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KAREN: Good evening, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well in real time, it's the 1st of February, and it's 6:00 PM. And we have a special slot for you tonight, because we'd like to know about some of your experiences and some of your opinions about your joining process to the Open University. What made you choose the OU? What were some of the factors involved?

And we're going to be thrashing these out with Alison Green. Now Alison Green is a psychologist. But more interestingly, you've been very much involved with developing curriculum, and scoping new areas that the Open University can get involved with. And you've been working on certain projects. And now you'd like to talk to students about some of their interests and reasons why they started to join the university. Alison, why is this important?

ALISON GREEN: It's important because as a university, of course, we're very, very motivated to give our students the best experience we possibly can. So we're interested in why our students want to come and study with us, what they want to study, what we do well, and areas where we can improve.

KAREN: So we've got a whole host of questions for you. And you'll see these in the widget panel. So if you're in the Watch and Engage section on the lower left-hand side of the screen you should see a range of multi-colored options. And we'd like you to fill in as many as you possibly can for us.

Some of them are very, very easy, like which course are you enrolled in, and what made you choose the OU. And some are a bit more difficult, some of the word clouds, and motivational factors. But you can also put things in the chat as well.

Now to use the widgets, all you do is open one, select the option that applies to you, and then you can submit it. And then you can see what things other people have filled in.

If there is a word cloud, which is a choice of three words, it does require you to put three things in each, well, one thing in each section. So three things in total. But if you can only think of one or two, that's absolutely fine. Just put a full stop in there and submit those to send.

If you're in the watch only, you're not going to be able to see any of this. And you're also not

going to be able to see or engage with any of the chat. So if you'd like to, you can come and join us in the Watch and Engage by going back to the website, studenthublive.kmi.open.ac.uk, select Watch and Engage, and just sign in with your normal student or staff ID. And then you can enter the website and see all of that there.

If you don't have a student account, you can get one, an Open University Computer user name. That's quick and easy to do. And you can just see the Frequently Asked questions section of the website.

Now Sophie and HJ, you're joining us and feeding in a lot of the chat. And you're both Open University students who've studied with the Open University. Sophie, as we know, you're a math student. And HJ, you've been doing politics, economics, what was the other one?

HJ: Philosophy.

KAREN: How can I forget philosophy?

So both of you are quite young, I've noticed. And a lot of students joining the Open University are a slightly younger demographic, perhaps as an alternative to university. So HJ, can I start by asking you why you joined the Open University? What were some of the factors that motivated you?

HJ: I think the main reason was because I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to university or not. So I did an OU module to give the university a try. And then I kind of just decided I actually quite liked studying this way, because it means I can do other things, and volunteering, and different types of work, and different experience. So I think that's what made it suitable for me, really.

KAREN: And do put in the chat as well some of the reasons that encouraged you to join the Open University. The thing with these questionnaires is that sometimes they can suggest various options. And we are limited. So if something doesn't apply to you, just put that in the chat. And if you are in the watch only, and you'd like to contribute, you can always email us, studenthub@open.ac.uk with any or all of your answers to these questions. Sophie, what was your story?

SOPHIE: So I went to university. I studied for about three months on a social sciences course. And I actually didn't really like the idea. I didn't like the course. And so I came home. And I actually found a job within about a month.

And so I did want to go to university, I did want to study, but I didn't necessarily want to leave again. So I had a look at the Open University. My dad had done a course there as well. And I found a really good math course, and decided to enrol. And that was that.

ALISON GREEN: Can I ask you both? Because you're both relatively young, as Karen has said, and you're both OU students. How do you talk to your friends about being an OU student? And are any of them thinking, oh, actually maybe I might think about studying at the OU?

HJ: I think, well, a lot of my friends hadn't heard about the OU. And they were all going off to brick universities. So they thought what I was doing was a bit odd and a bit different. But I did talk to it about them. And they sort of knew, understood why I was doing it. But actually one of my friends decided to do a creative writing degree after having a few chats about it, and how it all works, and quite likes the idea of it.

ALISON GREEN: Great. OK.

SOPHIE: Similar, really. Pretty much all of my friends went to university, the ones that were going, and they went to a brick university. So my friends, I think they are surprised.

