Lesson 4

How can I get the most out of the university experience?

This episode aims to arm young people with information about how they can make their time at university work best for them; they'll be hearing from university students and staff, who are offering advice based on the benefit of their own experiences and expertise.

Warm-up question

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

> How do you manage to balance your time between your schoolwork, and other responsibilities / interests? Do you think this might look different at university, compared to your experiences at secondary school?

Main task 1: scenarios

Pupils read each of the scenarios below, and discuss how they would best support / advise the student with their situation.

Scenario A

Jess is in their first year at university. They're doing really well with their studies in English Language and Linguistics, receiving good grades in all their assignments. However, Jess's life mainly consists of studying – when they're not in a lecture or a seminar, they're in the library studying. Their flatmates have asked them to go out to fun events many times, but Jess worries that it will take time away from studying, so always says no. Jess is starting to feel really worn out, and also a bit lonely. What do you think Jess should do?

Scenario B

Jack is studying history at university, and has a midterm essay due. He's read and re-read the guidance that the tutor has offered, but just can't make sense of it, and therefore is really stuck and running out of time before the deadline! He's asked a few friends who are on the same course, but they've each told him something a bit different. What do you think Jack should do?

Scenario C

Aalia has been having a great time since she got to university; she's been loving her English literature course, and has joined a load of societies, such as the Bengali Society, the Capoeira Club, and the Poetry Society. She's been keeping up good attendance in her lectures and seminars, and has been throwing herself into all the social activities run by the various clubs. This means, however, that she hasn't had a lot of time to keep on top of her weekly studies, and is now feeling a bit panicked given that exams are just around the corner! What can you suggest to Aalia to avoid this end-of-semester exam stress in future?

Scenario D

Emilia is loving her biochemistry lectures, as she finds them really engaging. Whenever she goes to the lecture, she tries to write down every single word that the lecturer says, as it all seems really important. She also tries to read every single thing on the reading list each week, both the "essential" and "recommended" texts, so that she feels fully prepared for lectures.

However, she's starting to feel really overwhelmed by her studies recently, especially as the workload is starting to increase. What can you suggest to Emilia, to help her manage all her tasks more effectively?

Main task 2: hearing from university students and staff
Summary of Main task 2

Pupils now listen to the experiences / advice of university students and staff, about how to get the most of university.

Relevant podcast excerpts

Andew Struan, head of the Student Learning Development team, highlights two main points – the importance of engagement, and being confident in asking questions (02:21) engage with literally everything you possibly can at the institution. There is so much to do. There are so many things that you can find out about yourself, who you are, what you love, what you hate, all of that kind of stuff. But just throw yourself into the experience. Throwing yourself into the experience is the way to get the most out of university. So do that with engaging with clubs and societies, engaging with your peers, engaging with your subjects. Yes, of course, you're here to be taught, you're here to learn. That's the important bit. But engaging with everything around that is such a marker of success. So, there's this idea of what's called the sticky campus. So, it's students that stay on campus and I don't mean live on campus, but students that stay around on campus so, engage with things on campus. And that can be things like, societies, it can be things like studying on campus, it can be things like making sure you attend your classes, but this the idea of the sticky campus is having students who stick around on campus and that is again such a signifier of student success. And we can see that again and again, it's not unique to Glasgow, students who spend time engaging with the campus community do better. So, spend time engaged with the things that the university has to offer you. Second one, don't be afraid to ask questions. There are so many questions, there are so many things that people that those unknown unknowns. So, the things you don't even know that you don't know, then there are the known unknowns. So, the things you know, you don't know and have to figure out... the whole idea of being at university is to figure these things out. So, ask questions, ask questions of your lecturers. Yes. Ask questions of your other students. Use that as a way of figuring out the answers to things and don't be afraid to ask questions. And then I think the third one is take every opportunity you can to engage with all of the support type things that exist across campus. Use things like lecturers, drop-in hours, use things like the additional reading that exists on Moodle. Spend your time engaging with all of this because all of that is there to help you. We all exist for this reason. Make use of it. Make use of it.

Emily Nordmann, psychology lecturer, agrees that there are important benefits to engagement (02:06)
I think the primary reason is well-being, which is that students who just turn up and have a go and who are there and who are part of the class are just simply happier, regardless of academic grades. If you come to the lectures, you will- you'll end up seeing the same people, you'll feel that sense of community, you'll get to know the lecturer, and even if you're not talking to the lecturer, you'll still get that sense of them and that familiarity. You'll feel like part of the university community. You will develop that sense of identity and belonging, which is really, really important and is predictive of wellbeing. So, there's that wellbeing side. There is also then

the academic side, which is that there are multiple studies that show that attendance and engagement are predictive of success. I'm not saying there are not exceptions to the rule. There will be someone who's binged the box set at the end of term and done well. There's always exceptions. But if you want a general rule, it's that the students who are just turning up, that's half the battle. And then there is also kind of the more cynical side, which is turning up and engaging. If you don't turn up and engage, you're just so much more likely to have problems further down the line. And it's much harder to fix something that has gone wrong than to try and prevent it from going, you know, so, again, going back to that help seeking, I will say to my first years, starting around this time, we're currently in week three of term, things should be starting to calm down now. They should be starting to make more sense. If they're not, really now is the time to come in and reach out because we can still, more than enough time to put things back on track. I think when you disengage completely, it's very hard to jump back in. You know, if you miss a lecture, go back next week. Doesn't matter if you don't understand it because if you miss two or three, it's very easy to convince yourself that it's better to stay at home and it's never better to stay at home.

