

Introduction to the new Social Sciences and Global Studies Curriculum

- 09 June 2022

PROFESSOR: And welcome back again. So this is our third session of four, and I've been joined by Gunjan and Lorena from social sciences. And we're going to be looking at the new Social Sciences and Global Studies curriculum. Remember that we've still got Damon and Tracy on the hot desk, and they can answer your questions. As before, remember, no personal information. This is a public platform, so only put information you're happy to share on there.

At the bottom of your screen, you've got a question flashing across. What is the most important global economic institution in your opinion? So tell us what you think. Put that in the chat box, and we'll come back and see what your thoughts are in a few minutes.

So Lorena, I'm going to come to you first. We've got DD321, Economic for a Changing World. So can you tell us what that's about, and why should students get excited about coming and studying economics with us?

LORENA LOMBARDOZZI: Yes. Hi. Thanks, everyone. So Economics for a Changing World try to be inspirational international economics module that tries to grasp the economic issues related to the global economic challenges of today. And to put it in simple perspective, we read every day on newspaper economic crisis, social crisis, care crisis, environmental crisis. So this module tries to untangle though various perspectives those issues.

And the three added value of the modules are basically this one. The first one is that it makes explicit that these topics and issues are understood by different economic theories in different ways, by using different modules, different economic assumptions, different language. So we try to make explicit those languages and those tensions and contradictions, that different strands of thoughts within economics have used.

The second one is an explicit commitment to colonialism, and we try to bring forward different examples that happen in different-- that are happening in different parts of the world. So using different case studies and different geographies, but also to include voices from, for instance, orders and theories from the global south. So you might be exposed to theory and intellectual thoughts that have not been studied in typical mainstream economics curriculum.

And the third one is also a commitment to include the historical approach to economics. So economic thoughts have evolved over time. What has been studied in the 18th century has been, obviously, developed and conceptualised and modified, but there is a dependency on why we study economics-- the way we study economics today. So there is also like a historical footprint in the way this module is taught, but also looking at historical examples of the issue of-- the legacy of colonialism, the legacy of imperialism, and how this has affected particular economic systems today.

PROFESSOR: Absolutely. So I'm sure every time we turn on the news, or we open a newspaper, we can see the real impact of economics. It's not just a subject at university now. It's something that's affecting every one of us every day. So, HJ, what are we hearing from the students about the important institutions? What are people saying at the moment?

HJ: Lots of great thoughts on this one. So Yester says either BlackRock or World Economic Forum. Christopher reckons World Bank. Robert thinks World Trade Organisation.

And Judy's got an interesting point she says that Davos, maybe as it's open to business and politics, but she can't think of any time that a change come out of it. And says, in fact, anything, like World Trade Organisation, I struggle to find a diktat that has made a difference. I think this is the type of questions that keeps us busy on these modules. Isn't it?

LORENA LOMBARDOZZI: are--

PROFESSOR: Absolutely.

LORENA LOMBARDOZZI: Yeah, no, so I can comment. These are all great and relevant inputs and insights, because we are actually tackling all of these. So this idea of having a political economy and political economy outcomes are the result of the intervention and actions of both private and public and civil society stakeholders. So you will study the Organisation of multinational corporations through global value chains, or the evolution of global economic governance, from the end of the Cold War until now. So all these kind of what we can call Bretton Woods institutions, so including the UN, the World Trade Organisation, and all these bilateral and regional trade organisations that have emerged. So these are all very relevant inputs for us. So we are very glad that students got the point of this one already.

PROFESSOR: It sounds as though we've got lots of students already talking about this. And obviously this module will give them the opportunity to go deeper into it and get more of an insight. I'm just thinking, going down to the pub, being able to have a really sensible conversation and understanding what's changing for us and what's impacting on us. So what will people get out of studying this then, Lorena? What are we hoping that people have at the end of the module?

LORENA LOMBARDOZZI: Yeah. So it's packed with skill and topics. So the overarching themes of this module are the study methods. So there are four main themes.

These study methods-- so it's the idea that we will actually develop critical skill and critical thinking by understanding the historical patterns of these nowadays social challenges. And as you said, these are things that are not far away from our understanding from our lives. Although, they seem abstract, but in reality, they are not. Because they affect our daily lives, in a way like central banks increased interest rates and affect our mortgages, to well, you have a new trade deal that affect our daily shopping at the supermarket.

