

Pathways Podcast, Season Three, Episode Six

Jess 00:05

Hey everyone, and welcome back to another episode of the Pathways Podcast. So, it's the start of the new year. It's a new term, and exams play a particularly key part in this. And to help me discuss this topic in a bit more detail, I'm joined by three really special guests today who I'll let introduce themselves to you now.

Max 00:24

Hi, I'm Max Campbell. I'm a third-year student and I'm the chair of the SSLC.

Dan 00:29

I'm Dan Murdock and I'm the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Chemistry department.

Adam 00:34

Hi everyone. My name's Adam. I'm back for another episode. I'm the other half of the student experience team with Dr Tom Ritchie.

Jess 00:41

That's great. Thanks guys. Right. So, let's get started. I wanted to give a bit of context, into my experience with exams so far, and also Max, feel free to give your views as well, but the last time I actually sat an in-person public exam was in 2018 for my GCSEs. Which is literally half a decade ago and seems really crazy to even think about now. And since then, and for the entirety of my undergraduate experience, all of my exams have been online and there's definitely pros and cons to this. Max, how have you found all, or what's your kind of take on the exam experience so far?

Max 01:16

So yeah, it is quite a shock to have, yeah, the transition from, from our school, as you say, GCSE, a level mocks all the way to university where it is online. It has been quite difficult. It has, it has changed the way you revise and the way you focus on it, just, it changes your methods of revision, and it can, yeah, like, like you said, there are advantages and disadvantages. I think with the way it has been, it has been, online for, for the first two years for us, and in some regards that that is, that is better. It does allow us to have access to our notes, which can benefit us. But there are come disadvantages. I mean, do you have disadvantages of your experience with exams at university?

Jess 02:06

I found a bit like a mix of both, as you said. So, for me, my advantages were kind of, you know, having access to notes and, and things like that.

So, if you've got really detailed notes, and you can refer back to lecture thing, lecture content, and you know, textbooks and things like that, which is really useful. But I'd say the disadvantage is you're really pressed for time. So, you know, if you are flicking through all of your lecture notes, you kind of are a bit more, yeah, pushed and you have that time pressure element of it, which maybe some other courses don't have because their exams weren't timed. So yeah, no, I completely agree with what you, what you said as well and you were also part of the exam working group within the department, along with a couple of the other students and staff members. So, you know, for our listeners out there, what exactly was this group and what were the goals.

Max 02:52

I worked with another third-year student, Alvia Yousuf, and a second year student, Tor Riches and the aim of the group was to help with the transition to in-person exams because we found out earlier on in the year the exams were going to be in person and the Chemistry department wanted to see how, how we could benefit students the most and help with this transition to in-person. As we haven't experienced in-person exams before, so we send out some surveys, get some feedback from year two students and year and third year students on what, on what they would like. We gave a few options. We discussed notes for in-person exams that you could take into the exam, so like a side of A4.

We discussed mocks and we were open to anything and everything. And we got, we got a variety of responses with a variety of some good ideas, some not so good ideas. And we discussed that in a few meetings with Dan and Nicola Chmel and Tom as well. We looked at the feedback that students gave us and narrowed down our options as to what we could do, what we could submit to the education committee in order to benefit students the most.

And we, we came up with a few options. So, the idea of mock exams were brought forward to the education committee and after some discussion that was passed through, so we will be having mocks. These will be, this will be one set, one set of mocks for each year and for third years, this will be taking place around week six of term two as third year exams are in term two. And these will go over the core modules. So, it'll be a set of questions from each of the core modules. So that's what was completed in weeks one to five. And then for, for the second years, this will take place in term three as their exams are in term three. And we'll again feature questions from each of their each of their modules. For the equation sheets. I'll pass it over to Dan.

Dan 05:01

So, another request was specific really for physical chemistry, and it is, sheets of equations that are used in the exams. And ultimately what's been passed by the education committee is rather than giving sheets of exams on Moodle, it's more going to be a pointer to what equation sheets are given in the exams and an indication of where these can be found on Moodle ahead of time. So, two things really came out of education committee, mock exams for years two and three, and also an indication of equation sheets, physical chemistry when they are used in exams.

Max 05:45

Can I, can I also add something to the mock exam bit?

Jess 05:48

Yeah, that'd be really great.

