

watch?v=kJ6ikz1KdmM&feature=youtu.be

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to The Student Hub Live. In this live session, we're going to be focusing on the OU Students Association Disabled Students Group. And I'm joined by Stephanie Stubbins and Natalie Pope, here, from the DSG. Welcome, and thank you for joining us.

This is a really important slot because so many students come to the Open University and choose the Open University, indeed, because they have some sort of disability. And your students group is such a valued source of support for those students. And so in this space, we're going to be hearing about how you can get the most support from your studies, if indeed this applies to you, and also learn a little bit about what may be going on for other students so that when you attend tutorials and things, you're aware of some of the issues that other people are indeed facing.

So we should have some widgets coming up on the screen about percentages of people who you think have a problem with their ability to study, how to get help. Have you heard of the Disabled Students Group and what we do? And how did you hear about them? And I believe that we're joined by some of your colleagues in the chat box as well who can answer people's questions.

So tell us both, then, how did you come to be involved with this group and what is it all about?

NATALIE POPE: Her first. OK,

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Well, two years today, I joined the Open University, so I started my first module. And I met Cherry Day because we live in the same area, and I found out about this Disabled Students Group and became a member. And later in the year, I was co-opted as a committee member onto the committee. And I introduced Natalie to the Open University, and she followed suit.

NATALIE POPE: A year ago tomorrow.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow, fantastic. So you say you became a member of, how? What is the group, and how does one join?

NATALIE POPE: Well basically, the Disabled Students Group is students supporting students. And we have various websites and Facebook groups and this sort of thing so we can get information out to people, or if someone has a query, or just wants to have a whinge, basically. There's someone there to listen to them.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: So they can search for the Disabled Students Group on Facebook. And when they request to join, someone will contact them by private message. So check your other messages, because we like to check that everyone's an OU student so it's a safe environment.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's important.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: And everybody knows that everybody in there is an OU student. And it's basically a support network in the Facebook group. If you want to access the virtual learning environment forums, you would have to join the official website. You can get details from the people on the Facebook group. And then when you've joined, you can actually go into our private forums, which is another way of interacting with the DSG members.

KAREN FOLEY: Now when you say disability, physical disabilities often spring to mind as things that would validate membership into this sort of group. But you are a lot more broad than that. And a lot of people have unseen disabilities, don't they?

NATALIE POPE: They do. The term disability, for this purpose, is a health issue that affects your ability to study, your effectiveness at studying. And I think, as you say, you hear the word disabled, and people automatically think of someone that's in a wheel chair or maybe missing a limb. And there are other health issues, and I think, long-term ones as well, that people live with day to day. And it just becomes a part of their life. And there are things out there that can help you and help you with your studying and how to do it.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: So this could cover mental health issues, it could cover learning difficulties. It could be physical difficulties as well. But it also could be something short-term. You might be healthy when you start studying and then suffer some type of health issues that affect your studies. And the help is there for you. And it's basically any health issue that affects your studies, you would be classed as a student that can join the Disabled Students Group.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. OK, so this is a really important concept, I think, because being considered disabled, as you're saying, isn't a fundamental thing. It's not always continuous. Very often it can be, but sometimes there can be issues or circumstances that could really affect your ability to study. So how do students go about getting support? I'd like you to, because you're both probably experts at going through the Open University route, as well as the students supporting students route also, could you tell some of our new students, in particular, what sorts of steps they might want to take if, for example, they feel that this applies to them and they'd like some support in their studies?

NATALIE POPE: The first thing to do is to tell the OU, to ring them up, if they want to, and have a chat with them, if you're already starting your study or you can access your student home page. There's a link that you can click to go through to the support group for that module. They will also give you information. And it's DSA, which is Disabled Students Allowance, basically, it's dependent on your funding body. There is a Student Finance England, and then you have Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and other countries. They all have different rules.

KAREN FOLEY: OK.

NATALIE POPE: So you can check on our website. There's lots of information there. But you need to check your funding body and the rules. Steph has some tips that we've only just learned. So,

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, good!

