KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, we have a treat for you now, because we're to be talking about preparing for postgraduate study. I'm joined by Jane Cullen, Janet Sola, and Maria Leadham from the Master's in Education team here at the OU.

Now, a lot of students get so excited by the idea that they can do postgraduate study with the Open University. We know that is a whole range of things, from taught degrees, Ed Ds, to sorts of things that are new, creative writing, there's a lot of option and a lot of growth in the post graduate perspective.

But we're talking about this from an education perspective today, which is wonderful. And I was really hoping that we could get to grips with some of the key differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study. I'm thinking again about how students can really start to prepare themselves mentally for this over the summer.

Now, I know we've got a lot of questions that are coming through. And we're going to raise some of those in the chat. But it might be that we can't answer some of them. And if there are questions, do email us. Studenthub@open.ac.uk, and we will get back to you with an answer. I know that people have already been sending questions in about this.

HJ: Yes, we've had lots of people for this, so I think the changing in funding has helped as well, a lot of people wanting to the master's.

But Sharon has a really good question. I'll read it all out just to make sure we get it right for Sharon. But she says, I've just completed the BA Honours in Combined Social Science and Criminology. She registered for the MA in Crime and Justice. And I believe it's the new MA and is for the first year.

But she's had a look, and the module website says this MA is not suitable for those who wish to do a PhD level study, which is something she was interested in. So she says, why is this, and is this likely to change? So you might have advice about other things that she could do to get ready for PhD level study, or top-up, or there may be alternatives. I'm not too sure.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, we did a FASS showcase, and we talked specifically about this module. So that might be quite an interesting one to start looking at. In fact, you can Google that on YouTube. Kesi Mahendran did a very good job session on DD801, so wonderful that one.

But it's really important to sort of get to grips with what you want to do at postgraduate level. And some of the master's levels then won't feed on in that sort of way. So it is important, and I'd probably recommend speaking to your student support team about that to see, again, what you're wanting to do at post graduate level. But some of the master's are more practical and maybe don't have the certain recognition that might be required to do something specific at PhD level.

OK. Any other questions?

HJ: Yes. I think the other main one, which leads into it, is just about difficulty, and hours of study, and how is it different, level three, and what can we expect? So I think that just leads on nicely what you're going to tell us anyway.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. OK. So the key difference in our prep, you said, is developing this expert view, this whole idea of specialising a difficult subject for people to get their heads around.

JANE CULLEN: So shall I start? OK. So I think the move from undergraduate to postgraduate is the move for many students to beginning to specialise. And for some students, it will be specialising around an area of their own professional practise, which is really the kind of master's that we're involved in. It is specialising in topics increasingly, which are topics of your own choice, and which are topics and specialisations that you yourself are interested in.

So that, I think, from my own recollection of my own undergraduate study, then an undergraduate study represents quite a lot of choice and quite a lot of structure. And in a sense that structure continues into postgraduate study. But increasingly you are becoming an expert in your own field.

And for some students, that will be a master's degree which is related to their professional job, their own professional work. And that's where it will end. But for other students, it will be the beginning of a journey, which, as you were saying earlier, might lead them into doctoral study and increasing expertise in their own field.

KAREN FOLEY: But they also have to think very differently, don't they, Janet?

JANET SOLA: Yes, I think one of the key things, and again like Jane-- when I was talking to Jane about this earlier-- I'm drawing on-- I don't think it's too dissimilar of my own experience of moving, from being an undergraduate, then being a teacher, and being a professional, working in a number

of professional capacities, then doing postgraduate. I was really struck at the time about that it did require for me to give a lot more of myself, for me to take control of the material.

And something that we emphasise within master studies, what's one of the criteria for assessment and for engaging in master study, is this notion of criticality. And by criticality we don't mean going around and downing people. [LAUGHS] Slinging off people, as one of my students once asked me. You know, because you've done your master's and your PhD, are you good at slinging off people? No, no, no.

Criticality is about being able to weigh up, evaluate, articulate, and develop different positions and different arguments. And I suppose that's-- I find it really intriguing at the moment, because we're seeing so much of our dismissal of experts. But actually, master's and doctoral study is, as Jane's been arguing, it is based on you becoming an expert and becoming knowledgeable and knowing the literature.

And when you move on from master's to doctoral study, you're moving on from just being aware of criticality and being able to engage with it, you're moving on to actually being able to contribute to the knowledge in your area yourself. So it is a lot of work. My own doctoral study, I remember, I actually remember throwing the eggs into the sink once. And my husband swore that he would never have another thesis in the house or dissertation. He drew the limit. And then, of course, four years later on I went on and did my own PhD.

