

**KAREN FOLEY:** Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, we're back in the studio, back in real time. Wasn't that exciting? I hope you agree that some of the interference was really worth it. Some people got up to some fascinating things. And Ruth, you've been up to some fascinating things in your studies. But today, we're going to talk about managing study work life.

**RUTH** It doesn't quite match going to Mercury, Karen, I'm afraid.

**MCFARLANE:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** It doesn't, does it? Aren't they amazing? You do incredible things though in Technology Enhanced Learning, and you've done so much stuff with people in secure environments and things. I think your area is really interesting, too.

**RUTH** Well, I do. I mean, I do really enjoy it. But I was just completely wowed by what they were saying in that previous session. It's amazing.

**KAREN FOLEY:** It's incredible. And you know, there are so many people here at the OU who are held in such high regard, sometimes we forget that our professors are going out to these conferences and are involved in all these sorts of things. And it really is incredible how well the OU is respected in those international circles.

**RUTH** Absolutely, and it's a great reminder of that.

**MCFARLANE:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** OK, so we want to talk about managing your study workload. Now we've had lots of students here at Student Hub Live who are doing two modules. We've had lots of level one students. And a lot of people have been worried about how they're going to fit it all in and managing their study workloads.

Now we've done sessions on time management before. We've done loads of things on stationery and various sorts of techniques and things we can use in our study. But I really wanted to focus on what the workload looked like and how one might start to fit it in. Because whilst we've got tips and techniques, actually, we really need to look at the package of the work. So I thought we could do that today.

HJ on the chat. I know you're all talking about food now. That didn't take very long, but I suppose it is nearly dinner time. So are people sharing their tips and ideas for workload yet, or

are you still talking about what you've had for tea?

**HJ:** Well, everyone was very intrigued and focused for our session on space and Skyping our guest. But soon after, we got onto the food. So we're having sausages and onions and baked potato and rice pudding and veggie meatballs and pasta, which sounds fantastic.

But we also had a nice chat earlier about some of the things people are a bit worried about, and maybe you could give us some advice on. So Deborah is talking about going from a 30-point module to a 60-point module. So trying to work out fit in the studying. We're a bit worried about extra time for TMAs, and a bit worried that sometimes if we're squeezed for time, when we rush our reading we struggle a bit to take it all in.

So yeah, any advice about this we're really looking for to. And we did have a great discussion about it, and I'm sure any thoughts, comments, or questions you have on this session, I'm sure we'd love to hear them and get some good advice.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And it's great you're getting into the spirit of things well and eating lentils, being a student. But you don't have to eat lentils all the time. In fact, probably sport science would say that they're not good for you in large quantities. They're good for protein. Right.

What are the recommended study hours then, Ruth? And how do people find out what they are?

**RUTH**  
**McFARLANE:** OK, so that's a really good question. And I wanted to have that as a starting point because that's where, when we're designing new modules, that's where we start. And so there are UK recommended guidelines on how long students should spend to study for a degree, because we need to know that you've kind of done the necessary work to get this high qualification. And I sort of wanted to say although it has a lot of hours, it's really worth putting that effort in and making it work for you.

So basically, the QAA, which is the qualification-- quality assurance? Sorry, I shouldn't have brought in that acronym without--

**KAREN FOLEY:** In fact, we've gone off them because--

**RUTH** Sorry.

**McFARLANE:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** --we've not known many-- no, it's not that. We've not known many of them today. So we--

**RUTH** OK, forget I even said that.

**MCFARLANE:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** We talk in our own words now.

**RUTH** If you're studying a 60-credit module, you should be spending about 600 hours in total, which

**MCFARLANE:** sounds like ever such a lot. And over 30 weeks, that's about 20 hours a week. So that sounds, you know. You think about how you're going to fit that in around a job and family commitments. So that's why I really wanted to break it down into what does that actually mean.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, that's means 20 hours this week we've been sitting at the Student Hub Live. Mind you, if you've got through that--

[LAUGHTER]

**RUTH** OK, so some of that 20 hours will be your own preparation for studying. So it will be things like

**MCFARLANE:** if you're doing an online tutorial, you might need an extra half an hour to get set up and online with the room and get ready. And that counts towards your 20 hours. So don't think you've got to do that as well as.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So it's not all intensive study time.