And they think it's a lot of work. They realise how much work I put in. And I think they're a bit scared off, in a way, by how long it is, because obviously they finished their degrees ages ago. And I did start mine a little later than them. But obviously I'm still persevering with mine. So they do recognise how much more difficult it is, though, which is nice.

ALISON GREEN: OK. Great.

KAREN: And for people who are just joining us, and just getting geared up for this evening's sessions, we have started a little bit earlier than we originally intended to, because we'd like to hear your views about being an OU student. So you'll see that there are lots of widgets on the screen. As you get settled in, and say your good evenings to each other, please do fill some of those in for us. So we'd like to know what made you study, what made you choose the Open University, and what were some of the factors, as well as some of the things that you're doing.

So Alison, we've got lots of questions here. What are the other things that you'd like to talk about tonight?

ALISON GREEN: We're interested in when students make a choice about a qualification. Are they drawn to the Open University because they see a particular qualification that they like? Or is it because they

have an interest in a certain subject area? So in a broader subject area, such as, or psychology, of course, which is my discipline. Or maybe in the arts, or in the sciences. Or is there one particular qualification that you've seen and that you really like?

KAREN: It's a really interesting one, especially, I guess, to pick up on psychology. Because the curriculum is really developing. And it's getting to a point now where there are the quite niche combinations of offerings as well. So the Open University, in terms of counselling, forensic, and psychology, combining those together, and offering quite different things. How competitive is it in the HE sector, the higher education sector, to start developing things that have a point of difference from other universities?

ALISON GREEN: Well for us, I think it's really important that we continue to be competitive, that we offer students value for money, and also that we move with the times, that we recognise what students want to study, what's popular out there. And that we're able to respond and come up with something that meets their needs.

So hence the developed psychology provision, which responds to the interest, huge interest in forensic psychology. It's still the "Cracker" "Cracker" effect. And also, of course, growing interest in counselling. So it's one example where we've moved the curriculum on.

And we're keen to do that with other areas of the curriculum, too. So hence, wanting to find out what it is that students want to see, what they want to study, how do they want to study. So all those sorts of things are part of our thinking at the moment. How can we best meet our students' needs?

KAREN: HJ and Sophie, are there any ideas, I know everyone's saying hello. But are there any ideas here in the chat that are coming through about how students are feeling about why they chose the OU, or any things that they're saying about their selection of the university?

SOPHIE: I think people are actually desperately filling in the widgets at the moment. Everyone seems to be impressed with all the event widgets going on.

KAREN: Yes, Stuart. You said you wanted a lot of widgets, and now is your opportunity to fill them in. You say; we deliver.

SOPHIE: Gavin has called it Widget City. So hopefully you will get some answers from the widgets.

HJ: We do have one post as well, that someone says my friend chose the OU because she was in

and out of hospital a lot, and even when she was at home, she could not travel, but she could study. So she did. And she's really proud of it. It's a very nice story.

But I know a few people as well who have been unwell, but they want to sort of get on and do something. And it's really given them a lot of purpose in what they want to do, and actually that they can actually achieve something even if they're unwell.

SOPHIE: And there's a lot of people actually I know that have started studying a long time ago, or not even maybe that long ago, but for some reason had to stop, or came out of their qualification. And now they've managed to finish off with the Open University, which I think is a really good idea, that it's not the end of the road if you had to stop for whatever reason. There's always another way going about it.

ALISON GREEN: That's a really interesting point, actually, because we've in conversations with some colleagues earlier, we've really wanted to make sure that our potential students know that if they started they can finish with us. So it's really interesting that you mentioned that, because that's something we're very keen that people understand. That there's that possibility to come and finish with us.

KAREN: OK. Stuart. Shame on you. There are not too many widgets now.

We've asked people about this whole idea of where they started to find out about the OU. And this has been quite interesting, because friends and family is the key driving factor in terms of what people are saying. And these figures are fluctuating as people are finding and filling them in.

And then of course it's difficult when faced with such a plethora of opportunity of widgets, Stuart to fill in. But at the moment, 57% are saying that they heard about the Open University through friends and family. And the next popular one is hearing about it online.

Online must be quite a common way, online advertising. It's an online university. Is this in line with what you expected?

