

## Exams, flexible learning and you podcast transcript

### Speakers

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Atharva Torne, biotechnology student

Zunaira Nawaz, a third-year pharmacy student

Paul Shore, Associate Dean for Flexible and Digital Learning

### Transcript

#### 00:00 – introductions

Sally

Hello and welcome to this podcast. I'm Sally Hickson from the School of Health Sciences. I'm the Deputy Head of Student Operations for Teaching and Learning Enhancement. We've been getting used to flexible learning in the Faculty of Biology Medicine and Health, and now we're getting ready for exams. We've got two students here who are going to tell us about how they're preparing and hopefully they'll share their top tips with us. And we'll also cover what to expect from online exams and how that varies with on campus exams. So I'll just ask our colleagues here to introduce themselves so you can hear where they're from.

Atharva

Hello everyone, I'm Atharva, I'm a third year biotechnology student part of the four-year masters program here at The University of Manchester.

Zunaira

Hi my name's Zunaira and I'm a third-year pharmacy student. I'm enrolled onto a four-year programme and I'm almost done.

Paul

Hello I'm Paul Shore, I'm a senior lecturer in biomedical sciences here in the Faculty of Biology Medicine and Health and I'm also the Associate Dean for Flexible and Digital Learning.

#### 01:15 – what exams do you have coming up?

Sally

Thanks everyone. Thank you. So I'd just like to hear from you Atharva and Zunaira about how are you preparing for your exams at the moment. How's it going?

Atharva

Really, I think because of the way SBS structures its year three I haven't properly begun revising exams. So right now it's really just a mix of reading the lecture notes that I've taken over the last six seven weeks and assessing the content that I'm confident with, and kind of, I'm having trouble with.

Sally

And you've not got any exams coming up have you?

Atharva

I have a couple of different exams but they're I think all of them are very different from each other. So, it's going to be, it's a slightly unconventional year again because one is an essay based exam, and another one is short answer based, while another one is just pure report writing or like scientific communication. So It's a broad range of types of exams that I'm going to have to deal with which means the way I approach the revision for that is probably going to differ substantially from each other.

Sally

Zunaira, let's hear about you. How are you preparing for your exams?

Zunaira

So in pharmacy we have a very different variety of exams. So we have multiple choice exams, we have long essay type... and then we also have OSCEs because you have to pretend that you're a pharmacist and you're newly qualified. And you have to... yeah, so you see a patient and then you have to determine what's wrong with the patient. So one of my brothers is a medical student, so I practice with him. He pretends to be the patient and then I pretend I'm the pharmacist and I ask him what's brought him into the pharmacy today. We also have to do ear examinations. So I have to look through his ear and then have to pretend that there's various conditions that are present in his ear. With the other modules we have an online exam. We have a calcs exam and you can't use calculator, I think it's just using the sample papers that are provided to you and making the most of your time.

Sally

So have you found that you've had more material available to you online, sort of different ways that you can access materials now that we're sort of more in flexible learning mode at the University?

Atharva

I think there certainly has been an increase in the amount of online material that's available. I think there are some lecturers who have a very interactive series of lectures, and then kind of supplement that with more in-person based learning through either just having one live session every week discussing either a novel paper within that respective researcher's field or just have a 45-50 minute conversation or Q&A sessions. So I think in that sense the amount of learning tools that we have available have changed in a good way really because instead of having, you know, five or maybe ten minutes at the end of each lecture, now we have essentially dedicated sessions. It's actually kind of... we can have a proper conversation as opposed to, you know, having 25 people behind me in the line at the end of the lecture waiting to ask their questions

Sally

Zunaira have you found in the three years that you've had at university that the materials and the tools available to you online have changed or improved at all?

Zunaira

I think it's improved greatly. So in the first year we only had the first semester, the second semester we didn't really attend because of Covid and then second year was purely online, we would come in for labs. And then third year we have a lot more placements. So for one of our modules, a patient, when we learn about pharmacology, we have a fortnightly drop-in session on Zoom for whoever has any questions about the four lectures that do happen each week. Anyone can come in and we can just ask any questions. I think it's really appreciated by everyone on the course because we understand that there are hospital pharmacists, there are community pharmacists who are taking the time out of their daily jobs to come and help us. And there's also Soft Chalk. So that's available to us now and it's just a condensed version of the lecture notes.

