

## **Preparing for the Future of Work through MBA studies - MBA with the OU – 21 October 2019**

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome to the Student Hub Live. And this event is about beginning your MBA with The Open University. My name's Karen Foley, and I'm a lecturer here at The Open University. And we're livestreaming this event from our campus here in Milton Keynes to you guys at home, who are hopefully on your computers engaging with us throughout today's session.

Now, this is a live online and interactive event, so it's your space to ask questions, to meet other students, and to hopefully, by the end of it, feel a lot more equipped to begin your studies with The Open University.

So let me explain very briefly how this all works. If you're watching live, you've got a chat pod at home, and you can talk to other students there, which is one of the best things about these sessions. You can ask any questions you've got, you can say what you're studying, where you are in the country, and all sorts of things like that. So anything goes in the chat.

We've also got Polly from our Careers and Employability Services, who is also going to be answering a lot of your questions. So please do use this as an opportunity to air anything you'd like to.

Now, in the chat, I'm joined by the lovely Michelle ...

MICHELLE: Hi, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: ... from The Open University Business School. Hello. Now, how is everyone today, Michelle?

MICHELLE: Well, a lot of new people, new to the OU ...

KAREN FOLEY: Great.

MICHELLE: ... new to studying. Haven't studied in about 30 years.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow.

MICHELLE: So you can imagine what that feels like, just coming back to studying. But everybody's really talkative, so do keep your comments coming. Don't forget that the chat box is here. Listen to what Karen and our guests have to say, and we'll have a great day today.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So Michelle is talking to you live in the studio, and any questions we'll put to our guests. But let me tell you what we've got in store for you today.

So we've got three 30-minute sessions. And the first one is about preparing for the future of work through MBA studies. And then we've got a session about learning technologies, and then finally, we're going to focus on being an MBA student. So there's plenty in store for you today.

Now, our first guests are Gillian Hannon and Michael Ngoasong. Gillian is the procurement and contracts officer for Mission Therapeutics, and was The Open University Business School MBA Student of the Year 2017. Based on your academic merit, no other criteria, I'm told, Gillian.

[LAUGHTER]

And Michael is the teaching director of postgraduate programmes for the business school, which also includes the MBA. So welcome. And you're joining us for a couple of sessions. But this one is all focusing on preparing for the future of work with MBA studies. And we've got everyone at home who's talking about why they're doing an MBA.

MICHELLE: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: And we'll feed a bit of that in later. But Gillian, why did you decide to do an MBA with The Open University?

GILLIAN HANNON: Well, I was always interested in doing an MBA. I thought it would give me a more rounded business education. I'd been thinking about it for a number of years, and then I actually met a colleague at work who was doing an MBA with the OU. And so I just thought, well, I'll take the plunge. And I thought, well, it's a long commitment, but I can stop at the end of a year with a postgrad certificate if it was too much. But I enjoyed it so much, I just wanted to carry on. And I had a phenomenal experience. It's quite transformative.

KAREN FOLEY: Aw.

GILLIAN HANNON: So I would encourage everyone that they've made a great decision to study with the OU, as well, a world-class leader in providing online education. Fantastic tutors. So you've made a good decision, and just, you know, enjoy it. And you know, there will be times when it's tough because we're learning new things, but you've got an amazing amount of support there. And you know, just keep going.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And you're going to share your advice, as well, for new students, because joining The Open University, I mean, like anything new, there are different processes and procedures and different ways of doing things, and it can feel a little bit overwhelming to do anything new, especially anything technological-based. So it's the time to ask any questions that students have got about that. And you're going to give us some really sound advice a bit later in the session about that.

Michael, you must oversee so many students. Typically, what are some of the reasons why people would do an MBA?

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Well, that's a really good question. We find a number of reasons. I mean, obviously the MBA is a generalist management practice qualification, so it's more career-related. So there are some students who are thinking about career progression, a career change, for example, moving from their present organisation to another, or moving from one job type to another in a different sector completely.

