Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this session, we’re going to take a look at how you actually learn at the Open University and we’re going to introduce you to the VLE, the Virtual Learning Environment and I’m joined by Georgina Blakeley, who’s the director of teaching in various social science qualifications and before that, you were chairing DD102, which is one of our largest introductory social sciences modules. So thank you for coming and filling us in, Georgina.

This is a space that students are going to be very familiar with. We’ve spoken today about various study spaces and pets and various things. But this is a certain fundamental that we will all have in common in terms of how students learn at the OU.

Absolutely. And the VLE I always think sounds a bit cold- Virtual Learning Environment. So I prefer to think of it as a library or a bookshop and you’re going to wander around it, take a few books off the shelves, have a look, see what's there and just kind of make yourself at home and I think that’s a good way of thinking about it.

But the difficulty with something that's virtual is that you don’t know how big it is and there are so many resources here. So I’m hoping that you can fill students in on the essentials that they really need to know. Because you can certainly end up filling your days and time with lots of advice, going on OpenLearn and all these things that can be really, really valuable, but equally can not be so good if you're procrastinating. [LAUGHS]

So what are the important thing that students need to know?

Yeah, you're absolutely right. It's a treasure trove, so you need a kind of map to help you sort of find your way around. So the starting point for students always is Student Home. Think of that as your base camp or a map, it's where you go to to find everything else. So it's always your starting point.

So this is where you log onto the open.ac.uk website. You put in your OUCU, your Open University Computer Username and then it will lock you in onto your record.

That's right. And that's what you'll come to. It'll look a bit strange here, because I'm not a student. So for a student, it's going to look a lot better. It will list your modules, a lot of information about yourself. So for me, it looks a bit bare, but for students, it'll look a lot richer.
They’ll see a lot more in that space.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So this is the place that most students will start their sort of connection with their studies, is it?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Yeah, it is. But the place I think where they’ll spend even more time- so if we think of this as the base camp from which you kind of go to everything else- is the module website. So I want to spend a bit of time looking at a module website, because that’s where you find all your studies.

So I’m going to start with DD102, because I’m familiar with that. But it’s also a starting point for many students in the social sciences. So we’re going to have a quick look at this website and this really is where you’re going to spend a lot of time, because it’s where you find all your resources for studying. It is the equivalent of a library. But it also has things like your agenda, your study calendar. So let’s have a quick look at that.

Right there in the middle, you’ll see this kind of big block here and it says Current Weeks and All Weeks. And this is where you go to at the start of every week. It’s really important, because it tells you each week what it is you have to do. Yeah, so think of it- it is the calendar, it’s your agenda, it’s your to-do list. This is where you need to go to find out what I’m doing every week.

KAREN FOLEY: I like those completed boxes.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: I know. That gives you an immense sense of satisfaction, because you can tick it when it’s completed and you think, wow. So students, now look, they’re on week 16. They’re kind of halfway through if they started in October. So for those students, that’s an immense amount of achievement.

For students just starting off, you might want to look not at all the study calendar, but just at the first few weeks. Because otherwise, that can seem a bit overwhelming. But it is a really great place to kind of go and it’s where you should start every week.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So what might students do in a week then? I can see that they’re all listed here and we can see the sort of featured week and there’s also the tabs with the Current Weeks and All Weeks.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: That’s right. Do you want me to click on a week to see kind of what a student is going to do?
GEORGINA BLAKELEY: OK. Let's, shall we go for- let's go for the next one, week 16 here. OK. So you always have an introduction. So that's going to show you really clearly kind of what it is you're going to do each week and hopefully from this, students will see that I kind of struggle a little bit to kind of find my way around. So hopefully, that will kind of put them at ease.

So it's really important, because you get an introduction. And it tells you here at the bottom, "This week you will study." So right away, you know what it is you're going to be doing this week. And you can have a look and think, oh, well, the chapter and that's going to take a bit of time, so I'm going to perhaps put aside sort of four hours maybe to look at that. But then there's an audio, so well, I might kind of do the audio while I'm on the bus. Yeah.