Max 05:49

So, for the mock exams, they will not be marked by academic staff, but answers and solutions will be provided in the form of PDFs or videos. So, they'll be able to provide you with a walkthrough of the answers. So, this will be self-marked, but these mocks are supposed to be representative of an actual exam, so you'll still have, you'll have someone reading out the rules and regulations of the exam as, as is what happened with GCSEs and A levels. And it'll be under proper exam conditions, in order to benefit students, the most and give them the most representative example of university exams before the real ones.

Jess 06:31

Yeah. That's great guys. Thank you so much. In terms of getting feedback from, you know, exams, like the mock exams and things like that, what can students do for that in terms of support?

Adam 06:42

So, throughout term two, we've created a comprehensive, scheduled of events as part of the we are chemistry project throughout the term we've got town halls planned. We've got the first one on the 25th of January and another one at the start of March, and we've also got study spaces available. And they'll be similar to Chem Cafe on Monday night in terms of seeking assistance and support and feedback. It'd be a case of coming along to one of those.

So, for example, the town halls. The town hall is a, is a q and a session that's designed for students come along to and learn about how the exam process will work. It'll also give everybody the chance to kind of troubleshoot any concerns. So, if you've got anything that's on your mind around exams, then please come to those. We've invited some key colleagues along as well so hopefully between all of us, we should be able to allay any fears and answer any queries that you might have.

Our town hall and study spaces will be available on Wednesday afternoons. So, although it'll be similar to Chem Cafe, it gives people the opportunity to come along on a different day if Monday night isn't convenient. We'll also be providing things like pizza as well, so it really gives you the opportunity to kind of break out, and chat informally with colleagues and other students about the upcoming exams.

We do recognise the fact that, it's not always easy to put your hand up or ask a question, so we've created an anonymous pad for anybody that wants to ask any questions. So, we're going to distribute the Padlet in the next undergraduate newsletter and we've also popped the link, on our link tree on Instagram as well.

So, if anybody has any questions or if there's anything on your mind now, you can start using that Padlet straight away and we'll start addressing those at the first town hall. So just head to the bio in our

Instagram link, and you can access a Padlet. Ideally what we'll be doing is building up a collection of FAQs. So, we'll be picking out the most common questions and answering those, we'll also compile these onto a webpage as well. So, if somebody can't make a town hall, all the answers will be there.

Jess 08:41

That's great. Thank you all for your input there. I think for me, like one of the really good things about the exam working group, just to go back to that, I think it's been great to have actual, current students getting involved with this group because you guys can really relate to how the whole student body are feeling about exams. I mean, noticeably, everyone's feeling quite stressed about them. So, I guess you'd go into meetings with more, you know, stronger and genuine motivations, which the rest of the cohort can really benefit from. So that's been really great. Thank you.

I think the question that a lot of students have on their minds at the moment with the lead up to exams is, I guess what will be the main differences between in-person and online exams and essentially, you know, what can, what can we expect when in person exams?

Dan 09:24

The big difference obviously is that you are not going to have your notes to rely on for these in-person exams. So, it's really going to have to change the focus of your revision. In the past you've been able to rely on. focusing very much on knowing your notes, knowing where things are in your notes. Maybe also, digitizing them so you can just do control F and search for a topic. Obviously, that's no longer going to be possible and so instead you're going to have to rely not so much on memorization, which is obviously a worry that I think a lot of you have. But on attempting to make links, so when you revise, the focus does need to be on understanding material, seeing

how material relates to other material, maybe even from different modules.

If you do that, you'll suddenly find that, memorisation is less of an issue than you are perhaps think. in terms of the questions themselves. I wouldn't worry too much about the questions being massively different from what you are used to. The biggest change that we had to make for online exams was quite often we'd need to do things like remove the names of molecules because otherwise you could just go onto Google and maybe find a reaction and copy it down.

Again, it really is, we've got to focus a lot more on kind of digesting and understanding the material. You can no longer rely on being able to look things up and even, you know, people say, well, if you become a professional chemist, you have to look these things up. Yes, we can. But the difference is, is we understand what it is we are looking up to begin with, if that makes sense. We know roughly what the answer is, and we look up things to get the final. The whole picture rather than just, I'm going to type in a, a molecule at random and see what Google spits out at me outside of the questions.

