

KAREN: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. We're now going to take a look at why languages and intercultural communications matter. And I'm joined by Mirjam Hauck, who's the associate head of internationalisation, and Rosina Marquez-Reiter, who's the head of school of languages and applied linguistics, to talk about the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures, which is your one-stop shop for communication in an interconnected world.

Now, did you know that learning a new language is one of the top 10 things that people most want to achieve in their lives? And we've already seen today that understanding cultures and languages and behaviours and gestures can help foster not only personal, but also professional growth and societal inclusion. But before we start, we thought we'd have a bit of fun. We've got some of our widgets up and running, ready for you. So we'd like to know what you think the right answers to these questions are.

In Germany, when is the appropriate time to celebrate your birthday? When is it appropriate to drink a cappuccino in Italy? And how should you give or receive a gift in China? So a bit of fun there. Fill those polls in, and we will bring those answers to the end of the session.

Now, a little bit of context for you. When the University started introducing higher tuition fees, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of students who were studying a language at university. In fact, the number of students studying a different language in the UK-- that's not just with the Open University-- has dropped by 25 percent in the last recent times.

And most students were doing this study out of a professional interest. And they suddenly became priced out of study because of the cost of high fees. And this has been a huge loss to society.

The other issue is that many universities have significantly reduced the language that they're offering across the higher education sector. But luckily for us, the Open University is bucking that trend. So Mirjam, I wonder if you can tell us a little bit more about how The Open University and, in fact, yourself are doing this?

MIRJAM HAUCK (Associate Head of School, Internationalisation & Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, School of Languages & Applied Linguistics): Well, we listened to our students, and it was very clear that there was a need for more flexible learning opportunities, for shorter languages courses, which are less study-intensive than our core curriculum is. So now, we are going to market with the first suite of 16 short courses in languages, and also one in intercultural studies-- Chinese intercultural studies. And these require the learners to do four to five hours a week. And they're non-accredited initially, but if you like it a lot and you want to continue studying languages, you can turn your non-accredited short courses into accredited learning at the OU.

KAREN: That's absolutely fantastic. Now, what sorts of things can people study? What sorts of courses are on offer?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Well there are beginners courses in Spanish, in French, in German, in Italian, and in Chinese, and the Chinese culture course that I've already mentioned. But this is only the beginning. Our next suite of short courses will be courses in artificial intelligence for the workplace, languages for leadership, intercultural communication at the workplace, British sign language, fake news-- we have a whole production pipeline on the go for short courses to be presented in spring 2021, in autumn 2021, and beyond.

KAREN: Now, it's the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures. And this is so important, because it's not just the language that you're learning. Can you tell us a little bit more about the importance of combining culture with the acquisition of language?

MIRJAM HAUCK: I mean, this is what we do in our language short courses anyway. It's the learning of languages, but also the learning of intercultural understanding of intercultural communicative skills that happens in all our language learning courses, short courses. But we also have bespoke courses in the making on intercultural communication skills in the workplace, in particular.

KAREN: Now, Mirjam, you'd mentioned before that some of these non-accredited courses, they differ to MOOCs. And I wonder if you can tell us about how they differ to courses on MOOCs and Open Learn?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah. There's a huge difference, because first of all, our short courses sit on the Open University's virtual learning environment. And they benefit from the many different activity types, from the many different ways you can engage and interact with the other learners and with the learning advisor.

They are smaller groups of learners. They're flexible short courses. You can combine them, mix and match them. And as I already mentioned, you can turn your non-accredited learning into accredited learning. All this does not apply to MOOCs.

KAREN: That's fantastic. And of course, you can study anywhere and any time zone, et cetera, which has a huge benefit as well. And I guess--

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah.

KAREN: --one of the important things is building up those skills over time. We were talking earlier about how sometimes it's not just the language, but it's to enrich something else that students will want to do. So for example, students studying classical studies may want to learn a language to read texts in the original language.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes. That might well be the case. I mean, it is for leisure learners, for pleasure learners, but also for professional development purposes and to support the studying of any other subject area. You're absolutely right, Karen.

KAREN: So there are courses that students can mix and match, which means, I guess, that they could do more than one at a time if they wanted to. Is that right?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah. Absolutely. As I said, there's four to five hours of study time required per week. If you want to give more time to this, if you feel passionate about it, I'd say you can study two at a time. Some might even push it to three at a time. I wouldn't do more than three at a time, though.

KAREN: What about if you haven't learned a language before? Do you need to have any prior skills? Is harder if you haven't learned a language before, to access one of these?

MIRJAM HAUCK: No, not at all. We start at level zero. Beginner 1 is our first level. And you do not need to know anything about language learning, absolutely not.

KAREN: Now, you mentioned these digital badges, and I've seen some of these on people's CVs. They're quite a new thing right now. Can you tell us about how you get them and what the value is of them?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Well, badges acknowledge informal learning efforts, so like non-accredited learning in this case. And they are awarded in relation to criteria. And the criteria are the skills that you acquire in the course. So everything is listed.

A future employer would know exactly what you have learned in the course and whether these are the skills that you need to find that job out there. And you can embed your badge into your digital signature, or you can create a badges backpack and accumulate them in there. They're just proof of your learning effort and of the skills that you have acquired.

KAREN: So we can see an example of one badge here. And I think what I quite like about these badges is that you're using the data to actually showcase what students have done. It's not just completing something. And anyone can look at a screen and turn it off and on, can't it? But this actually does have some value.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah. The expression that is used is that the skills, the evidence of the skills, is baked into the badge.

