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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the *Student Hub Live*. Well, this is the first of our Boot Camps. And for those of you who just joined, a big welcome. This is our online interactive community space, and we're getting you all geared up ready for you OU study.

Now, a lot of you are new students, just beginning your study journey. You're already excited, some of you are nervous. It's a really, really important time. So we hope that you can take the time and space to have a think about how this might all impact on your studies.

And so to do this, we've been talking about who's here to support you in your studies. And I've just been speaking to Zach Eaton about that. And I'm now going to talk to Mark Nichols, who has some brilliant ideas about learning online.

Now you're going to get really familiar with doing stuff online, right? So some of your watching materials might be exclusively online. You're going to watch a lot of videos, read a lot of stuff, do activities, submit tutor marked assignments online. So there's a lot of stuff online. And it's important that we're able to engage with that.

But what's brilliant about this next session is Mark's going to give us some ideas about how to actually use technology and how to use this digital environment to your advantage. So welcome Mark. I hope that's not too big a sell, but you do actually have some brilliant ideas. And I'm always very inspired when I talk to you about things because so often it's about a mind session, about making technology work for you and your learning as opposed to thinking, I have no idea how to work Windows, and what's this Alt-Tab thing, and this, that, and the other. There are ways of making things simple, especially if you aren't used to technology.

MARK NICHOLS: Absolutely. We do know, Karen, that most of our students are actually quite OK with technology. So the good thing is it's now part of everyday life. Quite often, we'll book our holidays online and think nothing of it. And to some extent, the OU's using technology to the same level. So if you've got what it takes to book an online holiday, you've probably got what it takes to study online as well.

KAREN FOLEY: And if you're here online, then again, that's a good indicator. We've put some widgets, our interactive tools, and we'd like to know what you think. So there's some questions there about

how often you use the internet when you study? How do you use the computer as a student?
Three factors you think you most need to work on?

So fill this in. Just click on the widget, and it'll open up. And then you can select the multi-choice question that applies to you, and then close it, and your results will submit. And we'll feed those into the discussion a bit later.

MARK NICHOLS: Great.

KAREN FOLEY: So Mark, what do we mean by online? And is online and digital synonymous? Are they different sorts of things?

MARK NICHOLS: They're not quite the same thing. So online, if you like, is an extension of digital. You don't need to be online to use computers all the time. In fact, a lot of what you do with the OU, you won't need to be online. You can do quite a bit of work offline, away from the internet, even on the move.

KAREN FOLEY: So we'd expect a lot of our students to be using the internet. And as you say, we're very OK with searching the internet. But sometimes there can be the psychological barrier between thinking that something is possibly more complex. For example, we were talking about ICMA's beforehand, and that can sound a bit scary if you don't know what it is. But actually, like you said, if you booking a holiday, it's often just clicking the right button, isn't it?

MARK NICHOLS: Absolutely. In fact, using technology is almost like riding a bike. Once you're on there, once you've got your balance, once you're on your way, you really don't think about the bike anymore. It's the same with computers and using them for online study.

KAREN FOLEY: So the different ways then that this digital information can help us sort of enhance our learning-- and some of this has to do with the access to the internet, access to technology. So my question is, how much access do students need? And when do they need it?

MARK NICHOLS: Right. Well, you'll be doing a lot of online tutorials, probably, through your studies. So as long as you've got a fairly good broadband connection-- even a low-end computer will do it-- I'll show you a device I've got here later on. So you don't need a lot, actually by way of set up. Again, if you can book your on holiday, if you can stream online media, if you're watching the likes of Netflix or something like that, everything you need is already at your fingertips.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So there's different sorts of things. There's this access. And part of this-- it's

something I know that students can sometimes worry about is, have I got the right computer? Have I got enough storage? Is there any sort of aspects that you think about, things like broadband in West Wales, for example, people really struggle with things like that. But equally, I've seen so many students go to internet cafes and find workarounds for stuff. So when should they worry? And what should their priorities be in terms of their sort of technical set up?