Sally

Have you had opportunities to rehearse practical exams?

Zunaira

We haven't had an opportunity to rehearse, I think we do have some... So one of our lecturers, called Dr Sam Butterworth, before the practical he pre-records the lecture and he tells us what's expected of us in the lab. And I think that does help us. Other than that we don't have any other practice but when we are in the labs there are PhD students and they do help us wherever they can. I don't think they do get frustrated, but I do ask a lot of questions because I don't want to get the wrong answer! But then they're happy to help whenever they can.

Paul

Do you find that useful having access to the material before you start your practical sessions  
Zunaira?

Zunaira

I do. I think I'm the type of person who likes to be organised and so before the week starts I like to print out all my lecture notes or my lab materials, and I have a separate fold for each module. So I think it helps to be organised, and I think it's very helpful.

### **06:30 – revision top tips**

Sally

Great. I was going to ask each of you for your top tips about revision. I think Zunaira you've already given one of your tips about being organised, but have you got another tip that works really well for you when you are revising?

Zunaira

I do, yes. I think I've got two, so the first one is don't be harsh on yourself. University is very hard and I think if you've made it here, it's only going to get better. And the second one would be, I think just going off the point that I did make, so to be organised. So I think it helps if you're organised from day one. So you should start from the day that semester one does start. So in our school, we have semester one exams and then semester two exams. So after semester one we don't have to look back on semester one content. So you're just focusing on semester two for semester two exams if that makes sense.

Atharva

I think in addition to what Zunaira said about being organized and just not being too harsh on yourself, I think from a more kind of 'how to revise' standpoint, the power of creating outlines

is very, very underrated among students. It's kind of taking off now, so now that we've kind of moved on to more online learning.

Paul

Can I just ask of a follow-up on that Atharva? We have quite a few students who have raised issues with regard to how long it takes for them to summarise the lectures as when they've videoed. Do you have any tips for students when they're looking through the videos and making notes? Some students are taking up to four hours to work through 30-minute videos and the like. How do you go about making notes from videoed material?

Atharva

So my approach really is kind of to have a first listen through that entire lecture and kind of identify areas that I have a rough idea of what I know and don't know about.

Paul

Do you speed the lectures up? Do you run them at 1.5 or 2 times..?

Atharva

So I think it really depends what time of the year we're in... most of the time, no. But if I absolutely have to, say about a week before the exams, then maybe 1.25 times is the way to go.

Paul

Yeah, I've listened to some of mine just a little bit back and I sound much better at 2 times the speed you know? [Laughs] And you get through it in half the time of course.

Sally

Zunaira, do you make notes or summarise content when you're revising?

Zunaira

Not when I'm revising, but I do have another top tip.

Sally

Go one then.

Zunaira

I think in certain schools, I don't see it in Pharmacy, but I think in medicine you're ranked against your peers to get an F1 or F2 position... in Pharmacy, you're not ranked against anyone so I think you should help everyone when you can because at the end of the day you're going to get a job that's good for you. And if you outperform someone else, it's good for you, but I don't think you should be competing. I don't know if that makes sense?

Sally

Yes.

Zunaira

You should help everyone when you can.

Sally

Okay, that's nice. So further to the tips that you've just given do either of you, or do you know of any of your student friends, who might struggle with procrastination and getting ready for exams?

Atharva

I think yeah, a hundred percent that's something that's very common. Not just for me personally but I think I can confidently say for a majority of the students at the University. In terms of tips I don't really have any except maybe just catch an episode of anything they'd be watching on Netflix? 20 minutes, 30 minutes, something like that? I think that usually helps kind of just taking your mind off whatever you're doing. Try not to get onto that second episode and just "say one more episode" because then that's just a cascade that would probably result in you bingeing a whole season of *Big Bang Theory*. Not speaking from personal experience at all!

