

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live.

Well, this has been a fantastic Moving On session. And in this section we look at study intensity.

Now, an increasing amount of students are looking at studying two modules at the same time, sometimes with nothing else to do in the day. Other times, with jobs, families, and all sorts of other responsibilities and roles that they also need to commit at that time.

Sometimes students will take one module, and it might overlap with another one. So there might be a period of high intensity study throughout the duration of those modules.

So to discuss this very topical issue right now, I'm joined by Fanny, who is a student, and also volunteer with the Open University Students Association who's been studying full time for a year.

And Frank works in our student support team over the road, and the Open University Law School, and the Open University Business School. And you hear from students all the time.

And Rachel has just been on talking about moving up. But Rachel, you've also done some really interesting research and scholarship on study intensity and some of the issues.

So here we're going to have a chat about some of the things that have happened from our experience and that we've heard from other students about, and also your chance to share tips and concerns, and, by all means, ask questions to our panel today.

So Fanny, can I start with you then? What is it like studying two modules at once?

FANNY: Well, your social life goes out the window. And you try and find every break, every minute, every bus journey you've got. You've sort of got a book.

I mean, that's in an ideal world. But I do like leaving things to the last minute. So even though it is full time, it's sort of just writing TMA after TMA, and just trying to juggle it all.

KAREN FOLEY: It's hard, isn't it?

I think one of the things with the Open University is that so many of the modules are structured

around a similar sort of thing.

So you might have five or six assignments or things, maybe an exam or an end of module assessment at the end. And often, those will happen at the same time.

And for students studying two modules at once, they go, why have you scheduled all these at the same time? I've got two assignments in a week. And that, unfortunately, is just part of the sort of system, and the way of doing things, because of the way that we assess students.

How do you deal with that.

FANNY: Well, you need to have really good time management. You need a good diary. I would say a desk planner to lay everything out.

And what works probably best is to divide my time up into chunks when I'm focusing on one module one week, and then the second on the other week. And communicating with my tutor is very important I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, Frank, you have a lovely analogy about reading books, which I just love.

FRANK: Yeah. I try and present it to a student is if you read sort of actively for pleasure, try and balance sort two to three different novels at the same time. And you sometimes lose the focus with one or a particular one, where you can sort of. But it's finding a way to find all three novels interesting equally.

But I compare it. Yeah. Very much so. If you've got three books, it's a bit like OU study. You're balancing three separate reading lists.

KAREN FOLEY: And sometimes one gets really excited, and you're like, I'm not going to stop now. I'm going to finish that.

FRANK: It's going to happen.

So yeah. Human nature, you may tend to sort of swing to the more interesting one than perhaps the other.

But sometimes, depending on what modules you're doing, and how your OCAS and your scores are going, maybe you want to commit perhaps more to another.

But yes. Understanding that you've got three separate reading lists, and you are going to need

to allocate time to each one, which is a challenge in itself.

KAREN FOLEY: It is, cause we asked students before actually, which I didn't read out, which were their sort of key primary motivating factors for choosing a module. And the key one was because they want to. They love it. It's fun. Et cetera.

So that must be really difficult when you're sort of met with this choice between, I really, really like this, but maybe it's important to do that. And it's that whole sort of thing where, like in an exam or something, you're going to get the best marks by divvying out your time appropriately. Writing a genius essay, and not writing one at all is just not going to give you as good a chance as doing two good enough essays where you stand a better chance of passing.

RACHEL: Yeah. No. I think you're right. And I think for a lot of students, it does come down to, what are their study goals? Why are they choosing modules? And how are they choosing to do their qualification? Because obviously they might need to do certain modules in order to achieve a certain qualification.

And so that might mean that some modules kind of tick their boxes more than others in terms of interest.

But it is about choosing the right path for them. And I think with some degrees across the university there's issues of accreditation. And then their degree classification might be really important. And so one of the things that we, having spoken to a lot of students, are beginning to encourage students to think about is, do they have to keep up the pace the whole time through their degree?

Maybe slowing down towards the end because of how much more level three matters in terms of degree classification, that might be a really useful thing if they have study goals beyond their degree, or career ambitions beyond their degree, is trying to look at that big picture as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Which is hard I think.