**RUTH** Some of it will be things like reading forum comments and having a bit of a chat. And some of

**MCFARLANE:** that time will also just be thinking time and processing. So although that 20 hours sounds really scary, actually, in reality, it's probably more like 12 or 13 hours of what we call directed study time, and the rest is what we call self-directed study time. So the way where you're arranging your own time and resources and your stationery, and having a few biscuits to help with the thinking.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yes, we like doing that, but not too much. So how do students find out what is directed and what is underdirected?

**RUTH** OK, so within your study planner, the academics on your module will be making it clear how

**MCFARLANE:** long you should be spending on each activity. And so what you'll see when you go into week one and activity one, and it'll say you should spend about an hour on this activity, or you should spend about three hours on this activity. And that guidance is really there to give

students sort of a framework. So that if it says you should spend about an hour and it's taken you more like three, well, then perhaps you need to have a think-- oh, I'm maybe doing this in too much detail or too much depth. So those guidelines are really meant to indicate for students the level of detail that they should be going into.

But having said that, we do know that everybody's different, of course. So where it says an hour, some people might race through that in 20 minutes, and for some people that's going to be two hours. So really in your first few weeks of study, you need to be getting a sense of your own pace and what works for you. And there'll be some things that you can whiz through, and some things that you do need to spend a bit longer on. And there isn't a right or wrong answer. It's what works for you, and it's just finding that right balance.

I suppose one of the first things that you really need to do is have a look at your study calendar and work out when your assessment tasks are due in, when your assignments are due in. So have a look at your TMA dates, and especially if you're studying two modules. I have so much respect for people who study two modules at the same time because I just think it must be-- it must be like reading two books at the, you know, and trying to remember all the different contexts.

When we are designing modules, we know-- and when we know that students are likely to be studying two together, we do really try to make sure that the assignment dates aren't falling at the same time. So we try to give students a bit of a break from one TMA before the next one is due. But of course, that can't always be the case. We have so many modules, and because of the openness of the OU, students could take any combination. So sometimes you may find that you've got two TMAs due at the same time. Well, obviously, you know, you can't write two TMAs at the same time. So you either need to bring one date forward or ask for an extension for the second one. But of course, I'm always cautious about recommending extensions because that then puts you back and then you've got to play catch up. So really--

**KAREN FOLEY:** Is it a valid reason to ask for an extension, that you're doing two modules?

**RUTH MCFARLANE:** It's probably not because it's your choice to do the two modules. So really, I think if you are taking the decision to do two modules, you need to be really organised with your time, and you absolutely need to have all those dates in your calendar right at the beginning of the year.

**KAREN FOLEY:** No, absolutely. Is Libby still watching, HJ? Because I emailed Libby back, and she was telling me that she's got a clash because she's doing two modules. So she's at a clash of some

dates. And some of them relate to tutorials, and I guess some of them are going to relate to assessments as well. Because it's inevitable, as you say, that over a nine month period, with probably six pieces of assessed work, they're likely to fall in a similar sort of area. So it is common.

How can students sort of balance those things and make decisions about what they're going to prioritise? Because some students I know sort of say, right, this is this week's module and that's last week's module. Some can sort of chop and change and do half a day on each. Everyone is their own person, and I guess it's about finding your own sort of style and balance. But how would you encourage them to listen to their gut and listen to what's working for them, playing around with different ideas so that they can really experiment as they're learning?

**RUTH**  
**MCFARLANE:**

I would say that trying to do a bit of each every week is probably the best strategy just to keep on top of things. And like you say, I think it really is a question of finding your own, finding the passion that works for you.

In terms of workload, we have some guidelines that we use at the OU when we're designing modules so that our academics can get a sense of how long they think a student might spend on things. And I just thought some of those might be helpful for students to think about. So for example, we use a words per minute study speed. When you're reading a newspaper say, or a novel, you might read at about 250 words a minute. When you're reading on screen, it's a bit slower because of the scrolling and, you know, just different. So it's actually more like 200 words a minute if you're reading a website.

But we allow for a study speed of 70 words a minute, which is quite a bit slower. And that allows for time for note-taking and highlighting and things like that. So when we're recommending it should take you two hours to read this paper, for example, that's based on how many words are in the paper and on a study speed of 70 words a minute. And we actually have a bigger range of things, but I just thought that that one time would be useful.

