KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to *The Student Hub Live.* Well, we've spoken a lot about things that you might not know about at The Open University. And we've been relating these to your studies. We've covered all sorts of things, like how to trust news and get library skills to be able to identify what might be fake news. We've had the sports science team in to talk us through biscuits and bananas and what to eat and do during our studies.

We've covered all sorts of things in our quiz and our Wheel of Ologies. And right now, we're going to show you some things that happen behind the scenes at the Open University to enhance your student experience. Now, I'm joined by Joanne Watts and Chris Edwards from Learning and Teaching Innovation. What a fantastic name. So what is it that you two do there, and what did you want to tell our students about?

CHRIS EDWARDS: OK, well, I think we can talk about two different things. And I think the first thing-- Jo isn't here. This is Vicky Marsh.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, yes.

CHRIS EDWARDS: And so I've come to talk to you about something that we call TeSLA. And it is a research project with altogether 19 partners across Europe and South America. And what we're trying to do is look at ways in which we can authenticate individuals when they do online assessment.

And so at the moment, we do a lot of online assessment as an institution-- not all institutions do. And we're starting to get used to mobile phones using fingerprints or face analysis. And what we're trying to do is see what place that can have in authenticating an individual's work as they do assessments online.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow. So this is getting them to not cheat.

CHRIS EDWARDS: It is to do with not cheating.

[LAUGHTER]

But it's also to do with opening up new opportunities. So I think already we use our systems. We use something called Turnitin, which is a anti-plagiarism tool. And students work routinely-- maybe not in all subjects and not all modules, but it's put through that. And that flags where

there's been quotes they used which haven't been properly cited and things like that. And that can help us feedback to students and help them to-- teach them how to do these things properly and be more academically rigorous.

But it can also, in the assessments that are crucial, it can highlight if there are any issues of people passing off work that's not theirs, which is obviously in all our interests to make sure that we stop.

KAREN FOLEY: We had a video, Chris, earlier about plagiarism, so I hope everyone's got that straight. But if you haven't and you'd like to find out more, we did a session in the Open University Business School induction event the other week, which was called A Cite for Sore Eyes. And you can catch all of that on our YouTube channel or on the Student Hub Live website. So that was a big session all about plagiarism. And we showed you some of the reports on that, which was great to see.

So it's not that we're all sorts of evil people trying to catch students out, Chris. There's lots of exciting stuff happening in Learning and Teaching Innovation. And as you say, this authentication is important in a distance-learning environment. You guys do a lot around that. So why is it important right now for the university to start investing in some of these different ways of including authentication in assessment?

CHRIS EDWARDS: That's a good question. I think what we find is that technology is moving on so quickly. A lot of institutions that are used to teaching face to face are starting to move online. And a lot of places are giving online teaching. And so I think we need to make sure we're at the forefront of this work to make sure that we understand how to use it and how best to use it to help students.

I mean, obviously it can all be put in in a way that closes everything down. But the Open University is open and open to people, places, methods, and ideas. And we want to make sure that whenever we use something like this, we use it for the benefit of our students and for the whole community. And so I think that's probably the main reason.

And I think there's all sorts of research projects going on behind the scenes. So it's good to be able to just come and tell you a little about one, and one that we're going to be inviting students to take part in.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Absolutely. And I'll come on to your section in a little while. But I just want to talk about

how you're involving students in this, Chris. Because as usual, The Open University likes to include a diverse range of students to be able to participate and get feedback, just to sort of sense check that things are right. How are you including this?

CHRIS EDWARDS: OK, well, the tools are designed for us. We are using those. We haven't been involved in the design of these tools. But what we are doing is we're designing the interface in which we present these to students. And so the interface is of the VLE in Moodle, the same as our--

KAREN FOLEY: That's the Virtual Learning Environment.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Sorry.

KAREN FOLEY: I have to clarify.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Another acronym.

KAREN FOLEY: I haven't even asked you and embarrassed you with what TeSLA was, because I don't know. And we're in the same department.

CHRIS EDWARDS: We are.

