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**KAREN:**

We've been talking a lot today in this refreshers week about the relationship between student and tutor, which we've agreed is very, very important. And on your screen you're going to see three widgets, where we'd like you to fill in. How often do you usually contact your tutor? Now if you're a new student, you may not know. So you can maybe put what you think would be the right answer in that for you.

We've also asked about your three main study concerns. Now if you don't have three-- if you've only got one or two, just put a full stop in the other boxes so that you can submit your answer.

Also, how confident do you feel about contacting your tutor? So, very confident, fairly, confident, or not very confident at all. We'd love to know your thoughts on that. And in this Q&A session we're going to try and answer any question you throw at us. So if there's something outstanding, let us know.

But I've asked Jonquil Lowe-- and welcome Jonquil to the studio. Thank you for coming. I've asked you to prepare all of your common questions that students normally ask you, and also the ones that they don't ask you, which I think is even more interesting. But you're a senior lecturer here in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and you teach in economics. And you've been a tutor for a long time.

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Gosh, about 10 years now.

**KAREN:**

It feels like a long time. So often now, students are being allocated tutors right at this moment in time, and some, as we were talking about earlier with Georgina, may have been with their tutor for quite a while. But the assessment may be getting a bit more tricky. So I wondered what sorts of things students would tend to ask about their tutor-- maybe if they didn't know anything about the Open University, or even what a tutor or an associate lecturer was.

**JONQUIL LOWE:** I think there's actually a lot of confusion if you're completely new to the OU as to just what your tutor is there for. And your tutor is there to support you during your studies, and to help you engage with the materials in your module, but also developing your skills as a student. And ultimately helping you develop as an independent learner-- though that's not going to happen

in your first module. It's a gradual journey.

**KAREN:** It is. It's all very well planned, isn't that? But Georgina was telling us about tutors being allocated to students, and the importance of students making contact with their tutors. And she also said that most tutors will work part time for the Open University.

But I wondered if you could say something about the grouping. So how many students would a tutor normally have? I mean, how well might students be expected to get to know their tutor?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** OK. So typically a tutor might have around about 20 students. So it's quite a small group. And you as a student, you get a chance to know the other students as well, partly online through forums. But also your tutor might be running face to face tutorials, or tutorials in an online classroom. So you get a chance to get to know the other students in your group, not just your tutor.

**KAREN:** And you might also get to know other tutors as well, because sometimes you might have sessions where you're taught in a team. So whilst your tutor's marking your work, you may have access to other tutors. Why is that a good thing?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Right. Well, as you said, most of our teachers are part time. And I think that's actually a huge strength, because most of them come from the industry that's related to the discipline you're studying. So they've not just got that academic knowledge. They've got that hands-on knowledge as well about applying that subject to the real world.

And you're going to tap into that as you get to know the tutors in the cluster. You're going to get to know all those different angles. So I think it's a really, really positive, good experience. But you will have that special relationship with your own tutor, who is the one that is going to mark your work, and is the one to go to if you've got problems.

**KAREN:** So while students are enjoying their relationship with their tutor, how is that manifested? I mean, Peter was telling us about assessments, and that tutors will often be marking about 45 minutes to an hour on students' individual tutor marked assignments. So they give them quite detailed feedback. Is that something that's consistent throughout the module that each student is on?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Well, pretty much. So I mean that's pretty much a hallmark of study at the OU, is you do get this fantastic one to one relationship with the tutor who is looking at your work in detail, and not

simply giving you a mark, which to be honest is in some ways the least important part of the assessment process. What they're giving you is a lot of feedback about how to develop as a student, how to become better at your subject.

So I sometimes call it feedforward, not feedback, because it's all about you developing. And at the OU you really do get a lot of that one to one teaching, albeit at a distance, often much more than you would get in a conventional university.