So it's a really good starting point to kind of see what kind of activities you're going to be doing each week, work out how are you going to fit them into your study timetable. Because some of them, like reading a chapter, are going to take a lot longer. Others might be actually quite small, so although we give a suggested order, fit them in the best you can. So it's nice to follow the order if you can, but if you can't, work out how you're going to fit in these different activities.

KAREN FOLEY: So this is the really important time management then. We'll be showing you a video on time management later, but you encourage students to really sort of get a holistic view of what it is they're doing and then think about how they can fit it all in.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Absolutely, because each time you sort of click on one of these- if you sort of go to the sidebar again, it will tell you, for example, let's start off with a chapter. OK. It's going to tell you the time that we suggest that you spend on it- so suggested time allocation. We've said five hours to study the chapter. Many people aren't going to need that, but that's a kind of ample, generous suggestion of how much time to spend on the chapter.

And then there's an activity after it, activity 16.1, which kind of tests your understanding and knowledge on the chapter. That takes about 40 minutes. So by looking at that, you can then work out how you're going to fit in that study into your week.

KAREN FOLEY: Now can I just, while we're on this page, Georgina, can I ask you about these boxes? Because students will see these activities and there are the instructions and then they've got something that they can type into and then it says Save and Reveal Discussion. What happens with that?
GEORGINA: Shall we have a go and see?

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, go on then.

GEORGINA: Well, not being a very good student, I haven't been particularly diligent this week. So I'm thinking, oh, I'm not quite sure, so I'm just going to go like that.

BLAKELEY: thinking, oh, I'm not quite sure, so I'm just going to go like that.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, I do that sometimes.

GEORGINA: Sometimes we do. You know, we're all human. This is what we do. So Save and Reveal Discussion- oh, it hasn't worked. OK. Let's try again. Oh, yes.

BLAKELEY: Discussion- oh, it hasn't worked. OK. Let's try again. Oh, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Maybe we've broken it.

GEORGINA: No, I haven't broken it. I've forgotten how it comes.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: A letter is going to cheater, now, Georgina, saying the student is cheating.

GEORGINA: It's really important to say to all students, you can't break it.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: No, no.

GEORGINA: And even more importantly, your tutor can't see what you've written.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

GEORGINA: So we encourage students to write a proper answer. Don't do what I've just done. But actually sometimes, you don't have the time and you do just want to see what are the suggested answers. That's how we all sometimes work.

And you'll see below that, it says Discussion. So there you can check against what you've written and think, am I more or less on the right lines, am I not? Now, your tutor can't see it. So it doesn't matter if you make a fool of yourself and you get it wrong, or you just think, oh, I'm not quite sure there.
But what you can do if you think, oh, I don't think I'm on the right lines, is you can talk to your tutor and say, well, I did this activity and my answers look nothing like the answers that were given. Can you help me out here? So it's a good way of testing your own knowledge. It's a good way of kind of then prompting a discussion with a tutor if you think you're not quite going along the right lines.

KAREN FOLEY: But these are the sorts of activities that if you were in a brick university or even at a tutorial, these sorts of things would be things that you talk to other students about. But of course, we can't all do that. So we're talking to our pets and chocolate biscuits and various other things. But this activity, I mean, spending a bit of time doing it really does help clarify your understanding, doesn't it?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: It does, which is why, really, you shouldn't just put XXX. Because it is about kind of working out what it is that you've got from the chapter or what it is you've understood from watching a particular video or an audio.

Two other important things to say there is you can save it. So if you have written a proper answer as opposed to the one that I've given, you can save that for later. And that's really important when it comes to writing your TMAs, writing your end-of-module assignment, because you can look back at your notes. They're there saved.

And you just said, well, you know you can't talk to the students. Well actually, you can. Because if we go to the top again- let's sort of go back up here- you'll see along the top is a whole set of different tabs. We can click on each of these in turn, if you want. But the one that connects us to students is the one that says Forums. Do you want to look at that now?

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, please.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: OK. So we have the Welcome forum and that's closed now because the Welcome forum's only open at the start of the module. You have your Tutor Group forum and your Cluster Tutorial forum. The cluster kind of brings together a group of tutor groups, so it's a nice size, you've got lots of students in there and lots of different tutors.

