because in addition to doing other things, you're very much into allotment gardening.

MARTIN HIGGINSON: That is true. And I can actually show you a little prop here, just to show I've been down to the allotment already today, which is my onions, which I think went down very well, or will go down very well later. So yeah, certainly, Karen, I mean, I think one of the things which Shonil touched upon was, kind of, inequality, yeah.

And I think one of the striking things last week, actually, at the Cornwall Summit of the G7 leaders was this difference between, on one hand, you had the G7 leaders having this gourmet dinner of locally-sourced food, and yet just a, kind of, few miles down the road, you had a food bank which had had about a two hundred per cent increase in use over the last, kind of, twelve

months or so. And I think as social scientists, what we're really interested in is, kind of, trying to explain that.

And some of that is definitely economics. You know, I mean, part of it is income. Do we have sufficient income to actually buy the produce prices? Not just the price of food, but also the price of alternative things that we have to consume such as fuel. So do we do eating or heating, for example.

And social factors, so - such as, you know, within the household there are, kind of, power dynamics. We often hear about the mother who might feed the children before their partner; social networks.

I'm lucky with my allotment, you know, I've got ten minutes one way, and I can, kind of, pick my own food. Ten minutes another way, and I've got a street full of cafes, shops which have healthy food. But many people don't even have that kind of physical environment. Yeah, I mean, I think it's one in eight people don't even have a garden, yeah, and don't have transport links. And in my hometown of Bristol, you know, one in twenty people actually suffered some sort of food insecurity.

So there's a definite connection here between the local and the global, as well. I mean, Shonil talked about consumption. You know, what we consume can affect climate change, which can affect people two thousand miles away, for example. And so it's a real issue, both locally and globally.

KAREN FOLEY: And there are also so many issues around the food choices, because, as you can say, you know, you've got access to healthy and nutritious food, whereas some people may not have access to some of those things. It may not be desirable - there's so many things that can underpin just the, the basic choices that may be seemingly available that are much more complex in reality.

MARTIN HIGGINSON: Yeah, yeah absolutely. And, you know, that's also compounded by marketing of food, social images of food. That kind of, not so much of the human capital, but the way we actually are brought up in families, our cultural norms, our social norms, kind of, shape those choices, as well. So it's not as straightforward as just saying someone has income or someone has shops down the road. Absolutely, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So, Matt, what might politics then have to offer, in terms of some of these current global challenges? And I see you've brought a prop along, as well.

MATT STAPLES: I have. I've got a great British bangers, which are very topical at the moment. Many people have read about the sausage wars between Britain and the European Union.

But, but to be serious for a moment, obviously, what's happening in Northern Ireland, there's been an impact on food and what can go between Great Britain and Northern Ireland because of the border, because of the Northern Ireland Protocol. It seems fast outage is in. But actually, when you talk about security, we're talking about security of identity. People feel this identity is under threat because of trade being different between Northern Ireland and Britain.

But then going further, you think about the way that actually access to foods securitised during lockdown, and also at the start of Brexit when we didn't have certain things coming into the country because of the dislocation of customs, regulations with new regimes, of governance around import and export. And then with, with COVID, there've been limits on when we can go and access food, what shops are open. Different populations, you know, older people, or people who work for the NHS or for the police, are allowed to go in at certain times, other people at other times. And so [INAUDIBLE] was, kind of, politicised.

Going further, as we've, kind of, distanced ourselves from Europe, you're seeing food almost as foreign policy. So we've just organised and signed, or about to sign a treaty with Australia to have a free trade, free trade treaty with them. Zero tariffs on foods.

They were very keen to sign that, as because we've, we've removed ourselves from Europe. But they - because of their very critical stance on the [INAUDIBLE] the [INAUDIBLE] minority - China, which was their biggest market, has actually put sanctions on thousands of Australian products. And so their biggest market has [INAUDIBLE] overnight.

And so you've got the juxtaposition of a food [INAUDIBLE]. Thousands of Australian farmers now have their livelihoods at threat, juxtaposed with foreign policy. So, you've got new, new relationships being built up between Australia and Britain all to do with food, but actually, to lots of other things: economics, crime, foreign policy, you know, [INAUDIBLE].

And so the simple sausage is a metaphor for actually lots of interrelated questions that link our individual lives with actually global issues. You wouldn't think about when you get some sausages, you're actually linking it with much bigger, kind of, global question there.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, no absolutely. It's throwing up lots and lots of things that, that on the surface level seem very simple, but, but are much more complex. So we asked everyone at home what they'd had for lunch. We've had a lot of mixtures. But again, just these simple sort of questions throw up a lot of things.

Here's what you've been eating today for your lunch. We can see some things that are quite, you know, specific to particular, perhaps, areas, like sourdough bread is perhaps associated with certain areas. Some people are having particular healthy foods, some not so healthy foods, et cetera, but lots going on there.

So Shonil, we can see now that, that food is a really essential commodity, it takes on different sorts of meanings in an increasingly globalised world. I wonder if you might just sum up this section for us.

SHONIL BHAGWAT: Absolutely, I think food is an essential commodity that has become a very mobile in a globalised world. So in old days, you would imagine a small-holder farmer growing food and consuming in their household and possibly the village. But food today is increasingly globalised.

And it's transported hundreds of miles across the world. And so that mobility does not necessarily mean easy access to food for everyone. Food is distributed unequally. And that is why some people in the world are food insecure, sometimes acutely food insecure.

