

PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY

FutureLearn MOOC

Notes for teachers

Week 1

PRE UNIVERSITY MOOC

The Preparing for University MOOC was developed to equip students for the challenges of the university learning environment. The lessons tackle specific skills while reinforcing skills learnt in previous lessons. Much of the course involves students having a go at specific exercises with minimal training. This also reflects the way material is taught at university. Instructions are rarely comprehensive and students have to tackle questions and learn through feedback, and discussion with their peers, as to how they might improve next time.

These notes will follow the activities and steps of the Preparing for University MOOC. The notes will explain the rationale behind some of the steps and suggest questions you might ask to your students to guide them through the learning.



WEEK 1: ASKING QUESTIONS

Activity: Identifying your skill set

STEP 1.1: This step is a chance to discuss with students what they might want to get out of the course. This could also be an opportunity to highlight the difference between skills and qualities (skills is the ability to do something, and qualities are a characteristic), while envisaging that they are both important in their own right.

The article recognises that not all students understand what is expected from them when at university. You might ask your students:

- What qualities do you possess that will aid your studying at university?
- What qualities may you need to develop to help you study?
- What skills do you have that will help you study at university?
- What skills do you think you might need to build on?
- What skills do you think you might need to learn?

It might be that students don't know the answers to these questions. If this is the case, that is absolutely fine. The course will help students to better understand the answers to these questions as they progress through the Pre-University MOOC.

STEP 1.2: Meet the team

Many university lecturers, learning enhancement tutors, and school teachers were involved in making this course. This step introduces a few members of the team who are regularly involved in keeping the course up-to-date. In this step, your students can introduce themselves to other learners on the course by commenting in the 'Comments' box at the bottom of each week. Examples could include what they intend to study at university, what they hope to learn from the MOOC etc.

The course has learners from all over the world, reaching over 200 countries.

Activity: Identifying your skillset

STEP 1.3: What do university lecturers' value in their students?

Understanding what university lecturers are looking for in a student can be a bit of a mystery. In this step, lecturers from a range of disciplines describe what they value in their students. You will note that a key word is continually highlighted: 'curiosity'.

You might ask your students to listen to the video and pick out 2 key words that match to students' current skills. At this stage you could ask students to revisit the questions in Step 1.1 and see if the video has given them some ideas to develop their responses.

STEP 1.4: Lifelong learning

Start with an inclusive statement about embracing diversity in our student cohorts at university. E.g. 'Universities have a diverse student community with students from a wide range of backgrounds' This step is particularly relevant to students coming into study at a later stage in life. You might ask your students:

- To share what excites them about learning, or about a particular topic
- To share how they feel about returning to education

To discuss their hopes and fears about higher education, you could use virtual post-it notes, word clouds and/or online quiz software to encourage participation and discussion.

Returning to study after a break, be it short or long, may feel daunting, but it's do-able! Universities are made up of a hugely diverse student body, who are all studying for a range of reasons. Universities generally really value having adult learners in their lectures and seminars as they can share a more diverse range of experiences and can be more likely to speak up and share ideas.

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.5: Introduction to week 1

This video introduces the focus of this week's lessons: asking questions. In this video we raise some important points. It talks about having the confidence to engage with the material presented in lectures. What does this mean? Why might students need confidence if they are just sitting listening to a lecture?

Depending on the course, a lot of material at university is presented in the format of a lecture. If students simply sit and listen, they are losing a huge amount of potential learning. One of the most important lessons is to learn how to learn in the lecture environment. The video says that lectures should inspire students to learn more, and this happens through questioning the material that is presented. This means identifying where you might want to learn more, making links between the information in the lecture and other learning or reading you might have done, or making links with your own knowledge base.

Research has shown that if students simply sit and listen, they will only use their brains as much as if they were watching a film. Students need to work on ways to increase their brain activity during the lecture. You might ask your students to plan/set targets on how they could start practising skills that will support them in lectures.

STEP 1.6: Why do you ask questions?

This step asks students to think about why they ask questions.

Students tend to respond that they ask for clarity – for example, if they don't understand a point, or if they wish to know more about something. Asking questions can be linked to the key word, 'curiosity', from the video 'What lecturers value' (Step 1.3). Curiosity drives us to ask questions. If we lack curiosity questions tend to arise from simply wanting clarification. Wondering about something a lecturer has said, and forming that wonder into a question is not simple, but a crucial skill to acquire if students don't already possess it.

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.7: Discussion of the process of questioning

This is a video of a seminar where a lecturer discusses the concept of lectures with a group of sixth form students. This video highlights the need for students to understand the importance of getting the most out of a lecture. Some points highlighted in the video that might raise discussion:

‘There is no such thing as a pointless question.’ Is this something you agree with?