**KAREN:** So a tutor might then learn what a student's doing, and might be able to track their progress, and say you're doing better at this, or this is doing well. But each assignment is also testing very different skills, isn't it?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Yes. The assignments, though, are created in a very structured way. So you're progressing your skills as you go through the assignments. For sure, some of the content matter may be that subject in that TMA, this subject in the next TMA. But you're also developing this underlying set of skills as well, which is building on what you've done in the previous assignments.

But your interaction with your tutor, I must stress this. It's not just about assignments. So you talked about that initial contact with your tutor. It's really important.

So when your tutor is assigned to you, the next step is your tutor will get in touch with you. And I would really encourage students to respond to that contact. So your tutor will probably say something like welcome to the module, and give some idea of how you can contact them, and when they'll be available.

Most tutors, let's say, well, they work part time. So you can't really expect them to be available 24/7. But most tutors will respond to you if you email them within a couple of days at most. And many, because they're working, they perhaps have their email on all the time, they'll respond immediately. Or you might prefer to contact a tutor by text, say, or mobile phone, or pick up the phone. Your tutor is open to contact with you in the way that you are most comfortable with.

**KAREN:** What are the important things, then, that one should know about students? So if you're a student, what should you be telling your tutor in this sort of contact, maybe when you're replying to their welcome email?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** OK. Well, I mean as a tutor one of the things that I usually do at the beginning is to ask

students what their aspirations are, and what things they're worried about. And I mean it's quite interesting.

So there are two things that most students are worried about. One is often essay writing, because perhaps they haven't done that since school. And the other is time management. And I mean that is a big one for our students, because about 3/4 of our students are working. Lots are bringing up family as well. If you're a part-time distance student, almost by definition you've got a lot on your plate. And time management is going to be something that you're going to become very good at.

**KAREN:** When we've asked people watching now about their three main study concerns, by and large time management is the thing that's most prominent for people, in addition to things like understanding, forum engagement, keeping up. So there's a lot going on in terms of skills, I guess, and things that people are going to have to juggle.

**JONQUIL LOWE:** I mean, time management is an interesting one. And it's one of the reasons why it's really good to develop that relationship with your tutor. Don't feel shy about contacting them. Because by far and away the most common query that I get from students is can I have an extension?

So the TMA cutoff date is coming up. And the student kind of realises, oops, I'm not going to be able to squeeze that in. I've got overtime this week, and all sorts of things going on. So that's a really, really common request.

Now as a tutor, I mean, an extension of, say, a week I will give without question. If a student wants a longer extension, it's problematic from the sense that if you get behind with your studies it has a knock-on effect. So it's important to talk to your tutor about why you need the extension. It's not simply can I have it, but digging to those underlying reasons.

And there's a lot your tutor can do to help you. So you mentioned the questions students don't ask. The one they don't ask about is substitution, mainly because they don't realise it's there, or don't understand what it is.

So not every module, but a lot of modules, operate substitution, which means that for at least one or maybe one out of two of your TMAs, you will be able to have a mark which is the average of your scores across all your TMAs, rather than the actual mark for the TMA if that mark would have been lower than the average. Now it happens automatically.

But the way you can use it with time management is it means that if a TMA is substitutable, then if you're really pushed for time that's a TMA where you might say, well, OK, I haven't got time to do it properly. But I could put at least something in and get a few marks. Or in the extreme, you might say, well, OK I think I'm just going to miss that TMA.

And it means that when it all comes to the final reckoning, you don't actually get 0 for that TMA. You get the substitution mark. So it's a kind of tactic you can use. Obviously if you miss a TMA, you're going to pull down that average score. But particularly at level one, where you either pass or you fail, so there's a 40% cutoff. If you pass your TMA, or your continuous assessment as a whole, then that's fine.

But we don't have classifications at level 1. So it doesn't count towards the classification of degree you eventually get. So it doesn't determine whether you get a 2.1 or a 2.2. What's important at level 1 is passing.

