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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to our *Student Hub Live* open day. Well, we've been covering an awful lot, and there's been a lot of sharing about online skills, et cetera. Our next session is going to focus on our Student Support Teams, which are people that you're going to come in regular contact. I'm so pleased that so many of you are all excited about your studies and really positive and enthusiastic about it. It's wonderful to hear, and it's going to be a fantastic journey.

But let me introduce you to Zach and Liesl.

ZACH EATON: Hello.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you for coming along. Now, you're in our faculty of business and law team. Liesl, you're an education advisor, and Zach, you are a senior advisor. Students call you regularly and ask you lots and lots of questions. And I've got some questions here that students commonly ask. But I wonder if before we sort of start with some of the questions, you can tell us about your role and why students might need to call you. And what happens if they're stuck on anything?

ZACH EATON: Yeah, so as you said, I'm a senior adviser, so anything really that a student needs that isn't academic that they can find out from the tutor. So if they're doing ideas and essays, that you would be the first point of contact. Anything other than academic would come through to us. And depending on the level of complexity, I might be able to deal with it. Or my colleagues might be able to deal with it in the initial instance. If not, then it would go and carry on over to Liesl, who would help out with the more complex stuff.

LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD: As an educational advisor, we look at providing guidance to students who have complex issues that are affecting their time and ability to study. So we look at sort of what the student's called in with, and we try and support them to find resolution to move forward to support them with their studies. We're really a friendly bunch of people, and we'll always look to support them in any way we can by identifying the problem with the student. And that's why we like students to call in and speak to us if they have any issues. And like Zach, when you're on your module, you can talk to your tutor about your studies or any issues that you're having with the taught information. But if it's circumstances around your studies that are affecting your studies,

then you'd speak to your Student Support Team. And there's lots of people like Zach and I on the team who are only too willing to speak to students on a regular basis.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, you've mentioned complex issues. And we know that many students who study with us have various disabilities. And in fact, we've got a specific session on that next. And we've got some great advice that we can tell you about for that. But some students have mental health disabilities that they may not think of as a disability. Some students may be evicted from their house. Some students have all these sorts of problems, and I can think, well, that's not really a real problem. It's sort of something that's really affecting my ability to study and concentrate, but it might not be seen as a legitimate thing. So what are the sorts of things that students call you about, or maybe that they don't call you about and they should call you about?

ZACH EATON: I mean, anything really that impedes the student's ability to study as well as they can is something that they can discuss with us. And it doesn't matter whether it's a mental health problem, or disability, or whether it's something-- they might have more work commitments. And like you say, you know, it does happen where people are evicted or they have to move house and area.

All of these things are things that will affect your study. And what is great about Open, about online distance learning, is the ability to work that learning around your work, family, kids, anything. But we understand that life events happen. Anything can happen during your studies. And we would look to explore. Really, there are options if they can better plan their studies and explore what ways in which we can support them and what they can do to help them through their journey in their studies in that way.

KAREN FOLEY: So you mentioned that people could call their tutor, or they could call you. When do they know who's the right person to contact? You mentioned academic related things, but what happens if they say, well, I'm not really sure if this is academic or not.

ZACH EATON: They can call either one.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah?

ZACH EATON: And if you want to call your tutor in first instance, because they'll be usually your first point of call. And call them. And if it is something to do with us or something that we can help with, your tutor will refer it onto us. If it's the other way around, we will always happily answer the phone. We're open all days of the week and on Saturday. So any time if you're not sure and you can't

get a hold of your tutor, you can always call us.

KAREN FOLEY: Now you mentioned calling. And we talk about calling a lot. But there are other ways, aren't there, that students can make an inquiry.

ZACH EATON: Yeah, yeah.

LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD: Yeah, you can contact by email. You can go via something called your Student Home Page. You can call us on our regular student number, but you can send in an email to us and that will generate a request to Student Support Team for us. So the most important thing for students to be aware of is that you can contact us at any time. And you can do it either by email or by phone, and you can let us know in that email what the issue that you have is and how you prefer to be contacted.

There's a huge amount of support available to all our students, regardless of their individual circumstances. That's the most important message to get across to new students and existing students. Just call us. We're here to support you, either by email or by phone. And we have a social media network as well. There's lots of support available for students if they want to contact us. It doesn't matter what their issue is, just let us know how things are going.

Some of the things that we come across-- may be students think that they don't need to contact us. But if we don't know what your issue is, we're not able to offer you the support that we can. So it's really important, whatever the issue is, just give us a call and we'll look how we can support you.