Zunaira

[Laughs] I was going to mention Flora. It's an app you can download it and you can keep it. So it's a tree planting app. So you don't stay on your phone and then so the more time you spend off your phone, the more trees you're planting. Also, every day I don't do any work after 6pm. So I do all my work before 6pm and then 6pm til about 11pm is my time for whatever I want to do.

Paul

I think it's also useful, isn't it, to break down your study into sort of 20, 30 minute sections to look at the, you know... you look at this mountain of revision that you have to do and that in itself can inhibit your study can't it?

### **11:45 – online exams**

Sally

That's great, thank you. Let's move on to a different topic now... some people listening to this podcast may not be familiar with online exams. Can each of you describe how these work on your course... maybe you've had the change from campus-based exams to online exams? How do they work on your course?

Atharva

Right? So since we moved to online exams, I think last year, so in my second year, the format I think across Biological Sciences has been, we have 48 hours to write an exam for each module. We usually get assigned I think five or six questions and we have to answer two of them, of course within a set page limit. It's usually three pages plus one for figures and then references for third year. So that's kind of the generalized format really for most of the modules in the School of Biological Sciences, at least the ones I'm taking. And then this year there's also the addition of a problem paper which is more data based on you know, short and medium answer based questions. But I think that is more the exception to the rule because that has been in existence since before the pandemic. So the form for that hasn't really changed.

Sally

Okay, you mentioned 48 hours for an exam – that's quite long?

Atharva

Yeah, so what really happens is we get assigned a paper at let's say Monday at 9.45am and then we have until Wednesday 9.45am to submit it. Although it is 48 hours I think that has more to do with the fact that some of the students may not actually be in GMT or the UK time zone. So they kind of have to accommodate for the fact that time differences might prevent some students from kind of submitting at their normal working hours. The general

expectation from most lecturers is you don't spend more than five or six hours on each essay really.

Sally

Okay, thank you.

Paul

Can I just ask Atharva, you did say there's a word limit to your essay length isn't there?

Atharva

Ah, so it's not a word limit. It's a page limit. So for I think second year, the page limit is two pages of just the essay content plus one page for figures while for third years it's three pages plus one for figures.

Paul

It's that window in which you can do that isn't it?

Atharva

Yeah, it's more of a window. The expectation from anyone really is never that we expect you to spend 48 hours writing two essays.

Sally

Yes.

Paul

To clarify as well, I think this year many of them are going to a 24 hour window. For those students who are listening in, make sure that you know what the window is and what the specific instructions for your exams this year are. We wouldn't want you to think you've got 48 hours to do an exam if it's actually 24 hours or less. I think sometimes the MCQ exams as well, once you start them, you have a set period of time to finish it then as well don't you.

Sally

Yes, yes. Zunaira, how has it been for you, doing online exams?

Zunaira

So for the exams that can't be externally examined, so like the OSCEs, we'd have to do them on campus. So for the OSCEs we have three stations, each of the stations lasting about eight minutes roughly up to about 24 minutes. And then for the calculations exam we have 20 questions and I think it's two hours? I may be wrong. And then if you finish it within I think the first hour you're allowed to leave. But if it's within the second hour you're not allowed to leave until everyone's finished. And then for the other exams, the online, I think it's a 48 hour window but once you do open the exam you have to finish it within two hours so you have two hours of each exam. So for one of the modules of patient where we learn about pharmacology, it's 20 questions and you have to do it in two hours. It seems like quite a bit because they give you case studies and then it's five questions per case study. So I think it's four I think it's four case studies if I do my math properly? Um, but yeah and you have to do it within two hours.

Sally

So I imagine that you do these online exams in in your home or somewhere that's appropriate. How do you get in that right headspace to sit an exam, because you're not sitting in a big exam hall like you might have done in previous times?

Atharva

I think for me personally I have certain goals that I intend to achieve within the next five years so for me always kind of having that in the back of my mind keeps me focused on what I'm doing. It's not something that's kind of specific to exams, it's for everything in general.

