[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, this is the session I've been most looking forward to out of the whole programme today. It's our "Shaken or Stirred, What do an Open Degree and a Pina Colada have in Common" cocktail party, from the Open Programme, my great friends and Sophie and Kate, even. HJ legged it at the first sign of alcohol.

So welcome to the studio, Kate.

KATE: Hi, it's great to be here. I'm looking forward to my cocktails.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, so am I. It's going to be very exciting. So you will see, as usual, some widgets that are coming up on your screen. And we're going to have a little talk about the Open Programme. And joining me in the studio, today, are Peter Taylor, hello.

PETER TAYLOR: Hello.

KAREN FOLEY: And Helen Cooke. Hello. Thank you for bringing all of this in. I am excited.

PETER TAYLOR: We did do our best to please.

[PHONE RINGING]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh?

[PHONE RINGING]

Oh. Hello? Hello? But, but - it's cocktails. You've got to have alcoholic cocktail party. [SIGH] Well, I suppose so.

[CLACK]

PETER TAYLOR: Sorry, no alcohol in our cocktails today. The only alcohol we have is my molecular models over there. As a chemist, I knew that that would happen.

KAREN FOLEY: I knew I shouldn't have agreed to have a cocktail party with chemists.

[LAUGHTER]

I should have thought that through. OK, all right. Well, it does look interesting, I'll be honest. So what have we got here? Why did you think this was a good idea, then, to demonstrate the Open Programme with this plethora of non-alcoholic drinks?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, first of all, the Open Programme is for sophisticated students. And so we needed a sophisticated environment to talk about the Open Programme.

KAREN FOLEY: You're doing good.

PETER TAYLOR: And secondly, the Open Programme is all about mixing. It's about mixing curriculum, at different levels, taking a subject here, a subject there, and putting it together. And that's what cocktails are about, mixing different drinks and putting it all together, and such that the final product is greater than the individual parts.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, you have sold it to me, even though there was no alcohol involved. So how does this Open Programme work. I know Helen said we have to talk about this before we get Peter on to chemistry.

[LAUGHTER]

So we need to outline to people -

HELEN COOKE: We won't be able to talk about anything else.

KAREN FOLEY: We won't. How does the Open Programme work? Because this is basically a way of getting a tailor-made degree that suits you. And one of the things I know that we talked about before hand is how people will often fit this into their interests, their qualifications, and their employment, to get something that really, really works for them.

And throughout this session, we've been talking a bit about languages, a bit about maths, and ways of fitting things in that are really interesting.

PETER TAYLOR: So it's all about students choosing the modules that meet their needs. As you said, it might be something that you're interested in, you've always wanted to do it, maybe something to do with your work. Lots of reasons why students choose different kinds of modules. And it may look really odd mixture of modules, to anybody looking in outside, but, if you look at the whole student, their kind of whole life, it actually makes sense to them and the way it all fits together.

So the important thing is, and we hold up our -

HELEN COOKE: Yeah.

PETER TAYLOR: - first.

HELEN COOKE: So there's lots of different ways of building an Open degree. So of your 360 credits, you might choose to do a range of different combinations at each of the three levels, so at stages one, level one, level two, and level three. That's one option. You can kind of mix and match as you like.

The other way of doing it is perhaps choosing two particular subjects. So you might choose maths and music, for example. And you'd then study 180 credits of maths and 180s credits of music. And obviously, you can mix and match those subjects, as you choose, what might be relevant to your career, your own personal interests. And providing that you study the right number of credits at each level, then you can build a degree that is unique to you.

KAREN FOLEY: And I guess this is important, because you couldn't, all of a sudden, start doing maths and music and then say, hey, I fancy a bit of chemistry right at the end, because you wouldn't, I guess, have the grounding in it, would you?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, it depends. If you've done something before, so you might be prepared, then you might be able to do a kind of higher level module. But if you've never done maths before, doing kind of third level quantum physics is probably going to be a bit of a stretch. So it's sensible about thinking about how you're building your knowledge up through the programme.

And one of the things that we have, for these kind of 180 strands, is suggested modules that kind of feed into each other. And they're available.