I'm just mindful that 86% of people watching right now are studying part time with responsibilities.

And this whole idea of study intensity, it's a very value laden thing, study intensity.

For somebody, two modules at once could be completely enormous. For some people, studying a 30 point, which is effectively half of a half time module, could be incredibly overwhelming because of the responsibilities that they've got going on.

So there's this whole thing of study intensity being something about how much time you've got effectively to do the tasks that you need to do, irrespective of what those tasks look like. But they can feel very different, I think, when you are doing two modules that have a similar amount of assessment periods over a certain amount of time.

FRANK: Well, we would say it's about picking the right qualification, and the right module, but equally the right intensity. Because students' circumstances vastly differ.

So we always try to let the students know what's best for them. But you're absolutely right there, Karen. Give a call to the student support team. We can help you make that decision if you're sort of hemming and hawing over whether to 60, 90, or 120. But the need to balance is crucial.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

But it's one of those things, I think. So many students think, oh, I'll call the student support team because I've got a problem, et cetera. But you guys are brilliant at helping students weigh some of those things up.

And John said earlier that one of the key reasons that students end up dropping out is because they aren't doing the right qualification for them. So the qualification, but also the study intensity is very important. And what might seem like a brilliant idea at the start of the year, coupled with a change in circumstances can seem like a very bad idea at the end of the year.

How do you actually help students make the right decision for them? What space do you give them?

FRANK: Well, we always sort of say, well, what is the best solution for that particular student? But there's lots of things that we can sometimes try to do to support students.

The first thing we always look at is the assessment strategy. So and you're studying three modules?

FANNY: Yeah.

FRANK: And they may have different strategies. So, for example, the earlier assignments in one particular module maybe only 20% weighting. The latter one is maybe 40% weighting. And so you could then maybe shift your focus perhaps on the latter part.

Some modules, you may already have achieved the OCAS with your first few assignments. So you may be able to relax on the last one.

We always say, if you're ever experiencing any personal circumstance, or struggling, or you feel like it's snowballing, give the student support team a call, because we will be able to present some options to you to ease that burden.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

Let's take a quick trip to the hot desk, because there are some crazy people out there who are doing 120 credits.

HJ: Yeah. We've got Stephanie. She said, she did 120 credits at level one. And to manage it, she had an Excel sheet where she planned out her time and thought about how she could fit everything in.

Now, I like that tip. But some people are using just study planners that they write out, which I think is a good idea.

Megan has done 90 credits all together at once. And Peter the same as well. He did full time.

And Colin as well said he did two 30 credit modules as well. Not 120. But even so, two modules at a time is still a challenge, because you've got all those assessments.

PRIYA: Absolutely.

HJ: But you still got to think about managing everything.

And this is also great what Stephanie said about having a study buddy. So you share tips with each other about planning out, and check in, and ask each other how it's going. I think that's a great idea.

Now, hopefully we can have some study buddies in the chat as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

No doubt that's a great idea, Stephanie. I love it.

At the moment most of our students are doing 60 credits, perhaps because they've maybe done some at a higher intensity beforehand. But I wonder if we may just pick up on this issue about often we think of study intensity as being two time 60. And I teach on a 30 credit module that's often paired with another 30 credit module. That is not the same as 60 credits. It's completely different.

Have you heard about this, Fanny, from other students? And, again, what would you recommend?

FANNY: From October I was doing a 60 and a 30 credit. And I would say I spent the exact same amount of time on both modules, especially around TMA time.

You've got pretty much the same amount of questions, the same amount of word account, at least on the two modules that I did. I had two TMAs on the same day. It took just half my time with it. It wasn't more for the 60 credit really.

And I do hear from a lot of students that are juggling three modules. So effectively two 30 credits and a 60, which is what I did for two months. It's like having three 60 credits in intensity.

KAREN FOLEY: Because you'd have less assignments. But when you have them on a 30 credit, when you have them there is as much work, effectively, as an assignment on a 60 credit module. But there are just less of them.

FANNY: Yep.