Sally

Zunaira, do you have any comments about open book exams or online exams? Have you enjoyed them?

Zunaira

I think they can be quite stressful. But I think, because I practise... so I'm a practicing Muslim I practise my faith quite often. So I think that does help and I think I find comfort in knowing that you are rewarded for everything you do. If you put effort into something, you will get something out of it. So your efforts don't go wasted. I think making sure that you ate properly the day of your exams. So if your exam's at 12pm for instance, making sure you've had a proper breakfast and making sure you've got a full bottle of water with you because when you open the paper and then you scroll all the way down and you see all those questions, you do panic slightly because you think I'm not going to do those 20 questions in two hours but the matter of fact, is you do. And I think don't underestimate yourself.

Atharva

Yeah I completely agree like especially when there's, you know, once you kind of hit double digits in the number of questions, panic can set in. But I think like I said, all it really takes is like for you to answer that first question and that like once you answer that first question you really just get in the zone, and you know 20 questions really do pass by it much more quicker than you think they would.

Paul

That's an interesting one isn't it exams are stressful whether they're open book or closed book anyway aren't they? Are other specific stressors associated with the online type of exam as compared to the closed exam? Would you say that they're more stressful or less stressful, or different types of stress?

Atharva

I would say that since they're open book there's no kind of real set format except that it has to be an essay. The number one stress would be "is what I'm saying what the markers and the lecturers are looking for?" I think that is kind of the number one stress irrespective of what you're studying really. But I think the thing about that is even though it is stressful. It kind of also is a good example of why you need to make sure that you have that outline ready and you have a real example, real life examples going for a broad range of things. Because even on the off-chance that it might not be fully what the lecturer or the markers are looking for, chances are that if you can kind of convince them through your knowledge and through the published literature that you're citing, it might just help you know recover your final grade.

Paul

I think that's really important, what you've just said, in terms of the design of the questions you know. From the lecturer's point of view, as somebody who designs these questions for open book exams, of course we don't want it [to be] where the students will look at the question and go "oh I can Google all those answers". It is about challenging you to think about connections and to assimilate information as you've described and integrating

information and selecting information that will specifically address that question. It isn't a case of, you know, anybody could just open this and answer it. You do actually have to have the knowledge and understanding, don't you, to be able to do that.

Sally

A question for Paul, what happens if a student has technical difficulties on the day of an exam?

Paul

Ah, yes, so first of all stay calm! Most exams allow for a temporary loss of access and your work is saved regularly. If you have a technical issue, first of all, check the IT Service availability information and if the service status shows a problem with the University system, then this means that the issue is known and is being addressed. In this case, Schools can adjust the submission deadlines and we can take account of these things so you won't be penalized for that. So if you experience any network problems as well, you know, then the advice is to close the browser and try again. It's often, you know, turn it on and off, use a different browser... but ensure that you're using the recommended browsers as well. So again I think it's particularly important as with all exams to make sure that you read all the instructions and that you're well prepared. You know so as Zunaira said it's really important to be well organized, not only in your revision but in the specific preparation of the details so that if things do arise, technical difficulties issues, do arise on the day, you know what to do. If these issues do continue then take a screenshot, get the evidence., you know, a photo of any error messages and you can submit that with any mitigating circumstances. But again these issues are rare. The most important thing, I'll just reiterate, is to be prepared, be aware of what you need to do if a technical difficulty does arise.

## **22:20 – on-campus exams**

Sally

So let's move on to on campus exams. Many people listening may not have had much experience of exams with the pandemic, their exams being cancelled and everything, but what has your experience been around on-campus exams?

Atharva

I think Zunaira has probably had more experience than me. I think my only experience as part of my degree was when I did my year one multiple choice exams in semester one, just as the WHO said "yeah, Covid-19 might actually become a pandemic"!