I remember the kind of trials and tribulations. And when I talk to my current students, and I'm supervising quite a few students at the moment, they go through this. But it's a bit like, I was saying to Jane earlier, it's a bit like preparing for a marathon. It's hard work, but there's a huge amount of satisfaction. I personally felt a lot of achievement, and there was a lot of empowerment. Because once I got my master's, and even when I had my doctorate, I was able to stand up in staff rooms, and I was able to defend my position. I was able to stand up against my male senior teacher and argue the toss, and I got listened to.

Because I will say it's sort of the power of being able to be critical in the sense of being able to round an argument, being able to look at the evidence, and being able to sort out ways forward. And one thing I think we don't really stress enough is that master's is the beginning of the route which goes on through to doctorate. You are a problem solver when you're a researcher, and it's hugely satisfying.

KAREN FOLEY: Maria, did you want to say something as well of what sort of feeds into this about with the

Open University? So many people are studying and working at the same time, and in absorbing this knowledge and sort of generating these expert opinions, there can be a richness which is quite unique to this sort of study that combines practise with knowledge.

MARIA LEADHAM: Definitely. I think if you're studying and working-- we're involved in the MA education for most of our students. We're also practicing teachers. But whatever your field, if you're working and studying at the same time, you've got that relationship between the two. You can immediately read a journal article, and it resonates. You can think, oh, yeah, that's how it is. You can maybe even put it into practise if it's got a practical bent to it. There's a reflection back and forth I think. So that's really valuable.

And I did a master's by distance learning while I was teaching, and, actually, while I was also bringing up my family. I felt I spent a third of my work day on each of those. So there's a lot of time juggling, but I really felt that at the time that you read about something, and then you see it reflected in the classroom. And then you go back and read more, and it's hugely empowering and valuable and aids reflection.

KAREN FOLEY: There's a lot going on. Because on one hand, you're developing this very expert view on the knowledge base of things that are there. Then you're also looking at the skills level. And in the meantime, you're making choices about the methodologies you're using and the way your investigation evolves. So there's an awful lot of complexity and interplay between these various aspects that students need to get to grips with.

JANE CULLEN: I think that's true. And they are skills that develop slowly. And I think that that's one of the things that is important to stress for anyone who's beginning post graduate study. As Janet was just saying, it's challenging, and it can be a bit like running a marathon. And the complexity-- the difficulty of it is not to be underestimated. But I think it's almost like it is like a joyful challenge.

But I was thinking-- you know, I did my first master's degree decades ago, and my first specialism was applied linguistics. And I remember reading Michael Halliday's *Language as Social Semiotic* in the laundrette watching the washing go round and thinking, I'm going to read this sentence, then I'm going to watch the washing go round until I understand it. And then I'll go on to the next sentence.

So I think this idea of coming to grips, getting to grips with academic writing, which can be dense, which can be complicated-- there are complicated big ideas out there-- is hard. And

one of the things, I think, that separates out post graduate study is not just the depths of writing which students are engaging in but the amount of seminal and difficult and dense writing that they are asked to engage with.

And for me, it's always seemed like it's important to remember that it's experiential learning. That there are all sorts of guidance and tips and advice that can be given to students and will be, you know, as part of any post graduate Open University study. But there is this taking time. There is this spending the time on it. And the amount of time, I think, that is needed for postgraduate study is, again, not to be underestimated.

Our degrees demand 15 hours a week, which is a massive amount of time to find for people who are engaged in busy, professional lives, which almost all of our students are. So 15 hours a week is a solid amount of time round the edges of full-time, busy lives, as Maria was saying, with work and with family. So it is important for prospective students to understand that they need to be able to commit that time. Because one of the things, I think, which is a marker of student struggling is when they can't find the time for postgraduate study.

KAREN FOLEY: And like you say, there's so much there in terms of stuff to cover. There's a denseness in the reading. I think when we were planning this, you made the point that sometimes some of that writing isn't as well articulated as it might be. And so one can sometimes get confused, as I often do reading something. I think, I don't understand this. I can't make sense of this. And it may be because it's not particularly well written. But sometimes it can be difficult to understand that when you think, this is a revered paper, or this is something that seems to make a lot of sense, but I just can't get why.

So what are some of the skills and tips that students could get to get through some of this density and to be able to get some clarity about what matters from the volume of stuff that they're going to be tackling?

JANET SOLA: I do think you have to engage with it. But I think, taking up more what Jane's saying, and that's my experience as well. And it's experience that I think we continue. When I go and take up a new research project and get engaged in a new module, I can actually have that. I can be encountering this literature and thinking, you know, what planet are these people on?

And I think partly-- and then, of course, I read more. And the next thing I go home and I start using these words-- lately I've been into governmentality and things in politics, what's going

on. And my family and my husband are saying to me, well, what do you mean by that?

