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KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this session, Ruth McFarlane is going to introduce us to the Virtual Learning Environment, a key space for your OU studies and something that we hope will inspire continuing students, as well as those of you out there who are new starters.

Now, we've got some things we'd like you to tell us. So on your widgets, you should see, Have you already had a look at your student home page?, How easy was it to navigate-- so that's in terms of easy to difficult-- and have you found your study planner yet - yes or no. So we hope that you can select the answer that applies to you, open the widget, press your answer on the button that's fitting your situation, and then close the tab. And then that result will submit.

Ruth McFarlane, thank you for coming along today. And I asked you to come along because you're both a student and you've been teaching, and you're also working in Technology Enhanced Learning. So you're a great person to sort of fill us in on some of these things from a student perspective.

Now, the Virtual Learning Environment is something that students are going to be seeing every week, if not every day of their studies for the next nine months of the module. And we've had some really exciting refreshers to this that some students may have had last year, some students may have this year. But it's becoming a lot more easy to navigate.

However, there's an awful lot of information on there, which can be a little bit daunting for new students, because it's very easy to get lost in the library, doing lots of research on interesting things, and sort of forgetting that you need to find your assessment and where your tutorials are, et cetera. So I wondered if you could talk us through some of the key things that students need to know, in particular thinking about really what they need to prioritise if they're new students.

RUTH MCFARLANE: Sure. Thank you. So you're right, there is a lot to see on the Virtual Learning Environment. And we've got an example of it here. So I've chosen to use S111, which is a lovely module called Questions in Science. So some students may be studying this, I hope.

So the first thing I want to say is that, when you're exploring here, you can't break anything.

Just go for it, and click on things, and see what's there. And it's really worth students spending a bit of time in these couple of weeks before their module starts exploring and seeing what's useful. There's a lot of really useful information on here. Some of it is a little bit hidden.

We've tried to make it really visible. But because there's so much, it does take a little bit of sort of finding your way around. So I'm going to give a few pointers this morning about things that people can find.

And the other thing I wanted to say is that nobody's checking up on what students are doing. So they mustn't feel that there's any sort of monitoring or assessment of what they're clicking on. It's absolutely up to them to find their own way through this and see what works for them.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a really important point, because, often, there are these fun activities, where it says, write your feedback in this box. And I've heard students saying, oh, did you read my feedback and was it right? And you think, well, I can't see it.

It's something that's there as a tool to enhance learning. So nobody can see whether you're clicking on things. You're not assessed on whether you've done the activities by selecting them on the study calendar, for example. Or no one can see what sorts of things you're writing.

RUTH MCFARLANE: No, exactly. And if you are going to be assessed on it, that will be made clear. So that if somebody else is going to be reading what you've written in a text box, for example, that will always be stated before you complete that activity.

KAREN FOLEY: So this is your space. You do what you like with it.

RUTH MCFARLANE: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: So there's different tabs and tools, which look fairly self-explanatory.

RUTH MCFARLANE: So the first thing I want to start with is by saying, if we have a look across the top here, you'll see these headers-- Assessments, Tutorials, Forums, Resources. So those are really the key things that students need to be focusing on. As a student myself, the first thing I always go to is the Assessment tab to see what is it that I'm going to be assessed on, what assignments will I need to write, when are they due, how many marks are they worth.

So I think probably that's the first place that lots of students will head, is going and having a

look on that page. And you'll get details of all of your assignments that are coming. You may know already in the OU we call it a TMA, a Tutor-Marked Assignment. And if you don't, you'll very quickly get familiar with that terminology, won't you, and find that that's what you're using.

And the other type of assessment is an ICMA, which is an Interactive Computer Marked Assignment. So the difference is just who's marking it. Is it marked by the computer or by the tutor? So that's your assessment, which will decide how well you get on and whether you pass your module. So I would say that's probably the first place to start.

KAREN FOLEY: So what do you do, Ruth, when you're studying? Do you look at the questions? Or do you look at the dates, or both?

RUTH MCFARLANE: Both. I always-- when I first start studying, I look at the whole calendar. And the first thing I do is mark when are my assignments due in. What are those key dates throughout the nine months of study. Because that's really what you're working towards, isn't it?

And that's-- and especially if I've got-- if I know I've got a big family event coming up and then my assignment is due the next day, that means I'm going to have to get my assignment finished a few days early. So I always sort of look at what are my other commitments around those times.

KAREN FOLEY: And the assignments also have really good information about what you need to do for that task.

