

HOST: Welcome back to *The Student Hub Live*. In this session we're going to talk about exploring the relationship with your tutor-- probably one of the most useful contacts you will have this year within your Open University journey. Georgina Blakeley, thank you for coming along. Now you were the chair of DD102, Introducing the Social Sciences. And you're now going off into different areas. But one thing that's always been very dear to your heart is the relationship between students and tutors. Why does it matter so much?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Because as you say, the relationship you have with your tutor is absolutely key to your success and progress with the Open University.

HOST: So can students do well then and never speak to their tutor?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: They can. But I would advise most students that at some point in your journey, you'll need somebody to talk to. And I think it's really important to remember that your tutor is there, first and foremost, to teach you. I think we forget that tutors are actually teachers. And they'll teach you in various ways. The first thing they'll do is to help you to use the module materials, and to find your way through the module websites, and basically how to study.

But the second key thing, and I know you've talked about this already, is that they'll teach you through the feedback they provide on your assessment. And that's absolutely fundamental to your progress and how you improve as you go through on your student journey.

HOST: I'd like to pick up on that. But before I do, we've got three widgets that we'd like you to vote on. So they're all word clouds. And what that means is there are three options. Now your results won't submit unless you put something in each box. So if there's only one or two, just put a full stop and submit those results. And you'll also then see what other people have put in the chat. We'd like to know what areas you'd like to ask your tutor but haven't, what most concerns you about contacting your tutor, if anything-- and that may be if you're a new or a current student-- and what is the best piece of advice you have ever got from a tutor? And now the challenge there is to put that in one word. So you might want to expand on that in the chat box as you're going through, as well.

Georgina, Peter and I were just talking about assessment. And we were talking about the tutor-marked assignments and the importance of understanding the feedback that you've had

from your teacher. Now sometimes, best will in the world-- and this happens to me, as well. I think I've been very, very clear about something. But a student will pick that up and not understand what I've been talking about. And what's most upsetting is when they don't get in touch and clarify it. Because I have spent time marking it. And I'd like them to be able to take advantage of my thoughts on the matter. But sometimes it's not clear. What should students do then, in terms of how to seek clarification about things?

**GEORGINA
BLAKELEY:**

I think students sometimes feel guilty about contacting their tutor. They think, oh, I'm bothering them. Or, I'm going to be a nuisance. But you have to remember, that's what your tutor's there for. So see your tutor very much as a resource, as somebody you can email, or telephone to ask for support. And when you get your feedback-- obviously, we're all human, so the first thing you do is look at the mark. And when you've recovered from that, you might be really pleased. You might be a bit disappointed. You might be a bit miffed that it's not as much as you thought.

But then take the feedback. Because that's the bit that really matters. The mark, in a sense, isn't as important, which I know sounds strange to students. But it's true. Because it's the feedback, which you should really see as part of teaching and learning. So you need to take that feedback. Have a cup of coffee, cup of tea-- maybe something stronger. Sit down and read it. Take notes. And then, if you think well, I'm not sure what they mean by, you need to improve your structure, or your paragraphing is not very clear-- whatever it might be-- write that down. Put it in an email. And send it to your tutor.

And your tutor will then think, OK, this is something I can respond to in an email. Or they might think, actually, it would be better to have a discussion. Or they might say, well, a lot of people said that. They're struggling with the same thing. So we'll cover it in the next tutorial. But the important thing to remember is that you really must feel that you can ask your tutor these questions. Because that's what they're there for.

HOST:

No, absolutely. Meg, John, and I were talking earlier today about caring for yourself in your studies and getting this TMA feedback, thinking about that, and thinking about how to most usefully apply some of this. And we were talking about the positives and the negatives. And often, tutors will feedback positive comments, as well as negatives.

**GEORGINA
BLAKELEY:**

Absolutely.

HOST: But Meg, John, and I were talking about some of this self-serving bias, where we focus more on the criticisms, and we think well, I must do that better. And as you say, sometimes things may be not clear, like, you need to expand on this. And then students can think, well, I've used the word count. How can I expand on this? How might they then deal with some of those things that are more about what they're doing, as opposed to what they're including?

**GEORGINA
BLAKELEY:** About what they're doing? Can you say a bit more about what you mean by that?

HOST: Yeah, so sometimes a tutor might say, you need to expand on this. Or, you've described this in too much detail. You need to evaluate more. And students might think, I don't know what you mean by evaluate more. Because I think I've done that. So when there's maybe-- it's clearly explained. But students don't know what to do.

