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KAREN FOLEY: So Peter, we're here to welcome new and prospective students to the Open University. Now, I wonder if we could first talk about the mission of the Open University, which is being open to people, places, methods, and ideas. How might new students experience that?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, the great thing about the university is its openness, which of course is in the title. And anyone can come and study with us. We'll help you to get on the right course. We'll give you the information to make sure that you're making the right choices. We'll support you. And I think that's the key thing, that we are going to be flexible. We're going to work in your interests and make sure that you get the study opportunities that you're looking for.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, we're in Walton Hall itself, and during this event we're going to be talking a lot about some of the buildings and some of the key people who formed the Open University as it is today. So I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the social mission that's so important to the Open University.

PETER HORROCKS: The university's idea was generated by Harold Wilson, the great reforming labour Prime Minister of the 1960s. In 1963, around the time when he was speaking about the white heat of technology, which was the idea of how technology and society were going to change throughout the 1960s, he put forward the idea of what was then called the University of the Air. And that idea of providing education for people who otherwise didn't have the opportunity to go to university was the founding idea of the university, and it's been something which we've held to ever since.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, when I was a student at the Open University, apart from going to the odd tutorial, I had no idea what the student population looked like. But in your role as vice chancellor, you must have an idea about the student demographics. So can you tell our students about some of the other students who are studying and a little bit about the diversity of that group?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, there are about 175,000 other people who are students of the university. So you're a student of the largest university in the UK. We have international students, those outside the UK. We have lots in Ireland. We have lots in Europe.

And it's quite hard to generalise about OU students because in that fantastic diversity, there's

a huge range of people. So as vice chancellor, I award degrees. And I sometimes have 18-year-olds, people who study when they're at school, but then I can have people who are in their 80s. There are some people who just study for a short time, others who study for 20 years or more.

Many with disabilities. 17% of our students are registered with disabilities, and that means that there are as many OU disabled students as many universities have students overall. But I'd say that's the key thing. Overall, they're an extremely diverse bunch. The average one are about 28, 29, in work, looking to get a qualification in order to be able to improve their prospects. But that's by no means true of everyone.

I think one of the things that we want to do is to link people together in academic communities much more, linking them to the OU's academics, so the people who write the courses, linking them to their tutors, both their individual tutor, but also tutors who we are grouping together so that there's a variety of experience of the university's academics. And then linking students together, and also linking students with previous students, with alumni, people who've already graduated or maybe people who are a year or so ahead of them. Because we think there's so much more that you can learn from other people as well as the university's academics.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, there's been some information in the press recently about the Open University redesigning. And I think it'll be useful just to talk to our new students about what the implications are in terms of that for them.

PETER HORROCKS: I hope that it'll be very positive for students, both students who are starting now and students in the future. So a lot more emphasis on preparation, on induction to make sure that OU students have got general studies skills. How to study when you're studying at a distance, as well as curriculum specific preparation. So rather than waiting until the moment when your course starts, there will be much more information at an early stage.

If you're struggling, much more proactive support for you. So we'll be able to tell how you're doing through the way that you're studying using the website. And we'll get in touch with you in appropriate ways. Improved personal support, more support from tutors, and extended hours for our support services via phone and email.

KAREN FOLEY: If a lot of these changes are going on now, for new students who are just starting to study, might there be a risk that any of that could disrupt their study, and what is the Open University

doing to make sure that this is a really smooth experience for them?

PETER

HORROCKS:

Yeah. We're going to take it very carefully. We're working very closely with the Students Association, the Open University Students Association. If you haven't heard of it already, do get involved in it because they can give us really good insights which we can take advantage of. And we'll be proceeding carefully.

What we want to try and do is to add new features and to have those improvements, and then at the same time take away and reduce some of the problems that we've had with old systems and things like that. So we'll need to do that carefully, but obviously it's a student centred set of changes and so we want to make sure that it works for students and doesn't disrupt anything.

KAREN FOLEY:

One of the changes that was particularly highlighted is this whole idea of digital by design. But as a distance learning provider, surely the Open University already is very digital. So what do you mean by this whole shift towards being more digital, and should maybe some students who are frightened of digital things be worried about that?