So if you're stuck with an activity, you can go on there and say, has anybody you done activity 16.1? I've not a clue what they're talking about. And so you can talk to other students. It's not the same as being able to do it face to face over a cup of coffee. But you know, you can have a virtual cup of coffee with students and get that kind of feedback and interaction with your
peers. Because you can bet that if you’re struggling with something, other students are struggling as well and you can help each other out.

KAREN FOLEY: And it’s interesting to read what other students are struggling with. Sometimes you might not know that you could have been struggling with something and that taking a look at that is important as well, isn’t it?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: But that can take a lot of time as well. So it’s important to sort of filter and I guess maybe Michelle was talking about having purposes before and I guess if you have a problem or you’re stuck on something, it’s important to go in and come out again, instead of just sometimes I can sit there for hours and think, oh, this is all very interesting and then before you know it, you’ve lost that time.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Yeah, I was kind of thinking about that earlier and listening to the other sessions. And again, there’s two points here. One, this can become distracting, so only use if it’s useful. Don’t kind of get stuck in there and kind of treat it like Facebook and spend hours on it.

And the other really important point is don’t compare yourself to others. It can be very off putting and it happens at every Welcome forum that the module hasn’t even started yet and someone will say, have you done your first TMA? You’re thinking no, of course, you shouldn’t have done your first TMA. But for that person, it actually might be the right thing to do if they’re trying to get ahead because they know they’re going on holiday or whatever. But never compare yourself to others, because it is about your journey and what you want to get out of it.

KAREN FOLEY: No, it’s really important. Now, I wonder if you could just show us briefly these other tabs. Because the Assessment one, Rob gave us this brilliant tip before, which he prints the question out for the TMA really early on and he puts it on his computer so that he can remember it and focus his reading and then also know the answer to that question. So this is the page where you would get all of your assessment for your module. So it’s important to know how many and also the dates, isn’t it?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: That’s right. My mouse is sticking a little bit now, but I will try and get down there in the end.

KAREN FOLEY: But yeah, you should also have- students should also see a button which links them to their- it’s not working- to their TMA system. It should kind of go-
KAREN FOLEY: Each TMA has their own.

GEORGINA -sort of there. Yeah. So you should be able from this page to submit your TMA.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

GEORGINA But it will also show you all the TMAs that you have to do and if you click on them, it will take

BLAKELEY: you to the assessment week within the study calendar and there, you'll have all the information

you need- the student notes, there might be an audio that talks about doing the TMA with

tutors and it gives you all the information you need to do whatever assignment.

Importantly, it gives you the hand-in dates and then when you've done it, it gives you a score. So you can go and look back here and look at the scores and sort of check your progress as you as you're going along.

KAREN FOLEY: And also, it's very important to understand how your assessment is structured, because often what happens is the first ones won't count for quite as much.

GEORGINA Absolutely.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: And they're also often a lot smaller. So it's important to know sort of I guess how big the assessment is- both in terms of the overall grades, as well as the complexity of the task.

GEORGINA Absolutely. I think it's nice to think about your assignments as kind of building blocks. So you start off small DD102, I think you're right about. I'm a bit out of touch now, but I think it's about 100 words.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: That is small, isn't it?

GEORGINA And it's worth sort of 5% of your overall grade, something like that. So you know, your first

BLAKELEY: TMAs are where you're allowed to make all the mistakes. It's a learning process and what you really want to get from those TMAs is you tutor feedback. Yeah. That's what really then helps you progress. Because you get a lot of feedback, particularly on those first assignments and you can learn from that and start to improve when it does begin to count a little bit more towards the end.
KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And we’re doing a session on assessment later today. Now Georgina. Next we’re going to talk about tutors. So the Tutorials tab is really important as well and again, a lot of this integrates, doesn’t it, into a student’s study calendar.

So the page you showed us first, that’s obviously got the TMAs and the relevant weeks. These are almost shortcuts. But when you book on to these tutorials, they also populate into that study calendar. So you’ve got a really nice map of what you can do each week.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Yeah, you can get to the assessment, the tutorials, the forums, resources, from the study calendar. You know, that’s that central block that always kind of takes you to where you want to go and shows you where you should be, which is important. But yes, you can also kind of navigate by those sort of tabs along the top that we’re just doing at the moment.