So I would recommend that for students, they test that out for themselves. See how long it takes you to read a passage of, say, a thousand words, and get a feel for your own study speed. And then that will really help you to gauge for future articles. It's quite easy to get a word count for something. And then if you've got a lot of study coming up, you get an idea of your pace by measuring and counting. And then you'll be able to allocate some useful chunks of time.

**KAREN FOLEY:** People are swapping tips, and Libby is still online trying to work out how many hours she can spend organising her stationery, which is substantial. And people are sharing tips and talking about study pace. Now you mentioned this sort of thing about comparing yourself and your own speed to the recommended speed. Now this always sort of invokes this idea of, well, am I normal? Am I slow? Am I just different?

And David Heley is coming on next to talk about benchmarking and setting our own expectations. So I don't want to sort of crossover too much into that section. But what does it mean, Ruth, if you are higher or lower than the recommended average?

**RUTH**  
**MCFARLANE:** It doesn't mean anything at all. It doesn't mean that you're cleverer or not good enough or anything. Some people read quickly. Some people read slowly. So it's certainly not a reflection on your ability. You can be sure that the amount of study that is in the module is the requisite, is the required amount for you to be able to pass and be able to get a distinction if you study all of it.

But the amount of time that you spend is not a reflection on how good you are at all. It is a very individual thing, and people need to find their own pace for it. And sometimes people can study really quickly and do very well, and sometimes they can study really quickly and not do very well. So it's--

**KAREN FOLEY:** So sometimes when I read very quickly, I don't understand what I'm reading. And maybe if I took it a bit more slowly-- Also, I've noticed that some module texts are a lot more dense than others. So sometimes you might have 100 words that actually you really need to sit down and pick through, and sometimes, you know, there's a whole introduction to something that's really just setting the scene in context.

**RUTH**  
**MCFARLANE:** Definitely. And when I was talking about study speeds, we do allow for that. So when we're deciding how long it should take to spend to read something, if it is a really complex piece of text, we allow a much slower sort of study speed of maybe 20 words a minute. So we do allow and try to recognise when there's lots of concepts being introduced or when things are really complex.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, it's so interesting just because we've been introducing students to many people at The Open University and Learning and Teaching Innovation. And some of the things that people do, you know, to sort to calculate things and the stats going on behind the scenes, it really is

phenomenal. I want to take a quick trip to HJ on the hot desk because I know there's lots of advice being shared out there.

**HJ:** Yeah, we're just talking about some of the ways we plan. And Ruth says that she does have some clashes of deadlines, but because we can see the dates in advance, she plans out quite well. So she has more than the allocated time to complete them. And James bought a large calendar so she can put on her wall and write down all her TMAs and tutorials, which I think is a great idea. I had one of them.

And we're talking about note-taking techniques as well. So Pomodoro techniques, we'll have to look that up. And there's lots of links in the chat, which is fantastic. And Sarah doesn't reckon that the OU includes coffee breaks in study time. So that's probably something we'll have to be aware of while studying as well.

But actually, one great point we had with is when doing some of the online activities, we can get a bit distracted if your module is only online, is I'll go on YouTube and things like that. I know I procrastinate terribly. So maybe Ruth has some advice on what we can do about keeping focused on our study as well.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah, and not having naps. Because nap breaks are not included, Devon and Sarah. Wish I'd never started that. Oh, I invited some people from sport science to come along and sort of solve this biscuit thing for our students, and they told us to eat lots of bananas and take these power naps.

[LAUGHTER]

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now we're all doing it, including HJ.

[LAUGHTER]

**KAREN FOLEY:** OK, so what do you have to say, Ruth?

**RUTH**  
**MCFARLANE:** OK, so in terms of the distractions, then definitely we need to manage those. And as HJ said, it is really easy when you're online to just check on Facebook or just have a little look on YouTube. So I would really recommend closing down all of those distractions. Try to just focus-- set yourself a time, say I'm just going to look only at the module materials for an hour, two hours, and then give yourself a break. We all need to have a break.

This is where the biscuits come in. Go out and walk the dog or do something that doesn't involve looking at a screen or doing any reading. But try and be really disciplined during the time that you've allocated. And I know that it doesn't always work and there's always distractions and interference. But if you can, try and shut away and have a little Don't Disturb Me sign, or a hat on, or something like that.