KAREN FOLEY: So we'll let that drop. Virtual Learning Environment, yep.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Thank you. And so we're controlling that. And that is essentially presenting things to students in the way that anything in the university systems are presented to them. So hopefully, whatever techniques they've got for dealing with that, they can use in the same way. But we're also including questionnaires. So we want to find out-- the main reason for doing this is to find out what the student experiences of during this and what the student perceptions are and how useful and how easy it is to incorporate these.

KAREN FOLEY: So are you sending this questionnaire out to students?

CHRIS EDWARDS: We are, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: They can expect it in their mailbox soon.

CHRIS EDWARDS: So if you're just starting a module now, then in all likelihood, we might be writing to you through the CAMEL system to invite you to take part in this--

KAREN FOLEY: We don't know what CAMEL system means. Do you? It's an email.

CHRIS EDWARDS: I did know. I've forgotten exactly what it stands for, like most things. But it's the formal way in which we communicate with students. And it appears on your student home page.

KAREN FOLEY: And we've spent a lot of time, Chris, talking throughout this whole past few days about how we sort of moderate student communication. So students aren't going to be bombarded with all of this stuff. But when they get an email, we really do value their opinion and want to hear from them.

But in addition to sort of them feeling altruistic and giving us their feedback, actually participating in surveys can give you a really good indication of how someone else has designed a study. I often find that a very useful insight. I learn things like, oh, I didn't know you could do this, that, and the other. So it's quite fun to do as well.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Yes, well, we hope the students find it a valuable experience for themselves. It obviously might have an impact if you're just at beginning of your studies. It might have an impact on the kind of modules and assessment you have by the time you finish your degrees. And it helps us in refining what we do. So yes, please, please, do take part.

And obviously, it doesn't impact on your assessment or your grades in any way, whether you do or not. But it does help the institution. And hopefully it's of interest to you.

KAREN FOLEY: Because you've got to jump through a lot of hoops and go through all your ethics and make sure everything is on board. And all the data is anonymised so students don't need to worry about contributing.

CHRIS EDWARDS: There's a very rigorous process that we go through to make sure that we do things properly and that students' safety in every aspect is taken into account and to make sure that you're not over-involved or asked to do things like this. So yes, although there's lots of students starting now, we won't be allowed to invite everyone, because some people have opted out of this. Or some people, if they're continuing students, may already have been asked to do something very recently, and we won't be asking you again.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Let's take a quick trip to the Hot Desk, both of you, and see what everyone's doing. Oh my, Lee, you have zoodie.

LEE: Yes, I have acquired a zoodie in my little break.

KAREN FOLEY: How did you get that?

LEE: Well, I must confess, I did bring it with me this morning. It's not an OU branded one, so I've committed a treasonable act.

KAREN FOLEY: You just have to not turn around, Lee.

LEE: I know. Absolutely. Absolutely. But we've had some really interesting comments, some really good feedback about Turnitin, about plagiarism, about referencing. So we've been signposting a lot of our students to the library resources. And of course, the Cite for Sore Eyes is coming back today at 5:30. So we're all sort of eager about that. And those who miss it or are at work or unavailable, then it's available on YouTube or available on [INAUDIBLE] services as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you very much. And good to see you back, HJ, as well.

HJ: Thank you. I'm just trying to get my head around Graham's explaining blockchains to me. So I'm just trying to get around that. It seems very technical.

KAREN FOLEY: Do you know anything about that, Chris?

CHRIS EDWARDS: I know a little. I'm not sure whether to invest in them yet. I might be too late already.

KAREN FOLEY: Chris, do you want to tell us anything about any other developments in Learning and Teaching Innovation in terms of technology that you're working on right now?

CHRIS EDWARDS: I feel that I should have a big answer to that. There's a lot of technology around. I'm personally not involved in much more beyond TeSLA and the work I do in teaching and in the master's in online and distance education. So I shouldn't say anything more about anything else, I don't think.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, we've got a lot to cover with Vicky, also, who's been doing something completely different. But I guess one of the things I would say, Chris, is that the area that you're involved with-- and so many of your colleagues are doing incredible things in terms of the pedagogy, the way that we learn things. And that's sort of being fed into how the academics present their module material.