FRANK: Very deceptive, that, because it is the same challenge. It's just at a smaller scale.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

RACHEL: And you still are having to deal with, as you said, a number of reading lists. Most of the time you would have different tutors for each of those modules. You have different forums to be visiting, keep on top of, maybe collaborative stuff.

And so, of course, two 30s is not just the equivalent of a 60. It is more time intensive than that. And I think, again, going in with your eyes open is what's important.

So being aware that two 30s is more than a 60, then that means that you can kind of have that sort of thinking about planning, and your time. And across the whole thing.

But I would say the most important thing for that is, be proactive. So if you know that you've got three modules, or two 30 credits, and you know you're already busy with other commitments outside, speak to your tutors. Let them know.

They do have that information. But, of course, in a big group, it's that proactive contact that just means that they are aware that you are under pressure in that way. And so that can be really helpful.

Just make sure they're aware. Be proactive with the student support team. If it's beginning to become a bit much, have a conversation. And it might be that it's a good choice to maybe defer one of them, especially if you have these long term goals that require you to get certain grades.

And I worry that at the moment there's still that feeling that to defer is a negative. It's like you've let yourself down by that.

And actually, of course, for a lot of people it might be a really positive choice for them, and it might be a really good decision based on that wider picture. And being able to convey that to students is probably really important.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

Rachel, you work as a staff tutor, which means that you oversee students and associate lecturers as well. And sometimes you might need to sign off extensions for students.

And I wonder if we could get your views on this. Because sometimes students might say, I'm doing two modules at once. And they might then start saying, well, I want extensions here, there, and everywhere. What is your view then in terms of how that works and what is kindest for students?

RACHEL: I think the ideal is to try and work to the deadlines, because even if you have extensions, the module's moved on. So you're constantly catching up. So where possible, try to meet deadlines.

Now, of course, some things come up from time to time. You fall behind. At that point, be really

proactive. Put a study plan in place. I know that if you speak to educational advisors, they'll help you put a study plan in place for the next few weeks while you're catching up.

Again, speak to your tutor. I've got two weeks behind. How can I catch up. Help me decide which are the key tasks that I need to get done while I'm catching up, knowing that there's a summer where I could catch up on other things, or there are study breaks at Christmas and Easter time.

So think about that.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's not just doing everything fast and getting back there. It's about being selective and thinking about what you need.

RACHEL: Strategic.

KAREN FOLEY: And I see you nodding there, Fanny, in agreement, about the extensions and things.

FANNY: Yeah. Studying through break weeks. I think if you're doing it full time then you don't get break weeks. Not Christmas. Not Easter. Not on any break weeks.

On my 30 credit now, because I was doing the two previous TMAs, I'm supposed to be having a break week this week, which I didn't even realise until yesterday, because I had to be constantly doing it to be able to catch up with it.

KAREN FOLEY: And have you had to get extensions in your assignments?

FANNY: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: You have.

FANNY: And once you get an extension, one extension comes after the other. Because if you need the extra week, or two weeks, then you obviously know that you're going to be focusing on that one module. So you've not only fallen behind with that module, but the other module or two that you're doing alongside it.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

FANNY: So it's constant extensions. After it's really hard to catch up with it.

KAREN FOLEY: And, of course, a lot of the ways that the modules are built means that things get progressively

more heavily weighted. So things matter more towards the end. And they get a bit harder as well. And sometimes they've got a very complex thing at the end, like an end of module assessment or an exam, which is often overarching. So it's harder in sort of that sense.

And so when those things matter towards the end, the last thing you want is that sort of bulk of stuff to do.

FANNY: I had two TMAs due on the same day. So I had to do one earlier and one after the other.

KAREN FOLEY: Because, of course, you can't get the extensions at the end, can you?

FANNY: Yeah. There's no--

KAREN FOLEY: So it's difficult.

OK. Well, let's talk about time. Although most of them right now aren't doing 60 credits, but we asked in terms of considering high intensity, what might be some of the reasons. And the most popular one was because I want earlier completion.

The second highest one was I need earlier completion. And then I just want to come in at third.

