
Life as a Lecturer

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 9**

Karina

Welcome to Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni podcast. My name is Karina, and I am a collaborative outreach assistant at the University of Essex and I work closely with our Aspire and Aspire Higher programs.

Katie

My name is Katie and I work for the outreach team alongside Karina at the University. If you have any questions about any topics, we discuss please use the hashtag #UnderstandingUni on Twitter, or you can email outreach@essex.ac.uk.

When students attend open days, they often hear about how different university is from their school experience. Throughout our podcast we have covered a variety of aspects such as independent study and course choices to explain how your studies and opportunities may differ. But today we wanted to delve deeper into the educational side of things, more specifically, how the staff at a university differ from teachers in schools and colleges. Joining us today, we have two guests who are lecturers at the University of Essex. We are joined by Dr Mike Rogerson and Dr James Canton. If we start off with you Mike. Would you mind just introducing yourself, share a bit about you and your role at the University, please.

Mike

Oh yeah, you've already said, my formal title, I suppose, but I'm a lecturer in the school of sport, rehabilitation and exercise sciences. So, we've got courses like sports and exercise science, sports therapy, physiotherapy is under our roof too and sports performance and coaching. So, I lecture on modules that some of those course students have to take, and I do other tasks in the school, as well as well as my own research.

Katie

Lovely and could you tell us a little bit about your pathway as well. Just summarize how you became a lecturer too. That'd be great.

Mike

Yes, sure so like many lectures, I did a PhD so I spent three to four years doing research into a specific topic which essentially was my grounding in how to do research. And after that I became a research officer. I was doing more kind of evaluation applied research in the real world, but from an academic point of view. And then, a progression from that was to become a lecturer. So, lecturer is expected to do research, as well as teaching. So, from our point of view, in our school, we were interested in in both of those and university of Essex more widely, indeed, is a dual intensive university. That means interest in both research and teaching. So during my PhD in research officer time, I did some teaching on our degree courses. So, for me it was then a natural kind of progression to go from research officer to being a full-on lecture.

Katie

Thank you for that Mike and over to you, James. if you could just introduce yourself and also share your pathway as well, please.

James

Sure Katie. Hi everybody, I'm Dr James Canton so I'm what's called senior lecturer in the, what we call the LiFTS department. Which isn't anything to do with lift but it's to do a literature, film and theatre studies. But it also includes journalism, creative writing, you know and wild writing, which is why I've kind of have a specialism in. I have this great title, someone gave me a great title, which is director of wild writing at the University of Essex, which I like a lot. Yeah in terms of my kind of pathway to becoming a lecturer, Mike's is a nice straightforward pathway he's a good guy you know, he did he's done it the right way, the way you're meant to do it. I was, for many, many years, I did I did a certain amount of traveling when I left university, then I kind of went into secondary school teaching. So for many years, I was teaching the good folk of London and

Essex English and English literature mainly. And I did that for over 20 years, I was trying to work out how long it was, but I couldn't even count. And then I did an MA and then I did a PhD part time, basically, while I was still teaching and eventually, I arrived as a full-time lecturer at the University of Essex.

Karina

That's brilliant. Thank you so much for that. In schools and at Open Days many students are told that school teachers and university professors or lecturers are very different to each other, but they don't really get told about how the roles differ. Could you tell us a little bit about what the key differences are between lecturer and a school or college teacher, James.

James

Yeah, sure Karina yeah. It's an interesting one, I think. I mean that you know to certain extent we have these kind of like almost stereotypes that we imagine, like the lecturer being someone who kind of wanders around in long robes and, you know, is very serious and is very converted and is almost distracted from the world. Whereas, you know secondary school teachers or sixth form teachers, as someone I don't know, maybe they are a bit more personable, bit more friendly. I'm not entirely sure that's a useful dichotomy, you know useful divide really. You know I mean I was just thinking about the question and it's a good one, but I think I think the reality is that. Often in secondary school you just spend all day with your teachers, you know, there might be a form tutor, you kind of hang out with them. You know, I used to really enjoy being a form tutor and kind of you know that relationship that you build with your students. I think, in some ways that's hardest to with a lecturer. Though we do have personal tutors and we kind of spend time and we kind of chat with, and you can, you know I'd have certain sort of favourite students that will kind of come along and we'd have cups of coffee. You can do that kind of thing, which is really nice. So it's a bit more of a of a kind of grown-up relationship, I think. It's the kind of better way of putting it. It's more like a straight sort off one-to-one relationship with another human being. Whereas you know in secondary school perhaps it's got that sense of, you know the kind of the slight variants of the child to the adult to it. As much as anything.