So we will understand the dynamics and the technicalities behind, for instance, a trade agreement, international trade policies, protectionism. How state protect the strategic industries, and what is the driving forces that push states and like governments and international organisations to, for instance, invest in technology or, for instance, in the care economy.

Then, we have the second team is to look at the issue of interdependence. So I believe that is the picture that I have, actually, we have chosen as our cover of the book, but our topical visual of last year during the pandemic is very big, like, ship-- exactly, that one-- that got stuck in the Suez Canal. And that picture is very powerful, because it tells us something. That although the impact of things is very localised, so we can feel it in our daily life, but it's happening basically in the canal-- in a ship that got stuck in a canal.

The structural causes are indeed global, and the results are very complex and interrelating dynamics that affect the way the economics is organised at the political level, the way states and governments organise their national fiscal and monetary policy, but also how private players. So both consumers and producers

interact with these policies in a global sense. So these are very complex issues. We are trying to explain that.

And lastly, very quickly, the unevenness-- so the third team looks at that. What are the multidimensional inequality that our global economic system are observing nowadays? Looking for environmental justice, fiscal justice, poverty, inequality, financial crisis. So all these issues are basically put together.

But from a more practical sense, we also have a component of debate. So students will learn how to develop, present, and actually defend an argument in relevant policy issues that can be the idea of, like, being a more free market versus liberalised trade policies, or what is the relevance and contribution to GDP as an indicator of economic health. And finally--

PROFESSOR: Absolutely, yeah.

LORENA LOMBARDOZZI: Yeah. We also have math skills and Excel to have a more technical and applied contribution and skill development for the students.

PROFESSOR: Brilliant. Thank you. Absolutely-- it's a fascinating subject. Explains so many things about what we're seeing today. Alexander's put a post saying, hopefully, this won't happen in the Manchester Ship Canal. Hopefully it won't become a local area.

So thank you, Lorena. We're going to move on to Gunjan now, and we're going to look at a D325. So this is researching everyday geographies. So first of all, can you explain what that means, because it's a new term to me, and then you can tell us a little bit about the module?

GUNJAN SONDHAI: Certainly, and thank you, everyone, and hopefully, I can share some of the insights that we have on this module. Well, Researching Everyday Geography, so let me take each of the words one at a time. Because all of them mean very big things and very different things.

So firstly, this is a level-three module. This is a module that's the capstone module, in effect, or the final-year module as part of the Geography degree. So the Geography degree, which is relatively new, as well as part of the OU, this is the module you take at the end of it, do your big dissertation project, to in a way consolidate a lot of your learnings that happen within the degree programme.

But what makes it particularly unique, especially within SSGS, is that this is the first research dissertation module. And what that means is that it's really driven by you, unlike the other OU modules, where you're being taught or you learn about concepts and ideas that are being presented to you by OU academics, and they are in a way refining and synthesising a lot of these discussions. This module sort of takes you, your curiosity and your interest, as the point from which you start the module.

And what we offer as part the module team that we've worked on is really trying to give you the content and the skills that you need to be able to start from your curiosity, something that triggers your interest, and really builds our way through to the end, which is a dissertation project. And building your skills, more importantly, as an independent researcher, as an independent geographical researcher. That forefronts how to think about geography and wider geographical relations, and how they impact your everyday life but, more broadly, the wider structures in which you live.

So really starting from the researching component of this, which we use the term curiosity quite a bit in the module, in the text, and everything that we do. Because when you research it's formalised curiosity, as anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston has said quite often, and she's quoted repeatedly on that. Because really, what it is doing is trying to get you to think about what you're curious about, in hopes that you are actually interested in really digging it through and really learning more about it. But doing so in systemize,

systematic, and organised way, in a way that you employ rigour into research and to move forward from that.

PROFESSOR: So you say that the students get to choose what they do their dissertation on. Have you got any examples of the sorts of things that have been done or you think might be done? What might a typical student focus on?

GUNJAN SONDHI: Well, the module is still-- we're going to start our first presentation in October. So we don't have students who've done this, but this is where the second word of the title comes in, the everyday. And really, because we want you to start with things that you're curious about, we think it's worth highlighting that your everyday life and everyday practises, everyday routines, are worthy topics for you to take seriously for geographical examination and exploration.

You might think these are banal parts of your life. These are things you do, but you don't think about it. But really these are valid points of entry into thinking more broadly about issues that might be of concern to you.