The other thing I would say is that not everything requires your full attention. There are some bits of study, like, for example, reading forum messages. I often do those while I'm cooking. So I might have my tablet there beside me and I'll be just reading and scrolling down, and then I'll be, you know, checking on how the dinner is coming on. And so there are some things which you can manage two or three tasks at a time. Maybe you've got a bus journey and you could download a blog or an article or something that you want to read on the bus where you don't need to be taking notes.

So I suppose one of my other tips is think about all those extra little pockets of time that you have in your day and see how you can maximise the use of those. Because actually, if you can find a spare 15 minutes every morning, then that's another over an hour that you've added into your week.

**KAREN FOLEY:** You've talked about sort of shutting things down, and actually, the other-- I couldn't bear to shut down my email. I find that really, really hard because I feel disconnected with things. The other day I did shut down my email, but I had it available on my phone. So I could sort of know what was happening, but without the distraction of having it on my computer. And I found that really helpful.

And HJ I know I spent a lot of his studying time on the bus. And I also know that you do it on the train as well, HJ. And not having Wi-Fi can sometimes be a real advantage because you don't then get distracted. What were some of your ways to study on the move, HJ?

**HJ:** I think my main things was just downloading all the little podcasts and keeping some of my notes on my phone as well. So when I did have those opportunities when I was trapped somewhere, like a train or a bus, it was the only thing I had to do. And actually, I always get so surprised about how productive I am on public transport, which is probably one of the downsides of having a car now, isn't it?

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Yeah, no, exactly. But once you start thinking about making choices and changes to things, you know, if I caught the train there, I could buy this much time. And it's amazing.



Actually, it is amazing how many people you see with OU books on the train. I met a conductor the other day who said, oh, you've got an OU book. I'm doing my degree. And there's this whole sort of way of recognising people, actually, who are doing this sort of thing.

So finding the time and slotting things in, but equally recognising that there are high and low level intensity tasks, what might be a good way of breaking down and identifying what those tasks are, maybe using the study planner?

**RUTH**

**MCFARLANE:**

Yeah, so within the study planner you should find that each week there will be a description of the different activities that you have to complete that week. And as you get to know your module pattern and format, you'll become more familiar with things, like an online activity, or a downloadable reading, or a video to watch.

I knew somebody who used to save all their videos and watch them in the bath. So finding sort of strategies like that and different activities that you can do at different times, I think it's just really worth almost perhaps keeping a little record of different things that you can do at different times during the first two or three weeks. And you'll find that you get into a bit of a pattern.

I suppose I would also say that one of the things I've had to do is that when I'm studying, I just can't let myself watch any of those boxed sets or brilliant programmes that are on. And I have to completely shut off and not allow myself to do that. So instead of a Tuesday night at 9:00 in front of the telly, that has to be a Tuesday night of studying. And then I'd treat myself to a binge catch up once I finished my module. And that's the advantage of you online catch up.

**KAREN FOLEY:**

A reward other than chocolate. Cassie would like to know about logistically studying a level one and two module at the same time. And I guess there are some restrictions in terms of what can be studied when, and whether you need to necessarily pass a level. But some students will be studying things concurrently, and some things might be harder than others. Logistically, I mean, do you know whether it's possible.

And Cassie, maybe you could give us a little bit more information about what you mean about studying these. Whether it's something that you're already doing or whether you're just thinking hypothetically. I've done year one, so could I do years two and three, i.e. level one and two at the same time. So let us know.

But logistically, Ruth, some people will have things that are easier or more challenging. Maybe

they've got a 60 or 30 credit. Is there anything you can say about different levels of intensity when doing concurrent study?

**RUTH**  
**McFARLANE:** Oh, gosh. I think it's about, partly, it's about knowing your own sort of body clock. What are your times of the day when you're most alert? What are your times when you're a bit tired, but I can probably squeeze a bit more in?

So for example, I found when I was studying that I can't get anything done in the mornings. I'm just hopeless. I have to do all those little easy, tick them off, admin-type things in the mornings. And actually, my peak time for study is between about four and seven in the afternoon, early evening. And so on now that I know that, I don't get too fed up if I've got a whole day of study and I haven't got anything done by 3 o'clock. I know that that's the time when I have the most energy.