So I think that you have to engage with it. You have to get to understand it. And I think you have to start taking control and ownership of it. So I think you also have to realise that when you're reading academic work, you might be reading somebody-- like Chomsky is a person that I'm aware of in linguistics. He's a big figure. I might be very scared when I first read Chomsky. You could think, my, god, how can I counter this?

So what you've got to be aware of, though, Chomsky is being countered by somebody like Foucault, who's another specialist. So they argued themselves, and they took different positions. So you've got to learn to see that people come from different positions, and they're not going to all be structured into the same mould.

So one way that I think-- and, again, when I was teaching, I worked with students in terms of developing this-- was to start to sort of train yourself maybe to go through a book or newspaper articles and start asking yourself from the very beginning, what stance are these people taking? Where are they coming from? What is their argument? And how does their argument-- what's Chomsky saying? What's he arguing? What is really at the heart of his message?

Then look at somebody who is arguing with Chomsky and say, well, what are they arguing? I think once you get into a mindset of comparing and contrasting, it can make your life a bit of a-- it's a bit difficult in your life when you start listening to people or the politicians on the *Radio Four,* and you start-- I'm doing it all the time, because I think I've been trained that way so much.

But on the other hand, it really does make you think and makes you get to the heart of even social issues in your everyday life, not just your study. And I've personally found that really empowering for me to be able to look at that. And again, I use it at an everyday life level as well as in my own research and my own study.

KAREN FOLEY: And I guess this is how you're starting to develop that expert voice, by looking at others' arguments, and by trying to identify how they're arguing, and where their positions might be. And slowly but surely, I guess, you get to a point where you're able to take a step back and start sort of saying, well, if this is what's going on, and then maybe, like you say, from another field you can introduce some different perspectives to start generating something original. But it would take time, wouldn't it? You couldn't all of a sudden come in and say, well-- especially

not with Chomsky.

[LAUGHTER]

MARIA LEADHAM: I think things like we were discussing earlier, having a reflective journal, having somewhere where you write down your thoughts, and even talking it through. What are you grappling with? Whether that's talking it through on the page or with another person. Taking advantage of tutorials, or maybe you've got somebody in your own contacts you can talk to and discuss with.

But if you have problems with a difficult paper, you're reading Halliday, whoever, the first time, maybe planning out so that you haven't just got one block of time, and TMA one is due, and you've got to get to grips with it by tomorrow. You plan in a kind of scoping of TMA one, and then you do it in several goes. You're not doing it all crunched to the deadline, because life gets in the way, doesn't it?

You've got a job deadline, or your child's ill, or something else. So I think particularly with our students you've got to be a really good planner, really organised, really efficient with your time. And if you're a parent, you've probably got those skills honed already.

But having another go at the reading because your subconscious sort of-- you work on it a little bit. And the next time you come back to it, things click into place. So it's not being daunted that first time by all those unknown, hard words. You might have to do a bit of reading rounds.

JANE CULLEN: And I think the other thing about that is finding and isolating and focusing on the seminal literature. And I think guidance on that-- and that can come from within the tutor group, from the academics who work on the post graduate module, from your peer group, it can be written into the module materials. But there can be simple ways. And if you find a seminal paper, the references at the back of it are probably seminal literature as well. And it's starting to find these shortcuts.

Because academic literature, there is-- there's a gob smacking amount of it out there. And not all of it is good, and not all of it is well written. Some of it is dense but well written for its complexity. But some of it is incredibly difficult, because it's vague and ambiguous. And I think it's starting to differentiate it, starting to hone in on the most important, the most seminal.

JANET SOLA: I would actually add to what Jane is saying, and I think we mentioned this in our discussion.

When I'm reading-- I've just gone through reading a whole batch of examinable components. When I'm reading them and looking at them and looking at what the students are saying in those examination-- they're largely essays they've submitted-- I can clearly see who's really understood the readings, who knows them, who hasn't, who's just had a nodding acquaintance with them. And it really does make a difference to the way you meet the assessment criteria, the way you kind of meet it, and I think your own satisfaction. But I do have a few kind of simple tips, well, easy tips that I've found myself as an academic.

I'm like my students. I have to read-- I often have to start reading into the margins sometimes when I'm reading really complex things. I do things like get my computer to speak the paper to me, listen to it when I'm sitting in the armchair. If I'm really too tired to read and concentrate, or I'm busy trying to decipher the paper and sort of listen, I find-- because I work in literacy, in areas of literacy-- I find using all our senses can-- so it's something simple like that.

The other tip I have is I do find students who talk, who read papers, form a reading group, just like the ladies in my middle class cafe right next door. They read. I find the students that engage and talk about them, I can see it coming through in their work. And often my students think the dialogue and the tutorials or working through activities-- this is post graduate. This is a waste of time. I should just be summarising, or somebody should summarise it for me, and it should just move on.