KAREN FOLEY: Because certain things can build up. It's like, you may have to move home or something. And then all of a sudden, you might have a problem connecting your internet. And what seemed like something fairly simple can eventually end up with you sitting in an internet cafe or the USB of your eTMA, your tutor-marked assignment, trying to get things with quite difficult issues.

So I guess talking about things early can be good if they do build up. But also when would students know that these sorts of things were an issue? I guess I'm saying, when is it valid, and what can you really do about it? Say you are moving home, or say your internet goes down, which is a really common thing. And I don't think anyone really, until it happens, fully appreciates how it can mess up your whole life. But what sort of things can you do for students if these happen?

- LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD:** Well, they can bring in a lesson. First and foremost, if they're going to move house, if it's a planned event, you normally really get a date. They normally get their internet plan. But there are the sort of ways you can access. You can go into local libraries. There's internet cafes locally.
- You can talk to your tutor if you're on a modular and you know that you've got an assignment coming up. A tutor-marked assignment is how you're assessed on one element of the module. You can ask your tutor, possibly, for an extension. You can let us know. We can put a note on your record. And we can look at other ways that we can support. You can send things via the post if you want to complete an assignment. So there's other ways that we can support you. But again, it's really important that students out there, if we can help you, just give us a call on our number.
- KAREN FOLEY:** So you're really into this problem solving. Because I can tell that you're not going to take my phone call and go, don't worry about your assignment. Just leave that one. Or maybe sometimes you can if it's a substitutable assignment. So what's your approach? You're trying to help problem solve. And sometimes, I guess, when things happen and you're sort of so fight or flight, you can't really problem solve. Is that what you do, then, with students, is try to figure out what the options are and then how we can manage that process?
- ZACH EATON:** Definitely. It's about just having a conversation and about working out what's going to be best for the student at that particular time. Whether or not that is an extension or whether or not that we look at maybe submitting an application to take into consideration their circumstances, whether we look at, like you say, substitution on certain TMA's may as well. There's always options. And we just go with the student. We'll talk them through all of the options. And we'll find out, I think, together mostly what's going to be best for them in the current situation.
- KAREN FOLEY:** So there's no right or wrong? It's not sort of, you've done this, therefore that will be the solution. It's really tailored.
- ZACH EATON:** Yeah, definitely.
- KAREN FOLEY:** I'm just wondering, actually, whether there's sort of a sense that students get, and just verbalising something and having that space to say, I'm stuck. This is a problem. And whilst you can help them solve it, there must be something really nice in being able to just pick up the phone or email someone and actually articulate things that are going on. Because I guess

once you do that, you're one step further to finding a solution to it, aren't you?

ZACH EATON: Definitely. I would say that having a conversation with someone is always going to be more effective-- I mean, in my personal opinion-- than the email. You can lose some of the context in an email.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

ZACH EATON: I think building up a rapport with someone is something that, I mean, all of us in the SST rely on to make sure that we're giving the best advice and guidance that we can give. You know, we always want to be open and approachable for our students to just give us a call. Like I say, if they don't know who to call, then call us. If you kind of know but you're not sure, then call us. If you want to explore your options, if you're worried about something, whether or not it's in this module or you're thinking about your future studies later on and your qualification, it's about just making that call. Because we're all here for them--

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

ZACH EATON: --whilst they're on their journey to getting their degree.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. HJ, How's everything on the hot desk-- or hot chair, isn't there?

HJ: Yeah. It has been noted that I've stolen this chair from Sophie. I'm not sure if--

KAREN FOLEY: Actually, Sophie's haircut's gone down very well with our regular *Student Hub Live* attendees. And I see you've made an effort with your today, which is very nice.

HJ: This is as close as I get to a shirt. So maybe we can-- you can tell me what you think. I'm not good with these things, honestly. And I didn't do anything with my shoes. They're a bit-- I'm not sure if they're appropriate for the university. But yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: They're fine.

HJ: I suppose because I'm used to studying online like everyone else, we can sort of get away with these sorts of things, can't we? But we've just been talking about-- we've got lots of people just starting off, and very excited, and doing their DSA, and sort of getting ready and geared up.

And a few students as well have come back who've been to events before. And there's lots of advice. And we're just talking about student discounts as well. That's one of the great things,

isn't it? But I think it was Vincent who just said that he found that the support and help is always freely given and gives a bit of relief when you're worried about studies as well. I think that's a lovely comment. And I found that studying too. Everyone's willing to help from tutor, anyone that you call up. They're brilliant.