NATALIE POPE: Yeah.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: So I put off going for a Disabled Students Allowance. And it's only because Natalie joined after me and she went for Disabled Students Allowance that I decided to go for it. And I went through a different channel. Now, most people would apply through student financing and ask for the form to be sent to them, and sometimes that delays the process. So something that should take six to eight weeks can take longer because the form has to be sent back to the OU to be filled out and then sent back to the student before they can send it back to the student loan company.

So I actually contacted the OU through the student home, through my student support contact, and asked them if they could give me information about DSA and the form I had to fill in. And they actually sent me out a pre-filled format with my module and qualification details,

KAREN FOLEY: That must have been helpful.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: which cut out the process of sending it to the OU and waiting for them to process it to send it back. So I received it within a week. I filled out my bit from the form. I got my evidence in from a doctor and consultant. And my DSA was sourced out very quickly within a couple of months.

KAREN FOLEY: What were the supports like, in terms of who you call? Were they friendly and helpful in terms of how they dealt with it and processed it?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Through the OU, there is an actual Disabled Students Support Team now. I know there was one before, but it's actually labelled Disabled Students Support Team. So if you've got any health issue, please fill in your profile on your student home page to inform the OU about your issues. If you don't like phoning, some people aren't quite comfortable talking to other people, you can do it by email through the contact system on the student home. And the Disabled Students Support Team will actually email you and ask you what other support you need. And if you're going through the process of student finance or any other help that you need provided, they will give you advice and support all the way through.

KAREN FOLEY: The idea of sort of labelling can be both very enabling and also can sometimes feel very constraining for people. And as you say, things are fluid. Just because something applies one minute doesn't mean that it's a categorical thing that's going to be there with you for the rest of your life. What is it about this process of labelling and opting into that you find supportive? How does it actually help you, for example, going to tutorials or getting your work done or dealing with your tutor? Do you find it stigmatising, or do you find that it helps?

NATALIE POPE: It does help. I consider myself really lucky to have got DSA. It has helped me massively. They have assistive equipment, they have assistive software, they can get you a mentor or a non-medical helper or a scribe if you can't take notes. I mean, what they can offer is absolutely amazing. And it often doesn't occur to people how much stuff is there.

KAREN FOLEY: Because technology's moving on so much and there are so many things. I mean, we can't even list them. We've had sessions on The Student Hub before where we've talked about some of the things. But it is so vast and so dependent on people's individual situations, isn't it?

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely. And that's it. People's health issues are also individual. Just because I suffer from fibromyalgia and so does Steph, her symptoms might be different to mine. Going through the Disabled Student Allowance, they make it personal. It's personal to you.

So you'll go to see an assessor. And I know from our groups sometimes something really worries people because they think that they're a medical person and they are going to say, well, you're not disabled. So you're not, that is not the case at all. These people are actually experts in assistive technology and software. And they will, you have to be honest with them. And they will ask you about your issues and how it affects you in your study. And they will say, well, we can do this, and that will help you do that.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: You can also get training for the assistive software. So I got certain software and equipment, and I had an hour every week for four weeks and was trained up on the software that I wasn't used to.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: But I think it's also important to highlight, again, the profile. The profile that you will fill in and you can update at times is something personal to you. But it doesn't show up on your OU profile to anybody else. But it can be shared with your tutor, so your tutor is aware that, if you've got hearing issues, that you might need to face the student when you're talking, that online tutorials, you might need transcripts or the slideshow sent to you.

NATALIE POPE: They might be partially sighted and just need someone to guide them to a classroom.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Or anxiety issues. So the tutor can adjust the tutorial to the students that need the extra help within the tutorial.

KAREN FOLEY: We asked people what percentage do you think of people have a problem with their ability to study due to health. And I wonder if you can tell us what the statistics are. We had 36%, which is the highest number, saying 10% to 20%. And up to 50% was also 36. And most people were gunning for those, followed by over 50%. What is the proportion of people who may have a disability?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: I think it's surprising.