MARK NICHOLS: A lot depends on the module you're studying. But for the most part, you can actually download a lot of module materials. So when I studied with the Open University, I tend to take a look at the PDF documents of the materials, download those, and work with them offline. So don't always need to be online to study.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, excellent. That's a really good idea because so many people study on the move. And we were talking a little bit about time management earlier, and fitting study into all your plans and things. And I guess that would be a really great way to take things with you.

MARK NICHOLS: Absolutely, yeah. It's certainly the way I study. So my own personal strategy is to download the materials as quickly as possible. I'm load them up usually in a PDF reader, Adobe Acrobat, which is freely available online. And I've looked at how to highlight the documents and I'll add my own comments to them. When I study, too, I'll have a Word document open alongside, so I can take notes, quickly move from one version of the document to the other. So for me, that works quite well.

But I think everyone will have their own strategy. Some students might prefer to print things off, others might prefer to just use the VLE live. So it really comes down to the choices you make as a student and what works for you.

KAREN FOLEY: So I wonder how you guys feel about being online and what sort of strategies you are using for your studies. Is it something that you do, like annotating PDFs? Do you download things? And are you planning, or have even thought about how you might take your modules materials out with you? HJ, what are people talking about?

HJ: I think we're just general tips, which I always like. It's-- every year I always feel slightly more prepared, but never completely prepared, so different tips are useful for trying out. So Rachel says a tip is-- as an online learner is to get involved with the student union and their forums so they can be useful for help, advice, and support.

And Julie's asking, is it OK just to have some general chat on the forum? So, I'm sure your

tutor won't mind. There's welcome forums, where people can introduce themselves, talk about what they're doing, which is great. Definitely do that. And I'm sure your tutor would love it if you start up a chat thread on your module page as well

And Kate has a really great tip. I like this one. She says, don't be afraid to go on Student Home and have a click about you. You can't break anything. Just see what's there, see what you can find and explore.

There's a lot there. And we are having a tour later, which is really good. But there's so much stuff that even I don't know about and haven't discovered yet, which I know I've been using this student home pages for years and years.

But Vinson's up for some second-year tips. So we're talking about things that come as you progress and get used to using the basic things, like student home, so using things like Google Scholar, and Reference Management Systems, which is really great. So any more tips, I'd love to hear them. And remember, you can tweet them to us as well @StudentHubLive. I really like that because it means that we can like them all and chat them too.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely. Well thank you all the second years for coming. And like Vincent and Rachel with all your great tips and ideas, it's brilliant. And that's what really, really makes this unique.

But don't feel overwhelmed if you think I don't know about referencing tools, et cetera. You need to pick up the things that are right for you and your studies. And it's all about knowing that there is stuff out there, and then you can select it as and when you need it.

So it's brilliant and brilliant to share ideas. And they're lots of students at a variety of levels with lots and lots of different needs. But there was a lot going on, so please don't feel too overwhelmed by it all.

So Mark, I wanted to talk a little bit about the online study skills and the online technical skills, because there's two things going on. And you've been talking a little bit about, I guess, some of the more technical skills, so annotating PDFs, using notes, using some of these formats to make them work for you. But the study skills are all so important. So can you tell us a little bit about how people tend to be more successful online learners. What do they do?

MARK NICHOLS: I think the number one piece of advice I could give anyone studying online or digitally is close everything other than what you're working on. A lot of people say that digital learning can be

distracting. Well, it's mainly because you've got your Twitter feed open, you've got Facebook open, in another tab. You're trying to do too many things at once. So one thing I do, quite deliberately, is closed down Skype, close down Outlook, close down the email, and just focus purely on what I'm supposed to be doing at the time.

KAREN FOLEY: A difficult strategy, but one, I guess, that at least you do that. But how long? Is there a golden half hour, hour? What sort of time periods tend to work for people in terms of blocking off and really focusing on things?