**GEORGINA
BLAKELEY:** I think they need to ask for examples. Because sometimes it's actually very difficult to explain something like that, without your tutor providing an example. And it might be that the tutor can provide an example that they can put on the forum that other students can also use, as well. And I think the thing is to keep asking. If you get an example, and you think, I'm still not sure, so can you explain a little bit more? And to look at the sample answers-- they're sometimes available as well.

And some tutors will give you model answers or past essays for you to look at. Sometimes it's also good as well for your tutor to give you an essay that doesn't quite work so well. And you can look at that and see how that can be improved. I think it's sometimes helpful to take the personal element out of it. Because I think when we get feedback on our work, particularly where we focus on what needs to be improved, it's easy to take that personally and to think it's a criticism about you. And of course, it's not. It's feedback on how you can improve your work and get better.

HOST: And part of being an academic is having feedback.

**GEORGINA
BLAKELEY:** Oh, absolutely.

HOST: You're writing books, peer reviewed papers, all of these things. You're constantly getting feedback. And it's part of the whole process, isn't it?

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

If it's any consolation, I can say quite honestly that I've had feedback on an article that I've submitted to a journal that's had me in tears. And I've not been able to look at it for at least two or three weeks. But then I think, OK, I've got past the disappointment. I'll get the feedback out. And I look at it. And then you can start to engage with it much more constructively and think, OK, well maybe they do have a point. And I'll try and do this. And I'll try and do that.

HOST:

But there's lots of feedback. Peter was saying that some tutors will spend 45 minutes, an hour giving very detailed feedback. So for students, they might think, well, I've got an idea of this, this, and this. There are two forms of information they'll get. There's the summary. And then there's the detailed script comments. How would you advise students work with their tutor to maybe prioritise some things that they need to work on, bearing in mind that there will be quite a comprehensive coverage of areas to improve, and we wouldn't expect them to improve on everything? How might they have an individual plan, and think, well, my tutor thinks I really need to focus on this, or this, and how might they then go about exploring that in the relationship?

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Yeah, I think it can be very daunting sometimes when you do get the feedback returned.

Because it can seem like such a huge amount to deal with. Some tutors-- I think what they do with that is say, OK, I'm going to give you feedback on all this. Because that's my job. And so you might get a lot of very detailed feedback. But some tutors will also say, OK, I know there's a lot of feedback here. But next time, concentrate on one, two, and three. That helps.

If your tutor hasn't done that, you can ask them, and say, look, I really appreciate all the feedback you've given. But I'm struggling with all the-- I can't possibly put everything right at once. So could you advise me, for the next TMA shall I concentrate on this, or this, or perhaps these two or three things? Because it's very hard, I think, to work on everything, particularly if you're starting out. It might be referencing. It might be your introduction. It might be conclusion. And be realistic. You're not going to fix everything all at once. That's why we always tell students, it's a journey. Take it every step at a time. You're not suddenly going to be brilliant.

HOST:

And right at the last module, people will still be getting a lot of feedback. Because there are different things. As you start improving on something, other things come to light.

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Absolutely.

HOST: And so it's a journey, isn't it?

GEORGINA Yes.

BLAKELEY:

HOST: The other thing that I like to link between your session and Peter's is the idea of assessment. You mentioned the importance of looking at grades. But also, there's this idea that assessment is staged. So things will get progressively harder. And assessments also have different areas that they're focusing on. But for some students, they can think they're doing better if they're getting higher grades, if they're getting feedback of a certain kind. How can they make sense of that?

GEORGINA I think it's very important to reflect on your own progress, and particularly not worry about what other students are doing. Because what you're always doing is measuring yourself against what you want to achieve-- and for each student, that will be very different-- and also, measuring yourself against your own progress. So I would say to a lot of students, particularly if you think, oh, I'm a bit lacking in confidence. I'm not sure. Avoid Facebook. It's really not helpful to get the impression that everybody's getting 80s and 90s and you're maybe getting 30s and 40s-- partly because that's not the reality. A lot of people don't say what it is they're getting. And also it's not helpful. You're comparing yourself against your own progress. So I think that's really important to keep that in mind. And be realistic about what you want to achieve.

HOST: Excellent. Thank you.

So aside from the TMA then, you've mentioned before that your tutor is your individual person that's helping you with your learning. And they're your teacher, in a sense. So they're teaching you things. Now we've been talking a little better about how people might make contact with their tutor. And some of our students are just starting out. So lots are at level one. Some may have been studying and may not have been making the most of the relationship with their teacher. So for those of those who are just starting out now, should their tutor have contacted them? And what if they haven't yet? How could they maybe go about making contact? What would your advice be in terms of when to do it and what to say?

GEORGINA It will vary. And that's partly to do with when your tutor gets allocated the names of their student group. And sometimes there's a glitch in the system and you get to know before your tutor gets to know. But that's not really a problem. I would wait until the start of the module.