So sometimes that's another time management technique you can use, is just to perhaps lower your own aspirations. I mean we all perhaps like to compete with ourselves and do the best we can. But sometimes tactically, at level 1, all you really need to focus on is passing your modules.

**KAREN:**

I was talking to Peter Taylor earlier. We did a assessment 101, and we were talking about the importance of reading the assessment guides, and understanding the structure of a module. And this is where if there was substitution available to that module, because it doesn't happen in all of them, that would be outlined, as well as the weighting of the various assignments that would form up the overall assessment.

**JONQUIL LOWE:**

We've got the DD102 website open here, which is a very big module. So quite a lot of certainly the social sciences students might be looking at this. So what you really want to look at is assessment up in that top tab. And there we go. We open it up.

Now the important things here are assessment guidance, which is the guidance that's specific to your modules. So that's where you're going to find those weightings of your TMAs, and any special rules for your particular module.

So sometimes, for example, assignments will have quite tight word counts. It's quite deliberate. It's to make you prioritise and think about what's important, and structure your arguments with

tight, concise wording. So students are often very concerned about what counts towards this word count. What about a table, a diagram? All of those kind of things.

So in this module-specific assessment guidance, there will often be things like tables perhaps don't count towards the word count. So that's where you would look for that specific guidance.

If we just go back to assessment, you'll see at the bottom there's also this social sciences assessment information. And that's more general, the kind of rules that whatever module you're on, that those rules apply.

**KAREN:**

So if someone's looking at this, then, in terms of contacting their tutor, because maybe they read this and they don't really understand substitution, or the implications of it. Or even perhaps the learning design. You mentioned maybe not doing a good job, but doing a little bit of a job. Because sometimes you can learn something really valuable that may benefit a later piece of work. So would that be something, then, that you could talk to your teacher about?

**JONQUIL LOWE:**

Yeah, very much so. And what your tutor might do, I mean if you know you're really busy at the moment, maybe you're moving house or something. So you know it's pressurised at the moment, but later on you'll have a bit more time, what your tutor might do is help you focus on particular bits of the module now, and direct you to what might be most important right now. But then after that crisis, that time management crisis, you can go back later, and then pick up and do a more thorough job.

**KAREN:**

And if you're using that study planner, you can tick off your progress, so you can go back to it.

We asked how often people would usually contact their tutor-- often, occasionally, or never. Do your students contact you as often as you would like, Jonquil? Right.

**JONQUIL LOWE:**

It varies a lot with students. Some students never, ever get in touch. Some students it's a real struggle to even make that first contact. And I have to say I'm persistent. If a student doesn't reply to the email, then I try phoning and texting, and goodness knows what. I've had some lovely chats with mums and dads as well. Get them to call me when they're back in from their festival.

But other students kind of fall into the pattern more easily of contacting the tutor when they have a problem. And it might be quite regular. So perhaps before every TMA they might be in touch just to check have I understood the question correctly, and this, that, and the other.

- KAREN:** So we asked you how often you would normally contact your tutor. Jonquil, let's see what people have said. 85% have said occasionally, with 8% often, and 8% never.
- JONQUIL LOWE:** OK. Well actually, that's pretty good. That's much better than I expected. But I would say to the 8% who said never, you're not doing it right.
- KAREN:** Well yes. Although I've had students who very successfully have managed to complete their study just through being very, very conscientious with very little contact. But also, there's this issue about not only just contacting, but often there's a reason why people aren't contacting that may be due to confidence. So we asked how confident people feel about contacting their tutor. Let's see what people said before we discuss this further. The choices were very confident, fairly confident, or not confident.
- So 46% said they felt very confident, although as I said, we have a conscientious group of students often at the Student Hub Live. 31% fairly confident, and 23% not very confident. Is this a representative sample, Jonquil, of how you think most students feel about contacting their tutor, bearing in mind these are occasionally in touch?
- JONQUIL LOWE:** Yeah. I think that's probably about right, actually. I think a lot of students are a bit fearful. And it could be you're right, the 8% who never get in touch, maybe they don't need the tutor, and that is fair enough. But some of those, that may be a confidence issue. There are obviously some there who aren't confident, but are nonetheless getting in touch. So that's good. They're overcoming their fear.
- And I think usually once you've broken the ice, it's like any situation. Strangers are always a bit intimidating, aren't they? So once you've broken the ice, once you've got to know your tutor, then your confidence builds.
- KAREN:** We're getting short on time so I'm going to cross-reference to tell you about a session we did about when to contact your student support team, and when to contact your tutor, which is available on the catch up. But broadly, Jonquil, is there a time when it's inappropriate to field something to your tutor, if you're not sure whether you should be in touch with your student support team and your tutor? Do you ever get offended if people ask you a question that's maybe isn't quite meant for you?
- JONQUIL LOWE:** No. No. I mean, your tutor is really there to help you with the module itself. So the academic content, and with your study skills. But your tutor is also a kind of one stop shop. Because if