ALISON GREEN: I'm surprised, actually. I'm very surprised that the word of mouth, the recommendations from friends and family at the moment seems to be the way in which people hear about us.

KAREN: With only 14% saying TV adverts. And I don't know whether I'm primed to recognise the TV adverts, but it seems to be very, very prominent. So interesting that the online advertising

activity, in terms of media, I guess, is getting more than the TV.

ALISON GREEN: Absolutely. Yes. Yes, that is really interesting. Yes.

KAREN: Maybe because people are looking online, and associate it more, so they recognise it more. Because until you start noticing things, maybe you're not as aware of them.

ALISON GREEN: Could be. And it could be because people know that when they come to study with us at the OU, that they will be studying online. So maybe they're looking online anyway. There's a bit of that, yes.

KAREN: Excellent. OK. We've also started thinking about the process. So you've asked quite a lot of questions here about starting that journey. Did you get enough information?

And this is something that's probably changed for a lot of people since when they started. Also, they're very, very subjective in terms of how much information is enough. Because as we know, the OU have reams of information if you know where to look for them.

But of course, it's getting the right information, isn't it, and the right balance. So how are things changing in terms of how people are accessing information and finding out about where to study? What amount, I guess, is the right amount?

ALISON GREEN: It's a good question. I think if a student knows what they want to study, then finding that information about us is relatively easy. But for those students, and I think they're in the majority, who are less clear about what they want to study, then I think their experience that it's actually rather difficult sometimes to find exactly what they need to know.

And it's an interesting question to put to our potential students. If you weren't sure, if you felt perhaps I'd like to do something in social sciences, how easy was it for you to try and find your choice, and then think, yes, actually I really want to study art history, for example, as part of a combined degree, or sociology with something, for example, say. I can't answer that question, actually. I don't actually know how difficult it might be for students. It's something that we're interested to find out.

KAREN: Yeah. This question about was there information that you wanted to know, but couldn't find? Again it's one of those questions about not maybe knowing quite what that was. We've been spending a lot of time over the last couple of days sort of sharing ideas. And word of mouth seems to be very important. Because until people say, well, I've done this, or I've done that or

did you know you could change your qualification to an open degree, for example, people may not be aware of those options and flexibility.

ALISON GREEN: Absolutely. I mean, that's the key thing. I think the flexibility of what we offer is obviously very important. In a sense, it's almost as if people need to know a little bit about us to understand that that flexibility exists. So yes, flexibility in terms of choices, switching from, well, we don't actually encourage students to switch from one qualification to another. But of course if they do change their mind, and people do, then we try to accommodate. We try to accommodate all of those different eventualities.

And we're also trying to fit in with life experiences, too. So for example, your friends who've been ill, or people who've been ill, who at a conventional university, thought that might be it. Whereas we try to flex our curriculum and our schedule so that their study isn't devastated, isn't curtailed by life events. Life happens. And they can pick their studies up at sort of a later point.

KAREN: It's very interesting, going back to that idea about referrals and friends and family being very important. Because it seems to be a bit of a shift. So whilst friends and family and referrals can be a key driver in terms of people finding out about the OU, once people find out, and were interested in joining the OU, the idea about finding out more shifted.

So what we've seen here is 59% are saying it's online or social media in terms of finding out more about that. And then the next most popular is direct contact. So actually speaking to the Open University through email.

Is it a sense, almost, this is something I do, is if I'm interested in something, I think, what are the other perspectives? And look on social media, and see maybe reviews, or go onto Facebook groups and see what things people are talking about. People are a lot more savvy now in terms of making choices. Is this a result you would have expected to see?

ALISON GREEN: I think so, I think because this is where education is moving. So the students are getting information from a multitude of sources. And everyone is using social media. Everyone is using Twitter or Facebook. So it's reasonable, I think, for us to consider, well, yes, that's what our potential students would do. They will look online. They will look at our prospectuses. They will look at our website. But they're going to check us out, with their friends, with social media, with Facebook, just to find out, well, that's what they say. But what's it really like?

KAREN:

Yeah. No, absolutely. And in fact the OU Facebook page, and they're very quick at responding to people about things, and also quite clever. I saw one, I think it was the Student Association. And they had some banter going on about someone doing a TMA. And the OU Twitter account was e-mailing them saying, don't forget to have a shower. And it was all quite jovial and bantering. But it is this immediate response as well. And that's something that's nice through social media that the OU are engaged with.