So nobody's saying, I have the time, I have the money.

[LAUGHTER]

So it's really a sort of very driven thing, because for some students the idea of six years can feel like too long.

And for some students, it is too long in that they may not be able to wait. There may be a certain reason.

FRANK: I always say it's that battle in your mind, classification versus completion, what's the priority for you.

So with some degrees, like law for example, you have to do it in a certain amount of time. So that puts a bit of pressure on some students. They feel compelled to do it.

But no. It's what's best for you, cause, as you said, level three is where it really counts. So level one, and perhaps level two. Maybe accept that challenge. But be very mindful at level three. If you've struggled with level one and level two--

KAREN FOLEY: Is it worth it?

FRANK: Yeah. What's more important? Classification or just getting it done.

KAREN FOLEY: Because this is one of the things you've said, Fanny, is really think about to what extent that's really going to matter at that point, isn't it?

FANNY: Well, I wouldn't personally do it on level three, because obviously it counts double weight towards your classification. On level one you can catch up with it over the summer. But then again, it really gives you the base knowledge for level two and level three. So it's not just about the scores you get, but the actual knowledge you've got to build on to level two and level three.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, exactly. And it's your degree at the end of the day. And it's so much fun doing it and learning all of these things that you may as well have a relatively pleasant time along the way.

FANNY: Yeah. I'm doing the 130 credit. And it's much more enjoyable than when you're just constantly having to think about deadlines, and if I don't do it this week then I'm not going to have time next week, because I need to focus on something else next week.

So with the 130 credit that I'm doing over the summer now, I can really see that you can actually just enjoy studying and spend time looking up extra information, because you have the time. Whereas with full time, you just don't have the time to do extra research in the things that interest you.

KAREN FOLEY: Frank, you often talk to students. And one of the things with this is finding the time. So how do you help students then try and find this time to fit into a week?

FRANK: Oh, that's the hardest thing in the world to try and find the time. But it's really accepting compromise is probably the way forward, being proactive, but also, especially when you're experiencing maybe personal circumstances, it's accepting. What is the most important? Are you willing to make that compromise?

If the options are perhaps deferring the module, or just maybe sacrificing a little bit of your OCAS your score, we'll have a chat and see what's best for you. But it's probably that willingness to maybe compromise maybe at that time if you're struggling.

KAREN FOLEY: So people can phone the OU student support team if they want to know more about how their

weighting works, and what sort of matters. And each module will have the assessment laid out very clearly, saying this is what matters.

Rachel, I wonder if you can tell us about whether students might be strategic then? Because sometimes there's an option to substitute an assignment. So sometimes students may do that if they're studying at high intensity.

What are some of the things that students can look for when they're trying to make sense of that assessment plan for that particular module and how they might approach it, irrespective of whether they're studying at high or low-low. This could apply to anyone.

RACHEL: Absolutely. And I would say, engage with that right at the start of the module, so that you know exactly when those key points are in the module, because actually that in itself can help you decide other things, other commitments you might have.

But you're right. If you are studying at high intensity, and you begin to fall behind, knowing that an assignment is substitutable, which you would know if you've got that kind of awareness from the start, it might be that that's a way of keeping going with the modules and stuff.

So, again, speak to your tutor. Speak to the student support team. They both will be able to help you decide what's best for that module, because, of course, the rules are different for different modules. Some don't have any substitutable assignments. And so it has to be module specific. It has to be based on circumstances.

But especially because clashing or close deadlines is one of those key challenges that students tell us to do with studying multiple modules. And so knowing when those pressure points are.

I say to students, if it helps, give yourself a deadline for one of the modules that's a week or two before. So you're kind of working to a pretend deadline. But it means it spreads it out more. And so there are strategies that you can come up with to help you pace yourself across the module.

But knowing how much they play a part in the bigger grade for the module and things, that helps you make some of those decisions.

KAREN FOLEY: Can you explain briefly what substitutable things mean? Because some students may not know.

FRANK: Yeah. OK. So we have a way of sort of saying never really rely on a substitution unless you're absolutely--

KAREN FOLEY: But what is it? Is it like you can just not do it?