It's not like that. It's about getting inside the thinking, inside the position. So the more you use tips from engaging with reading it on an individual level to a social level, the more it will show in your work, and the more you'll achieve and take on a master's level.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm so glad you mentioned this whole idea, because it was the one thing that I was really keen to talk about is this whole idea of the peer exchange. In academic world, we go to conferences, and we talk to other people. I was on a writing retreat the other day, and you sort of think, actually, I just want to do my own things. But the most valuable thing I got from that was talking to somebody about something completely unrelated, making connections, and having different ways of thinking about things. And I found it so, so useful.

But for some students, like you say, time to get the children to bed, do this, that, and the other. You can be forgiven for neglecting the importance of really engaging, but it is what differentiates the quality of arguments at post graduate level. So how can students, in particular if they're doing this at a distance, how can they connect with a peer exchange, get

some friends who they can talk about these papers to?

JANE CULLEN: I think one of the things is it's not simply left to the students, and that's a good thing. So, for example, on the qualifications that we work on, it's built into the structure of the module. The thing which I think differentiates-- perhaps I'm being-- I'm generalising too much. But I think post graduates work well at forming their own academic community, and they do that at a peer level.

So it is this interesting dichotomy-- individual expertise being built up. Because at post graduate level, a student is becoming more and more, as we were saying earlier, their own individual expert, their own individual specialist in their own field. But we're all, as academics, we're all members of very, very strong academic communities, which have that identity.

And post graduate students-- there is this whole idea of graduateness, and it is that idea that you might be taking a taught, professional master's degree, and that means that your post graduate study is entirely wedded to your post graduate professional practise. But you are going on that way to becoming a fully fledged member of the academic community. And that idea of graduateness is where it starts. And I think we find altogether that graduates, post graduates start kind of that rich dialogue, that post graduate dialogue structured within their module materials, but then they develop it themselves.

MARIA LEADHAM: You're becoming an independent learner, aren't you? Whether or not you gone to do a PhD, you don't have to-- it's not a hoop to jump through to get through to the next stage. Doing a master's, you're becoming an independent learner. And you can carry on, if you're a teacher, researching your own content text, and that's going to be of value to you. So you're becoming a reflective practitioner. And I think that's immensely valuable, isn't it?

JANET SOLA: I always sort of think-- I have had a lot of students who say, look, I'm just-- my students, my master students, as we're saying, a lot of them have got very busy day jobs, are juggling a number of things. But the ones we're I've cajoled them and explained this to them and whipped with to just come along and join us, they've invariably said to me, the beauty of the Open University audience is it's something I didn't have a post grad, because I was just a regional university with people that were in similar areas.

What really strikes me when I engage with the student community is the diversity of experience. I have people from Sri Lanka, people from all over the world doing the modules I work on. And I love engaging with these things, even though I'm very busy, because I learn

from my students as well as the students learning from me.

So it's sort of something-- I think humans are social beings, aren't we? What you have at a post graduate level is a chance to engage socially through the OU, socially with the world, but also at this level that Maria's saying of reflectivity, of learning to also own things and take things that you want out of it. But if you don't engage with the community, how do you develop that to a honed extent?

MARIA LEADHAM: It can be through forums, maybe you are encouraged to work together as part of the TMA, or you instigate that. You've got a forum there, use it. You can engage with your whole tutorial cohort or go wider for the whole module. And, of course, you've got that day-to-day teaching context where you have got real people around. They might not be doing an OU MA Ed, but you can still bat ideas back and forth and seek out opportunities, I think.

That's part of the independent learning. It's not just presented to you. You're given the tools. You've got to go out and find the literature, work out whether you work best reading on paper, or highlighting electronically on a tablet, on a Kindle.

I've started reading on my phone, because I've got a slightly larger screen. And you do the odd 10 minutes here and there. Different media work in different ways, don't they? And it's up to you to find that, seek it out, as an independent learner.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, thank you so much, Maria, Janet, and Jane, for coming along. As ever, we're out of time. And I'm sorry, but that's been a wonderful, wonderful session with some real key points then about not being frightened of this denseness of the literature, trying to take a critical approach, and thinking about where others are coming from, and using your peer network as a way of sort of explaining ideas, et cetera.

We are going to be having some more events targeted at post graduate students in September. So keep an eye out for those. If you go back to our website, you can subscribe, and we'll email you when there are events coming up. So do do that, or you can email studenthub@open.ac.uk.

We're also launching some initiatives about getting some online rooms together for post graduate students to facilitate some ways of being together. So let us know if you're interested in that, because I know that just under half of you right now who are watching this have been at a post graduate level.

I hope you've enjoyed this session. We're now going to have a short video with Andy on the Summer of Love. And then we're going to be coming back to talk about a lot more administrative things that are very, very important to your study. We'll be talking about assessment banking and resits and resubmissions in a couple of minutes. So join me then, and we'll see you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]