HELEN COOKE: So they're available on the Open Degree Student Qualification website. And there's a whole range of different subjects. We've just picked a few examples here. And we've developed these, with faculties, so there are modules that fit together well in terms of the curriculum. And they really just give advice in terms of the modules that students might want to study at each of the three levels.

So we've got psychology here as one example. And behind, we've got health and social care. So we've got them in a whole range of different subjects. And students aren't stuck to these. They can still add other modules to fit alongside it if they like.

KAREN FOLEY: Now a lot of these pathways will start with one, like K101 for example. So there is a limited range of routes that people can start accessing a curriculum through. And with the Open Programme, you can change as you're going.

So you might be on a qualification, and then you might decide that you actually want to do two things, and you might want to change. How do students go about doing things like that?

PETER TAYLOR: The first thing is you need to start on an key introductory module. So that's kind of developing your key skills for studying. So that's the first bit. And a lot of people will say, I really want to do this subject. And they'll start studying it.

But then, actually, as they kind of go through it, they might suddenly decide, well, I'm not really as interested in it as I thought I was. But this thing really does interest me. So they can swap at various points. So you can swap qualifications. You can move, from a named degree, into the Open Programme, and from the Open Programme, into named degrees, during your study.

KAREN FOLEY: And this is something that's really quite unique to the Open University.

PETER TAYLOR: Well, it's a really unique offer, because we don't have timetabling problems. Any other university that is offering a range of different subjects is always going to have problems of lectures clashing and the like.

But because of the way we teach, we really don't have those problems. And you can study any combinations in any way you want. And so we have some really interesting students who've studied with us.

And you look at the reasons why they're studied, say, some business courses, because they're running a business. They might be doing some languages, because they're selling into a particular country. They might do some science, because that's the background to their product.

A whole range of different things that people are putting together for their particular needs. Because there aren't many things that really are just within one subject. Which is one of the reasons why we chose our cocktail party, because it's about alcohol in many ways. But alcohol isn't just about -

KAREN FOLEY: Well, it's not. [LAUGHS]

PETER TAYLOR: Well, it's not.

[LAUGHTER]

HELEN COOKE: Pretend to have fun.

PETER TAYLOR: But if it was an appropriate time not at lunchtime.

KAREN FOLEY: I think that's a very appropriate time. I've been here all morning. [LAUGHS]

PETER TAYLOR: No, no, no, the powers that be would not let us do this.

KAREN FOLEY: At least we'll impress them, anyway. Right, we've asked our students how many subjects they're studying. And most of them, 50%, well, that's not most. That's half. But it's the highest category, which is important, as my colleagues in maths will tell me. Are doing one subject.

So 42% are doing two. And most students are doing arts, humanities, and social sciences, at 54%, followed closely by 46% doing STEM subjects. So that's an interesting idea of who's out there watching. Interesting that a lot of people are doing two subjects as part of their degree. So perhaps this is quite a common option, is it?

PETER TAYLOR: Indeed, it is. Because I mean, if you need to kind of develop your skills and knowledge, within a particular subject, then usually you need to do pretty much 60 credits to actually grasp the subject and then move on to the next level. So a lot of our modules are around 60 credits. So it's tending to push people into those kind of two subjects.

Alternatively, you could do one half in one subject. And the other is pretty much a mix and match, say, doing some psychology at level one, but then doing something else at level 2.

KAREN FOLEY: Great. It all sounds good to me. Over on the hot desk, Kate, you've done a lot of work with the Open Programme, so I hope you're answering any questions that people have. Are there any burning issues before we can get on to these non-alcoholic drinks?

KATE: Well, Annie's mentioned that she's having a cocktail while she's watching us.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh.

PETER TAYLOR: Has it got alcohol in it?

KATE: Well, she hasn't said at the moment, so we're not sure. And Julia's -

KAREN FOLEY: It's 5 o'clock somewhere. And we've got an audience that are an international audience. [LAUGHS]

KATE: Yeah. And Julia's been talking about how she studies. She's actually studied maths and music. And how they're actually not as different as you might think.

PETER TAYLOR: Nope.

