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Hello, and welcome back to *The Student Hub Live*. Well, if you're watching in real time, we've just had the most fascinating discussion about Trump, and America, and the state of politics and international relations. And if you missed that, you might want to watch it on the catch up.

But there's more to discuss in politics and international relations to being an OU student. And here we're going to talk about assessment, which is an area of key concern. And I'm delighted to be joined by Judith Pickering and Peter Taylor. Thank you for giving us a 101 assessment survival guide.

JUDITH

You're welcome.

PICKERING:

HOST:

So we've got two widgets up on the screen now. And we'd like you to vote on them. They are, how comfortable do you feel about assessment? Are you comfortable? Or do you feel daunted? So put something on that scale to let us know where you feel. There's also a word cloud, which is, what feelings do you associate with assessment? Now there are three choices there. And it won't submit unless you put three things in those boxes. So if you can't think of three, that's fine. Just put a full stop so that at least the results will populate. When you vote, you can also see some of the things that other people have added, which is a very nice thing to do, as well. So this is all about new students. Some of them are coming to the Open University first hand. But we do have a lot of regulars. And again, if you've got tips and advice to share, please do do that in the chat.

At the Open University, the whole purpose, I guess, of distance education is this idea of us sending you stuff, you then doing some assessment to show us that you understand it. And yeah, there's a lot of assessment at the Open University. And these are tutor-marked assignments. So Peter, broadly speaking then, how does the OU deal with assessment? And what's the name of the game, then?

PETER TAYLOR:

So I think you need to remember that assessment is not just about marks. It's about teaching and learning as well. So the assessment that you get, as a student, will be asking you questions. You'll be replying to them. And they will be graded. But you will get feedback from

that assessment. So the feedback will be identifying your strengths and weaknesses, helping you develop your understanding, and preparing for the next assignment. So it's a lot more than just getting grades, although grades are important. It's about a learning process. And so when we design a module, and we design a qualification, we're looking at putting in those assessment points, working out what we need to ask, what the student needs to do, and revealing what they understand and what they don't understand, and therefore what the associate lecturer can provide in terms of supporting that student to move on.

HOST:

And we've got some sessions later about how to make the most use of your tutor throughout that process. But I was talking to [? Meg John ?] Barker earlier about caring for yourself in your studies. And we were talking about this idea of assessment, and the grades, and the feedback, and trying to be kind to ourselves when we're including that, and learning from that experience. Judith, what's your role in this process? And how would you advise students to take this, what can be quite a scary process, and view it as a really important part of their learning?

JUDITH

PICKERING:

I completely agree it's a scary part of the process. I was fortunate enough to do some study last year. And I sat an exam, three hours in exam, for the first time in about 20 odd years. That's giving away my age a little bit. And even though I work in assessment and I manage the assessment programme, I was petrified. And so I completely understand how students feel. And it is important to look after yourself and learn. So with the OU, it's not just about doing exams-- final exams. There's a lot of assessment that leads up to that. And so using that assessment, and looking at your teacher feedback, and actually reflecting on that, and then talking to your tutor about your feedback is all part of the learning process. It's important to engage with that. And that will help prepare you for sitting an exam, or doing your ontological assessment as well.

HOST:

Now last night we had a session on the virtual learning environment. And we were talking about where you access your TMAs and the study calendar. And we were also talking about the assessment guidance and how important that was for students in terms of understanding how the actual assessment was put together throughout the course or module that they were looking at. Can you talk us through that?

PETER TAYLOR:

Yeah, so what's important to realise, before we look at the site, is that the site has a discussion about that central bit about what you're meant to study and when. And interleaved with that are the assessment dates. And they're, as I said, designed to reinforce. They're not randomly

put there. They're actually there to help you learn. So if we look at a typical VLE here, so right the way down the middle, we've got the various things you need to do. And there, at the bottom of that, you've got TMA 02. So it's telling you when your TMA is and what you've got to do. So looking at the whole time table will give you those dates of the assignments. And you can put them in your diary so that you know when they're coming up, maybe putting in a reminder a few weeks earlier so that you can know when to start thinking about it.

HOST:

Now I've talked to various people over the last few days. And we've been talking about how while some students might want to get ahead, for a lot of students, they're doing the assignments in the week that scheduled for that. So it's quite acceptable to ask your tutors for help and support at that particular moment. But I've also heard that looking forward in terms of what the assessment is can help with focused reading and can actually help direct your studies. So what would your take be, in terms of your assessment needs head on? How would you advise students deal with this? Would you suggest that they look at things earlier or in the week that they're doing it?