FRANK: Yeah. In every module there will be an element perhaps where you may not necessarily need to complete that.

So if you've achieved your OCAS score already in the early assignments, it may well be that a score of less than 40 is still going to get you the OCAS overall in that particular.

I know one student I spoke with recently was doing three level three modules, and needed to achieve two grade two passes, and could afford a grade three in the other module.

So after various assignments, it was allowing the student to work out what's the best way to achieve that goal. So sometimes you can be strategic, and just make the most of the strategy.

KAREN FOLEY: So sometimes you'll see I guess they'll say TMA three or four is substitutable, which means that on one of those you cannot submit. And there's this assessment calculator, isn't there, which is brilliant for students who have those on their modules, which are most students.

But equally, if you're thinking about that, it's a good idea to talk to your tutor, and also the student support about the implications of some of those. Because sometimes it's a good idea just to do a bad job on something to get some feedback, or just to have something in the bag in case. And some students may not know that actually sometimes a substitutable thing can mean just not a brilliant job. It doesn't necessarily mean everything either needs to be in or out the bag.

FRANK: It's about that compromise because what's the lesser of two evils at that point in time? But absolutely give your tutor a chat or the bulletin.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And we're putting a link to the assessment calculator in the chat. So you can start putting in hypothetical scores, which is great, and then see where you might come out.

But it is important in some cases, because it can affect your degree qualification. So if you are thinking about it, and you're at level two or three, I really recommend speaking to an advisor about those, because it can have implications in ways that you don't necessarily understand at the time.

So then being strategic is another thing I wanted to talk to you about. And we sort of talked about some of this. But equally, we were talking earlier about the idea that as adults we often want to do things well. And we don't sort of want to have levels of a good enough job, et cetera.

And some of my students will email and say, really sorry, Karen. I haven't been able to put the time into it. And I'm, brilliant. Why should you put the time in 100% into everything? Because life's not really like that.

So when might students sort of say, OK, I'm going to do an X percent job on this one? Or I'm just going to try and get this in. How might students be tactical and strategic about how they work through those assessments, particularly if they've got a lot going on?

RACHEL: I think if you know that part of the assignment is building towards something else. So in one of the modules that I still teach, there are more than one component to an assignment. And one of those components builds across different assignments.

So, again, I've had students who don't have time to complete the whole assignment. But I've said, given that this is part of a bigger-- and part of the work you're doing on this module, even if you can just get that part, that would be better than nothing. And you might only get 20% or 30%. But, again, it's still 20% or 30% compared to zero.

And, as you said earlier, actually getting something in, and getting some feedback about the direction you were going, even if it's a plan, you might not get very many marks, but you will still get something.

I'm sure you've found that with some of the work you've done, Fanny.

FANNY: I've done that myself.

RACHEL: Yeah. Getting something and getting the feedback is still valuable actually.

FRANK: Really good. Getting feedback is incredible. Yeah. Take that if you can.

FANNY: On my last TMA I had a voice recording. So I knew that was important to get it in for my final TMA, because voice recording was an important part of my final TMA. So I knew to focus on that part, and then just get whatever I could from the essay.

And it still got me the mark. Hopefully I will pass.

RACHEL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

FANNY: But if you fall behind, it's just getting whatever you can out of the way, and whenever you can.

KAREN FOLEY: So what happens then? Cause life can get in the way, and we can often have very well intended plans. But things can happen, et cetera. So what should students do in those sorts of cases?

So we've all got advice from various perspectives on that.

FANNY: Well, I would consider deferring if you feel like you can't catch up with it. Especially if it counts towards your classification, then it's better to retake, take a step back, take some time away from it.

KAREN FOLEY: And can you explain for students who may not know what deferring means?

FANNY: Just dropping out of a module part way through it is the right explanation.

KAREN FOLEY: It's like pausing, isn't it really?

FANNY: Yeah. It's like pausing.

KAREN FOLEY: And sometimes you can take the scores you've already got with you, can't you? And then you can pick them up, depending, of course, on which module it is.

FANNY: Yep.