PETER

HORROCKS:

I hope it's not scary. We certainly work with our students and help to support students who've got problems with accessibility issues or just because they're unfamiliar with technologies. But there are huge advantages in being more digital. We'll be able to be more flexible with our start dates. If people have a problem, we hope to be able to allow them to defer just by a matter of weeks or a few months rather than necessarily wait for a year to catch up.

And it'll be so exciting to be able to update our course material in real time. So say something's happened. Say something's happened in politics. Say something's happened in international affairs, or a new scientific breakthrough. We'll be able to put that into our course straightaway, and you'll be able to have a discussion as an OU student about that as it's happening. So it's adding to the quality of the materials that we already have, but adding topicality and the ability for learning to be much more interactive.

Students will be able to contribute so much more. Case studies and students' own perspectives will be able to form part of the course as well, of course, the brilliant academic content produced by the OU staff. And I think if you think about digital services that people use in their lives, whether it's about social media, whether it's about internet banking. Sometimes when you first try it out, it's a little bit unfamiliar.

But something that's brilliantly designed should be able to be used without a manual, without special training. And so our aim will be to make sure that the OU student experience is a superb and as friendly as the very best digital experiences in the world.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, picking up on this idea of friendliness. Just before the module starts, students will be allocated to a tutor. And of course, they've got friendly people at their student support teams and lots of ways of making contact other than the digital. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how students might make the most of these people who can support them in their studies?

PETER HORROCKS: Go on the forums for your particular subject and be in touch with your academics and your tutors. Most tutors give out their email, and some of them give out a phone number. So be in contact with them. And if you've got a problem, don't just sit there worrying about it. Reach out.

Reach out to your tutor if it's an academic issue. If it's a more practical issue or something to do with your fee or something like that, contact the student support centre. So you've got these two really helpful resources to call on. And they're paid for by your fees, so why not use it? It's our service to you, our academic service and our customer service to you.

KAREN FOLEY: So right now, students can access the more general areas. And then just shortly before their module, they'll be allocated their personal tutor. And would you advise them to get in touch early?

PETER HORROCKS: Yes. I think the earlier you're in contact with the university, the more you're understanding how it all works. If there's any question that you've got, make sure that you're in contact and helping to resolve those things because the better your preparation, the more that you're ready to start studying, the better you'll do. And we know that from having researched it.

KAREN FOLEY: I wanted to ask your advice for new students, because when you became vice chancellor you immediately took out a level one statistics module. And you must have been very busy at the time. So I wonder if you could tell them how you went about mixing study and work, and what advice you might give them?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, I'm a bit of a crammer. So I didn't find it that easy to be very disciplined and say I'll do two hours every day. So I tended to do it in bursts, and to really catch up. I'm sometimes going to get slightly ahead and then leave it for a little while. Now, that works for some people. Other

people are steady as she goes, and go all the way through.

But I didn't find it difficult because I enjoyed it so much. The materials were so lively. The concepts were explained really clearly. I actually enjoyed the assessments, doing the TMAs and testing myself. Not that I did brilliantly with them, but I just enjoyed them because it flowed so naturally from what I'd studied into that assessment.

KAREN FOLEY: And finally, you mentioned student voice. And you said to students to get involved, and you've mentioned as well how the student experience is going to inform some of the changes that the OU is making. But I wonder if you could just tell our new students how they might go about doing that, and how important their voice is in terms of shaping these shifts.

PETER HORROCKS: So if you've got the time and you can get involved in the Students Association, they have representatives around the country. They have people who have an interest in particular parts of the curriculum, or if there are issues, for instance, to do with disability or particular employment group. So if you've got the time and you've got the inclination, please do get involved and look at the Students Association website on that.

But even if you haven't got the time to come along to meetings and so on, you'll absolutely have an opportunity to give your voice. So there are surveys which we ask people to complete at various stages during their modules. And other times when we'll ask you for your views on the university and how it's doing. So please just spend a few minutes, fill in that online survey. I promise you we take those things really seriously. The feedback that you give us, the advice that you give about how a course might change really makes a difference. So the more involved you are, the better for you and the better for the university.

KAREN FOLEY: Peter Horrocks, thank you very much.

PETER HORROCKS: Yes, a pleasure. Thanks to you, Karen.

HORROCKS:

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you.

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