And then there are entrepreneurs and people in business who want to come out of business to create their own business and run it as an entrepreneur. So whether you are into an existing organisation and you want to progress or whether you want to move into a completely different profession, we find many students are interested in using an MBA as the platform both to prepare themselves and to assume those different career opportunities.

And then alongside that, another aspect that we find, then, is what does it mean to make that career progression. So we're talking about not just thinking of simple solutions in organisations, because there's a lot of complexity in the world today, so thinking about how to make sense of this complexity in a way that will enable you to be an effective manager and leader in your organisation. So that includes applying concepts and theories to practical problems and using that insight to make decisions.

And then there are networks. Students always value how to develop their networks through an MBA. So universities can have all types of valuable networks, but how to use and benefit from the network is something else. So in addition to network, you're talking about networking. So networking skills become important, as well, for how you benefit and make the most of that network. We see many students who actually secure their career change because of the new networks and friendships they create through the MBA, where you get an opportunity to learn from people within your own specialist area, but also other specialist areas, as well.

And then, of course, there is this whole notion of doing an MBA to fit in. So fitting in means different things. It might be that you are doing an MBA from a triple accredited institution because many of your mates are into it. We've had students who have challenged themselves to do an MBA because their husband or wife or partner has an MBA, and they want to join in the discussion. But also, a qualification that enables you to be able to gain some credibility out there in the marketplace.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. What are some of the reasons people at home are talking about?

MICHELLE: Such ...

KAREN FOLEY: Sorry, you're doing such a ...

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

MICHELLE: ... good range of reasons. We have quite a few, like Margaret and Carl and Michael, who all want to change careers and expand their knowledge and education. And we have Anita, who's also looking for a career change, but she's not sure what direction. So she's hoping she'll get some inspiration from this. And we've got someone here, I love this, Murak has said that she doesn't want to be an accidental leader. And I love that. She wants to develop the knowledge and method so that she can be the best that she can for the service that she's in. So really motivated and exciting people on here.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And of course, Polly from the chat can give some career advice, as well. So that's absolutely brilliant. One of the things that you've both actually touched on is this whole idea around skills for coping with challenges in the 21st century. And I mean, Michael, you've mentioned quite a few of those. But Gillian, you were talking earlier about how your MBA had allowed you to gain some insights into very specific things. And we've

got a list here of some of the sort of ideas that you came up with about why this is so relevant right now.

GILLIAN HANNON: Well, we are living in an increasingly fast-paced environment at work. Change is a constant. We're expected to react quickly and make decisions with limited information. And I think that having the business qualification behind you gives you, I would describe it as an extra tool kit of, as Michael said, models and theories that you can look at difficulties through a different lens, come up with different insights, different perspectives, how you manage stakeholders, how you try and achieve that organisational goal.

And so it's not just, as Murak had said, being an accidental leader. You do actually have some underpinning behind it, you're not just reacting from one situation to the next. So I think it's having that sort of professional viewpoint on these issues at work that come up that allows you to drive things forward.

KAREN FOLEY: Because I mean, one of the things you were talking about, Michael, was not only the skills, but also the knowledge. And so it's these theories, these tool kits that can be applied to various situations.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So even when students are just starting their studies, some of that content they're going to be able to learn about can be applied in their regular settings. I mean, one of the key sort of things is about people at work. You know, humans are complex. They're not just robots. And this idea of managing systems and processes with very different ideas about the way things should be.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Exactly, yes. And so you're talking about, from an MBA perspective, there is the subject knowledge. You know, marketing, finance, leadership, operations. And increasingly, you are starting to see a lot of importance being attached to things like business intelligence. Massive amount of data is now available to leaders.