But yeah. I don't know if you've got any advice, because there are a lot of new students, so for people, perhaps, just starting off, not quite at the beginning point yet.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, that's a good question. Do you help people plan their time and things when they're not in a problem situation?

LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD: Yeah, one of the things that we do as a group in SST, the Student Support Team, is we look at when a student contacts us-- this is a new student-- what is their goal for their degree? What do they want the degree for? How are they looking at their studies? What interest do they have? It's really important we take into consideration student's choice about their study plans, the study intensity, that means how much study you're going to undertake. What's realistic for you with your current life at the moment? We try to help you explore that.

One of the things that we advise students to do early on if you haven't done it already, please access your Student Home Page. It's a really, really good link. When you log in, it's halfway down on the left-hand side. And you click Student Home. And it's a mine of information. There's all sorts of information on there for all the students to access about looking at completing assignments, what's available from School Support, how we can help you with lots and lots of different situations. And I would really recommend that our new students who are listening to navigate this student home page before they start. There's a wealth of information there for you. And if you have any questions, and you can give us a call.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, I've got a question. When do you think students would be likely to receive a call back or an email if they get in touch with you? I mean, is phoning-- you mentioned how nice it is to phone. I really, really get that. But if they email or whatever, what's the sort of response time that they could expect to get back a reply?

ZACH EATON: We like to get back to them within two working days. If the issue is quite complex, then we'll always send out an initial email or try and contact them within that two days to just let them know that we're on the case and that we're looking into it. But yeah, it's always kind of two working days we like to get back to our students initially for an inquiry.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. And do you get people who have maybe studied a long time ago and then think, oh, I want to come back to the OU. I mean, because quite a lot has changed, especially recently, in terms of how things are set up. Do you often deal with people who are coming back to the OU to study? Can you help them with credit transfers and things?

LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD: Yeah, credit transfers when students have maybe studied either external to the OU and if they've been to a campus-based university, we have a department here in the university that will look at their previous study to see whether it can be used towards any of our qualifications. So if you have studied previously and you've not considered the Open University, then you can send in your transcripts from what you've studied, and the Open University will look at it. And then if you have a qualification that you're particularly interested in, the credit transfer team will look at it assess it to see whether you can gain any credit. And it's really important that you do that.

We have a website on the Open University. It's called credit transfer, and we have a deadline each year for the study when the information needs to be in by. We can talk to students about that and whether their information that they've studied before can be used on any future modules within the Open University. We also give advice on resuming your studies when you come back if you haven't studied for a while. And that's a really key piece of information. If you're working or running a business, we're here to help you plan your studies so that you'll be successful and achieve your goals.

KAREN FOLEY: And what about if students start best will in the world, and all of a sudden, things happen, and they might need to withdraw from their studies? Do they phone you about that?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Definitely it's always good, if you do come to a point where you feel like this point in time you can't continue, or if anything's kind of happened, then it's always to call your Student Support Team, and we'll go through a revised study plan. We'll talk about the academic implications, the financial-- we'll walk you through everything so you can make the best kind of an informed decision. And if you need to withdraw, then we'll guide you through on how to do that and what you can do to catch up in the meantime.

KAREN FOLEY: Because a lot of students would do that. I mean, things do happen, and best will in the world, sometimes it is necessary to do things like that. And that can be difficult. But I guess there's a benefit in doing that sooner rather than later, isn't there?

ZACH EATON: 100%. I mean, a huge portion of our students are employed adults in full time jobs with

families. And life events happen. It's perfectly common for people to need to defer their studies and just go until the next presentation. Life happens. And we're always there to walk them through. And it's easy enough to put some stuff on hold. A lot of our modules have assessment banking. So you can bank the assignments that you have, that you've completed thus far, and then continue on from where you started on the next presentation of your module.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Cool. So we've talked about some of the problems and the need to speak to you early. But you also must know a lot of the good bits that students experience. So what would be some of the most important things, in your opinion, that students should bear in mind when studying with the OU?

**LIESL FINLAY-
CLIFFORD:** Gosh.

ZACH EATON: What would you say?

**LIESL FINLAY-
CLIFFORD:** I think looking at the modules that you're going to study, look at the information, when your assignments are due. That's quite a key thing, and gauging early with your Student Home Page, looking at all the information that's available on there, looking at any kind of issues that you think you might have or any further support that you might need, and to make sure you have the SST contact number to hand should you need anything.