So here you can see, you’ve got your next events coming up- one at Swansea. So I hope you’ve got that in your diary, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, yes. [LAUGHS]

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: And you’ve also got an online tutorial. So from there, you can get onto the online tutorials, which are done by Adobe Connect.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So you can literally click on that button there in the room. Excellent.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Absolutely. It will be in there. It will tell you if you need to load something onto your computer. It will tell you to check your sound. So you can do all those kind of things before the tutorial starts.

KAREN FOLEY: And the students, they have a slightly different interface to this, but basically, they’ll get a list of all of the available events.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: That’s right.

KAREN FOLEY: They might have some face-to-face options. We’ll cover a lot of this in the tutorials section later. But again, once they can select and register for those, that means that they don’t have to go. No one’s going to do a register or anything, but it means they’ve got a space on those and the tutor knows to expect them, which is important.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Yeah, absolutely.
BLAKELEY: The Resources tab, what's on that?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, this kind of important. Again, you can get all of this direct from the study calendar that we looked at. But it's really if you're kind of on the go or you want alternative formats for your study materials. So you can download, for example, the PDFs of the chapters in the book. You can download transcripts of the videos and the audios.

And that's really useful if, you know, you've got lots of train journeys, stuff like that, that you might not get a very good connection. But it's also really important if you have different needs and you want them to come in different format. So if you click on this- and let's try it and see- she says hesitantly, hoping it's going to work.

So you go all different ways of downloading. You've got an eBook, Kindle book, PDF version- you know, basically anything you can think of- and of course, I suppose we should have said right at the start that we're looking at this on a desktop view, but you do have a mobile view, as well. Yeah. And we know that, you know, mobile is kind of like little mini computers these days and students may well find it easy to kind of study with their mobile on the bus, on the train.

KAREN FOLEY: You can even go to tutorials on your mobile, as well.

GEORGINA I know.

BLAKELEY:

KAREN FOLEY: It's brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

GEORGINA I'm sounding like a dinosaur here. [LAUGHING]

BLAKELEY: Apparently. But these are great so you can download. So when you're planning a time each week, you can say, right, I'm going to download this, that and the other and then get those formats. Also the PDFs are good if you want to annotate those or search for things, for example, as well. So they have other functions as well as just being accessible and available to go on the go.

Now, we've got a few minutes left. And I'm just very mindful that we've covered the most important thing as well. But there are other resources for students in terms of subject websites
GEORGINA: Let's go there.

BLAKELEY: -things that they can enjoy as OU students.

GEORGINA: OK. It works a bit like a sort of module website, but you don't have that kind of study calendar down the middle, obviously and depending on what qualification you're doing, your subject site will look a bit different. I think two are really important here - connect and the one that it was on, the plan.

Connect because this space is really for when you're not on a module. When you're on a module, you've got access to your tutors, to all those other students and you feel kind of part of a community. But when you're not on a module - either in between modules or just kind of waiting for the next one to start, or wondering what to do next - it's easy then to feel a bit disconnected, a bit isolated.

So that's when your subject website really comes in and you connect via forums, those induction forums, those forums that the qualification leads are on and they'll answer any questions about what's coming next, about what you might want to do. So that's really helpful.

And the other thing that I'd like to highlight here - but again obviously, you know, press the buttons and find out what's there - there's a lot of resources again for when you're between modules. So you're moving on from DD102 perhaps onto your second level 1 module, or you're moving from level 1 to level 2 and there's lots of bridging materials, preparatory materials, to get you ready for your next module, either at level 1 or at level 2.

So I'd really kind of advise students to have a look at those, because it can help you one, to have something to do in those long summer holidays, if you have those. But also really just to get you ready so you feel confident for your next module.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Now, there are lots of other resources as well and we'll be hearing from colleagues at the library and career service. But very briefly, can you just finally end by showing us how students can access those particular areas?

GEORGINA: So we're back to student home and I guess one of the most important ones is the Help Centre.