Karina

Definitely, thank you for that and Mike would you like to add anything else.

Mike

Yeah, I suppose I can build on it just a tiny bit. I mean James is the one that's got the careers in both in both camps to boot, I think that it's kind of an obvious point when it's mentioned that at school you're largely as a pupil forced to be there. Or it's the thing that is expected. Whereas at university, you've very much chosen of your own volition, to go and do whatever you're doing university. So as a lecturer, I definitely have the privilege, I guess, of coming into sessions, with the assumption that everyone is really keen to be there and engage with whatever we're doing and I guess, I've never been a school teacher, but I guess at school, you can't make that assumption quite so quickly.

Katie

Yeah exactly, thank you for that. To lead on from that, as well see comparing and perhaps the timetables between school or college and university because, like you said Mike you have to be at school. You're there every day roughly between nine and three thirty, 5 days a week. But university is slightly different if you want to just explain a bit about how a timetable structure works for students and maybe a little bit about how your timetable is reflecting that as well.

Mike

Yeah, so if I jump in first, I guess, and so James and I are from very different schools in terms of what we were teaching, so it might be slightly different but, from my point of view the timetable, normally, in our school would be sort of consistent from week to week because in each term

you're gonna be taking certain modules and most of those modules will have one or two things that happen every week and the content of those sessions will vary, but, for example, if you have a lecture one week you probably have a lecture most weeks. There's also again kind of going to the assumptions and the fact that you are keen as a student to be here and be engaging with the course. I think lectures have more availability to them to set readings, to set tasks that you're going to go and do what. You might consider as a student to be in your own time but one of the reasons for an absence of lectures all day long and other sessions all day long where your timetable, you have to be there are certain places, certain time, is it a lot of important parts of learning happened when you're doing other things, either on your own or as a group and that's outside of that traditional kind of like teaching space, as it were, so, the fact that you're not in lessons, if you want to call them that, all day is really important thing. If you're just sitting and listening, the whole time you wouldn't actually learn as much if you have that variation. And then from our point of view as lecturers we have various year groups, various modules in each year that we we're teaching, so we have to change the kind of knowledge hat that we have on at any one time through the day and then we're not doing that, we're doing things like meetings with students and staff meetings and research activities and things like that.

James

Yes, that's really nicely explained Mike. I think the kind of life of the student is quite the I mean that's one of those distinctions between perhaps school and university is that on an individual experiential basis you know. If you're an undergraduate, say you might have you might have a lecture where your kind of like sitting there bit more passively like taking information in. You might then have an hour break in your day where you go meet some people, or maybe a chatting about what you've done last night and then chatting about what you were just in the lecture on and then you go and maybe have a seminar. Which is a much more kind of smaller group, maybe 10 of you sitting around, sitting around a table chatting about, maybe it might be completely different sort of subject matter but it'll be within your kind of overarching subject that you're studying at university. And then, again, you know within that you might as well be kind of chatting collectively, you might you might then go together will or with one of your friends might then head off to the library to get some stuff that you wanted to look up or maybe even physically get some books out that kind of thing because you because you're going to be writing an essay or you're going to do. You know you got a PowerPoint presentation to deliver in three days' time on another aspect. So, there are these kind of crossover areas where, in some ways it's like school or sixth form, you know, in some ways, I think you know it's sort of a stepping stone from kind of school where you have certain subjects that you're perhaps not so interested in. Sixth form, you've slightly bit more chosen what you want to do, and then at the university hopefully you're you know you're even more doing what you want to be doing, and the reason for being there is more obvious.

Katie

Thank you, James and that kind of reminded me of my own sixth form experience. I went to a sixth form and you're right that there was a little bit of a progression from school where I was able to call my lectures by their first name and there was a bit more independent study as well, so that that is kind of like a little mini representation of what university might be like for you. And I'd also like to thank you for sort of breaking down the difference between lectures and seminars as well. That's what I was going to talk to you guys about and but I think what I'll do is ask you the next question, which is about your favourite methods for teaching at university level, and is there a particular subject that you enjoy talking, or is there a particular way that you like to teach at university level. James, do you want to go first?