How do you make sense of all this in your decision-making? And then you have the sort of cognitive skills, being analytical and critical and reflective in your workplace. And I say critical. It sounds a bit daunting, but really it's about how you analyse, integrate, and make sense of information such that the decisions you are making can be informed.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, OK. Gillian, one of the other things that you talked about that was quite interesting was the management of stakeholders in your project. I think this taps into that whole idea about how we work with other people, and that whole idea of not being accidental but managing people within an organisation. Have you had experience of that?

GILLIAN HANNON: I think that is one of the learnings from the MBA, the tools to manage stakeholders. People are so, we work in diverse workplaces. You've got personalities, cultures. Ultimately, most of us have been tasked with a goal to reach. And we have to take all of these different people with different viewpoints on a journey with us, and try and get them to buy in. That is probably one of most challenging things in any workplace.

And as you say, particularly the strategy module, change management provides you with some theories and insights as to how you would manage different people, how you relate to

them, how you understand their perspective, how you sort of take them on that journey because, you know, in a leadership role, you do have to move a company from A to B. Not everybody is going to be on board with that initially, but in order for it to work, you do need to bring people with you.

KAREN FOLEY: It requires key leadership skills, doesn't it? I mean, change management is a big thing. What are people saying about that?

MICHELLE: Oh, absolutely right. So James said that he thinks a number of people do their job well and they get promoted, but management is totally different. And that's why he'd like to do the MBA. And we've got Colin, who's transitioning from being self-employed to working for a large company. So again, skills. And Martin says it's relevant because it fills the gaps between management and operational level and a general level. And I think what you're saying about strategy is really important. Being able to think strategically can really help you move your career forwards.

GILLIAN HANNON: The MBA material covers quite a lot on leadership and management of people. And again, I would go back to saying it gives you that professional underpinning of, well, you know, this is not just a carrot and a stick approach to managing people. As you said, they're not robots, they're people. You have to tap into what motivates them, why they're with that company, how you ...

KAREN FOLEY: Has there been a light bulb moment for you, then, when you thought about ways that you can lead people and get them to do something maybe you want? You know, maybe that's changing something or doing something else. Has there ever been a time that you thought, oh, that theory, that thing I learned in the MBA has really helped me to sort of bring these people alongside me?

GILLIAN HANNON: Yes, I think a number of ... particularly on the people management skills. So a lot of the theories, when I was reading them, I thought, this is totally what is happening at work. And I could see some theories, as Michael said, you need to be critical. They won't always be relevant to what you're looking at. But some of them are particularly ... absolutely hit the nail in terms of insights into what's going on in your environment at work. You know, how people react. Because you know, it's all about the relationships with human beings at the end of the day.

And I think what helped me, I like learning anyway. I liked having that kind of academic validation of perhaps what we're all thinking, but we're not quite sure if we're on the right route. But having that kind of academic underpinning of actually studies have been done on this, and this is what they've demonstrated allows you to move forward and make little changes at work and to understand people, empathy. And one thing I will mention also, which is quite topical at the moment, having a growth mindset.

And I think the beauty of this MBA is, right from day one, you'll be learning skills that are immediately applicable in the workplace. So it's not as though you go away and learn a lot of stuff and say, oh, after the MBA, I'll apply this. All the skills are immediately and directly related to day-to-day business life, in one manner or another. And you start to grow professionally and as an individual.

It is a journey. It's definitely a journey. And you know, I would say just enjoy it. If anyone's feeling nervous, especially on the first modules, they are quite introductory to the business environment. The OU eases you into it. And perhaps some of the more challenging modules come later on, but then you're kind of set up to take those on.

KAREN FOLEY: So there are two key pillars that underpin the MBA. And one is critical analysis, and the other is reflective practice. Can you share a little bit about why those two pillars are so important?

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Well, if you take the first one, critical analysis, just listening to some of the comments that Michelle has been reading out, critical analysis includes challenging not only your own thinking, but also the thinking of other students. So always asking yourself why, and to what extent, is this perspective relevant for me. So what does the subject knowledge or the theories and concepts you're applying mean to you. So that could be your own context, your own personal circumstances, your own organisation.