KAREN: Brilliant. And we've also got a French badge here, which again outlines some of the credentials that people can see when they access the badge.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Absolutely, yes. And you carry that in your--

KAREN: So you mentioned--

MIRJAM HAUCK: Oh, sorry. And you carry that--

KAREN: Sorry.

MIRJAM HAUCK: --in your digital signature, for example. And then, the employer can click on it and knows exactly what you have learned.

KAREN: Brilliant. No, that's absolutely fantastic, especially if they can access it so easily, in terms of one click of a button and they can see all of the skills there. So you mentioned that some of the beginners modern language courses are just the beginning of what you're planning to do at the Centre. So it sounds like there are big plans. Can you give us a bit of a preview about what we might expect to see in the next year, 18 months?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Well, Yeah. I mean, we carry on with the traditional language learning. After beginners, comes elementary. And then, after elementary, comes intermediate, and then advanced. That, we will carry on with anyway.

But we are also going to market with courses in artificial intelligence in the workplace, intercultural communication in the workplace. British sign language is coming. A short course on fake news is coming, but also English skills for the health and social care workforce. And many of those that I've just mentioned, we are doing in collaboration with partners, both inside and outside of the Open University, which is another exciting aspect.

KAREN: And I like the way that you're working with non-accredited learning to give those options, in particular instances, for students who want to then turn those into credited learning.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes, absolutely. You may be familiar with making your learning count. It is in a module within the Open Programme of the Open University. And that is how that works. You take making your learning count plus a couple of short courses, and then you have accreditation.

KAREN: Wonderful. Thank you so much. Rosina, could I come to you now and talk a little bit about why language and cultural communication is more important now than perhaps it ever has been before?

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER (Head of School, School of Languages and Applied Linguistics): Right. Thank you, Karen. I mean, the Open Centre and language and communication is particularly important now in light of continued declining languages market in the UK. Well, we have actually witnessed a number of language learning opportunities on the wane. The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures offers, as Mirjam says, short, bite-sized language courses that can be studied flexibly at a reasonable price, and can be easily incorporated into anyone's routine.

A strategy paper, actually, recently published by the British Academy in collaboration with our partners, highlighted-- and I read now-- language is strategically vital for the future of the UK as we look to recover from the coronavirus pandemic and strengthen our relationships across the world. Now, this showcases language learning, encourages understanding and respect for others. And foreign languages also expand a view of the world and can actually liberalise our experiences. So language and intercultural communication, particularly now, are key to our relationships in a connected world and key to our future, and especially important in post-Brexit Britain to succeed in trade and international relations. So the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures, to us, and we hope to you, too, represents an important step in this direction.

KAREN: Brilliant. Thank you so much, Rosina. Now, we asked everyone at the beginning of the session what they thought the right answers were. So Mirjam, would you like to lead us through the right answers to these polls?

MIRJAM HAUCK: I can't-- ah.

KAREN: I can see them now.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes, I can see them now, as well.

KAREN: To celebrate their birthday in Germany? 61 percent said the night before.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Mirjam should know that one.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes. That's when we usually start and keep the party going until after midnight.

[LAUGHING]

KAREN: So a very liberal approach to birthdays. Excellent. So people at home have got that one right.

The other question we asked was, when is it appropriate to drink a cappuccino in Italy? So let's see what people at home said about that. 48 percent said between 2:00 and 4:00 PM.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Yeah.

KAREN: Can you shed some light? Yes,

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes, I can. I think Italians usually drink their cappuccino in the morning, and they stop drinking cappuccino around midday. That doesn't mean that Germans and others do not drink cappuccino later in the afternoon in Italy.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Well, that's some Italians, too.

KAREN: It's interesting isn't it?

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Me, too.

MIRJAM HAUCK: You're right.

KAREN: No fighting now. What about giving or receiving gifts in China? So when should you give or receive a gift in China-- with both hands, right hand only, or left hand? Let's see what people at home said. 86 percent said with both of the hands. So is this the right answer?

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, it is.

KAREN: Yes, it is. It is. And why? Why? What's the symbolism behind this?

MIRJAM HAUCK: I don't know, actually the-- I guess it's a sign of respect, because you have to really face your partner fully when you accept a gift or you give a gift in that way.

KAREN: Yeah. I've heard one colleague say it's something about showing the seriousness of intent, that you're committed--

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah.

KAREN: --to being able to give that gift, because you're using both hands and stopping what you're doing.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Yeah. Yeah, makes perfect sense.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: That's very possible, yeah. It makes sense.

KAREN: Wonderful.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Maybe it depends on location and the setting. And this is what's so interesting about languages and cultures.

KAREN: Yes. Absolutely. I will be talking more about this with Mara in our next session, which will be absolutely fascinating. She's got some great examples of why some of these things are so important, to avoid embarrassing yourself by drinking your coffee at the wrong time in the wrong place.

Well, thank you so much. It's so exciting to hear about the work that you're doing. And these short courses, I know from many colleagues before, have been really enjoyed to enrich our understanding of things alongside study, but also for those hobbyists, who just enjoyed learning a language at an accessible fee.

And I think this reintroduces something that was really, really valued, in a way that's been made possible now with all of these regulations. So Rosina and Mirjam, thank you so much for your time today. That's been a really useful session.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Was a pleasure.

ROSINA MARQUEZ-REITER: Thank you.

MIRJAM HAUCK: Thanks for having us.

KAREN: No, my pleasure. Well, we're going to have a short break now, before we continue some discussion about languages. So we're going to play you a quick video, and I'll be back for our next session very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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