Pearl and Layla, undergraduate students, have found that university staff are very approachable when you have questions (02:02)
L: You just email someone and that's you. For example, seminar tutors I've found are really, really helpful because they really make it clear they're here to help. So their email is always open if you've got a question you want to ask. Even if you think it's so silly, just ask it because it's better to feel like you look stupid, which by the way, you don't, than not know, you know cos how are you going to find out other than asking?

P: Yeah that's one thing particularly, like, seminar tutors, like lecturers you know you might go a whole year and never speak to your lecturer but you will see your tutor every single week. They're there to support you and they're there to help you so you know it's not you're supposed to reach out to them. I mean in reading week my tutors probably hated me because there were several thousand very annoying emails, "what's the word count again?", and it's for your own clarity and it's really useful. I think when you're coming from school you think that all the teachers you're going to get at university are going to be sort of untouchable, you can't almost go near them. But you can, so it's fine.

L: That's what they're there for.

P: I mean, also the lecturers, that's another thing worth noting. It's really nice to go up to a lecturer, because often they'll ask at the end of the lecture, "anybody have any questions?" If you're sitting amongst 200 people, that can be really scary. It's a bit intimidating, I mean I remember in first year answering a few questions in a lecture of that size and being like, "oh my god" afterwards, almost feel like I was gonna faint, you know! Whereas if it doesn't mean you can't- if that's too nerve wracking, which it totally is, you can go up after the lecture, you can email them, you can schedule a meeting, there are so many different ways you can do it and sometimes even though it is really useful to talk to your tutors, it's sometimes easier just to talk to the source, and often your lecturer will be the convener of the course, they'll literally have all the information and that can be the most direct way of getting an answer about something. So really reach out to your tutors, if not reach out to your lecturers, it's not like- yeah, it's a lot more accessible than it's made out to be.

Layla again – here she talks about how she used the break she had from university to reflect on effective study skills (00:58)

On my second gap year, I wasn't going to come back and then at the beginning of this year I was like, well I do want to study so let's see what I can do, and then I kind of started, like, I don't know if my phone could hear me, but videos started coming up on my TikTok of how people were studying, and there was- I don't know what her name was, can't remember for the life of me, but there was one TikTok page of a girl who was basically showing all these different ways that, not she studies, but that there is to study, and to revise and to even just start taking your notes so that it- because I feel like when you take notes even in a lecture, you're just writing, but you don't know what you're putting down on paper and that was kind of my issue in my first year, and then when I saw that and was kind of already having these thoughts about maybe, maybe going back because I wasn't sure yet, and then I saw that I was like, "oh I could totally do this again, cause now I know from first year that didn't work for me".

Pearl again – here she talks about how to be pragmatic about prioritising and managing your workload (01:13)

And also I think one thing that's interesting is knowing you can't possibly do everything all the time. I think, you know, obviously there is a degree of stuff you should just get done. And that's sometimes less than you think, you know, but I remember I probably, like, this time last year when I was having all of my midterms and I was just like, "Aah!" I remember getting sent, like, I studied Theology last year, which was interesting, but there was some dense reading on that course, and we got sent this one document and it wasn't reading for a seminar, it was just pre-reading for a lecture and it was 70 pages and I was like, "I can't read this", and I remember having a bit of a crisis about it and I just realised, "Well, maybe I just won't". Like I'm not trying to sort of preach about "don't do your work", but sometimes you can't do certain amounts of work and you have to be able to identify what's important and what's not. Doing reading for a lecture isn't as important as doing reading for a seminar or reading for an essay. And so once you kind of realize and you start to pick out what's most important, it just kind of takes the pressure off a little bit.

Main task 3: returning to their advice to the students

They return to their notes about how they'd advise Jack, Emilia, Aalia and Jess, and decide whether there's anything they want to change / add.

Summary points from Lesson 4

- Engagement is EVERYTHING (in terms of engaging with staff; engaging with peers; and engaging with all that university life has to offer)
- Developing good study skills is vital (e.g. effective note-taking)
- Working out how best to prioritise tasks (which ones are essential, and which are desirable) is a good way to not let academic work overwhelm you