So as Matt and Martin have suggested, economics and politics, as disciplines, have a lot to contribute to understanding that mobility of food. And there are other disciplines in SSGS that collectively - can actually - are actually very well equipped to tackle a complex global challenge like this.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful, thank you, Shonil. OK, so we've seen that there are lots and lots of issues. We asked you at home what are some of the key challenges that affect us, in terms of global challenges and food security. These are some of the things that you mentioned.

Key on people's minds are things like climate change and environment. But there are also other aspects that we've talked about here like: inequality, transportation and economic strengths. So lots and lots of things here being picked up by our audience at home. Thank you for that.

So Matt, we've had a lot of growth in new curriculum in this school. In fact, that's all we're talking about today for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. So why now? Why is there so much increased production of materials for our students?

MATT STAPLES: Yeah, no indeed, I think that, that kind of collage you just showed was actually a really good example of many of the issues we're currently engaged with. As a school, we look at lots of global challenges facing the world today, and the UK's place in that changing world. We draw together lots of rich historical and contemporary insights.

And hopefully we're providing, you know, some of the answers, or at least we're engaging critically with some of those big questions that the students today have actually mentioned. You know, issues around identity, around climate change, around who we are, around our belief system, how we're governed, how our economies work. You know, issues of injustice. And so, ultimately, the school, because of its very diverse background, we've got eight different disciplines, you know, from Philosophy to Criminology, Economics to Politics, Geography to Sociology.

You know, we've got a very [INAUDIBLE] disciplines, which enables us to tackle these big fundamental questions, and also how those big fundamental questions impact on us as individuals, groups and societies in a, you know, in a very complementary way. And hopefully, that's why our growth has been so phenomenal.

KAREN FOLEY: And then lots of issues here people are picking up on. We asked everyone at home what they thought - what their worries were about food sustainability. Matt, take a look at this very quickly, because it shows the diversity of aspects that are covered that I think responds very well, as you said before, to the areas of curriculum that we're looking at, because there are things here to do with environment, but also, as you were talking about, inequality.

So we're looking at affordability, the cost to the consumer. You know, then there are other things like soil degradation and aspects that, you know, ultimately, it's a, it's a power issue, in terms of

who controls what, and what their output is to local people. People are picking up some really key things here.

MATT STAPLES: Yeah, they are. I mean, that's absolutely fantastic. I mean, we're about to have a showcase, you know, exploring international relations, you know, how will they govern, how states relate to each other. We're looking at how societies are organised in DD218. You know, we're looking at global development issues of inequality between societies and in societies.

You know, so we're looking at many of the topics that the students have addressed today. And we are trying to think about these issues both from a disciplinary perspective, but also an interdisciplinary perspective. How do these different disciplines collectively come together and address some of these global [INAUDIBLE] questions?

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. Sandra says that she thinks that addressing the cultural differences is a major global challenge, because culture affects every aspect of life for people. And Eleanor says looking at big food and the harms that they've done, as well. I know this is a particular interest in, in Criminology. Cases of environmental concerns and how big food has played a part in that.

So, so there are lots of very interesting things. And, and I'm sure you'll enjoy our later discussions today about those. I wonder if we could just finish, Martin, with looking at the responsibilities here, because, you know, providing all of this material, et cetera, and looking at the sort of interactions in terms of those dynamics, I wonder if you can tell us about the responsibility of students as global and active citizens, and communities of learners, and how they play a part in all of this, also.

MARTIN HIGGINSON: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think one of the exciting things that I find about SSGS as a school is, is the role it does play, actually, in helping students become, if you like, you know sounds a bit cheesy in a way, but global citizens. I think it helps inform them about debates, arguments. That they can take those debates and arguments into the workplace, into the church, into the mosque, into the pub, you name it.

And I think that there's two aspects to this. I mean, one, I think we should really value our students themselves in the way they interact with each other. I mean, we're an incredibly diverse student body. Probably the most diverse, I think, in the University.

And students learn from each other, you know, whether it's about race, identity, socio-economic status, gender. And, and they learn from each other in forums. They learn from each other in tutorials.

And actually, they shape academics, because we, ourselves, have to respond to our student body, as well as all the discipline work that students follow in their modules. And I think there is a responsibility. Yeah, I mean, students, like all of us, don't have to agree with everything they study and everything they learn. But hopefully, I think within SSGS, is what students come out with is they're more equipped to engage in those debates, whether it's at a political level, a social level, or via an economic level. Yeah, so it's very important.

KAREN FOLEY: So we've opened today with an outline of some of the issues. There are many. Shonil, I wonder if you could, sort of, end today's session just with some thoughts, really, in terms of how the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies can help to tackle some of these big challenges that we've all talked about.

SHONIL BHAGWAT: Yeah, absolutely Karen. We talked about food security. There are a number of other challenges that are covered in the curriculum that we have in SSGS, whether it's environmental sustainability, or migration and mobilities, peace and conflict, rich-poor gap, transnational organised crime or global ethics. Quite a wide range of challenges.

And I think that challenge-led curriculum also helps us to make it a more current, vibrant, exciting. And collectively, the eight disciplines, I believe, offer something that essentially is more than the sum of different parts. As a relatively new, and growing, and expanding school, we are keen to make sure that the research strengths of our academics are directly informing the new curriculum that we produce.

And I think that's where - that's what students will discover with the SSGS curriculum, that it's very critically research-informed curriculum. It gives them an insight into what is current and up-to-date knowledge about the specific challenge. And I think, as a school, we offer that new cutting-edge nature of curriculum that, that we offer.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Shonil, Matt, and Martin, thank you so much for that. Well, stay tuned. We're going to watch a short video, which is about the BA (Honours) in Criminology, 'What is Crime', because our next session is going to focus on social research: crime, justice and society. So stay tuned for a really exciting discussion in just a few minutes. See you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]