And another aspect of that is what Gillian was mentioned, as not all theories and concepts relevant for particular situations or for particular students. So being critical includes making some judgement as to which of those concepts might be relevant. What do they mean for you, how relevant are they in your own situation, what are the limitations if you tried to apply them to the sort of issues that you face in your own organisation.

So all of that is that notion of critical thinking and critical analysis. It means that, by the time you make a decision, you are much more confident that you've considered the possible alternatives. And then you are much more confident that the approach or the direction you are taking is the one that is most appropriately for your own context.

And if you then take the second one about reflective practice, the good thing with reflection is that we all do reflect, in one way or the other. Some people are much more thoughtful ...

KAREN FOLEY: Except Michelle who's too busy.

[LAUGHTER]

MICHAEL NGOASONG: For, for ...

[INTERPOSING TALKING AND LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, and I must actually mention, there's a pin at the top of the chat, because it is scrolling really, really quickly. So if you're finding it all a bit much, just click on the pin on the top right-hand side of the screen, and then you can hold it, and then you can scroll back down and up. And if it is overwhelming, don't worry about it. Just focus on what we're saying. Thanks, Michelle. Sorry, Michael.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Yeah, so we all reflect. Some of us reflect more implicitly, and others more explicitly. So the MBA is challenging students to be able to be much more explicit in their reflection. And part of that includes providing a range of tools for reflection. That could simply be your own Excel sheet that you've created for what is aid, what are the issues, what has worked in the past, and what does it mean for your own situation, what can you do differently.

For others, it includes using the tools for reflection that have been provided in the different modules. But reflection enables us to identify how well we did in particular issues and processes, and what we can do better. And so that process of continuous learning and reflecting and improving, but also capturing the practices in a way that you can share with others, both with other classmates, but also with people in your organisation, is what makes reflection very valuable for students.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, no, it's really important. It's one of those things students can really struggle with. So having those tool kits, those frameworks to then say, hey, I tried to change this. Bearing in mind these motivations and all these other things going on in the organisation, how effective really was that? And some principles may be universal, whereas others might be very specific to that particular context.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Exactly.

KAREN FOLEY: So general advice, then, for OU students, because we've got a lot of new people here.

MICHELLE: A lot of new people.

KAREN FOLEY: And do pipe in if there were any questions about that. But I'd like to talk about some of the sort of things that we know are common, which is fitting something into often a very, very busy life. And many OU students can feel that they're completely on their own, everyone else is super organised with their Gantt charts, et cetera, and then, you know, here's me sitting at home feeling a bit behind.

MICHELLE: They say they're organised with their Gantt charts.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, yeah. Well, I've never said that. I would never be so presumptuous. But how might student sort of juggle work and study and other commitments, et cetera? Any advice on that, Gillian?

GILLIAN HANNON: I think everyone's going to be different. For me, I started off, I did an hour in the evening after work. And then I would do Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon. So for me, what worked was putting aside a certain amount of time and just sort of saying, OK, that's what I'm going to do in that time. I think for some people, it might be more fluid than that. It's finding a balance of what works for you, and knowing that you are actually getting through the materials and you're not behind, because I think that in itself can be quite demotivating if you feel, oh, I'm behind.

So keep going. I think try and stick to a schedule, a schedule that works for you. Don't avoid all the nice things that you've been doing, because those, you know, you need to interact with friends, you need to go to the gym and be with friends and family to keep you going, because this is, I think I said this before, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. So you need to pace yourself.

KAREN FOLEY: And in addition to all this content, of course, it's the skills. And those can take time to really absorb and apply. So you know, ploughing through the content and worrying about really reading every single page, may be better just to take a back step and think what skills can I apply here and, you know, what are my priorities, really. There's lots

of nerves in the chat, which is coupled with enthusiasm, isn't it, because we all want to do really, really well.