So I think if you know that you've got two modules and one of them is really tricky and intense, find the time of the day or the day of the week when you know that you get your best work done. Or maybe it's after you've had a particular meal, or perhaps it's after you've been out for a walk. And I think it's about recognising in yourself, being really tuned in to how you're studying. And when you've had a really successful study session, think about the context of that and all the other things that were happening, you know, before to make that successful. Make a little note of it and try and keep repeating it.

**KAREN FOLEY:** We've been talking about reflective journals people have set up and bullet journals and those sorts of ways of thinking. How do you then make a reflection, I guess, on what's been working for you? Do you ever-- I know you running a lot. Is that when you sort of think about, oh, that went well, that didn't go so well. When do you reflect on these things and make adjustments to what you're doing? When did you realise that this 4 o'clock to 7 o'clock thing was so important?

**RUTH**  
**McFARLANE:** Well, I realised that when I was working from home and trying to sort of cram lots of things into a day, and then actually not managing to get very much done at all before midday. So my reflective journal is often about how things have happened rather than what I've actually learned. It's sort of about the circumstances.

So I do go running a bit, but that doesn't tend to be my thinking time. Bizarrely, the time when I seem to solve all the problems of the world is 3 o'clock in the morning. And I will wake up and I'll be really sort of focused on lots of things. So I keep a little notebook by the bed because

then I can just write it down and I know I won't forget it. And then I can go back to sleep again, and wake up and discover all sorts of amazing things.

**KAREN FOLEY:** No wonder you're so tired in the morning, Ruth. I think that is a variable one might want to look at. HJ, what's happening on the hot desk?

**HJ:** So I've just found out you can get student discounts on things like Spotify and other music playlists, which is really cool, and play some music specifically for study and share that with other people. So I might go and do that. But we're also talking about some people like to spend 40 minutes studying and then take 20-minute breaks, and all these different methods that work for each of us. Adele-- I like this one-- phone chatted to friends who aren't studying quite useful. So she posed Plato's question of what is courage to a group of friends, and it helped spark some ideas about her TMA and some of the questions she could bring up herself.

But Kasia said, on our studying level one and two questions at the same time, says, I've registered for L161, which is level one, and she's just seen A230, which looks really interesting. And she'd like to see if she can start that in February. Could she do those at the same time do we reckon?

**KAREN FOLEY:** Oh, law and arts. What a combination. She's had to call her student support team, wouldn't she? To find out.

**RUTH**  
**MC FARLANE:** Yes, I think so. Yes, I think it's probably worth getting some proper specific advice on that. So if-- but if she was starting one in October and one in February, then at least she's already got into the flow of the October one. But there would still be a few months of overlap. And I think you'd really need to think carefully about what other the time commitments you have, and about are you ready for that second level study before you embark on it.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Phone Lee, Kasia, who you met before on the hot desk. He's really lovely. So you just need to call the student support team. You'll call him tomorrow. Good, because he's not here. We're not on tomorrow. So he'll be able to answer that question. But very good point, and thanks for filling us in on that.

Ruth, as is usual, we get out of time. So what's your parting thoughts and big piece of advice for students about managing their workload?

**RUTH** So I would say think about what works for you. It's great to compare and hear advice from  
**McFARLANE:** other people, but we're all so different in how we study. And so do what works for you.

If you find that you're falling behind, don't panic. You don't necessarily need to study absolutely everything. I shouldn't say this.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, you should. I think it's-- because you have a choice to make. It's about being clever.

**RUTH** Exactly. And I think you can, sometimes you can pick and choose and say, right, well, in that  
**McFARLANE:** week 11, there's loads of stuff there, and I'm only going to be able to do half of it. And that's fine. You can always come back to it later if you're still interested in it. But read the TMA questions carefully, and see what you desperately need to do for that TMA. Be a bit picky and choosy.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And strategic.

**RUTH** And strategic.

**McFARLANE:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** Excellent. Well, we're going to talk to David Heley about that very subject next. So Ruth McFarlane, thank you very much for coming along today. And thank you everyone in the chat. We're now going to take a 60-second adventure on Mercury, which Louise would really like. And we'll see you back for our final session of the Student Hub Live with David Heley, looking at benchmarking and setting your expectations. See you in a minute.