PETER TAYLOR:

I think when we design modules we try to design them for the average student, working at a particular rate. And we know that for some students, life just isn't like that. So there will be times when you do need to get ahead, times when you know you're going to be a bit behind but you'll be able to catch up later. So it's important to plan the year, really, knowing when you'll have the opportunity to get ahead, when you'll have the opportunity to catch up. And I think that's how you need to work. The issue comes, when an assignment has a cutoff date, you can't get feedback until that cutoff date has passed. So even though you might be ahead, you might submit something in good time, you're not really going to hear back until after the cutoff date.

HOST:

Yeah, yeah, so that's in terms of actually doing the assessment. But what about finding out when these are due and actually having a look at some of the questions?

PETER TAYLOR:

Well usually they're up on the VLE, the dates. And for most modules, the assessment questions will be available. For some of the newer courses, which are just being delivered, there may be some of the later assignments may not be there yet. But in general, they're being there. And so you can start planning them. But the problem is that a lot of the questions won't make sense until you've had the opportunity to study the material.

HOST:

And do all the reading, and--

PETER TAYLOR: So don't start looking at assignments and saying, gosh, I don't understand what all that means. Because it will become clear.

HOST: Yeah. Now there are ways that we direct students to tackle these assignments. They get student notes. So that will have a lot of guidance about where they might look for things they might like to include. Sometimes it will have process and content words. So it will give students an idea, I guess, about what the marker is looking for in terms of completing that. And we also have this assessment, which will be throughout the whole module. So that might cover things like referencing, word limits, and all those other important things that aren't going to be replicated in each assignment particularly.

How do students navigate that? And where do they find out where those various aspects are?

JUDITH PICKERING: OK, well, there's loads of information available-- online particularly. So if we just click through-- so again, this is your module website. This is the new Nook module website. I believe someone walked everyone through this yesterday, actually.

HOST: Yes, yes, we had a thorough look through last night. And if you missed that, it's available on the catch up service.

JUDITH PICKERING: So on the new website, there will be an Assessment tab, where you'll be able to access your assessment. And you'll be able to see what marks you've got for assessment that you've completed. You will be able to get access to your assessment strategy and other assessment information in there. So module-specific assessment guidance will be available from that tab. If you go to Student Home, you'll be able to access-- this is a Student Home page. You'll be able to access the Help Centre from that page. There's a tab at the top. And if we go through to the next slide, these are just some examples of where you can get some generic information, advice, and support around how to tackle assessment from the Help Centre. So here you can see there are study skills. And it tells you how to prepare for your assignments, different types of assignments, how to write for the OU. And then again, if you look at Assessment and Exams, there's some advice and guidance about how to prepare for exams, how to manage stress, because I know people get stressed. I certainly did. But there are ways of dealing with that. And being prepared is one of the best ways.

So you can see here that there's lots of information worth just going through and having a look. Read through there and see what you can find. And if you've got any questions, do get

back to your tutor about those.

HOST: I'd like to pick up on that idea next. But people are talking about there being a lot of different types of assessment. And you've mentioned exams. We've also seen end-of-module assessments, which were there. I saw an ICMA before. What's that?

PETER TAYLOR: So one of the things that when you start the course, there should be a module guide. And the module guide has all the descriptions of the course. And in there, there will be an assessment strategy. And the assessment strategy would describe the various types of assessments there'd be, where there's a tutor-marked assignment, or there's an exam, or some kind of end-of-course essay. But there might also be these computer-marked assignments. And these are interactive computer model assignments. So they're online. So you go online. And it's a very sophisticated, multi-choice type questions. Some of them are drag and drop. Others are just choosing particular questions, rearranging sentences. But it's a different kind of online assessment that is computer marked. And you get feedback from that as well. So you don't just get feedback from the tutor-marked assignment. You also get it from the computer-marked assignment. And as I said, the assessment strategy, as described in module guide, usually tells you how much weighting there is, so the significance of each of those in the detail.

You mentioned the whole thing around things like referencing, and the like. Well often, that's described in a separate assessment guide. So as a separate document, on the right hand side, there's an assessment guide, which will tell you all the things you need to know around assessment. So it'll describe each of the different types of assessment activities.

HOST: And it also contains important information about perhaps which pieces of assessment may be substitutable, which can be a really nice thing for students to know about. So it's worthwhile reading up on.

Peter, you've been talking about end-of-module assessments and exams. And I wonder if you can clarify the difference between those, compared to a TMA, a tutor-marked assignment.