A lot of our demographic is changing. So I think what we've seen more recently is a lot more students in full-time work, and a lot of younger students, as I said earlier. And so people are sort of shifting in terms of how they're studying.

And there seems to be the emphasis right now in terms of changing career, and wanting to achieve something through studies, as opposed to doing a degree, and isn't it lovely, and I might pick a next module and be a lifelong learner, and just keep progressing. Because I really, really love it. So this whole shift with qualifications may have affected the motivations for people studying, and also the extent to which they can connect with some of these qualifications.

So some of the things that we'd like to know your thoughts on are, what do you want to achieve through your studies? Again, for those of you just joining us, you can select one, two, or three of those items. But unless you put a full stop or something in each of those boxes, it won't submit to send.

And we'd also like to know if there's anything we can help you do to improve the application process, and also your first experiences connecting with the OU. So let us know on the variety of scales and word clouds how you found that experience.

So Alison, in terms of the shift, then, with people wanting to achieve things through their studies, you've been working very much with curriculum to try and sort of make those connections. What's the big growth area in terms of what people are choosing to study? Is it these more arts-based and creative industries that people are keen to look at? And what's big right now in terms of what people are wanting to achieve?

ALISON GREEN:

Right. Well, psychology still is huge. It's still a very important, popular subject across the UK, across all the four nations, and for us as an institution. It just is hugely popular. And long may that continue.

Other popular subjects, though, are business studies, and law. And some of the more classic kinds of studies. But the Open Programme still has a place, which is interesting, actually. Because even though we've diversified, and we have more particular products, particular kinds of qualifications, there still seems to be a place for the Open Programme. Which is interesting, I think.

KAREN:

Well you'll like this next widget. Let's have a look at what factors made people choose the OU. So we've asked about whether it was value for money, whether it was flexibility, availability of tutorials, and subject strength of the OU brand, or recommendation.

79% have said it's the flexibility of study methods. 16% say it's been recommended by a friend. So these friends and family have their various guidance perhaps as more people are joining. But the flexibility does seem to be one of the key driving factors.

And I know for many of my students who are balancing work and life, not only is it the flexibility of when to study, but also, as you say, things like the Open Programme do offer flexibility of qualification, and being able to map things on to your working experience, and your home life. So things that are really relevant to an individual.

ALISON GREEN:

I think the Open Programme is really important for those students who have started, and they have some study elsewhere, and they don't quite know how to complete. They don't want to complete at a conventional university, because it didn't work, perhaps didn't work because they were working, or because they had family commitments, and so on.

And I think the Open Programme is important for those kinds of students, because it offers them a way in which they can finish and complete, and then go away. They have a degree which has currency in the marketplace in terms of employability in what they might then go on to do.

KAREN:

You've also asked about the process in terms of being prepared to study. So we've asked people on a scale how prepared they feel to begin their studies, very prepared or not prepared.

Now I'll warn you that we have quite a conscientious group of people who come to the Student Hub Live. So it's a bit of a biased sample. But let us know how prepared you felt in terms of your study, and also in terms of registration, how easy was it to register for a course.

Now we've been talking a lot about student support teams, and about how students might be

able to access things within the Open University. But I guess this happens beforehand. We had some colleagues from the Open University in Wales, and we were talking about how some students would go along to the centre, pick up some of the books, and then think about which modules they might choose to study.

But in terms of registering, it is a fairly simple process, although it may be that the choice of what to choose may be more difficult. Is that the sort of thing you're meaning, or are you talking really about the physical registration process when you asked this question?

ALISON GREEN: It's about registering, but it's also about getting their loan in place if they're students studying in England. So how easy is it for you, having decided yes, I want to study with the OU? OK. How easy is it to make that transition from, OK, I've decided I want to study?

And then the start of the module that they've chosen to study. So that involves things like actually registering with us, and making sure that they register on the right course, so that they're on the right course, the right programme for them. Because that's a key thing, having students start on the right course of study, and studying at the right intensity so they're not taking on too much. So how easy is it for them to make those kinds of informed decisions, and get themselves on the right track right from the start?