We're open Monday to Friday, 8:00 AM till 8 PM. And we're open on Saturdays 9:00 till 5:00. And students can contact us via email. And when their module website opens, there's a planner there. And there's lots of information online. But that doesn't mean because we're online there's no one here to help you. There's lots and lots of people within your Student Support Team, whichever faculty you join-- whether it's law, business, science, education, languages, there'll be student support team attached to that for you.

So I really recommend looking at your Student Home Page. There's a lot of information on there. And then we can help students if they have any queries at all before they start. And we also have our Open Learn website as well, which will have tests and materials on some of the modules that we produce, and also there's Future Learn.

So if you're new to the OU and you're not sure, have a look at our Open Learn and our Future Learn websites to give you an idea of the materials that you might actually see on your

webpage before your module opens.

KAREN FOLEY: We've got a session coming up very soon about students with disabilities, but I guess you must have a lot of queries. How do you, then, triage those, and what happens when students speak to you about those things?

LIESL FINLAY-CLIFFORD: OK, thank you. If a student has a disability, we have a huge Disability Resource Team here within the Open University that looks at supporting students from a variety of perspectives. So whatever the student's individual needs are, they can contact the university. When a query will come in either to the Student Support Team, we will take ownership of that and then provide advocacy. And we will contact the relevant departments and ask the student to apply the disability support profile form, which is actually accessible by the Student Home Page. They can let us know what their individual needs are. And then that generates, then, the links between the SST and the Disability Support Team.

So we're seeing a seamless process for the student. So they're getting the support they need from all the departments. But someone has ownership of it so that the student can contact us at any time and keep up-to-date with the information. If their situation changes-- they need more support or less support-- they can contact us again and update that. So we have a huge amount of resources, and we look at reasonable adjustments and things for students to continue with their study journeys.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Now, you mentioned some of this. And you're talking about records and things. And I know that sometimes people can get worried about who sees what. I was talking to Georgina and Matt earlier and we were saying about how your tutor won't see whether you've ticked the study calendar or whether you've engaged with an online activity or what you've put for that. But I guess some of these records might be seen by people. So say you make a statement, who would see that? And who would see the communication? Or you move house, and you call the Student Support Team, would your tutor see it? How do we connect that information to support students?

And should they be worried, then, about the information they put on? Because I think increasingly people are worried about the data that they've given and the sort of implications maybe of sharing some of that data. They might be worried that, you know, their tutor thinks, oh, they can't manage their time. You know how it's like when you think, oh, this is not going to reflect well on me, even if it's not your fault. How's that data managed? And do students need

to be aware of anything with that data?

**LIESL FINLAY-
CLIFFORD:**

All the information we have is held on our data system called Voice. It's accessible by people in the Student Support Team. But it's really important for students to remember we are bound by the Data Protection Guidelines. All the information a student shares are only allocated to that record. The SST, student advisors and education advisors, we discuss everything with the student first and no one else, unless the student needs an advocate, and then they have to complete a form to give us permission to discuss somebody who's supporting them, so that students can have an advocacy agreement if they feel that that's important to them and they want someone to support them with their studies.

But everything is done from a supportive perspective to the student. We're not looking to say, oh, this person's done this or they haven't done that. It's a really supportive environment in the SST. And our job as advisors to ensure students that they can have a successful study journey with us. But the data is all held confidentially. We only discuss that student, that information without the student that specifically is asking to speak to us.

It's not shared with anybody who will advocate for the student on behalf of the university. If a student sends in a query, we will take ownership of that, and then we will contact the departments, get all the information that we need, and then we will feedback to the student. And that's the most important thing, that they know that they're going to speak to one person who can help them resolve their study issues.

KAREN FOLEY:

Do they speak to one person throughout? Like, say they get you, Zach. Would you be somebody who we could always call up? Or you mentioned there's a team there. Do students ever have-- do they ever form relationships with people? Or is it a case that you just sort of get potluck with who you call?

ZACH EATON:

I think it's always good when you develop a kind of relationship with your students and build up on a rapport. And if they feel like they want to speak to a certain aware, just out of continuity and a bit of a personalised approach to their journey, having someone there that is away. I mean, if you think of the law team within the business and law Student Support Team, there's five advisors. It's a personal. It's a dynamic team. We're aware of our law students on a day-to-day basis and what kind of queries are coming in.

There's only 18 senior advisors and six educational advisors throughout business and law SST. And we all come together and help each other out. And we all know when we're kind of

on and on the phone or available if the student feels that they want to return to either an educational advisor, which a lot of the time they will do, definitely if they need that kind of support. If they feel the need to request support from a senior advisor, though, we will always try best to make ourselves available for that student to just up the service and be there for that student that we've spoke to and given advice to.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's really nice. Because I think sometimes you can imagine this sort of massive, expansive area of people who are coming and going. But I guess it's nice to build up a relationship--

ZACH EATON: Definitely.