MICHELLE: Yeah, so there certainly are nerves, being new, but Margaret has said she looks forward to meeting new and like-minded people and learning and developing as a person. And they will. I mean, students will meet each other virtually, and get to know each other and build a community that way.

And Hillary said she's nervous about the day school. When and where it will be, how it will go, will I fit it in, all the classic kind of first day worries. But Mitch has pointed out that nerves can be good, that concerns around time, it's nice to see that anybody else has those, too, and to be able to kind of manage that collectively, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Can you address anything about the day school, then?

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Yes. I think just relating to the wider aspects of time management, look at the study calendar. So spend some time and review the module study calendar, and see different times when particular events are scheduled. The day schools, the residential schools, or the online tutorials, there are a range of them for you to choose from. But it means that the more you are alert to when the options are advertised, and then you can fit that in your calendar, the more it works for you.

And I think the other aspect of time management is also there is some time that is meant for assimilating reading and absorbing all the material. And then, because this is an MBA, there is some time that is student-directed in terms of the time you can apply some of those concepts within your own work situation and use that to reflect. And so the more you build that into your day-to-day practice as against just getting up and realising that, oh, you are meant to apply this concept ...

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

MICHAEL NGOASONG: So the more you are able to build that as part of your working day, if you are in work at that particular time, the more you find that it's much more manageable for you to be making small steps, but a very important aspect of the process.

MICHELLE: And Amanda's, I think she's absolutely right here, talking about where to study.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MICHELLE: And finding a place that's right for you. And it's going to be different for each person. And if I can just add, we have a fantastic student support team. So if anybody is struggling, or if even you think you might struggle, talk to your tutor, first and foremost. Don't wait until it's a big, massive challenge. Right away, talk to your tutors, talk to the student support team. There's loads of people here to help you.

KAREN FOLEY: And I don't know many people who've gone to a day school or a tutorial without nerves, especially initially, when you don't know anybody.

MICHELLE: Totally.

KAREN FOLEY: And you know, then as soon as you meet everyone there, and it's so lovely to feel connected and make those connections, and I think particularly in postgraduate studies, when a community of practice, having those people to reflect with, to talk to, to share things with is so much more important, perhaps, than undergraduate study. It's really nice to be able to nurture those networks, isn't it?

MICHELLE: Yeah.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: And the good news is that our day schools and residential schools on the MBA are very well attended compared to some of the undergraduate sessions, for example. And that's all part of this network and community of like-minded people, most of whom, sometimes the best teachers are the classmates.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

MICHELLE: Yes.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: In terms of coming to share their own perspective in different aspects of work.

GILLIAN HANNON: Quite often, you can bring all your learning together in one of these day schools and residential weekends. And I would say to people, you know, do try and set that time aside in your calendars to definitely attend those, because you will meet everyone, you will have a phenomenal experience. There's absolutely nothing to be nervous about. It's quite thrilling. You meet people from different industries. Your world is opened. And you know, and you consolidate that learning. So they were some of the best days I ever had on the MBA, was the residentials.

KAREN FOLEY: Aw.

GILLIAN HANNON: Absolutely, yeah. Yes, and I did make friends for life, so.

MICHELLE: That's brilliant to hear. It's about building that MBA community, really, and that support network. One quick question. Is the mailed content for the course digital copy or physical copy, Martin has asked.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Can you say that again?

MICHELLE: The materials, are they digital or physical?

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Well, each of the core modules have a reading that is both digital and printed, in the sense that the printed materials are sent to students, but there are also digital copies. I think what we have tried to do in many of the modules these days is that chunks of the printed material is also available in a particular week of study activity. So if it's a particular chapter, then a PDF version of that chapter is also available within that study activity. So they are available in both print and digital.

KAREN FOLEY: But if students are worried that they may not have received something, they should maybe speak to the student support team ...