BLAKELEY:

And by then, your tutor should have contacted you. And in that letter or email, they will say to you what's the best way to contact them. Sometimes some tutors prefer email. It's easier for them. Others prefer a phone call. And they'll also tell you what times are best to contact them.

I think it's important to remember that a lot of our tutors work part time for the Open University. So they're not going to be there 24/7 for you. So you need to bear that in mind and respect the guidelines and expectations they set out. If, however, you haven't heard from your tutor, and you have their email and details, by all means, drop them an email and say, hello. I'm on your module. I'm looking forward to hearing from you. And they will reply. But as I say, don't be offended if you don't get an immediate reply. I think email has created false expectations. We expect a person to be sitting there and just ping off an email as soon as it arrives. But actually, they may have children. So they may be getting somebody's tea. They may be working somewhere else. I think it's good to remember that tutors have been Open University students, in many cases. And like our Open University students, they have busy lives as well. So a bit of give and take in terms of response times and things like that is always helpful.

HOST:

Now you mentioned email. But some tutors give out their mobile phone numbers. And so some students may text them, or WhatsApp them, or message them. So there are various ways. And within those, you talk about this expectation of response. And I know that when I get a WhatsApp message from a student, they'll know that I've seen it. But I might be cooking tea at the time. And I might not be able to-- and then I might forget. Because I'm always working on email. So what my students do then, in terms of contact-- so say I missed the WhatsApp message, and I don't get back to my poor student. What might they best do then in terms of connecting and things?

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Oh, I think it's absolutely fine if you haven't had a response, in particular if it's something that you're very worried about and would welcome a response, is to simply either email again or text again and say, I'm really sorry to bother you. You might be busy. And that's fine. But could you just let me know that you've received the email and that you will get back to me. And I think most tutors are OK with that.

HOST:

Yeah. No, absolutely. So there are a range of ways of consulting your tutor early doors. What if you haven't done that already? So what if you've started a module in September, October. And you've been working through it diligently, sending off your TMAs. But you haven't really maybe had a chat with your tutor. And maybe you've missed their phone call early on, or they

haven't found you, or you haven't just managed to go to a tutorial, is there still a chance to connect?

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, and your tutor will be trying, I'm sure, to connect with you, whether that's through the forums, or whether that's through personal means-- through email, or text, or whatever. And some students are very self sufficient. And they choose to work independently and don't want to be part of that wider community. And that's fine. Because everybody has their own needs and interests. But if you really do need that support, I think it's very helpful to contact your tutor. And it's never too late. Because your tutor-- it might sound strange-- but they do actually want to hear from you. I know as a tutor, I welcome just a one line email from a student saying, I know I haven't been in touch. But actually, I'm fine. I'm doing OK. And that's great. That's absolutely super. It doesn't have to be a constant stream of communication. It's just part of knowing what's going on. And keeping your tutor informed, I think, is really helpful.

HOST:

Also the assessment can get progressively more and more difficult. So often at the midpoint in a module, things can suddenly start to feel a little bit more difficult. And that may be when you might really appreciate a word from your tutor, if you haven't had that time already.

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Absolutely. Tutors are very experienced. And as I say, a lot of them have been OU students themselves. So they know what it's like, even if they haven't, they know the modules very well. So they know when the pinch points are in the module, and when students are likely to start to experience the assessment as more challenging, or suddenly there's a lot more study materials to navigate. So they're very good, I think, at being able to help students through that, should they need that help.

HOST:

Now I was thinking the other day, I had some emails from some students talking about things that I think they didn't want to talk about. So they'd email me saying, I'm struggling on this. And I'd think, well, what are you struggling about? And I was thinking about why they might be speaking to me. And I realised that actually, they had something more difficult that they wanted to talk about. And so we were initiating an email conversation so that they knew I was replying. And then we could talk about what the matter actually was, much like we do when we're saying, how are you? And isn't it lovely weather? And actually, I'm finding this really difficult.

So in terms of students expressing their needs and what their tutor can give them, being British, sometimes it can be difficult to say, I really have not an idea about what's going on. I'm

way behind. I've missed out on all of this. And sometimes, equally, I know when I'm receiving those, it can be difficult to point people in the right direction. So there's a balance here about, I guess, naming what our needs are and also giving our tutor enough clarity in terms of how they can actually help address some of those things.

What might students do if they're feeling like they're falling behind and they might need a tutor to help point them in the right direction, spend five minutes with them prioritising? How might they deal with that situation?