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: But I know that we've captured over 2,000 students in the Disabled Students Group. And when you compare it to how many students are actually studying, that's a very small proportion, because a lot of disabled students and students with health issues don't know that they can get extra help or don't record their problems with the OU. So I think it's wider than most people think.

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely. And also, some people are nervous or wary or frightened or embarrassed, even. Embarrassment can be quite a big issue for people. And that's basically what we're there for, is to reassure you. And it's OK. You're not the only one that has a

problem, and you're probably not the only one that's got the same problem. It's everybody, and we're there to help.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Yeah. Through the Disabled Students Group we assign posts to the relevant area. So we are there for any student that's got a health issue. Come and find us.

NATALIE POPE: Yeah, absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: And that's so supportive, I think, because often when I have a tutorial, for example, I'll just have a look at the profile so that I can make arrangements. And if I'm teaching and I know someone has anxiety, I might send them an email beforehand. Some people I'll send the notes to beforehand so they know what to expect. And it means that I can make adjustments for the group that I'm teaching.

We did a lovely session the other week, actually, where I had two students with Asperger's. And they were sharing their ideas about how they could work. And they were very surprised that another person in that room suffered from a similar sort of condition to what they have.

NATALIE POPE: I think with disabilities, and especially with studying online, it can be quite isolating. So it is very easy to think that you are the only person that is going through this. We know that 22,000 students have registered as disabled with the OU, you know? And we're wanting to put the message out there. We support people, they support each other, you know? It's a really safe environment. Say what you like and no one judges you. And we're not medical people. We're not here to say, you can't join. We're here to say, well, you know, if you have this problem, if you go in that direction or you speak to this person, you'll be able to get some help.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Yeah. I just want to mention about the student conference this year that was held by the Students Association. And the DSG was seen everywhere during the conference. And we had a meet and greet. And it was overrun with disabled students.

NATALIE POPE: Yes.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: We were surprised at how many students with health issues came along. And we had an hour session, it went into two hours, and the same with the workshop. And it was just nice that other students knew that they could find us face to face. Now that's more difficult with distance learning, to have that connection, to know that you can talk to someone else. And even if they've got different health problems, you're still experiencing difficulties with your studies. It's good to be able to share those experiences. And that's what we find when we talk to students on the virtual learning environment forums and on the Facebook group.

KAREN FOLEY: Sophie and HJ, I know you've got some questions for Natalie and Steph.

SOPHIE: Yeah, we've had a chat in there. There's quite a few good, positive things that have come from it. There's a Janet who said she has had a wonderful experience with the OU. She's been diagnosed with dyslexia, and her tutor helped her get all of the help that she needed. She gets extra time on exams, and she would definitely, definitely advise people to go to the OU for help, which has been really nice to hear. And there's been quite a few questions as well.

HJ: Yes. Well, we've got some people popping in and out. So if you have just popped in, remember to say hello. And it's great to see you. And so we've got some questions you might have covered up, but because people are popping in and out, we're going to get you to answer the great questions live. So one thing Sylvia asked, we know there's some funding available for students with disabilities in the UK. But she's wondering what type of funding there might be for a student living abroad. She lives in Canada, Sylvia.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: I'm unsure about any specific funding in Canada, but I do know that you can apply through OUSET to get help with your studies. So you can find out more about that through the OU Students Association website.

HJ: And the main funding that we get in the UK is the Disabled Students Allowance. And someone was asking what type of things do you get with that or are you allowed to get with that that help you during your studies?

NATALIE POPE: Well for instance, I have arthritis and fibromyalgia. So I have an ergonomic chair that was built especially to my measurements so that I'm set correctly, that my posture's good. I have a desk, an electronic desk that goes up and down so I can study stood up as well as sat down or moving around. If my hands are hurting one day and I can't take notes, I have software where I speak to the computer and it types it all up for me. It's amazing.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: I've got wrist supports because I've got carpal tunnel in my wrists. So if I have to do some typing, I have got those armrests. I've got a foot rest for my feet. I've got a book rest, everything's resting, a book rest for my book, in case that needs a rest.