Zunaira

[Laughs] So when you do sit your on-campus exams, so in my year, there's a cohort of 135 students. Everyone's in a really big hall. Usually it's the one that's a sports hall just down Oxford Road, near Fallowfield. Um, and then there's different Schools, so you may have some Maths students with you doing their exams too, and you're allocated a number, a seat number, before your exam and you'd be given an email. And then there's an invigilator and she makes sure that you're not copying anyone. I don't think they're very stressful but I think I think, don't let your nerves get the best of you. Oh, and in regards to the OSCEs, so we got some feedback from our MOSCE, the mock version of the OSCE, and the assessors said they were really pleased with the students this year and they thought that students were really confident and that's something that patients do want to see. So I think just pretend even if you're not as confident as you really think you are just pretend that you are confident on the day and you should be okay, hopefully.

Sally



So a question for Paul. What should a student do if they need accessibility support for exams?

Paul

Ah yes, that's a very good question. So we have a Disability Advisory and Support Service. It's known as DASS and they can support you to put in a wide range of exam support including extra time. Most students who do have known disabilities register with DASS. So if you're not sure whether they can help, it's always worth speaking to them. You do need to get in touch in advance of the exam periods as there are deadlines published on the DASS website before each one. So many of you listening to this will already be registered with the service and hopefully have what you need in place already. But if you don't then please do contact DASS. You can go to the DASS website which is [www.dass.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.dass.manchester.ac.uk) and you can get all the information you need on how to access the support you need.

Sally

Thank you Paul, because there's a lot of support out there for students not necessarily just with the DASS service as well. But I'd really encourage listeners to explore that on the student support pages.

Paul

Absolutely yes, it's probably worth giving a plug to the Library here as well isn't. We have very extensive support for study provided to students through the Library through My Learning Essentials. There's information on there and support on how to study and prepare for your exams on there as well.

## **25:50 – celebrations and wrap-up**

Sally

That's great Paul. And can I ask have either of you got celebrations planned for the end of your exam period?

Atharva

Well I suppose we're just gonna go out for lunch with a couple of friends. I think most of my friends are actually graduating this year so we're probably just gonna combine everything into one massive party of some sort. Celebrating graduation, exams being over, and anything else that might pop up by the time it's June, and mid-June.

Zunaira

I think this year I want to go to a lot of theme parks, or I want to go to the Lake District again or I think Dovestone... I do want to go to a lot of theme parks. I think last year we cut it because of Covid, and in the first year because of Covid again I think. Yeah, and then something else may pop up, but I'm not sure yet.

Sally

Great, thank you. So my last question for you both is, you've been studying at Manchester for a few years now and I think you've both got one year left. Is there anything that you'd like to say about your time at Manchester University?

Atharva

I've had a great time here, really. Both in terms of social life – I've got incredible friends and peers in Biotech and in general in the School of Biological Sciences – and I've also had the opportunities to get involved with multiple lab and non-lab projects working both with the

researchers and other societies. So I think for me, it's been an overall positive experience because it's really allowed me to help develop, it's really enabled my personal and professional development at the same time. So yeah, overall a very positive experience.

Zunaira

I think I've had a great time so far. I think pharmacy is an incredibly rewarding career and one which is firmly rooted in the community. It combines my love of science and my desire to positively contribute to the wellbeing of the community. I do believe that The University of Manchester is a true melting pot of cultures and although it does demand a high quality of effort, I do think that if you're ambitious you can get anything you want and the world is your oyster.

Sally

Great. Thank you, thank you both, I think that brings us to the end of our podcast today. So thank you for taking part. We've really valued your inputs and your ideas, and your experience of exams and assessments and I wish you all good luck in your next upcoming assessments, I hope they go well. Just a reminder to any people listening, if you need support for exams, there's a lot of help out there. You can speak to your academic advisors or your tutors and they're there to support you not only with your exams but also with your general academic progress, and your wellbeing or anything affecting your ability to study. You can also make the most of peer support schemes and resources on student support webpages. There's loads of advice and guidance there as well as the excellent resources that the Library has to offer online about study skills and exam revision tips, as well as obviously general library resources. And also remember the University's got a fantastic counselling and mental health service available that offer a wide range of support if you need it and all the details are on the Manchester website. So good luck to both of you and good luck to everyone listening. And thanks very much.

**End**