

Lesson 3

A day in the life of a university student – getting to know what university is really like

This episode aims to demystify the university experience, by talking about some of the typical day-to-day experiences that students encounter. We hear from university students and staff.

Warm-up question

Teachers can pose the following question to pupils to open up the lesson:

What do you already know about a typical university day? It is different to your typical day at secondary school (if so, how)?

Main task 1: quiz

Pupils team up to respond to a series of “true or false” statements about day-to-day university life. Pupils must discuss reasons for their answers.

1. University teachers are really strict, and you should never ask them questions.
2. You should call university teachers “sir” and “miss”.
3. At university, it’s often the case that there isn’t just one right answer.
4. University students sit in lectures 9-3, with just a short lunch break.
5. A university “seminar” means something different to a university “lecture” – they’re not the same thing.
6. There’s a big step up at university in terms of independent learning.
7. It’s not that important to attend all your lectures, because they’re all recorded anyway.
8. When you’re at university, your time is a lot more flexible than it is at secondary school.

Main task 2: listening to the experiences of university students and staff

Summary of Main task 2

Pupils listen to short excerpts from university students and staff, and decide if they want to change any of their true / false answers (pupils discuss this briefly).

Listen to the following excerpts where staff and students talk about what’s typical at university – the answers to all the true / false statements are here, so listen carefully!

Relevant podcast excerpts

Emily Nordmann, psychology lecturer, talks about lecture attendance (01:56)

So, the lectures cover the conceptual and theoretical side of Psychology and we have tried to make the lectures engaging and worth turning up for, so one of my research areas is lecture recordings. I do a lot about attendance and stuff and it's one of those things where people have always said, “oh we should come to the lectures it's better than watching the recordings”, and that's true but I also think that, particularly following Covid, you kind of have to explain why that's true because you know we spent two or three years giving people online lectures so we can no longer argue that online lectures aren't effective because otherwise we have some questions to answer. So, what we really try and do is- is give people an experience that you don't get on the recording. So, during COVID, we did what we call watch parties. So, rather than

having, just like, the lecture recorded asynchronously, that means that you would watch it in your own time, or having it done live, we prerecorded the lectures in chunks. And then in the timetabled session, we streamed that video. So, you weren't lecturing live. And the great thing about that was that you could kind of take part in the chat as a lecturer, so you could kind of answer questions as they were coming in, and we would put in breaks and like quizzes and little discussion things. And when we came back to campus, I said to the team, "Don't go back to the 50-minute lectures, keep the structure, keep the chunks, keep the quizzes, keep the activities". So now every single lecture, there's a break and sometimes it's just a two-minute brain-break and you talk to the person next to you, but there's always stuff there's always an experience that you just don't get in the recording and we've seen that in our attendance figures. We have pretty high attendance throughout the entire term which, given our class sizes and the number of lecturers and students, so we've really tried to make it as interactive as possible, that there is a reason to come.

Layla, undergraduate student, talks about different kinds of learning (00:36)

I will say with school, they were- my school anyway, they were more towards a memorisation tactic. Looking back on it, I think they just wanted people to memorise things for exams and it's very textbook, this is the right answer, this is what you're supposed to write and how you're supposed to write it. With the nature of my degree now, there's really not a right or wrong answer, it's your interpretation. So those are two completely different things there and memorisation is not going to work.

Andrew Struan, head of the Student Learning Development team, talks about how staff and students interact (01:08)

there's a course I teach for students just joining the university and one of the questions we always get all of the time is how strict are the lecturers? How strict are the staff? [...] I had a question from one of these students just a couple of weeks ago saying, "What do I call you? Do I have to call you sir? Do I have to call you, like, doctor, sir?" And it's like, "Andrew is fine". And it's like, "OK, I just I had no idea. Like, I was like, how strict should this be?" So, I think that's a really common misconception of the fact that actually, most of the time, studying at university is less strict and less rule-bound than studying in high school. So that the relationship that the students have with their lecturers is much more personal is much more friendly, collegiate, not always, but oftentimes much more than high school. So that kind of misunderstanding of where students are kind of in the pecking order kind of, I guess, with regards to academic members of staff.

Pearl, undergraduate student, talks about what seminars and lectures are (00:42)

Yeah, so a seminar is the place you go where you kind of, all of the knowledge you've learned through all the readings and lectures of that week is all sort of put together in a group discussion and it's a group of, at the most probably 20 people, and that's very rare, it's usually more like 10 to 15 sometimes less, and you know... So that's a discussion, so you haven't done the reading, you can't participate in the discussion. Really not very useful for you, not really useful for anybody else, it's just you know, whereas in a lecture you're there to get information so you can bring information yourself in what you've read beforehand, but you're never going to be asked to sort of share that, you know.

Andrew Struan again, this time talking about a typical day's schedule at university (00:56)

So, lots of students will come from high school where they're studying 9 to 3, 9 to 4 every single day. They're in class 9 to 3, 9 to 4 every single day. And they think that's what university will be like. You know, that you'll come to university, you will sit down at 9 o'clock in the morning in a lecture hall and then at 5 o'clock at the end of the day you leave that lecture hall having had people speak knowledge at you for eight hours. And again, that's just not how universities work. We expect students to be working independently, reading, engaging with the literature, and then things like lectures, seminars, provide the backbone of the studies that they're doing. But actually, what we want the students to do is engage with all of that independently in their own time and use all the knowledge that they are learning in the classes to then kind of scaffold around the work that they're doing independently.

Pearl again, this time talking about organising her time (00:49)

And also I feel like, I feel like this is another thing I wouldn't really have done last year and I wouldn't have done at school, and I think it's probably just because at school you're guided more in your learning, so it's obviously less independent, and when you get to university you have to be the one who's deciding when you start an essay, when you prioritize certain work, and for me last year I definitely would have just stuck at something until it was done and then moved on. Which is not a very foolproof system, in case anyone's wondering. So this year, I think it's, again, kind of with a theme of flexibility. Don't be afraid to, I mean, not necessarily, you know, say you're in the middle of writing one essay, maybe don't jump and start writing another one, but it's not a crime to start thinking about another one.

Main task 3: reflecting on true and false answers

The teacher leads a discussion of the correct **responses**¹ (see bottom of the page) to the “true” and “false” statements, giving explanations for each. Pupils have the chance to ask questions if needed.

Summary points from Lesson 3

- A typical day at university does look quite different to a typical day at secondary school!
- There is indeed more emphasis placed on independence / autonomy (e.g. having to work out your own specific timetable each week, beyond just your scheduled classes)

¹ 1 F; 2 F; 3 T; 4 F; 5 T; 6 T; 7 F; 8 T