KAREN FOLEY: Right, all that counting, one, two, three, four.

[LAUGHTER]

Lovely. Let's get on with the drinks.

HELEN COOKE: So we're here having a lovely time. Obviously, it's a non-alcoholic cocktail party. But there is a serious side to things, as well. We wanted to use cocktails to demonstrate how different subjects can provide different perspectives on certain topics, certain key issues. So we've picked alcohol as that issue.

KAREN FOLEY: Non-alcohol.

HELEN COOKE: Non-alcohol alcohol, so Peter is going to talk a little bit about chemistry. Ah, I can bore you to death on this, so I'll talk to you as quickly as possible . So I've got some little molecular models there of ethanol. So ethanol is what? The key ingredient of alcohol. And one of the great debates about wine making is about, is making wine a science or is it an art?

So one of the big, big steps forward, particularly in kind of countries like Australia and the like, is the way that they've been able to take the grapes. And they've been able to take a particular yeast strain that's been genetically modified and put it into big stainless steel tanks to be able to sterilise it very easily and control the process of fermentation to give a good wine.

But then, if you go to France, then they'll say you can only go so far with that. Because, after a while, it becomes much more of an art. It's a question of blending the various kind of grape mixtures to get a particular taste. And that is very much down to the wine maker's art. So it's an example of nothing is in one subject, but it's in a range of subjects.

And then on top of that, you've got to think about how you market it. So there's a whole area around kind of marketing and packaging and the like, and logistics and delivery. Then there's

the kind of legal aspect of it, so what percentages are you allowed, or issues around kind of drink driving and then the social implications of drinking and the kind of health and well-being.

So if you just take just a simple thing, like alcohol, actually, it pervades a whole range of different subjects.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, yeah.

HELEN COOKE: The students might be interested, as well. We've put a load of links on the Resources page, I understand, from OpenLearn, where we've picked articles that talk about alcohol, but they come from lots of different subject areas. So there are things in there about a pub's closing and the different cultures. But there's other -

PETER TAYLOR: Video of me about sherry making?

HELEN COOKE: Yes, a video of Peter about sherry making.

KAREN FOLEY: Is this why we're banned from having any alcohol in the studio?

HELEN COOKE: He says he does chemistry, but you know.

KAREN FOLEY: You seem to have quite a keen interest in the subject.

PETER TAYLOR: Indeed, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. The thing with alcohol is you've got these brands. You've got identities. And you've also got personal tastes. And I guess that's the key point, isn't it?

HELEN COOKE: Yes.

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah. Historically, we've kind of developed different ways of making alcohol, from different products, and actually using them and, as you said, developing them into different tastes. So beer is fermented for one purpose. It's very different to the wine making, which is from a grape as opposed to hops and the like. So we've managed to kind of use our knowledge and experience to create those different flavours.

HELEN COOKE: Sorry. That's what we expect our students to do, as well, which is use their knowledge and their experience to build their own Open degree. So maybe a bit of what they've studied before with something brand new. Or something that's related to their job if it's something they're just interested in.

KAREN FOLEY: But how would they know, then, what's right? In particular, if they're going to be drinking lots of alcohol or cocktails, like some of the students are, how do they make those judgments then? I mean, who can they talk to, about choosing something that's right and getting to the end of it, so that they're not out of their depth, all of a sudden, doing something that feels a bit more advanced?

PETER TAYLOR: So I think people need to think about why they're studying and what the subjects are they want to study and for whatever reasons. So one particular area is around careers and employability, so understanding what subjects you would need to study to, say, go into a particular area.

One of the areas that we often get questions around is around teaching. I want to go into teaching. What kind of balance of subjects should I be doing? And so we've got a whole area, within the university, in terms of career and employment, that students can talk to people and get that good advice.

So that's one area you're going to make those decisions. Another is around what really interests you. So thinking about what are the subjects you want to study and why you want to study them and then talking to advisors about possible subjects. I'm thinking about how difficult is it going to be for me to be able to study that subject if I haven't done any of the earlier subjects.

So another one is languages. So clearly, you need to develop your language skills. But if you've got a reasonable kind of background in French, then maybe you can start your French at a higher level.