MICHELLE: That's right.

KAREN FOLEY: ... and see what should have been sent, or what isn't. But I do love the online resources, even when you've got printed things, because you can search for things, as well, and download them and read them elsewhere. One of the other things that's very important is the relationship with a tutor and feedback, and learning through assessment. And this is something that's really very special to The Open University because associate lecturers will mark students' work, give really personalised feedback that's both specific and that has some overarching key areas for development.

MICHAEL NGOASONG: Yes, the, I mean, we'll talk a bit in detail about the assessment and feedback in the later session, but across the MBA, what we tried to do is to get the right balance between different types of assessments. So at least there one exam on the strategic module to test the analytical aspects, and also the requirement that you need some exams on an MBA course. And then also the particular types of assessments themselves. So some of them are essays, some of them are for students to identify problems within their own organisations or the wider society, and do some analysis around that.

And that also includes finding and handling information from different types of sources. Some of them are industry databases that are more suitable for that particular type of domain, and others is more allowing the students to take their own initiative to decide what set of information is most useful for their assessment. And we've built in quite a number of opportunities for students to engage with tutors through some of the online tutorials to get their informal feedback as they prepare their assessments so that they're not just waiting for the final feedback on their assessment, but also developmental opportunities to improve before they submit.

KAREN FOLEY: And this is part of that whole reflective practice, as well, because you're developing and really establishing key skills, not getting them right from the very first piece of assessment. So while the assessment is very varied, I guess one thing that may be quite common is that certainly for that first one, whatever it might be, it's likely to be accompanied by some nerves, especially if people haven't studied for a long period of time. So I think we all worry about that whole sort of process of being assessed. How did you find it, Gillian?

GILLIAN HANNON: Well, you know, you're elated when you get great marks and you think, oh, it's fantastic.

KAREN FOLEY: It's a roller coaster.

GILLIAN HANNON: Yeah, I've nailed that one, you know. And there will be times when, you know, you get marks back and you're thinking, oh, I'm not happy with that one, I thought I did everything. But essentially, you know, step back, consider what the tutor has said, have a follow-up with the tutor, and do take that advice on board, because this is a learning experience. And to be honest, if you're not challenged, you're not really learning, are you?

So you will be challenged, and particularly as the MBA progresses and some of the modules are more difficult. And embrace that, I suppose is what I'm saying, as everyone will find it difficult if it's an area that they're not familiar with. It could be, for instance, you might be doing a lot of strategy or finance at work, and therefore, you know, you'll come to those modules and think, oh, well, this is straightforward, whereas somebody else might not be so

familiar and will find that extremely difficult. But then that's ultimately why you're doing this MBA. You are learning, you're not there to just sort of have things rubber stamped and be told, yes, you did a great job.

So you know, I look back on those experiences. you know, I've had some very open discussions with, I can recall, one of my tutors. And I was very grateful for her feedback, and I managed to turn it around in the exam, which is where it mattered. And I couldn't believe how well I had actually done in the exam when I felt that I'd messed up the paper. So, you know, you have to take on board that feedback, and keep trying and keep going.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, Gillian, thank you so much for coming and sharing your advice. I'm sure that's made people at home feel a lot more reassured. So thank you very much. You can now leave the studio, and we're going to meet one of the associate lecturers in our next session, as well as Catherine Moore, who is from the library over the road.

So Michelle, how's everyone doing at home, then?

MICHELLE: Well, I think the funniest, or maybe not so funny, story is that Aidan's books got left in the garden by the postie. But luckily, it didn't rain, which is amazing in England.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a stroke of luck.

MICHELLE: Absolutely. You would not want ...

KAREN FOLEY: How long ...

MICHELLE: ... that box.

KAREN FOLEY: ... before they were found?

MICHELLE: Hopefully very quickly, because it does rain quite often, as we well know.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, especially this time of year.

[MUSIC PLAYING]