KAREN: Well let's see what they said. So the first one is choosing the right qualification. Now a lot of people have said it was very easy. So the scale is really at that end of the spectrum. A couple of sort of bars saying that it wasn't very easy at all, because it can be quite challenging. But that doesn't seem to be the main problem. So a lot of people are saying that it was quite easy.

Whereas if we start looking at registering for a course, let's see how that maps onto it. It's pretty polarised. So some people are saying pretty easy. But a lot of people are saying it's not easy.

So are there any comments that you can tell us about that process in the chat? I appreciate it's dinner time, and there's lots of food talk to be had, and indeed lots of other talk about the days' events and activities. Is there anything coming through about this process, HJ and Sophie?

SOPHIE: Not so much. We've been talking about why people chose the Open University. And we've got Davin and Gale, who basically chose it for more medical reasons. And they were really impressed by the part time, and the optional tutorials, things like that.

And we've also had Stuart. He said he just did it because he was interested. He was interested in science, and documentaries didn't give him enough depth.

HJ: And Simon said as well that he studied at the OU because there were no other unis as good as part time. And I think we know the OU is one of the biggest part time providers.

ALISON GREEN: Oh, that's nice.

KAREN: It would be interesting to see your thoughts on if there were other universities that you considered. We've got a wordzel for that. So if there were other universities that you considered, you can say no or none or whatever. And if there's any one, you can just put a full stop in the other box so that we can see what was in those.

I mean, the OU is such a big brand for part-time flexible education. Do you think people even know, Alison, that there are other providers around?

ALISON GREEN: I think they're starting to know that there are other providers. And although we have the integrity as an organisation. We have a very strong brand. And we have very good quality curriculum and qualifications. But unsurprisingly, other institutions are competing with us increasingly, and offering part time qualifications, too.

So it's a big interest to us, I think, which are the providers students might potentially be considering, and why? Is there something that we could offer that we're not currently offering? And what is it? What is it that's informing a choice to study with us? But equally, if students were considering studying with another provider, we'd really like to know more about why.

KAREN: So put something in the chat about why you then chose to study with the Open University, as opposed to some of the others which we've had mentioned of Hertfordshire, Cardiff, Northhampton, Southampton, Warwick, de Montfort, Oxford Brookes, Swansea, UEL. So people are quite savvy in terms of the choices.

ALISON GREEN: Yes. There's a wide range there are well, which is quite surprising. So I thought it might be they might veer more towards if they were considering studying with the OU is because it's online and part time. But some of those are conventional face-to-face bricks and mortar universities. So that's quite a surprise, actually.

KAREN: It's interesting, isn't it? Because a lot of people are sort of tapping into the fact that they can

deliver curriculum from a distance. So these conventional universities are trying to offer things. And there's quite a distinction between the way that the Open University is specifically thinking about distance, often part-time, education in terms of how we can actually make that experience better for students.

Any comments, HJ and Sophie, in the chat, then, about maybe why people didn't consider those other universities? I know you've been speaking about why they chose the OU in terms of the flexibility. But is anything else coming through?

SOPHIE:

Simon's just mentioned that he did study at other universities. And he hasn't said which ones. But he looked for other part time, couldn't find any as good, and so he came to the OU. So he did it maybe a little bit of me, and went over to another university and didn't like it. So, yeah.

HJ:

Gail commented as well that she felt the OU will give me the best online backup and resources for her study. And Latisse as well said, I didn't consider any others, mostly, because what I was interested in was flexible study with the OU, as well as the reputation.

KAREN:

Excellent. Thank you so much, everyone, for your comments. Thank you, Alison for coming along. We've had a whole range of widgets there. We don't have time to talk through them all. But keep filling them in. And we're going to be bringing those up at regular sections throughout tonight's programme as well. So if you have just joined us, you'll be able to fill those in later.

We're going to have a short video break, where we're going to look at an OU religion video. And then I've got Paul coming in to talk about religion and politics.

But if there's anything that we haven't covered here, we've been talking about why you chose the OU. Perhaps other areas you considered. Do drop us an email, studenthub@open.ac.uk. We would really, really love to hear from people. But thank you so much for sharing your views. And thank you Alison, for coming along and talking to us. See you very soon.

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