you've got a query that's not something the tutor will deal with, the tutor will know or find out who you should contact.

So if your computer system is playing up, they will say, OK, here's the IT help desk number. Call them. And with other issues it might be your student support team that you should contact. But that's fine. Your tutor will just say, yeah, that's one for them.

**KAREN:** Brilliant. Are there any last words of wisdom you've got for students out there about making the most of their tutor?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Well I think that's actually, you've really said it yourself. Do make the most of your tutor. You tutor is there to help. And so pull your tutor into your support system.

**KAREN:** And they can always tell you if you're asking too many questions.

**JONQUIL LOWE:** I'm sure they never would.

**KAREN:** No, I don't think I've ever said that to any of my students. But yeah absolutely. Jonquil, thank you so much for joining me today. It's really nice to see tutors, and to hear how much they really do want you to get in contact. So if you are that percentage who aren't in so much contact, do make the most of them. As Jonquil says, they're often in institutions and applications that may be very relevant to a field you may want to go into. So do pick their brains about things.

Sophie and HG. All all right over there? Has everyone had their dinners? Is everyone happy? Have we seen enough fluffy animals for today?

**HJ:** Not too sure about that. It keeps popping up.

**SOPHIE:** That, and My Little Pony again, funny enough.

**KAREN:** It's silly time, isn't it?

**SOPHIE:** We have had some very nice comments in. Gail has said that she was reluctant to phone her tutor if she has a complex query. She figured they'd rather consider their reply than do it on the fly as phone call. Would you agree, Jonquil?

**JONQUIL LOWE:** Well, I think your tutor will make a judgement. It may be a query that's complex, but it may be something they've come across before, and so perhaps can give you an answer straightaway.



But if not, I mean, that's fine. Your tutor will probably say, well, I don't know offhand, but I'll find out and phone you back, or email you back. So it's fine. However complex your query, I think you should still get in touch.

**KAREN:** Oh, definitely. But there's something about the process of writing and articulating sometimes, isn't there? That when you sit down and think I've got these questions, and sometimes if I'll say, can you email me what they are, it gives students an opportunity to actually consider things, and often answer things themselves in the process of doing that. But also it can give me time to think about some of the things I might want to bring to that. So it can be a good way of initiating the conversation. But as you say, Jonquil, sometimes it's nicer to have a conversation on the phone about it.

**JONQUIL LOWE:** It is. Yeah, and sometimes your tutor actually isn't going to answer your questions out right, but actually might start asking you questions that are designed to make your mind think in a different way, or go down a different channel. So it's kind of a two-way process. It's good.

**KAREN:** Excellent. Well Jonquil, I'm afraid that's all we've got time for tonight. But thank you very much. Right. We're going to have a short video. We're going to talk about what is a forum in this video. So that will give you an outline, particularly important for new students who may not be used to Open University forums. And then we're going to come back with some life science with Nick in about five minutes. So we'll see you very soon.

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