The other one is you are going to be sat in an exam hall, so this is going to be a big room with small desks. It's going to be very quiet, which you might find a little bit strange. You can't get up and walk around if you think that things are getting a bit too much you know, it, it is going to be very much like you experienced when the, your GSE a level. So, I think you've all been in the exam hall before you all remember what it was like. You'll have people walking up and down the aisles so you might feel like, you know, we we're looking over your shoulder. All the time. It's just going to be a different atmosphere from being sat nice and comfortably in your bedroom or your living room with your laptop in front of you.

Jess 12:22

Yeah, I think fundamentally that will probably be, probably be one of the biggest changes is the environment that you are in when you're sitting the exam. Because I don't know, when I was doing my exams, I was literally in my pyjamas like most comfortable, which was quite nice and just kind of put me at ease a bit more with doing the exam. But also, Dan, based on your experiences with perhaps, you know, overseeing the exams or, you know, seeing how students were with the lead up to exams, do you have any words of advice for us as students, with lead up to exams.

Dan 12:52

Okay. In the lead up to exam, you need to be careful with your revision. One of the biggest mistakes that I've seen people make, and this is when I was the year one exam board secretary for three years, is that you focus far too quickly on revising for a single. Usually, the first exam to the detriment of all of the other exams. So, what we found was with the first year, it didn't matter which exam was last, so it could be physical, could be organic, could be inorganic, but the last exam always had the worst average mark because people focused far too much too soon on their first exam.

So, they'd spend about two weeks studying that module. and then they'd only have three or four days in which to actually focus on the other two exams. So, when it comes to revision, be a generalist. Make sure that you devote equal time to all of your modules. And then maybe when you get to a day two ledge for the first exam, you can start focusing, equally.

Don't bother revising for an exam the morning of the exam. It's really not going to do you any. at that point, it's a bit too late to start cramming this, this detail in. And also, when you're in the exam, exam technique plays a large part in getting a good exam mark.

Sit down, read to the paper before you start answering anything at all. That's a nice general tip that I was given 25 years ago. Read through all the questions. Try to calm down a bit. Don't just dive straight in. Remember that all of the questions should take just as long as each other. So, another mistake people make is they'll do question one and they'll get stuck, and they'll sit there, and they'll try to battle through, and then they'll find that all of a sudden, they've taken an hour, an hour and a half to answer a 40-minute question. And if you do that, you are missing out on the easy parts of other question.

So, if you get stuck, move on. Look at the next question, do the bits you can do on that. And then at the end, you can always go back and start to look at the things that you're maybe struggling with a bit more. So, get the low hanging fruit. Now, get the marks that you can get before you look at the stuff that you are going to struggle with.

So, exam technique does play a huge, huge role in being successful in an exam. What, what do you say?

Max 15:30

I agree. I think a lot of these exam techniques, they do overlap a lot with what you did at GCSE's or if you did A-Level mocks, as in, I even I was told in GCSE's, A-Levels read through the whole paper.

You know, your timings have to be quite good, you have to be quite specific and precise with your timings and like, not every question's going to take, as long as the previous question is the strategy there. It's not completely new to the, to university students as they have gone through that, and hopefully they've applied those strategies when doing their A-Levels and GCSEs.

Jess 16:07

Yeah, that's great. Thank you. I think what you both mentioned about exam technique is really, really important. I think what a lot of

students that have done the online exams at uni so far are used to is, as Dan said, you know, control F and just finding things in, you know, cheat sheets or, or you know, in their lecture notes and things like that. And a lot of students will be used to that kind of cheat sheet and, you know, relying on their notes. So, can you explain a little bit why about, you know, why the cheat sheet wasn't chosen?

Dan 16:35

So, the cheat sheet was something, that had pretty good support, from the undergraduates that were surveyed. It was something like 75% plus wanted a cheat sheet.

Yeah. And I myself am a big fan of the idea. I spent seven years, doing my PhD in America where the idea, these cheat sheets are a common thing and I've seen how, how they can be useful and there is an art to making. The problem came when we started to look at the written comments where people would explain why they wanted this, the sheet of notes to take in.