PETER TAYLOR: So you're doing your tutor-marked assignments. And tutor-marked assignments-- there are deadlines. And your tutor will be marking them and sending them back. At the very end, there's usually what we call a synoptic activity. It's about the whole course, rather than just on the bit you've been studying, which is what usually the TMA's about. So this whole course activity is usually something like an examination, a conventional examination, where you go to a particular centre. And there's invigilators. And there's the whole drama of the exam, where

you're sitting there, and you turn over the paper, and you pick up your pen, and the clock starts running, and your brain completely empties.

HOST: I'm just sweating away remembering.

PETER TAYLOR: So there are those type of activities. But there are also these end-of-module assignments, which are much bigger essays. So they're like a TMA. But they're not an exam. You don't go away and write it. You write them-- you have a certain number of weeks to produce it. But it's a much bigger synoptic piece of work.

HOST: See, we joke about the sweating and exams. I don't know many people who don't, to be fair. I actually found that I often used to get better at exams than I did with an EMA. Because I liked the idea of cramming. And also, I know when I've marked EMAs or exams, you're expected to do a lot less in an exam. Because you can't write as long an essay. You're having to do different sorts of things. There can be natural anxiety associated with exams. But these are all pieces of assessed work.

Judith, you've obviously lived through the exam.

JUDITH I survived.

PICKERING:

HOST: But for some students, who may have that at the end of the module, what would your advice be in terms of viewing this as a piece of assessment? Are people trying to trick you? How do you get guidance and support in terms of how you're studying for that sort of piece?

JUDITH No, you're right. People aren't trying to trick you. There won't be any questions in there that you wouldn't have covered throughout your module. I think probably the best way to prepare-- and what I did as well-- was to look at past exam papers. And those are now available. And do some of those, and try doing some of those in timed conditions at home-- so if it's a three-hour exam, get a past paper. Set your timer. Run through it in three hours. Don't be distracted by anything. Don't be tempted to look at books, if that's not allowed in the exam. And just see how you go. You can look at, potentially, some proposed answers, and see how they map. And that will give you a sense of what to expect, and an idea of have you managed to answer all the questions in time, in the time available, and give you some idea of what more work you might need to do to prepare for the exam. But it probably also, as I've found, gave me a lot of reassurance. Actually, no, I can do this. I've only got a little bit of extra work to do. I can touch

up in these areas. So I actually found that helped a lot.

The worst thing for me was the thought-- because I don't right-- the thought of just writing constantly for three hours was the thing that worried--

HOST: You have to hand practice, don't you?

JUDITH PICKERING: You do. You have to practise. Use exactly the same sort of conditions as you would in a normal exam. So don't be tempted to type the answers if you can't type the answers in the exam. Use a pen. And try out lots of different pens, and different pen sizes, and things like that. And just try and replicate that exam experience at home, beforehand, if you can.

HOST: They're less and less common now, as more and more modules are shifting towards various types of assessment and end-of-modules. Peter, you've marked a lot of exams in your time. When you've been thinking about marking those, how has that process been, in terms of seeing what students know?

PETER TAYLOR: Well fairly straightforward in terms of what I-- when I set an exam question, I'm not trying to trick anybody. Because I don't need to be too sophisticated in my questions. Because really, what I'm trying to do in exam conditions-- where I know the student has got limited time, and they've also got no other resources-- is I want them to be able to do their best and show me what they know. And so I want to try and write questions which are fairly straightforward.

So there's a couple of basic things I rely on students doing. One is to read the paper. There's usually a specimen examination paper, which we send out, which will have the same rubric, the same design, in terms of the numbers of questions, the type of questions, whether you need to answer questions from section A, B, or C, or whatever. So looking at that, and understanding what the paper will look like, should be no surprise to you then when you get into the exam. It should be at that same format.

Then reading the questions and understanding, what they're really asking, and thinking of what kind of answer that you can give to the question-- not an answer to the question you would have liked to have had-- which is sometimes what I see when I'm marking-- but actually what the question is asking. And making a decision about which questions you're going to do and, based upon the weightings, allotting the time accordingly. So if you say, you know, I've got six questions to do in three hours. And I've got half an hour on each question. And I aim to finish after half an hour, and stop, and then move onto the next one. Because if I spend 45

minutes on the first question, then I'm never going to finish the last one. So often when I'm marking exams, I'm seeing a really good first question, which is full of-- and then the last question is scribbled down, with bullet points. Because it's clear the person's run out of time. So that time management is quite important in an exam.

HOST: And we'll be doing other *Student Hub Live* events later about exactly how to cope with exam conditions. So select the Count Me In button and we'll keep you up to date with when we have those.

Sophie, Evaghn?