KAREN FOLEY: --with those students. And in particular, if something's a little bit difficult to talk about, it's nice to have somebody say who you've told the story to, in the first place, so you don't need to repeat it. HJ, how's everything going on the chat? You're busy typing away.

HJ: I know. I feel a bit rude sometimes, just being at the screen. But we're having such a good time talking about very important stuff, all the time. We never get distracted. But we've actually got some really good questions. So actually, I think it's Sheila asked if you get the same Student Support person every time. So if there's a big issue you talked about or you call back a couple of times, is that possible? Does that happen?

ZACH EATON: You can always request it. Like I said, we're small. We're quite dynamic. And we want to give the best service that we can give. And that ultimately, naturally leads to building rapport and good relationships with our students.

So if we're available, then we'll always take the call from a student that we've previously spoken to. So if a student feels the need that they want to speak to that same person, that's fine. It's always good to take into account that everybody is there for each other in the team and there for their student. So if it is a query that may be related to a previous conversation, you may want to go back to the same senior adviser. But all of the senior advisers and educational advisers there will be able to help you with your query. We're all open and approachable, and we'll all do our best to give them the answers and the advice and guidance they need.

HJ: I think a lot of people, just seeing your faces and knowing some of the people that might be on the phone, they're very reassured. And they said, you know, they've always had good hope

when they've called up.

ZACH EATON: Good.

HJ: They always find it helpful just to be, you know, open and honest and say things how it is. And I think that's great advice just to do that. We did have a question as well about someone who might be thinking about deferring with their courses. Is there any advice or key points you think they should have a think about before taking that step?

ZACH EATON: Yeah, I mean--

**LIESL FINLAY-
CLIFFORD:** They need to call in and speak to us about the issues they're having on their module that is making them think that they want to defer. I mean, if the student's not in the right place for their studies, our role is to support them through that process and to give them the advice and guidance that they may need. There may be some options that they've not considered. If they're in a particularly difficult situation and they maybe have not thought there's other options available to them, they can contact us. And we can have a chat with them with their studies. Our focus for a student is to support them, so they have that seamless journey, so that they are aware as Student Support Team, what we can support them with.

And I think if that student is out, there please do give us a call, and we'll see what we can do to help you with your studies and help you make the best informed decision that's right for you.

HJ: I think one of the things-- we always have very important questions. And this one came on on Twitter. We had a little debate with some of the people who were following us about-- so it was National Cream Tea Day the other day.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Damn!

HJ: There was a bit of a debate about how to assemble your scone, whether you should cream first then jam, or jam then cream, or just shove it in your mouth. We're not too sure. What do you guys think?

ZACH EATON: I think it's-- isn't it cream and then jam? I think that should be the way.

KAREN FOLEY: No, I think it's jam and then cream.

ZACH EATON: Oh really?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

ZACH EATON: All right, OK.

LIESL FINLAY- I just think I'd just like to eat the scones.

CLIFFORD:

[LAUGHTER]

I don't care how [INAUDIBLE] goes. I'd just like to have some.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, I hope we've answered those questions. Brilliant questions. And I hope you've learned something. And take home point here is-- lovely, friendly people. Are you going back to the office now?

LIESL FINLAY- We are, yes.

CLIFFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: Can people phone you?

ZACH EATON: Yeah, that's it.

LIESL FINLAY- Please call us.

CLIFFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: So if you're in the faculty of business and law, you might be speaking to Zach or Liesl later today. If you're not, you might be speaking to somebody equally as friendly and lovely. But thank you both so much. I hope you have a good day.

LIESL FINLAY- Thank you.

CLIFFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: I hope lots of students call you.

LIESL FINLAY- Good luck with your studies, everybody.

CLIFFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, brilliant, lovely. Thank you.

LIESL FINLAY- Bye-bye.

CLIFFORD:

KAREN FOLEY: Right, so, our next session is about support for disabled students. And I have some lovely colleagues who are going to come and fill you in on so many important things. So do hang around for that. But before we do that, I'm going to give you a little show around one of the areas way down in the back. It's the Legacy Garden, a really, really pretty lovely spot and perfect for some solitude at lunchtime. So let me tell you all about that in a short video before we're back talking about support for disabled students.

[MUSIC PLAYING]