FRANK: That's a crucial tip, Karen, because you can sometimes literally pause that where it's at, and then allow your circumstances to get you back to where you need to be. And then just get back into it again.

So it's an excellent tool for students sometimes when they're struggling.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

FRANK: Always recommend to get support.

RACHEL: And, again, speak to the student support team. Because whether you can bank your scores varies so widely across modules, and also how new they are, et cetera, et cetera. So it's really

important to have the up to date information.

But definitely either pausing with your assignments, or starting again. And actually sometimes that extra year to get the classification you want pays off dividends later down the line.

And also, people's circumstances do change. We don't always get warning. And we are there to support you. And we know that life happens. And sometimes we can help you get to that end goal at the end of the module. Sometimes the circumstances mean that it wouldn't be a good decision for any number of reasons. And then we can help you make that choice again.

So it is about being provocative. Speak. Don't sit panicking at home thinking, oh, I'll keep trying, keep trying. Speak to somebody as soon as you know things are beginning to slip, or you know there's a change in circumstances. Being proactive, especially if you're studying multiple modules.

Speak to all your tutors. The more you can get that conversation going, the more likely you'll still be in a position where you can make a really good positive decision, where you're still a bit in control, and you haven't let deadlines slip and things.

So the earlier you speak, the better.

FRANK: And one thing we have to tell a bit is that I know that sometimes students can maybe be a bit reluctant perhaps sometimes to share that with their tutor. Maybe they're thinking of maybe deferring. So call us at the student support team. We can have that conversation on your behalf.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. No. Absolutely.

Well, there's been some brilliant advice. I wanted to end.

Maybe, Fanny, I could get something from you, because, Rachel, you've given some really good advice. And I guess some of the things is that this is so personal to people, and that there is so much support out there.

But, Fanny, to end with, what would you say is really important for students?

FANNY: Communicating with student support and their tutors. Not just when things happen, but leading it up to it as well, through the whole way. That's what really helped me.

And when you first speak to student support, you might be nervous. But then you realise that they are just people sitting on the other side of the phone trying to help you. And they're not that scary.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Wow.

FRANK: They've said worse.

FANNY: Sorry.

KAREN FOLEY: And you must get a lot of students phoning as well, Frank, who sort of feel quite anxious about admitting maybe that things aren't going to plan.

FRANK: Absolutely. It's when that unforeseen or the unavoidable occurs in your life, and when you're doing that much study.

But between the academic guidance from the tutor and the student support team, we can certainly try and find a way.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Either whether that's doing something or just helping people, get them back on track.

Well, Rachel, Frank, and Fanny, thank you so much. It's been an absolutely brilliant session.

And we've got more for you this afternoon. I know a lot of you haven't chosen your modules or registered yet. There's a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences showcase here from 1 o'clock this afternoon. The chat room will be open from 12:30.

You'll need to log out and then log back in. And the full programme is on the website. That is on until 5 o'clock.

But I'd like to thank all my guests who've given a fabulous account of what it's like moving on up at the Open University. And also to HJ and Priya. Thank you for the help and support out there. How's everyone finishing at the end?

PRIYA: Yeah. Well, we've had some great sort of input here from some of our students. Stephanie's mentioned regarding to study intensity.

She did try 120 credits. But life got in the way. So she also had to defer. And I sort of explained

to her, nothing to be worried about there. We're quite familiar with students that want to try and balance everything. And that's what we're here for.

Peter made a good point with regard to extensions, and just sort of saying, a lot of extensions are available, but just to consider the knock on effect, and also how that could impact your final TMA.

And just from myself really, just to let you guys, we are here, as Frank has said. Don't feel that you can't pick up the phone and call us. We're happy to talk to you, and, of course, speak with your tutor as well.

HJ: I think Priya's summed up perfectly there. There's loads of help and support out there. And we have had a great time chatting to everyone this morning. We'll be there this afternoon.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you so much, HJ and Priya. And thank you everyone for all of your contributions today. That's all from us at the Student Hub Live team for this morning's session. But we hope to see you from 1 o'clock this afternoon.

And we're going to keep a minute's silence now for the Grenfell disaster one year on after the anniversary of that tragic event.