HELEN COOKE: We've also got a forum on our Qualifications website, where Open degree students can go and ask other students what they're studying, which is really nice. We find that students answer each other's questions and things like that, so asking which modules they've studied alongside other modules and why and things like that. So that's another place they can go for some kind of peer-to-peer support, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: And there's so many new modules coming out. I mean, gosh, if I was starting, I don't know what I'd do, honestly, because there's such a lovely mix of things. You mentioned people doing different things to do with alcohol and various different ways of studying things. I want to get on to the chemistry and think about how people could learn some of this and what you're going to do with some of these very interesting concoctions you've got here.

PETER TAYLOR: I don't know. This is my real kind of piece de resistance. So it's three layers.

KAREN FOLEY: Your party trick.

PETER TAYLOR: It's meant to represent the three different levels within the Open Programme, level one, level two, level three. Now usually, you can mix oil and water together to give you two layers. But it's quite tricky to get something to go into three layers. So that's in three separate layers. And I can shake it. It takes a little while, but it will come but to give me those three legs layers. You can see it's starting to develop those three layers again.

KAREN FOLEY: So even after a battering of TMAs, people will still effectively be in one piece at the end of an Open degree.

PETER TAYLOR: Indeed. Yes, they still will have their various levels together.

HELEN COOKE: And the other thing about that is, really, that that demonstrates that, by studying lots of different subjects and in a multidisciplinary way, which is how we describe it, it actually can generate new knowledge, as well, new disciplines, new areas of interest.

So even though you might be studying very discrete modules and very discrete subjects, actually, by combining them, it gives you something completely new, biochemistry for example.

PETER TAYLOR: But it's interesting that you study in one subject. And you develop, within that discipline, a particular way of approaching answering questions. And then you move to a different discipline. And you take the skills you learn there and apply it to that new discipline.

And you're coming at it from a very different kind of viewpoint and approach from people who've been studying within that discipline. So you're adding value to it and asking questions and things that other people wouldn't be thinking about.

So in that multidisciplinary space, you're actually, as Helen said, creating kind of new knowledge. And your particular combination of subjects you end up with might be quite unique to you.

KAREN FOLEY: I think they often, aren't they? But how would students then feel like going to a tutorial, and then you've been doing something completely different to everybody else? So you're going, effectively, to the same tutorial.

You've got people maybe, like you've mentioned, studying psychology. They may be the hardcore psychologists. And you might be doing it, because you've got an interest in a certain area. And you just may be tagging something on.

You've got people, then, who have all this background, and then you're talking about adding something else. How might students then feel? Do they feel different if they're doing an Open degree.

PETER TAYLOR: To some extent, yes, because you don't necessarily have the same shared background as the other students. But you have a different background. You have other things that you can add. So it's not as if you've got nothing you can contribute to that debate. You actually got a completely fresh viewpoint. So if you're coming from science or whatever, you can add a much more kind of straight science perspective to that. If you're coming from an arts, then you can add much more of an arts perspective.

KAREN FOLEY: Because every student has a different perspective. And a lot of the time, I mean, some of the modules I'll teach on, they feed into various pathways. So if I'm teaching psychology, I've got people who are doing counselling or people who are in health and social care.

So people will be coming anyway, from a different perspective, even if they're doing the named qualification. So I guess I would say to people, if you are doing an Open degree, it doesn't necessarily need to be that categorical. Everyone's bringing something different, aren't they?

HELEN COOKE: And the other thing is that the Open degree is the OU's largest degree. Just under 20% of our student population is studying for an Open degree. So you may well find, within your tutor group, that there are one, two, three, lots of other Open degree students. So actually having those conversations with students to find out what they are studying and why is really important. So they're not necessarily going to be on their own in the module. So yeah, just find out what other people are doing, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful.

PETER TAYLOR: As I said before, it's all a question of mixing things together. But what you end up with is greater than the sum of the parts. So it's not, oh, I've got this bit, this bit, and this bit. But you synthesise all that information together to create something quite unique and quite important.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Did you want to show us any other demonstrations?