And we looked before at the OU archives and thinking about how the Open University has always been incredibly innovative, whether that was tapes at one point or videos or little boxes with binoculars and things, through to the OpenSTEM Laboratory now and CDs and online things and the Virtual Learning Environments and how innovative it is. And Learning and

Teaching Innovation has been at the forefront of pushing those developments.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Yes, absolutely, and for a long, long time and hopefully for a long time to come.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. All right. Vicky, we're going to talk about LEO, so another acronym. Now, this one I sort of know. And it's a bit shorter. So I don't know whether that means it-- But let me allow you to explain what does LEO mean.

VICKY MARSH: And it stands for the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data set. And it actually leads nicely on from the conversation you were just having with Chris. So one of the issues in the sector, the higher education sector, that's been prevalent over the last few years is institutions are using email as a way of communicating with their students a lot more. Students are feeling absolutely overwhelmed by the number of surveys that they're being asked to participate in. So we've seen a large drop in the number of students choosing to respond to surveys.

So there was actually a change in the law in 2015 which facilitated the start of this project, which is a government-run project. So the idea is that they were looking at ways in which they could collect the information that they currently collect through surveys using existing administrative data sets.

So there were two purposes for that. One was to reduce the burden on individuals in terms of returns to surveys. But the second was to improve the quality of the information as well, because there was a concern where response rates were dropping that we were also then not capturing the views of all students and that there was potentially bias then in the results that were coming through.

So this is to say, and it's the first time that this has been done. So it's a pioneering way of collecting information. So it takes the HESA return. So HESA is the Higher Education Statistics Agency. And they're the government body that collect all the Higher Education Statistics data. So all of that is embodied within mandatory regulations and data protection rules.

The change in the law facilitated taking that data set of students as they graduate, identifying who they are, and then linking that information across all the government databases that they can think of, basically. So that's the Department for Work and Pensions, so looking at benefits information, the HMRC records, so gathering information about salaries and about whether or not students are working, and then also trucking back through all of the education data sets, so looking at and gathering information about what a student's education history is as well.

So this has been done across an entire graduate cohort for the country. And it's what's known as an experimental statistic by the government. So it will be formally ratified at some point. But this is the first year that this information is being released. And the two outcomes that they're focusing on, particularly at the moment, are the proportion of students who are in employment and comparing that across institutions. So they're looking to see what proportion of students are in employment, post their undergraduate study, and then also looking at their salary.

So you can imagine what's happened in the press with that information. So it's been broken down at subject level. So it's allowed the press to take that information and then do league tables that allow you to compare institutions to see what the salary range is.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, we've be talking about the importance of taking a critical approach to some of this sort of stuff. Let us know if you are in employment or not and also if you've got any questions. And Lee's put a link to the OU library in the chat. So if you're getting stuck on any of those acronyms, you can go and look them up in the library there. Meanwhile, Jane has ordered the red zoodie and Alexis wants some OU patches to sew on all the favourite items of clothing. So a lot going on there.

But as a statistician, Vicky, this must be incredibly exciting, because you're able to sort of take a very robust data set and start to look at trends over time. But equally, there are dangers to, I guess, having access to those. What's in it for the students, particularly the ones who may not be so keen on stats.

VICKY MARSH: Yep. So there's probably two questions in there that I'd answer. So one, in terms of what's in it for the students, I think the idea of this data set and of lots of the statistics that are coming out from the government at the moment, the rhetoric behind that is to provide information for prospective students when they're making choices about which university to study at.

So the idea is that if you have this information to hand through the mechanisms that are available to all prospective students, then it will inform your choice, and you will be better informed as a result of knowing what their potential employment prospects are for each individual institution.

KAREN FOLEY: That depends on the university or the subject area as well, because a lot of people choose to study with the Open University for a variety of reasons, some because they're working, or some through disability, et cetera. So for some people, it's a necessity, not so much a choice.

So will that impact on us? Or is it more a sort of thing that's going to impact on discipline?

VICKY MARSH: So to take the second part of your first question and to answer that, I think there are massive issues for this in terms of the Open University. So I would say I'm excited from the perspective that this is a pioneering way of linking information together. My massive concern-- and we have been engaged openly in conversations with the sector about this-- is that this is absolutely being taken from the perspective of full-time, undergraduate study.