James

Yeah, sure yeah that's really good question Katie because there, I mean there's kind of this there's these terms that get thrown around. So, a lot of people, I think if they don't know much about university kind of think Oh, you have these lectures, so you go into like a big room and you

sit really quietly. And someone down the front who's like an expert like does a really boring talk to you for an hour and you have to make notes and then at some point you're going to get tested on it probably maybe I don't know. I mean so lectures are still used, I mean it depends on what subject you're doing so in the LiFTS department, they you know we have literature lectures that I will give occasionally they tend to be about 50 minutes. Personally, I always break them down into about 20 minutes sections, so I'm never talking for more than 20 minutes. And even in within, I'd often do silly things like say "put your hand up if you've ever..." you know just trying to break it down a bit, because I think the old system of this kind of very rigid lecture or kind of audience mode doesn't really work anymore. And then in a subject like creative writing, which is mainly what I'm teaching. We don't have lectures, we have seminars, which is the kind of the other, the other format, which is as I say a kind of smaller group thing. More collective, more kind of conversational I mean even within a seminar I might be in you know, opening up discussion by doing a 10-minute talk about something you know, but within that I think students will be fully happy to kind of. And I'd say like interrupt if you don't get something, and you know slightly more informal, but we also have things like workshops where you would, you be kind of discussing maybe a certain style of writing. Start a way of writing and then you would I might introduce that style show a couple of examples and then the students would actually be you know physically writing for maybe 20 minutes, I might say okay guys we've all got 20 minutes now we'll write a couple of paragraphs, then we might read them out share bits you know in pairs, bigger groups might get people to come up and put them up on the on the whiteboard in some way, you know that kind of thing. So that's a workshop. Which again you get more in a more creative subjects, you get to get the workshop being used so drama classes. You know, obviously, then film they have kind of more practical, even more practical sessions of kind of working with equipment, etc, so you know quite a bit variance which again reflects a little bit in the teaching styles.

Katie

Yeah, definitely and I think that is so important to mention, because obviously every course will be different. And that's why we like to encourage students to when they're doing their research to look at the courses and look at the assessment methods and how the modules are taught, because for someone who excels in perhaps exam-based assessments, then, that would be a more suitable course for them, and the same in terms of teaching methods as well if you want to be getting nice and practical with your course and doing lots of workshops and things and then you want to make sure that you're getting that from the course so yeah, thank you for that James. Mike did you did you want to add anything about your area?

Mike

Yeah, I guess just briefly, you're totally right. Different courses will have different kinds of methods, they use different sessions they put on and even, the different modules you will take within your course so, for example in our school if you're taking sports and exercise science. In your first year, at least, you have sports, exercise, psychology also have biomechanics which is completely and utterly different. So, in biomechanics might be more likely to have lab sessions, where we are in a lab using specialist cameras and markers on the body to look at how joints move. Whereas in psychology maybe that's where you would have relatively more lectures and, yeah different type of information come across well in different formats and also thinking proficiency there's a reason why the old school, if you like, lecture has held on and part of that is due to efficiency so as a lecturer, I can collate almost a story of information on topic from lots of different places and put it into one kind of neat presentation, for you. But also, the number of students, I can deliver that to any one-time I've got 250 students in one of my modules. So, if I ran seminars of only 10 students on that particular module. We'd be here all term trying to just cover a small amount of content so is that. The looking at what kind of content is being delivered and therefore what session is best for it? That kind of talks back a little bit to the point I made about the times we don't have a session on so, on a Tuesday afternoon, you might have any sessions timetable well that's because part of the learning comes from maybe reading or doing a task or writing something so yeah, we've considered that, in the way the modules are delivered.

James

Add a final bit on that, really good point that Mike's making, that the lecture does have a place, you know I'm not disparaging it. So, in literature, for example, what you might get is you might within a module. You might get lecture on a book so say you're looking at 'War and Peace', or something you know, one of the kinds of greatest books ever. You know you get a lecture which kind of introduces it introduces some of the complexity, might talk about the plot, historical background, etc. And then you get a follow up seminar where you where you could kind of sit in a smaller group. And kind of go well I've read the book, but I really didn't understand the first chapter I didn't understand like what Tolstoy was doing with this character, etc, etc, so you've got a kind of more kind of closer feel, more informal chance to discuss the material that's been introduced in a lecture that's often the way that modules are structured.

Karina

Yeah, definitely agree with that. Thank you so much to both of you for that. Now normally students would wait until the new academic year actually begins in September to start working. University is definitely very different, and it is a very unique experience and most students will have a chance to sort of get a little bit of a head start before actually arriving at university. Mike, why don't you start us off with what sort of tips, would you give to applicants ahead of starting their course and why, would you give those tips?