And it became apparent to us that unfortunately people wanted them for the wrong reasons. And by that, I mean they were viewing this page of handwritten notes as being a direct proxy and direct replacement, for their lecture notes. and it could never act in that way. If you think about your lecture notes, this is usually going to be a hundred slides maybe of information, and you then have maybe a third or a half of a side of a four. You can't condense your notes in that way. And I think people were viewing it in a 'ah, well, we can write down all the things we're going to need for this on this side of A4', and I believe the University of Bristol tried this last year. They had these cheat sheets in Chemistry, and it really wasn't successful because students assumed that what they'd written down on this piece of paper was going to come up in the exams.

So, I would urge students, by the way, during their revision to maybe make their own little sheet, try to make what they view as being a

minimally complete set of notes. It is a really good revision technique. It'll help you focus on the bits that you're not so sure of, but also understand it. It has limitations, it's never going to take the place of a full set of notes. And unfortunately, I think there was too much confusion as to how these were going to be used or how they could be used in an exam.

Jess 18:48

Cool. Thank you for clearing that up. I think it's also fair to say that you know, us, we as a department acknowledge the amount of anxiety and stress that students are feeling with the return of, you know, exams looming, particularly with them being in person.

As we've spoken about a lot in this podcast, and as a student myself, I'm feeling a lot more pressure than ever. So, I guess to put our listeners at a bit more ease, what kinds of things have the department put in place to support students with the build-up to exams? Adam, I know the student experience team have worked a lot on this, and you've already spoken a bit about the exam town halls and the Padlet forums available, but I don't know if you wanted to speak a little bit about the We are Chemistry initiatives and events going on this time as well.

Adam 19:30

Yeah, absolutely. So, We are Chemistry has really been designed this term to really help support students with the transition back to in-person exams. So, my best bit of advice would be if you've got any questions or if you are concerned about the exams, then come along to the town hall. You can have your question answered. If you're looking for somewhere to study, we've found additional space for you.

But really don't sit on any questions or concerns that you. We're going to be there for you throughout the term to ensure that your

transition back to in-person exams is as supportive as it can be. So, yeah, that we, we've really tried to build some resources around term two this year.

So, if anybody has any concerns, then please do come along to one of those sessions and we'll be able to help.

Dan 20:16

Can I also add something briefly to that. Make use of the resources that already existed. So, revision lectures, these are a fantastic thing to go to, and we find, unfortunately, that we often don't get great attendance at these things, but revision lectures are possibly the best forum that we have, where you can actually sit in a room with the lecturer, the person who you know, runs the course, and you can really ask all the questions. So, revision lectures shouldn't be forgotten about. Cause they are genuinely a really useful resource and I urge you all to take advantage of these.

Jess 20:56

Yeah, I completely agree. I thought the revision lectures last year were really, really helpful. Max, I, I don't know if you thought the same, but I remember seeing you at literally every single revision lecture too. So yeah.

Max 21:07

Uh, yeah, they, they were helpful. Yeah. If I covered the content, they were really helpful, but I still attend all of them because you could, there's always stuff to gain out of it, even if you don't realise.

Jess 21:18

Yeah, I agree. I think the revision lectures were really useful as well as, you know, looking at past papers as well, because a lot of, kind of the examples and, and the exam questions are based off of that and

they're, you know, similar to some sort of extent as well. So, it's definitely a good sort of framework to, to use when you are revising.

Right. So that's all we've got time for today. I hope you guys have all really enjoyed this episode and found it helpful for the lead up to exams. And something that I really wanted to emphasise and mimic that everyone else has been saying on this podcast is just don't suffer in silence.

The department are here to support you, so please don't feel scared to reach out and ask questions as soon as they come to your mind. Don't leave it to the last minute. Don't leave it too late. If things are becoming too overwhelming or stressful for you.

I also want to say a massive thank you to all of the guests on the podcast today.

So, Adam, Dan, and Max, thank you so much. And the last thing for me is to wrap up by saying, please come to the first town hall on Wednesday the 25th of January in B2.04. Staff will give a full exam briefing and we'll give you time for questions as well. So do you keep an eye out, on your emails and on the Warwick chem Instagram for more detail.

So, to all of the listeners, best of luck for the year ahead and with your exams, and we'll catch you in the next episode.

Bye.

[Chemistry Exam Townhall Padlet](#)