One of the biggest issues for our students is that a huge proportion of them are already in employment. So we've already been able to go back and then demonstrate that there are some huge challenges about the way in which this information is being put together. And it absolutely demonstrates the risk of misleading statistics.

So for example, the Open University students, when compared against the rest of the sector, outperform all of the [INAUDIBLE] in terms of salary one year out from graduation, because most of our students are already in employment. So they're being compared against students who are career starters. And so as you then look at the next two points, they've got three years out and five years out from graduation, we don't do too badly.

But we drop down through the tables in terms of comparison then, because many of our students are at mid-point in their career, potentially. They may be career changers. So there will be very different trajectories for them in terms of where their salary's going if you compare them to fresh graduates, who you would expect will see quite a steep rise in their salaries.

So there are lots of concerns. So it's exciting in some senses, but we're also concerned about the rhetoric of not considering necessarily that there are different ways of studying and that there are different outcomes that would be relevant depending on the type of student that you're looking at.

KAREN FOLEY: Because this isn't the first time we've had this whole issue of league tables and the Open University being very different. And there's a lot of campaigning that goes on saying, actually, we're catering for different markets. We've got open access. We've got the part-time. We've got distance. We've got mature. There are all of these factors that mean that our students cannot be compared to the traditional undergraduate cohort. And it's very important--

VICKY MARSH: It's potentially misleading in this sense. and actually, for once, in the opposite direction to what you would expect in this case that actually, we look almost artificially "better," if you want, than

some of the other institutions initially after graduation.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. But these league tables and the sort of, I guess, gossip amongst policymakers, so to speak, is really important in terms of reputation. People on OU Facebook page have been saying, actually, is an an OU degree as good as another degree? And all of these things sort of can reinforce that idea. They can, like you say, be useful to say, actually, when you look at these outcomes, yes it is.

But for a lot of students, it's about feeling valid in their qualification choice, depending on what they're studying et cetera, and being able to justify those employability outcomes. We've seen employability becoming so much more important over recent months. And a lot of people are studying to change careers. So it's very, very valuable.

VICKY MARSH: I think also-- and to pick up on one of your early points as well-- that something that is quite clear that's come out of this research, which I think is really valuable going forward in terms of employability and how you consider those outcomes, is that it demonstrated that different subject areas have very different outcomes within an institution. So when you're making a decision about an institution, it's not necessarily just a case of an OU degree. It will depend on which subject area, potentially, that you're studying and the same for other institutions.

I think the other thing that's really fascinating that's come out from this work which has really provided a strong evidence base in a very different way to previous research is the gender pay gap. So that's come through quite clearly in the research across the sector. And it really demonstrates for the first time quite how different the trajectories are in terms of salary for men and women.

KAREN FOLEY: So aside from being incredibly interesting, what use are these statistics in terms of implementing change? What can you do with them?

VICKY MARSH: So good question. Another acronym coming up for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Get your pens and pencils at the ready.

VICKY MARSH: So the government brought into play a framework called the Teaching Excellence Framework, which came in two years ago. The idea of this framework was supported by the same rhetoric I was speaking about previously, which is all about informing choice, providing prospective students with more information. But it's also, in this instance, a way of effectively measuring what the government terms is excellent in institutions, which we'll say then validates, to some

degree, the status, I guess, of your institution and your subject area when you go into the employment market.

So many institutions have gone through that process and have been given an award of gold, silver, or bronze. So if you're out and about around cities, then you may see at face-to-face institutions, many of them, if they've been awarded gold status have got banners all over the place highlighting the fact that that's what they've been awarded.

So the same issues that I've just been talking about in terms of thinking about OU provision prevalent within this framework and the core metrics that are being used within that process are very much geared towards face-to-face provision. So the OU chose not to participate in the Teaching Excellence Framework-- it's voluntary at this stage-- this time round, because we've been engaging with a debate around-- and I think one thing I would say here is that it's not just about the OU being different.