Mike

Yes, a useful thing to cover actually, given that the likely stage of lot people are going to listen to it. So, before the course starts, I would definitely, I mean you probably should have done this before you actually involved on the course in the first place, but make sure you're aware of what modules are actually included in that course. What are you going to be doing in your first year, are there many things in there, like I mentioned sport exercise and psychology is something on one of our courses that you're going to be looking at? If you know that that's something you've come across before and actually struggled a little bit with. Then maybe this is a chance, just to kind of get yourself up to the best standards of understanding, you can before it kicks in with the course content, so you can either revisit all stuff you know you've kind of struggled with before and you've got a hunch it's going to come up. You could inform that hunch a bit better by saying look I've actually got a three or four week or whatever period between finishing my summer work and the course starting which books would you suggest, I look at for the psychology module. Or you could email lecturers specifically even to ask them what for their module would be a good place for you to look before things get started, so I definitely yeah would advise look at what's involved, maybe do a bit of reading just to get up to speed.

Karina

That's great. Thank you so much, and James would you like to add anything else at all?

James

Yeah, no that's just as Mike saying, really, I think you know. Having the online facilities these days is just so much easier, you know, rather than you know when I was going to university pre-interweb thing. You know you just had to kind of like find certain books. Your kind of I can't even remember how we did it, I mean I genuinely can't. Whereas now you just you just search whatever site it will be University of Essex literature department or whatever and there'll be reading lists, there'll be details about your module, there'll be you know your lecturers. And you know module supervisors email addresses up just all there for you, so you know that's the simple way of going about it, I would suggest yeah.

Katie

Lots of universities also provide transition courses for students before they start at university, and at Essex we have the Pre-University course which is an online set of sessions which support

students with study skills, introductions to the university and help them to make them feel part of our community before they start. So, lots of students going to university might not know what the expectations are from a lecturer's perspective on them. Some might think that completing their homework and ensuring coursework deadlines are met is sort of the standard expectation. What would you say you value in a student, to make them stand out and James?

James

Okay yeah. Well, I'm glad you mentioned that, Katie. I think you know go as much as you can, go to go to everything that you can you know go to seminars, go to lectures, you know we have this fantastic facility normally with most of those classes, that you can listen again. So, it might you know I mean there'll be circumstances where, maybe you can't go to something you know you got a dentist I don't know something you know, don't worry about it, you know really don't worry about it because we're used to that as well, but if you can go to everything. I'd suggest you know as we're saying read as much as you can widely around your subject area, you know be enthusiastic, be excited by your subject you know, like get into it you've got. Normally you've got three years, maybe four you know get into it, but really throw yourself at it, you know it's a fantastic opportunity to just really do something exciting and different, you're kind of stepping into the into a big kind of grown-up world, if you like. And I think that's, the best thing you know, one of the key criteria on all our marketing schemes for creative writing is originality. You know that is such a difficult it's like such a difficult thing to teach is such a difficult thing to kind of almost define because originality is all about reflecting on what already exists in the world, but you know, try to be original you know, like be confident and be happy and be original is like it's easy to say, but at university, that is what we're looking for, I think.

Katie

Yeah, and just as a reminder for our listeners as well coming to university, you are taking complete ownership of your education and. So yeah, be confident take responsibility for it because you've got all these opportunities in front of you that's what the university are offering, seize them and make the most of it. Your lectures aren't going to be there to say like hey, why not here at this seminar unless Mike's now going to tell me that he pesters students.

Mike

No, simply because some if I chased up every student every time, they weren't at a single session then that'd be my entire job. I wouldn't have time to actually deliver any content. So, what value in students, what I expect from students coming to study university are to fundamentally realize that you are here with the motivation side to master the subject you've chosen, and I will admit I didn't realize that, when I was an undergraduate student, I didn't I. was here, partly because it was a rite of passage, I was interested in the subject, but that was about it. If you can realize and therefore engage in a way decide I'm going to master this subject in three years or to the best of my ability, then that will put you in good stead. I realized that during my master's. For a lot of students, what I advise is treat it as much like a nine to five job as you possibly can. Now most people come to university have got some friend that they have who has not gone to university they're going and doing regular job of some kind, so my thought is, if you put in the same number of hours that they do. Then you're on the right path. Don't be tempted, as we said earlier, looking at a timetable and think well I don't have anything Tuesday afternoon, therefore, I don't do anything on Tuesday afternoon. Now, obviously it's up to you to be flexible, with your time and all that stuff but the put the hours in to master that subject and also just James touched on originality, which is a great point. In mastering a subject, you will get to a point where you start to have opinions and develop your own thoughts and arguments and preferences about stuff and that's really what we would like we don't want you to just regurgitate some, jumping through a small hoop type answer like might be more like school education is the answer, tell me again and then I'll give you a tick in the box. If you can show you understand that have maybe gone off and draw on few different ideas, not just what I said in the lecture then that shows me you've got understanding so that's my advice, put the hours in and understand the topic.