Students need skills to ask questions, such as confidence, as well as a basic understanding of the topic. You might ask students whether they feel that these are skills? You might ask a student how they might go about improving confidence and developing an understanding of the topic before a lecture? It might be that greater understanding of the topic helps build confidence.

The video raises the idea that students are in a unique position of being able to directly engage with lecturers who know a lot about their topics. It is important to grasp the opportunity, but this takes courage. As in the video discussion, your students might question whether lecturers like being questioned. Lecturers love taking part in academic (evidence-based) discussions, as outlined in the video in Step 1.5. The key here is the ‘evidence-based’ bit. Students must prepare for such a discussion with reading, and perhaps discussing the topic with their peers as a means to inform their questions.

STEP 1.8: Thinking about a lecture

In this step, we turn the discussion from questioning the lecturer, to thinking about questioning your own knowledge. To get the most out of a lecture, it is important to be able to link new information to students’ existing knowledge base.

You might ask your students:

- What would be a beneficial practice to complete before a lecture and why?

Do you use any of these methods now? Here, the focus is about how to turn the lecture into a learning experience. This is something the students must do for themselves.

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.9: Preparing for a lecture

In this step we aim to generate thoughts on what could be done before a lecture. The idea behind reading and preparing before a lecture is about creating a baseline of knowledge, which the lecture then builds on. This is a much more effective way of learning than having the first introduction to the material as the lecture itself. It helps with the process of asking questions about the material in the lecture because you already have some existing knowledge from which to then question the material in the lecture.

You might ask your students what skills this process requires. It requires quite a lot of motivation. It is too easy to turn up without preparation. This may prompt students to question what they want to get from their degree.

STEP 1.10: Asking questions on material you listen to

In this step, the idea is for students to understand the value of preparing for a lecture. Having watched one clip without preparation and one clip with preparation, ask students to compare their experiences. The following questions may help to facilitate discussion:

- Does preparation help students engage more?
- Does preparation help students to ask more questions?
- Does preparation help students to remember more? Do students listen differently if they have read up on the topic before listening to it?

Generally, if students read around the topic of discussion first, the new information builds on existing knowledge and helps to create more of a deep learning exercise.

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.11: Making notes to help formulate questions

At many universities, most lectures are recorded. This frees the students from trying to write down everything the lecturer says. Students can make notes about where they might need to revisit material, highlight bits they don't understand, highlight bits they are interested in and make a note of any questions they have on the material presented to them.

It is a good idea to warn students to be wary of the lecturer who advises them not to take notes. Making notes, however brief, engages the brain and helps them focus on what is being presented.

STEP 1.12: Undergraduates talking about lectures

'You don't go to university to blindly follow what your teacher says....'

You might discuss with your students the skills required to not blindly follow what your teacher says. It is not easy to challenge a lecturer – it takes confidence and a good knowledge of the subject. Sometimes asking challenging questions can prompt an interesting discussion that might not have happened if you didn't ask. Having discussions like this can be very valuable for deepening your understanding of a subject and acknowledging different points of view.

STEP 1.13: Preparation for the lecture

You might have a discussion with your students about what they already know about this topic. You might discuss with students their thoughts and the angle/view that the lecturer might take. At university, before the lecture, you may often just see the title of a lecture. As such, you need to think about the topic and come up with some thoughts on the topic from where you can engage in some pre-lecture research. Some lecturers might provide pre-lecture reading; this will help guide students in the right direction of their pre-lecture preparation.

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.14: **Origins of Life lecture**

Encourage students to take notes while listening and ask them afterwards what sort of notes they took.

STEP 1.15: **Thinking about the Origins of Life lecture**

The lecture in the video is thought-provoking. This lecture is a chance for students from any discipline to talk about the world and their own country and share views on this topic. Students may be able to engage in some evidence-based discussion.

Encourage students to use examples from the lecture to support their thoughts, which can be communicated in the comment box.

STEP 1.16: **Lectures at University**

You could take the opportunity here to see if the views of your students have changed about how they might approach a lecture. And do they now feel more confident about what is required of them at university within the lecture environment?

Activity: Asking questions

STEP 1.17: Top tips from this week

Week 1

1. Lecturers value curiosity and the first step in being curious is to ask questions.
2. Look at what the topic will be of the lecture; think about what you already know about the topic. Do a bit of reading on this topic, look at any material that may have been provided as pre-lecture reading, ask yourself questions about the material.
3. When listening to a lecture, always make notes as you listen. This helps you to engage with the material and recall information as it is presented to you.
4. After a lecture look back at your notes. Build up these notes and expand with extra reading and further understanding. Think about what you might like to know more about or if there are sections which you might not fully understand, so need to do some more reading.
5. Lectures are a starting point for learning. It is up to you to continue researching the subject and building up your knowledge base.

Questions to ask students:

- Are there any other top tips or insights that you have learned from this week of the course?

You could take this opportunity to share what week 2 of the course will be focused on (independent study).