MARK NICHOLS: I think it comes down to the individual. So it was interesting to hear Zach talk about the number of hours students should be dedicating each week. I fully endorse that.

But I think just keep going. Each of us get tired at a certain point. If you do feel a bit tired, go get up, get a coffee. Basically just treat it as you would any other sort of learning opportunity.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, you know this because you did your MA in open distance learning from New Zealand, actually, with the OU. So you'd have done a lot of study. Tell us, do you do different things in terms of picking up and downloading things on, for instance, public transport, reading something. Are there different high or low intensity levels that you'd recommend using technology for?

MARK NICHOLS: I think more and more as you enter into the work place as well, you are expected to read things on a screen. I'm quite comfortable doing that now myself. But it's taken a while to train myself.

What I tend to do is actually download things at home. I've got a very good wireless connection there, and then with the computer I have, just take that away with me. I tend to study in 15 half-hour blocks, but for taking a bit of a break, and then getting back into it.

But again, it comes down to your own circumstances. Each of us will do it differently. Each of us will study differently. We all have different life responsibilities that we have to fit our studies around.

KAREN FOLEY: I don't know if it's just me or because I feel really old at times, But I often like printing things on paper and highlighting or writing on them. I find it really hard to read long papers online and dense material. Have you got any advice for people about handling that sort of complexity, about maybe thinking about what things are, and like using the notes along side things, aren't you?

MARK NICHOLS: Well there's a difference between reading something and studying it. For me, if I'm actually studying something, I do like to take it more slowly and more deliberately. But I do like to have the opportunity to actually highlight and annotate as I go. So for me, working from the screen is actually quite good. The OU still does offer print materials across its different modules, so that should be a relief for those who do prefer print, especially for long extended things that you need to read.

KAREN FOLEY: Now it's interesting Mark, because we asked people about three factors they think they most need to work on. And only 2% of people feel that they're ready and/or set for studies. So there's a lot of scope, which is good because it's good to-- it's good to have potential to do more things, isn't there? And focus and personal strategy are the two things that people think are most needed to be worked on for people. So what advice would you give students in terms of maybe focus?

MARK NICHOLS: It is a focus. Well, as I said, just close down everything except for what you're actually working on at the time. But also set a goal for your study session. I like to set-- look at my materials, and find a place where I think I'd like to get to during that study time.

Others might have a few hours put aside and just work to that. But having an objective is very useful. But again, whatever works for you normally studying will also extend into the online world as well.

Underneath it all, though, comes confidence. It's really important that you're confident with the technology that you're using. And I know that many students come to us with varying levels. For some, it's a challenge to sit in front of the computer screen and watch a mouse move. For others, though, you're well and truly already using the likes of Office Suite quite, quite comfortably or you're a confident internet browser.

So confidence is the number one thing I think students should work on. And if you're not feeling confident as a student, there is an open learn course you can do. This is freely available from the University. It's called "Digital Literacy: Succeeding in a Digital World." So if you do take that course, and you're not a very confident user, by the time you emerge from the other side, I think you'll be looking at technology as an opportunity and not as a threat.

KAREN FOLEY: When I first started studying I thought, I've got to have it all perfect. And I had my notebook, and my highlighters, and I had everything. And I felt really anxious about doing it the right way.

And one thing I'm very mindful of now is I see students really experimenting, and they are tending to be the ones who are most successful. They said, I tried it like this, and I don't like like that. I've done it like this, and this is working for me. And this is how I do my essay plans. And we don't really care as long as they're succeeding in doing the right sort of things. But could you give students some encouragement about really focusing on what is working for them and reflecting on what strategies are in fact useful, as opposed to what they think should be useful?

MARK NICHOLS: Oh absolutely. I think every one of us has to find our own pace at our own level of comfort around use of digital tools. All I can really talk about is actually my own experience, which does involve using Word alongside PDF documents. It's a strategy I've built up over time.