RUTH MCFARLANE: Definitely.

KAREN FOLEY: And some students think that they need to study absolutely everything. And they can, and indeed, it's wonderful if they can. But students who maybe have life issues getting in the way can prioritise their time. And so knowing what you're being assessed on can really help direct your reading--

RUTH MCFARLANE: Definitely.

KAREN FOLEY: --and maybe help you reprioritise your focus.

RUTH Yeah. I mean, I tend to think of it in terms of a sort of essential and desirable type of

MCFARLANE:	categorising. And that may not necessarily be very clear from reading the materials. But actually, when you read the assessment guidelines, you should be able to determine for yourself.
	And it's OK to say sometimes, this week, I'm just flat out with loads of other things, and I'm not going to be able to finish all of that. And maybe you'll come back to it later. And we're all human.
	That's what happens to all of us. We can't hope to cover absolutely everything. Of course, if you get the opportunity, most of the materials are going to be so interesting you'll want to come back to them, because that's where you're studying.
KAREN FOLEY:	Now, Ruth, we asked students, have they had to look at their home page. 95% said yes.
RUTH MCFARLANE:	Good.
KAREN FOLEY:	On the whole, they found it reasonably easy to navigate, which is good. However, we asked them if they'd found their study planner yet. And only 60% had said yes.
RUTH MCFARLANE:	Ah, OK.
KAREN FOLEY:	So this is a very interesting point, because the study planner, which is here, is this great tool that you can use to select things. And as you say, if you think, I'm not going to be able to do that this week, you could possibly not tick it off as completed. And then that acts as an aid memoir for you really to go back to if you have some downtime later in the module.
RUTH MCFARLANE:	So I wonder whether the students just aren't familiar with what we mean by the study planner.
KAREN FOLEY:	Very good point.
RUTH MCFARLANE:	So on here, the way that this works is that you're shown the current weeks, which will be the week you are studying and usually the previous and the subsequent weeks. But you can also select this All Weeks tab. And then you will be able to see-- if I just scroll down a little here-- this is what we call the study planner.
	So this is going through week by week what are you expected to study. And if I expand-- I'm

going to choose weeks 2 and 3, rather than week 1-- then you can see each of the different topics that you're expected to study that week. And this is a great list. I love ticking things off on a list.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, yes.

RUTH MCFARLANE: So for me, this is one of the pleasures of studying--

[LAUGHTER]

--is as you go through, you can tick off to say that you've completed that one. And as you go-- and that serves as a reminder to you. Nobody else is checking this. It's just your own student reminder, which ones have I studied. And so it means that, if you haven't had time to look at part three floating or sinking, you can remember that. The next time you come, it'll show you.

And the other thing I really like is that, if we just go back to the top of the page, and you'll see this little bar here, it tells you how far through you are. So as you progress through each week and you're ticking off the different activities that you've done, it will show you how far through your module you are-- again, only for your own reference, not for anybody else to be checking. But I love that.

And actually, I always find myself getting a bit disappointed when it gets to sort of 95%, 96%, because it means I'm nearing the end. And I'm currently on a break. My next module doesn't start till February. I've been reading all these tweets from people saying they can't wait to get started. And I'm feeling a bit jealous.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, I know. So I wonder if that was the case. Maybe you have actually found your study planner, and you just didn't know what it was. HJ.

HJ: Sorry, just having lots of good chat about some of the tools that--

KAREN FOLEY: I hope you're not talking about cake.

HJ: No.

[LAUGHTER]

Unfortunately-- someone did ask right away. But unfortunately, there's none around for me to steal today. But we're just having a chat about all the different tools that people are using. So talking about using like parallel desktops. So some people use statistical packages with their modules. So using those are helpful.

And we've been talking about the kit we use also. Ruth really likes using her iPad, because it's really portable. And Laura likes her laptop, because it means she can sit in bed and watch us and study as well, which is really fantastic.

And some apps as well, so Deborah uses an app called Brain.fm, which has music that helps her concentrate, which is really good. And we are enjoying all the tips. And we like seeing the study planner as well.

So a lot of people weren't actually sure what the study planner meant. So it's good that we actually saw it as well. But also talking about student discounts, because we absolutely love that as well and the student cards that we can get.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, yeah. That's a really good point actually, because I know you've been talking about the cost of laptops and tablets and things like that.

HJ: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's worth getting and opening-- well, you can get a student card, an NUS student card. And if you look at the OUSA, the Open University Student Association, website, which is-- I think it's OUSA dot-- I can't remember. HJ will find the link.