Karina

Thank you very much for that, for both you. And just before we finish things off, I have one final question for each of you, so we can start with James and it's just could you tell us a little bit about the research that you have done or you're currently sort of looking into. Just to let our listeners know little bit more about you and what you do.

James

Yeah sure. Thanks Karina. Yeah, so kind of officially half of my time is not teaching or doing admin stuff. It's officially doing what we call research which it goes, as Mike was saying earlier, it goes across the university, so I try and spend as much time as possible writing, that's sort of what I do. So, I've actually today is publication date of the paperback edition of my latest book *The Oak Papers*. Check it out, buy it for your grandparents that kind of thing. Yeah, which is all about spending time next to an ancient 800-year-old oak tree and about kind of how oak trees and humans have always existed in close proximity and this kind of thing, so this has been my latest book and aside from that I'm, not because I come from London originally, I'm bit of a lot London kid really and I moved up to rural Essex, where I now live. And when I moved up here, I actually bought a little field that's like this nice little small field anyway, so the last few years what I've been doing is rewilding this field, so this is this is also what I'm up to and I've been writing about that process, as well as that's very much what was in my mind at the moment planting wildflowers and then writing about them, when they eventually arrive hopefully.

Mike

And my research kind of areas or main area I guess is looking at the role of the environment for exercise and predominantly psychological outcomes and people's behaviour choices to do with exercise. So, does it matter where you where you go for the exercise? So interested in that. Collaborated actually funny enough with James on some stuff that kind of lies, overlap between the two things we just mentioned. And recently as I'm in the sports exercise science kind of area, I have looked into, started looking into video system replay decisions that are made in football, so the introduction of technology and football. So, I've started to do a few things into that which is very topical.

James

Yeah, and I should add that Mike is one of the heroes of my book, *The Oak Papers*, because he's one of the people that I interview for the book. So that's quite nice actually, nice little crossover.

Mike

We've touched on a collaboration just decided to ask for doing this podcast yeah.

Katie

It's so lovely to hear and thank you so much for sharing those your research and things because when I was a university, I had no idea really that the lecturers were doing that in the background and it's really nice to know, because if a student is interested in your research as well, I guess, they can support you, or you can support them and that again more collaboration it's brilliant so that yeah thank you both for that.

James

Absolutely Katie yeah.

Mike

I think it's just to finish off as really important point, actually, I do think students should be aware of if they're going to be institution, where certainly like the university's dual intensive. But some, if not even if just be aware, if your lectures do research, because the benefit of that is that you're

getting up to date knowledge. You're not kind of having people taking a book and trying to teach you from it you're being taught by people who write the books and do the research to inform the writing of those books so that's a real thing I think, is that you are often on the kind of the cutting edge of understanding in a particular area that you're learning about.

Katie

Yeah, excellent point, thank you, and that also that leads me on very nicely actually to and to say to our listeners that is so important to do your research when you're looking for the course you want to study at university and then obviously the university you actually want to study as well. Do look at that that research. See what academics will be teaching the subjects you're interested in, perhaps they are studying a research area that the interest you, or you already may be looking into and at the University of Essex we have lots of live and pre-recorded talks that you can access on our website so you can get a little taster of lots of the courses that we offer so you'll be able to see what it's like to study at undergraduate level, as that is like a little step up from school and college. So, you'll be able to see what it would be like and also potentially get to know some of the academics in the departments you're looking into. And you can do that from the comfort of your own home because they're all online, and you can find them on our schools and colleges web page. If you go to the talks and taster's page.

I just like to say a massive thank you to Dr Mike Rogerson and Dr James Canton for joining us today to share a bit about your lecturing experience and it's been incredible to hear what you guys do, how you teach and I really hope that our listeners have taken all your words of wisdom on board Thank you again.

James

Very welcome Katie, thanks.

Mike

Yes, thank you.

Karina

If you have any questions about this episode don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #UnderstandingUni, or send an email outreach@essex.ac.uk. Additional resources will be posted on our website and sent to you via email if you're a registered listener. Thank you for listening to today's episode. Don't forget to share with your family, friends and colleagues.