SOPHIE: Yes. Some really good chat on here-- a bit of a competition about who's doing the most words in their essay coming up. But we have a question from Jordan, who is actually studying in Spain. And his next module, he has an exam. So how would that work, if he's studying abroad at the moment?

PETER TAYLOR: Usually we try and set up an examination centre abroad. You may have to travel further, because the distances that we can set up the exam obviously is more difficult. And there may be an extra cost, because of setting up a separate exam centre. But we've had exams all over the world. We've had exams in submarines. We've had exams in war zones. We've had exams on board boats. So we're pretty good at setting exams up in interesting places.

HOST: Are there any other urgent questions we need to address from the Hot Desk? Because we do have a session with Georgina next about getting the most support from your tutor. And some of this is, needless to say, going to cover assessment. And Evaghn, anything else?

EVAGHN: Not. Sylvia said that she's doing an MA in Classical Studies. And she struggled with her last TMA. So there is a question there about support. And then Jordan says he doesn't really get nervous, Jordan. He just gets-- no, he gets nervous, and not scared. Sorry. So yeah, I guess it's all good. All good on the chat so far.

HOST: Excellent. Now some nerves are very good and very useful. They help you think on your toes, don't they. I'd like to leave everything to Georgina about the tutor supports for students. But from an assessment perspective, what should students expect, in terms of support? So Georgina will talk about how to offer that support, or how that might happen for the students. But broadly speaking, what should students expect?

PETER TAYLOR: So you should be expecting good feedback on your assessment.

HOST: By good, you don't mean this is really brilliant work, Karen?

PETER TAYLOR: No, no, no, no, no, no, but helpful feedback on the assessment. So I tutor on a course. And when I can get my TMAs in, I'm trying to work out what best comments I can give to help the student to help them understand where they've gone wrong and what they can do to sort out their misunderstandings. And so one of my concerns is that I might give the student 65%. And then it pings into their tutor home. They see they've got 65%. And they're busy. And they think, I'll look at that feedback later. And they never quite get round to looking at it. So making sure that they're looking at the feedback-- because actually, that's probably one of the most important bits of support you're going to get from your tutor. So if it takes 45 minutes, an hour or so, to mark each assignment, that's individualised, personal teaching that you don't get anywhere else within the module. So it's probably one of the most valuable things that you'll get.

HOST: And such a unique thing to the OU, as well. Because where else do you get such detailed, in depth feedback? And I'm going to talk to Georgina about what to do if you don't understand that. So do stay tuned for that.

Judith, can we end with you, talking a little bit about, again, what students might expect?

JUDITH From their assessment?

PICKERING:

HOST: Yeah.

JUDITH Well hopefully, a level of challenge. It will help them learn, as Peter has said. They're not going to expect to be thrown into the deep end. If you're new students, don't expect you'll have to write a dissertation straight off the bat. So what we do here is very much develop your assessment skills, as you progress through the Open University. So you can expect to be challenged, but not too much, and be supported by your tutor. So I think that was what I'd say you get from assessment, really.

HOST: There is some scary chat in the chat about essays of 3,000 words. But that doesn't come til later, does it, Peter?

PETER TAYLOR: No. So I teach a postgraduate module, which is actually the very fine 60 credits of a dissertation. And it's 15,000 words. But that's all there is. There's no real study or TMAs. It's

just producing this 15,000. So it's about starting where you are building up as you go through the levels-- level one, level two, and level three-- to develop your academic voice, in terms of writing.

HOST: Some of my students, on the second-year I teach, complain about having only 1,000 words. Because the essays are very complex. And there's so much to put in. And the skill there is being very brief. So words aren't always necessarily a good thing, are they?

PETER TAYLOR: And I always say to my students-- because when they think they've got a 15,000 word dissertation to write, at the beginning they're always saying, how on Earth am I going to-- and I have to tell them by the time they get to the end, they'll be complaining that 15,000 words is not enough. You'd be surprised how quickly it is taken up.

HOST: Well thank you both so much for coming along and talking to us today. I think the take home message from this session really is that this assessment is not here to trick you. It's to assess your learning outcomes. You've shown us how and when to find that guidance, and also to look at the modular assessment for the module, and also the additional assessment for each TMA-- ICMA, EMA, and exam. And you've explained the differences between those, as well, really clearly. So thank you for that.

If you do have any more questions, we can put those to Georgina in the next session, when we're going to be talking about how to get the most from your tutor. So Judith, Peter, thank you so very much for coming along. We're now going to look at *Chaos Theory* for a quick ad break. And we'll be back in five minutes. So grab a cup of tea and join me for our next session, where we're going to talk about making the most of your tutor.

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