HJ: We'll post the link.

KAREN FOLEY: HJ will find the link, if someone hasn't already. So you can check that out. And then you can get a student card, which gives you discounts on lots and lots of things, which is brilliant.

HJ: On Student Home what we're also chatting about, which is really helpful, on the main student home page on the left hand side, it says go to GoogleApps mail. And that's how you get a my.open.ac.uk email address. And that's really helpful for discounts or if you want to have an email just for your study and university stuff. I

Do that as well. It's helpful to have them separate. But yeah, that's a really helpful little piece as well in there.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And Marisa has just managed to change her Amazon Prime to a student and has got a refund, which is absolutely brilliant.

HJ: Well done.

KAREN FOLEY: So well done, top skills there. Excellent. OK. So we've had a look at the study calendar. And just to sort of summarise, we've been talking about the beauty of the tick list and about sort of progressing your module in your study.

But I wondered if you could also tell us about some of the other areas. And I know that there's been a question about the online tutorials. And next, we're going to be showing you how they all work. But briefly, where do students go to access this, without stealing Rod's and Zoe's thunder, who are going to give us a complete demo.

RUTH MCFARLANE: I know that they're going to do it on the next session. But I do think it's worth students, again, exploring this and having a little bit of time to check that that's working. So I mentioned earlier that across the top here we've got these key headers. So we've looked at the Assessment one.

Within the Tutorials tab, you will find the details. So currently, no events, because the module hasn't gone live. But when it goes live, you'll see the dates for your tutorials. And this is where you'll be able to log into the online tutorial rooms.

So I won't say any more about that now. But I would say, have a little look and explore as soon as your module goes live and just make sure that that tech is working for you. I always find, I need 5 or 10 minutes before the start time of the tutorial just to make sure that that's all working properly.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And so with the tutorials, I guess the key thing is, get organised, put them in your diary, register for the events that you're going to attend, so that you've got your space already there, and set things up. Now, forums, we've had questions before about where people can talk and also about what sorts of things are appropriate.

We're very short on time. And we will be covering this a little bit later in the session about your tutor and connecting with other students at the end of the programme today. But broadly, this is where you access the forums. And then the Resources is the last top, which, again, has some really useful things. Briefly, could you just tell us about the library?

RUTH MCFARLANE: So I was going to say that the thing that you really need to spend some time on before you start studying is looking at how the library works. So you can access it either via the Resources tab or there's a particular label for the Library there. So do go and start exploring the library.

They have got some fantastic resources-- I'm just going to go straight to that one-- some things to help students if you're not familiar with using the library. It's really worth spending-- put aside an hour if you can to have a look through the library, find out how it works. And there's lots and lots of help for students here.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. We have our Freshers Fair, refreshers orientation. And that's on the 3rd and 4th of October. And then we'll be showing you how the library can help you with your studies. They're brilliant, not for information, not for material, but for when you have a question with referencing at about 3 o'clock in the morning.

We have a collaboration of librarians around the world, who can help people on live chat and things like that. So they're great for study skills and tips and advice and digital literacy, a lot more than just finding information. So it's really good to check out what sorts of services are on offer. And again, before your model starts and before you've got all of these things to plan, it's a nice time to be able to make sure that you're aware of the ways that they can support you in your studies.

Ruth, I think that's pretty much most of what we had planned to cover. But you also wanted to plug some sessions on OpenLearn, which are available on the Resources tab of the Student Hub Live website.

RUTH MCFARLANE: Again, I would say, there's lots and lots of free material about how to study. So if you're new to online study, then I would really recommend taking some time. So for example, there's one called Succeed with Learning.

There's another called Being Digital, skills for online learning. And that relates to what Mark was talking about as well. It's OK to try things out and find out what works for you. And there's a lot of free resources that students are able access via OpenLearn.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, thank you very much, Ruth--

RUTH MCFARLANE: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: --for joining me today. That's been really, really useful. And well done, everyone, at home who's been supporting each other so nicely and giving each other tips and ideas.

Holly, we're about to answer your question about how the online tutorial systems work with my next guests Rod and Zoe. So we'll be showing you how to get into our new system, what happens when you're there. And that will be incredibly useful for all students, whether or not you've been to a tutorial before. So do hang around and join us for that.

But first, I'm going to do another campus tour. And this time we're going to take a look at the Jennie Lee Building. So we'll see you in a few minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]