BLAKELEY: You'll see there's kind of Library and Careers there. Look - and it says "Get help with writing..."
and submitting assignments.” This really helps you with absolutely any kind of issue that you might have.

KAREN FOLEY: Except doing it for you. [LAUGHS]

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Except doing it for you. [LAUGHING] Yes. Yes. Don't be fooled. It says "get help." It doesn't say I'll do it for you. And a lot of this kind of help with study skills, an essay plan, that kind of thing- a lot of that's on your work module website anyway.

So think of this as an extra resource, in addition to your tutor, in addition to your module website. But it's really worth sort of spending a bit of time looking and see what resources are there- but without being overwhelmed and without getting distracted. Because again, you know, that can happen with these websites.

KAREN FOLEY: But these are things, I mean, we were talking we do a lot of study skills workshops at Student Hub Live in Adobe Connect. And I was talking to a colleague the other day saying, you know, so many of these things- essay writing, exams- they're basic principles. But you layer them over and over again and they have a resonance. So this is a great space to be able to go, OK, I've got a problem and if you download some of these books, they're really helpful guides.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Absolutely. And you'll find that your tutor might often point you in this direction. So if you're struggling with writing introductions or conclusions and you've had to go a couple of times and it's still not quite coming together, your tutor might say, well, OK, here's the link to the Help Centre. You know, there's an exercise on how you do this. Have a go at this.

KAREN FOLEY: And there are activities as well and videos. It's not just all publications and books.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: No. No. No. No. There's some great ones with students saying, well, I struggled with this and this is how I kind of solved that issue. So yeah, the little videos are excellent, really.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So that's the Help Centre, which again, is a whole range of resources on many skills things.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: The last one- come on, mouse. I quite like to click on the Library and I think-

KAREN FOLEY: We all like to click on the Library.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: Well, I think it's interesting. Because when you're starting off, you don't necessarily think you're
BLAKELEY: going to need the Library, because you're kind of given everything you need to study. But perhaps two things that I'd really recommend at this stage to level 1 students is the Library do a number of training events- referencing, which is something that students can struggle with again and again and again.

And one that's not on here, but I know they do a lot, is an Adobe Connect introductory session. Now, it's really great, because it's not like your first tutorial where you're thinking, oh, goodness me. What am I going to do? It's with Library staff who will just help you to get onto the system and just kind of acclimatise and get familiar with it.

And it's really helpful to do that, I think, before your first tutorial. Because if you do that with the Library staff, you're then ready for your first tutorial. And your levels of confidence are then that much better and it's much easier. You're not worried about whether your sound is going to work or anything like that, because you've done that already with the Library.

KAREN FOLEY: And they're all quite short session, as well and you can find out about those as well as on Student Home with the Facebook page. The Library have a great page and they'll advertise then events that are on.

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: So you know, I would use that. They have lots of little things about how to use the Library services. Because again, it's massive. It's one of the biggest online libraries. So you know, don't just jump straight in. Get their advice on what you're going to need at what stage of your studies.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Georgina, thank you so much. It's been a really wonderful whistle stop tour of the Virtual Learning Environment. It's very exciting and there's lots there. What's your one tip for students in terms of focus then, considering all of this complexity?

GEORGINA BLAKELEY: When you're on a module, your module website and within that, the study calendar. When you're not on a module, spend more time in the Library, spend more time on the subject websites. And the one we didn't have time to look at is the Careers website. Don't think you don't need that till the end. It's useful to think about it throughout your studies.

And the one tip, you can't break anything. Yes, so just wander around it as you would a library. Spend some time doing that the start of your studies.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, thank you, Georgina, for showing us around that and we'll be hearing from colleagues, both in the Library and Career service a little bit later today. But everyone's been filling out the
polls and it seems like you're all very confident now with using your module website and most of you are planning on going on it once a day. So that's great to know.

We're going to play a replay video now for you, because we'll be back live again at 12:15 and I'm going to show you one of my favourite sessions with Suzanne [INAUDIBLE] on time management- a very crucial skill and she's got stacks of advice in that. And then we'll be coming back to talk about your tutor with Isabella and Anactoria. So I'll see you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]