HELEN COOKE: Not necessarily. As I said, I have my little molecules over here, which I've got ethanol in. And one of the interesting things, I find, is around distillation. So trying to distill kind of drinks is against the law. You need to have a licence to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: I can tell that you do.

PETER TAYLOR: [LAUGHS] But it's an interesting process, because it doesn't come up when you distill the kind of ethanol-water mixture. It doesn't come over as just pure ethanol or water, they come over together to give you a particular concentration. But one of the things I did find, in the summer, was I think it was some beer. I put some beer in the freezer to cool down. And I forgot about it.

KAREN FOLEY: Big mistake.

PETER TAYLOR: But when I opened it up, all of these ice crystals had formed. So you then pour the liquid from the ice crystals, and then you have a much more concentrated drink.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So instead of -

HELEN COOKE: Don't try this at home.

[LAUGHTER]

PETER TAYLOR: But it was an interesting observation. It was just the ice that crystallises out leaving the ethanol behind.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. We've asked people about various pieces of advice that they give to people who are studying various pathways. You've mentioned that Open programmes are greater than the sum of the parts.

But what advice would you give to students, who may be doing this sort of thing, who need to be fairly focused, because, perhaps, they're doing different skills, perhaps they're doing concurrent modules that have different priorities, different timetabling and very different things going on in them? What advice would you give?

PETER TAYLOR: It's hard, because, often, we try to kind of balance the TMA deadlines and other things with modules that we know students will be studying together. So they're kind of deliberately coming together so that it's staggered.

If you're studying across two completely different subjects, then there could well be overlaps and big gaps. And that's something you just need to plan, really, in advance. You need to be thinking of, when are my TMAs due? When are those busy times going to be? How can I stagger things through the year and get a clear plan in place for your study?

HELEN COOKE: But also, students don't have to do that on their own. They can always contact their student support team. And even when choosing their modules, they can speak to advisors to find out more information about when the TMAs might be due and how that might link with other modules.

So yeah, they shouldn't be afraid to contact their student support team if they want some advice on choosing, not just the subjects that are right for them, but also if the timing is right and if the assessment and everything is going to work for them.

KAREN FOLEY: And I imagine that the students who are doing this, who are combining things, probably have quite an eclectic way of being anyway. It probably makes sense to them. Because like you say, they're choosing things that fit around their lives and fit into their ideas of what they want to do academically. So would those students be quite good at managing those different disciplines and time scales?

PETER TAYLOR: It's interesting that, if you look at combined honours offerings at other universities, they have quite a high A-Level tariff for students. So in order to kind of cope in that kind of multidisciplinary world, you do need to be quite well-organized and be quite brave in order to take on those different subjects. Because, within a single subject, you have a fairly clear pathway through it. But for an Open Programme student, who's choosing a whole range of different things, then it is quite daunting, can I do this or whatever. So Open Programme students are not only sophisticated, they're brave.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, you love them, you do.

[LAUGHTER]

Well thank you, both, so much for coming in. And thank you for this wonderful cocktail party, with no alcohol, but you have seriously demonstrated, I guess, this whole idea that things are tailor-made, they are to suit individuals, and that you can layer things to get something greater than just what's going into it. And I think that's a really, really nice option. No wonder it's so popular.

PETER TAYLOR: And it's the way the world is going. People are looking for those whole, wide range of knowledge and skills in a whole, wide range of different settings.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well thank you very much. And you can find more resources on the website. Helen and Peter have given us a lot there. And if you're interested in finding out more about alcoholic beverages, they have selected a lot. But there is a really interesting mix, actually, in all honesty, of things from the sciences, et cetera, around alcohol and human health for example. So do check out those links, which are on the Resources pages of the website.

Well thank you, both, very much for coming along. We now have a little video break. And we're going to show you a video about the Open Programme. And then because it was so popular last night, we going to be showing a Hazel Rymer doing some citizen science about volcanoes. She did a fantastic talk about being a volcanologist last night.

And if you missed that, you can check it out on the Catch Up service, which should be up on the website very, very soon if it isn't already. We'll be back soon for a session about the Group Tuition Policy in just over five minutes. So we'll see you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]