But I think as you go through your studies, as you experiment with different ways, you'll probably find just some surprises that really sort of take you from [INAUDIBLE] which you then build into how you normally study as a student. We know that quite a few of our students will actually study with pen and paper, even though they are studying digitally. And that's fine as well. Whatever works for you is really the key thing.

KAREN FOLEY: We asked our students which applications they often use in their studies. And we had some great things. And we've already been seeing some really nice referencing tools. Let's see what was most popular for you at home.

So Google comes in, needless to say, right in the middle. Word, and you've mentioned the Office Suite, et cetera. But lots of things like Grammarly, Thesaurus, Wikis, Khan Academy-- brilliant source of information-- Mind Genius. So there's lots and lots of different things here. You can see the breadth and depth of both programmes, search engines, and apps, and things that are going to make life easier for study.

So moving them on to technology then, you've mentioned that many of our students are very confident in working with tools. And you've mentioned some of the things that people can do if they're online. But you've also got some great ways of working yourself. So can you tell I'm more confident or people who are keen to sort of experiment, how you work, and things that you've done that make it easier.

MARK NICHOLS: Absolutely. Getting the right device is really important. So over the last year, I've been using a particular type of computer if you can see. Hopefully it's showing all right.

OK, so you can see that my desktop set up at work. I've got a small tablet there that you can see that on the left or right-hand side. I'm not sure what you're looking at.

But you can see too, it's got an external keyboard, an external mouse. And I've also hooked it up to another monitor. You can see on that side, that's actually a ranged portrait rather than landscape because we tend to read documents in portrait form.

Now that little computer I've got just there is a really interesting little device. If you were looking at buying a device as a student now to study, I would be on the lookout for something like this. This is actually a Links Microsoft PC. It's a full computer, so it's not like a tablet. It's not just an iPad or an Android. This actually runs Windows 10. And it also has Office Suite in there. It comes with a detachable keyboard as well.

But using these peripherals on the side, I can plug it into an external monitor, external mouse. It runs everything else on USB as well. So this is actually a full desktop tablet-- laptop replacement. But I could also take it away with me on the train. So it's a fantastic little device.

It's 220 pounds, so it's fairly pricey. But it is cheaper than an iPad. For another 80 or so pounds, you can get the external monitor, mouse, and keyboard as well. So it's an all-in-one device. It's been working really well. In fact, in the photo, I'm actually using my OU-issued laptop as a base stand for it. It seems all it's good for compared to the [INAUDIBLE] itself.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. But I guess one of the points here is that we see students study spaces, and being set up, and using technology as part of those. We often see them with a study calendar, and stationery, and various sorts of things around them, so yeah, some brilliant tips.

For people who maybe don't feel technically able to do this sort of thing, or don't have the money to buy things, or don't even want to, is it possible to study using a library computer and a range of books and things?

MARK NICHOLS: I understand there are computers in the library. There are publicly accessible computers all over the UK, which should be adequate as well. I think, though, if you are studying at tertiary level, if you are interested in getting a degree and going out there and working with other sorts of roles you aspire to, you do need to use technology. You do need to be capable with it and confident with it. So I think I'd be inclined to take the challenge and get a device and work it through myself.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Mark Nichols, that's been really, really helpful. Thank you so much for coming along today and for talking to us about that. And I hope that you found that useful.

And thank you so much for sharing all of those brilliant tips. HJ's been collating some of those links. And if you haven't mentioned things that you'd like to mention later on Twitter, do let us know, and we'll put a list of those on our Resources page on the *Student Hub Live* website for you.

OK, in our next session, we're going to show you about the virtual learning environment. So this is more specific to your area of study. And we'll show you what the key things that you need to learn about.

So don't go away because I'm joined by Ruth McFarland next. But we're going to show you another little compass tour video. And we'll see you in five minutes.

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