So for example, your basic cup of tea, and if you've looked at other OU modules, you might have come across a reference to the basic British cup of tea, quite often referring in reference to Stuart Hall's examination of it. Which really talks about giving thought and making unfamiliar and questioning something that is taken for granted. So you might take the cup of tea for granted, but if you really think about it, well, where does the tea come from? Where does the sugar come from? The cup in itself is likely to be imported from China as well.

But all of these have certain histories with them, and their wider geographies, in which they need to be embedded and thought through. In particular, colonialism, empire building, and globalisation over time. So how did it come to be initially? What does it mean now? How is it linked to the British identity? All of these things are very valid points and important topics for geographers to explore, but really, they start from your everyday cup of tea.

PROFESSOR: OK. I've noticed the tickertape question's now changed. We're asking the students about what they think is involved in a research module. So if you get a chance, fill in the chat box. Give your answers to that. What you think's involved? And I'm going to come back in a few minutes and see what you've got to say on that.

So you've explained the everyday. So students really do get the chance to pick something they're interested or passionate about and focus on that. So when it comes to research, then-- it's a frightening word. We all get frightened by the word research. How do we help students to research? What support do they get?

GUNJAN SONDHI: So there are three key parts to which the module is actually trying to support students, not just in building their research skills to become independent researchers or to become geographers, but really to become careful geographers and careful researchers. And that word care is quite crucial for geography, currently, but also as researchers moving forward, because research is not an objective. It is a process that's really tied with lots of inequalities embedded in it. There are risks involved to research. As you say, it's a scary word, because research can be harmful, just as much as can be helpful. So really trying to build those sensibilities throughout the entire module.

But practically, what does that mean, and how do you build those in? We have the module divided across five key strands, what we call the research. And the strands are how do you go about developing your research question.

So how do you take something that you are interested about and actually formalise it into a research question for academic research? How do you then really go about starting that, moving from the research question to what we call a literature review? But really trying to understand what has already been said and done about that research question and that topic that you might be interested in.

Then there's the third strand which is actually going and writing your data, because this is about independent research. This is about you generating data. You figuring out how do you go about learning about these things? You've seen what others have said. What can you find?

And then analysing that, and how do you go about analysing whether it's quantitative and qualitative data you've generated? Maybe it's lots of database of questions that you found or data you found, or it's analysing tweets or Instagram posts or TikTok videos. Or perhaps, you're into gaming, and you really want to explore the gaming environment, and that in itself is also a valid point to do research and do analysis.

PROFESSOR: Yeah.

GUNJAN SONDHI: And then the final, the fifth strand that we really look at is writing, which we tend to forget about but a very crucial point. But really, to try and highlight that these strands are not linear processes. These are all circular. It's messy. It's daunting. It's scary, but we provide you with the tools and support to enable you to do that.

PROFESSOR: Wow. So research is a lot more than just sitting in the quiet library with books, and then not moving for days on end. So thank you for that introduction. That's fantastic. I've lost my notes. So D325, Researching Everyday Geographies, it's like, I was confused with the title, but thank you for explaining what that means. That's brilliant.

So, HJ, I noticed we've got a few people saying what they think research is. We've had a really clear explanation there. So what are people saying there?

HJ: Yeah, lots of excellent contributions in the chat. So Judy says, lots of conversations and lots of internet research. Francesca said, getting your ideas across and gaining a lot of knowledge. Robert says, choosing a subject, picking a question and title on which to hang the dissertation, and doing lots of library researches.

Yustis just says, statistics, and he's put an emoji there. I'm not sure whether that means he's a fan of statistics or not, but we'll find out. Joanna says, asking questions and looking at journals. Sandy says, analysis and synthesis and stamina is involved when doing research, being ready to be challenged. I think that's fantastic. And Carol says, when you're doing research, we're always who, why, how, and always questioning throughout. So we've got those key points that we want to use to question.

PROFESSOR: Carol, a woman after my own heart there. You can't get away from who, what, where, when, why, how. The tutors friends, that's what we call them. So thank you everyone for that. That's fantastic.

So Gunjan and Lorena, thank you so much for introducing the modules, and thank you, everyone who's taken part in the chat. And we really look forward to seeing you for the next session. We're going to take a very quick break, and we'll be back to look at the new Arts and Humanities curriculum. And we're going to be talking about four brand new short courses. So we'll see you back here in a few minutes time. Thank you, everyone.

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