KAREN FOLEY: I can imagine you, Steph, sitting there, studying in a lovely,

NATALIE POPE: Actually sitting there rocking, you know, the chair rocks.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: But I've got cervical spondylosis. I've got osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia. And my chair has got special pumping up cushion parts on the back so it goes around for lumbar support. So that's useful because sometimes I'll get different pressure and pain in different parts of my back. And then it's also the assistive software, headphones to work with Dragon. Dragon, it records your voice. So I can do a little bit of typing, but I can't do a lot, so I talk to my computer and it writes for me.

NATALIE POPE: It's quite cool.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Then you've got [UNAUDIBLE] which reads to you.

NATALIE POPE: A screen reader.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Yeah.

NATALIE POPE: You can have a mind mapping programme, Inspiration, it's called. I find that really, really useful. And you map out your notes like a mind map, and then you click a button and then it transfers it all over to Word like that. It's really cool for doing TMAs. It's so easy.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: And I have audio note taker. So it's like a dictaphone, but it's on your computer. So if you had a laptop, you could have it on laptop. But I've got it on the PC. But you can download an app so it goes on the phone.

So if you've got permission of your tutor and the people in the room, you can record your tutorial. And as you go along, if you press the screen a different colour, if it's the tutor talking, you can click tutor. If it's a student answering, a student answer in a different colour. If it's just chit chat, a different colour. And then when you go home, you can put it onto a Word document and you can just pick out the colours. So if you just want the tutor's information, it just gets downloaded straight onto a Word document for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow, that's fantastic. But I guess that you, whilst you're hearing about all these wonderful things, you need an advisor there, don't you, to almost see what would work, because some of these technologies can be really, really useful. But sometimes for some people, I think, oh, just getting to grips with that would freak me out.

NATALIE POPE: Oh, I think that way, too. I think oh my gods, you know?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

NATALIE POPE: I'm not a techie person. I can find my way around a computer, but that's about it.

KAREN FOLEY: But they enable you to be able to use them as well, which I think is a very nice thing.

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Well, you have an assessor. When you apply for Disabled Students Allowance and you get accepted, you would then put in for an assessment. Now that sounds quite worrying, but they're not actually assessing you. They're assessing what you need. So you go along to your risk assessment appointment. And they will talk through not just the evidence that you've supplied, so your doctor and consultant, but how it affects you on a day to day basis. So you might need something that I don't use, and they will pick that up. And then they will arrange for you to have the training to use any software or equipment that you need through those session.

NATALIE POPE: You can guarantee that they are going to recommend things that you've never even thought of.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Like wrist supports.

KAREN FOLEY: And do you get regular assessments, then, as you're going through your studies? Because for many OU students, they'll be doing it in six years, which can be a long time. And things can change. And technologies can change, also. How do you keep updated, then, with how things are moving?

NATALIE POPE: Well basically, with your mentor or non-medical helper. You just apply every year to the Disabled Students Allowance to extend your hours for that year, basically.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Yeah. If you have something that changes within that year and you're not coping with your studies, you can ask for your DSA to be updated with new information. But it would have to go through the assessor again.

NATALIE POPE: That's right. You would contact the assessor that assessed you in the first place. And they will say, well, yes. We can do this for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Can we take some more questions?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Yes.

NATALIE POPE: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely.

HJ: Yes, there's lots of great chat. Cherry tells us as well there are over 22,000 students with health issues studying with the OU. So the OU's definitely very experienced and they know what they're doing, don't they? And they offer some great support.

NATALIE POPE: They are really good. They are really good, you know? They are not at all, they don't want to embarrass you. They are very courteous and considerate.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: We actually attended a student voice workshop which was OU focus towards disabled students. And it was for student voice. And we, me, Cherry, and Natalie, were invited. And we thought we were going to workshop just to have a chat with people, but we got separated into different tables with at least six people in each table. And we were asked about disabled students' experiences.

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: It was to do with communication.