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Yeah. I think it's really hard. Because if you are experiencing difficulties, whatever they might be-- whether it's with your study, or in your personal life, or family life, or work environment, or whatever-- I think the longer you leave it in terms of getting in touch with their tutor, the harder it becomes. So I think the sooner you can tell your tutor that you're beginning to feel difficulties about something in some area, it's better to let them know. You don't always have to go into details. You might not want to give them details of your work situation, or your family situation, or whatever. That's absolutely fine. But I think they need to know that you are experiencing challenges, whatever they might be. If you want to talk about it, that's fine. But they do need to know. Because they do need to start to talk to you about how to manage your study in the way that's best for you. So really keeping them informed as soon as possible is absolutely key.

But also remember that you don't just have to talk to your tutor. I think that's important too. Your tutor's always there, if you need them. But there is the Student Support Team as well. And you might feel happier, depending on the issue, about talking to someone who's not, in the end of the day, assessing your work. And that's fine too. Because the Student Support Team will tell you are you to that you've contacted them, which is great. But they won't necessarily need to tell them the details. So there's that level of confidentiality and anonymity kept within that relationship.

HOST:

Now Ryan Gregory and I did a session yesterday, which you can watch on Catch Up if you missed, about when to contact the tutor and when to contact the Student Support Team, which was really useful. And what we realised was that sometimes students might just want to ping off an email to a tutor. And the tutor might refer them on. And there was nothing wrong with that.

GEORGINA

BLAKELEY:

Absolutely. Tutors tend not to be trained counsellors, for example. They're not career advisers. They won't know every answer to every question that you pose. But they can point

you in the right direction. And if they can't, they can say, well, OK. Contact the Student Support Team. Because they will be able to help you. So yeah, it's about knowing the different sources of support that you can draw on.

HOST: Thank you, Georgina.

I'd like to look at the widget, which is, "what is the best piece of advice you've ever got from a tutor?" And I know that we don't have a huge amount of time in the session today. And then I'll take a quick trip to the Hot Desk as well, to see what's been going on there. So let's see what you think the best piece of advice you have ever got from a tutor is.

Don't do too much. Learn from feedback. Engage in forum. Analyse more. Evaluating more. Great. And well done. Those are some really, really wonderful, kind things. And I hope people have really appreciated themselves for what they've managed to achieve in doing some of those quite complex tasks.

GEORGINA Absolutely. That's all really good advice.

BLAKELEY:

HOST: Lovely. Thank you.

HJ, and I've got-- oh, Sophie. Sophie, that doesn't look like you.

[LAUGHING]

We've got [INAUDIBLE] in tonight, where we're going to be putting all your questions to her in the Q&A session. So I hope you've been collating all the things that people would like to ask. Because we don't have time for all that now. But generally, I know there's been a lot of chat going on. So what's it been all about?

STUDENT: So yeah, it's just been all really good-- some nice chit chat going on. Nice to see that everyone has helpful tutors. So Stuart says that he always gets great tutors-- very helpful. They give him good feedback and when to brush up on, which is really nice. The same with Sylvia. And again, it's just nice to see that the tutors are there to help the student succeed, basically. So there's a good relationship that happens between the tutors and the students.

JOHN: We've been having a bit of chat about going to tutorials, as well, and how much we enjoy the chance to see your tutors face-to-face, or the online tutorials as well. We've got some regulars

for online tutorials. But I think people appreciate that. It's not just one way you get into contact with a tutor. And it's not very strict. They like emails. And some of them don't mind telephone calls. And you can see them at tutorials. And yeah-- I think tutorials are definitely one to go for.

STUDENT: Yeah, all very positive.

HOST: Wonderful. Georgina, what's your final words on making the most of your tutor?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: I think it's probably seeing it as a relationship like any other. And that means respecting each other. It means setting out clear guidelines about what to expect from each other and clear boundaries, as well, and treating each other as you would in any kind of relationship.

HOST: Excellent. And thank you so much for that session. That's been really, really wonderful. And really nice to see a tutor. So I hope that if you haven't met your tutor, you appreciate that they're a really lovely bunch of people who are really keen to help you. So do ask. Do get in touch. And do develop and make the most of that relationship.

We're going to have a very short video now about Achilles and the tortoise. And then we're going to come back for our final session this afternoon with Maria Leedham to talk about what, where, and how do workers [? write. ?] That will be a really interesting session. And we'll save all of your questions for Jonquil this evening, who's coming to do a Q&A session about your tutor.

If you have got a particularly lovely tutor-- and I'll dig this out a little bit later-- there is actually an award you can enter them for, which is from the Open University Students Association. So I'll dig those out, so you can nominate your tutor for that, and surprise them, which would be lovely.

We'll see you in five minutes. Grab a cup of tea. And I'll be back then.