This is actually about the part-time and distance sector. So the OU is different in terms of what we provide. But also, there are other institutions that are offering this type of provision. And as things are changing in the sector, more institutions are offering that type of provision. So it's about getting those outcomes right for those types of students. And this year, it's proposed that the LEO data, Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data, is used as part of the core metrics that are being proposed for the next round of Teaching Excellence.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Last night I had a discussion with the people from religious studies. And they were telling me-- in fact, they brought me league table, rather ironically, looking at the extent to which religious studies students were in employment. And they were ready mid-rank above things like history and things, which I found quite surprising.

How important is this whole idea of rank and discipline? I mean, should students who are doing the social sciences or STEM all of a sudden say, actually, if I'm not on that league table, I'd better change my mind. Or should they be studying what they want to anyway, the discipline side of things.

VICKY MARSH: I think it absolutely depends on what your motivation is for study in the first place. And this is absolutely something that we're trying to get across to the department of education at the moment. I think that if your motivations are around career progression, and particularly around salary, then I suppose then it may be that that kind of information is important to you.

But certainly from our perspective, what we're offering here at the OU is a rounded approach. And we're looking specifically to offer something that facilitates what we're terming "working gain." So the skills to facilitate that are absolutely important. But it's also about what do people gain in terms of their personal development, and also what do they gain in terms of what they learn?

And so I think the answer to that question depends on the individual as to what it is that's motivating them to study in the first place. And I think that we're trying to provide an offering that caters for many different types of motivations and facilitates individuals achieving what they aim to achieve.

KAREN FOLEY: At the heart of a lot of this is the value of a degree. And so sometimes people having a degree in religious studies or history may not go into those sorts of contexts. You'll often find them not in those contexts. But it's about recognising those transferable skills that they can then apply to other things.

And I guess some of the things, going back to the distinctive nature of OU study is this part-time, open-access thing that often enables our students to get better time-management skills, better self-discipline, self-motivation, reflective learning. So there are all sorts of benefits that our students may not be aware of that they're picking up along the way.

VICKY MARSH: Absolutely. And the open degree is a very good example of that, because you're not necessarily studying in one particular discipline. And again, that's an area that the Department for Education and the other bodies are really struggling to grapple with at the moment. How do you measure and use the same metrics for degrees that have a different outcome from that perspective.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well Vicky, thank you so much for filling us in on all of this. It sounds like you're really excited about it. And it's great to see somebody doing something really meaningful with statistics, I must say. And also really interesting to see how we're using some of this behind the scenes at the Open University to really campaign and advocate change for students so that they will get the benefits in the long term, protecting the nature of both disciplines and the reputation of the university and recognising that it is a very different context, which we all know and feel.

Chris, can I end by asking your advice for new students? We've got a lot of level one students out here. I know you've been studying. You've tutored a lot of people and taught a lot of

people over the years. What would you say to students right now who are just waiting for their module start with their materials and with their tutor?

CHRIS EDWARDS: OK. OK. I think if you're in that position and you're just starting study with us, then you're likely to be feeling quite anxious. And I completely understand that. I think it's overwhelming, all the newness of the things that you've been given. You've got all sorts of things to be looking at, all sorts of communications from the university.

I think one of the best pieces of advice I can give is to say that once you start-- I think quite a lot of people do tend to drop out, because they do feel just overwhelmed to start with. And if you can just keep on going through the first TMA and then through the second and just try and keep up with the work, then you'll start to find that you become familiar with all the interfaces that you need to do and the technologies that you need to use. And it will start to all fall into place.

So I think don't give up. Don't let yourself be put off at the start. And you're in the same boat as everyone else. Everyone is going to be struggling like that. And we do try to position TMAs and all the rest of it to try and make it easier as you start. But we don't always get it right. And we don't always get it right for everyone.

So your experience is valuable, of course. At the end of your module, you'll be asked to fill in the same survey and give us some feedback. And be completely honest when you do that, because we take it really seriously. And we try and adapt accordingly.

KAREN FOLEY: Chris, thank you very, very much. Well, funnily enough, our next session is all about the student experience on a module. So we're going to have a short break. But Chris and Vicky, thank you so much for coming and filling us in on those two projects.

We're going to take a quick look at one of the pop videos before we have Rachel and James talking about that very subject Chris has so nicely introduced, the student experience on a module. Stay tuned. Keep those questions coming in the chat. And I'll see you in a couple of minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]