NATALIE POPE: What issues? Is there anything we can do to help?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Support, studies. And it was really a good couple of hours session. And they had action points that they are going to change after the session.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's simple things like certain colours and fonts and things that can make a massive difference, not only to people with disabilities, but to people navigating things generally. I know there were some more questions, Sophie and HJ.

HJ: Yes. How about this one?

SOPHIE: We had one for, I'll pick out for you. Adele was asking about whether it would affect her ESA. So she is registered. By the looks of it, she's popped it on her profile, but hasn't actually applied for any support yet. Could you help her with that one at all? Is that,

NATALIE POPE: Your benefits are not affected by your Disabled Students Allowance. It's a bit like the Disability Living Allowance. It's not taken into account.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: PIP.

NATALIE POPE: Yeah. Or PIP, as it is now, Personal Independent,

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Payment.

NATALIE POPE: Payment. Yeah. And it has absolutely no effect on it at all.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: And for anybody out there that's actually delaying going for it, I did my four modules without any help and support. And I noticed a difference straightaway, as soon as I got support in place. Don't put it off.

NATALIE POPE: Absolutely, we recommend it.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. So what sorts of activities? You've mentioned the Facebook group, which is a very active source of support for people. But not everyone's on Facebook, and not everyone likes to connect in that sort of way. So what are the options, then, for people in terms of peer to peer, OU student to student support, then, which you guys are in charge of?

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Give us your list.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: So we do regular events on Facebook. But obviously, we know that not every disabled student will use Facebook, so we link it up with the DSG cafe,

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: which is on the virtual

NATALIE POPE: Learning environment.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Virtual learning environment. So we've actually linked the events together. We've covered events such as freshers. If you have mental health issues, physical health issues, we've also arranged support around TMA assignments, [INAUDIBLE] studies.

NATALIE POPE: Revision for exams.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: Revision exam help, not with the exam, but getting ready for the exam.

KAREN FOLEY: And can people email you in particular or get support peer to peer?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: On the website, there is details to contact anybody on the committee. But you can find us on Facebook, find us on Twitter, on Instagram, and on the VLE, Virtual Learning Environment forums.

KAREN FOLEY: And what's the most rewarding experience that both of you have had, to close with? Because you're obviously doing a fantastic job volunteering in this capacity with

your own time and putting in so much energy, and I can see the support that other people would get. But what's in it for you guys?

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: I think my best experience, I was going to say conference because it was amazing. But we started these live events on Facebook and in the forums joint, and we were doing 12 hour ones. They were so popular. We were tagging each other by tag team, taking turns to support the people that were in this event. And we actually did 24 hour ones. And then we actually extended to 48 hour events. And there were students through the night, through that day, contacting us through this event, asking questions, and getting support through us. And we had enough help through the event to cover all those hours. And I thought that was amazing. But the feeling at the end was just rewarding.

NATALIE POPE: Yes. It is very rewarding. And people are so grateful, and that's just lovely. It makes all the work worthwhile.

KAREN FOLEY: Aw, you are so lovely and selfless. It's incredible. Because I'm sitting here and I can think, this is going to look great on your CV when you've finished. When you've finished your psychology degree you're going to be able to put all this support and involvement with the university. You're really picking up some good opportunities here that are going to eventually support you. And don't sit and blush, because it is. It's great from that perspective. And I think it's wonderful.

NATALIE POPE: Oh absolutely.

STEPHANIE STUBBINS: getting as much out of it, because we are disabled students that need support as well. And it is a two-way thing.

NATALIE POPE: And we've had such good support we'd like to make sure that everyone else has that opportunity.

KAREN FOLEY: Aw. Well, you're both wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us. And I know there's some people from the Disabled Students Group in the chat. And I'm sure they'll keep taking your questions. Do you get in touch with them. They really, really are a lovely bunch. But that's Natalie and Steph. Thank you so much for coming along tonight for The Student Hub Live.

And we're going to, now, take a video about the Disabled Students Group. So we'll be back in about five minutes. And we're going to take a look at the Virtual Learning Environment, something that for new students, you'll become very familiar with. And we're going to show you where everything else, how to make the most of it. So join us in five minutes for that session.