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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live Open Day. Well, in this session, we're going to be talking about support that's available for disabled students. And I'm joined by Sarah McDonald, Lou Roach, and Paul Williams. Thank you for coming along.

Now, I've got quite a lot of questions that we need to cover in this session. So, Sarah, I wonder if I can first start with you. Can you tell us what is the Disabled Students Allowance, and who is able to apply for one?

SARAH
MCDONALD: Sure, yeah. The Disabled Students Allowance, or DSA, as we call it for short, is for some disabled students in higher education in the UK. The idea is that it's a supplementary fund to assist those students with the extra costs they might incur while they're studying with a disability. So not every disabled student will be eligible for this scheme, but many OU students find that they are eligible.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So how do they go about applying for one? What's the process involved?

SARAH
MCDONALD: OK. What we do is, they apply to an external funding body, because it's a government scheme rather than an OU scheme. It all happens externally. Part of the application process is, they have to ask their university to just confirm the nature of their studies.

So the application form will come to us, we will do our little bit, and then it goes on to the funding body, who then makes the decision about whether or not they're eligible for the scheme.

KAREN FOLEY: Sylvia wants to know how you find out what is covered, in terms of a disability. Where would you point her?

SARAH
MCDONALD: Yeah. This is always a difficult question to answer, because the great thing about DSA is it's tailored to the individual student. So it's always difficult to predict in advance what an individual student may get. Generally there are allowances for specialist equipment, for human support, for travel, depending on what the student needs.

But if they do want to find out more about it, they can look on either the website of one of the UK funding bodies, or if they go through their student home page, once they've signed up on a

course, there's some information on there about DSA and how the process works and what kinds of things it might cover.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Excellent. There's also a really lovely Open University Students Association group, the DSG. And they offer-- they've got a great Facebook group, and they offer loads and loads of support and advice, as well. So that might be helpful, as well.

So, Lou, if somebody is disabled and registered on a module-- so they've already registered, and they have a disability-- what do they do, in terms of informing the OU about this?

LOU ROACH: There are several ways they can inform us. They can go via the Help Centre on their student home page. And it's an online form which we ask them to complete, so they can disclose. They can speak to their study support team. Or they can call the disability support team, which is the area I work in direct.

The one thing we do try to point out to students is that they may disclose to a tutor, but a tutor is not a disability specialist. So the tutors normally forward them back to their student home page.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, we're talking about disabilities quite broadly. And I just sort of wanted to touch on this area, as well, because a lot of students study with the Open University with a disability. And, a lot of the time, they have comorbid disabilities, as well. So it might be a physical condition accompanied by a mental-health condition.

And, again, some of those conditions can vary over time, or change completely, depending on what the actual condition is. So it's quite a common thing for students to disclose this. What happens when they do disclose it? And when should they do that?

LOU ROACH: We urge them, first of all, to disclose as soon as possible. And when we say "disclose," some students have a health condition which they don't class as a disability-- until, of course, they have to attend a tutorial. So maybe a hearing-impaired person may need to sit near the front. A wheelchair user, for instance, may need access to accessible toilet facilities.

So we do ask all our students to disclose as soon as possible. The earlier they tell us, the better it is. And then we can then create an individual but personalised profile for them. The content of that profile is exactly the information they've given us from the disability support form. And, once we've created a specialised-- if that be the right phrase-- profile for them, we then email them or call them and ask them to check their profile, make sure they're happy with

it, make sure they're happy with the content.

The one thing I will say, the disability support form is normally only submitted once, unlike the Disabled Students Allowance form, which has to be submitted--

SARAH Each year.

MCDONALD:

LOU ROACH: --each year.

SARAH The students have to reapply for the DSA each year.

MCDONALD:

KAREN FOLEY: Right. OK. OK. And I guess-- so, firstly, in terms of, then, having this disclosure, do they only disclose things that have a sort of formal diagnosis? I mean, on a lot of my student's records I'll see things like anxiety, dyslexia, you know, difficulty concentrating, various things. To what extent does something have to be a formal medical condition?

LOU ROACH: For our side, for the disability support team and disabled student services in general, we do not always ask for medical evidence.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

LOU ROACH: So, any health condition, any medically diagnosed condition, we need to know about, because that can have a major impact on somebody's studies. And without that information, then the relevant staff who need to know, for instance, tutors, support groups-- people need to know. So, obviously, we ask students to disclose everything related to health.

KAREN FOLEY: And then you say that there's a sort of personalised profile for students. And you've mentioned how this might be really relevant for somebody with a hearing aid to maybe connect to a hearing loop, et cetera. And So adjustments can be made for students like that.

What sorts of things might happen for somebody who maybe has anxiety or maybe other adjustments might need to be made? What's the point, I guess, in having this profile? And how does it help the student, ultimately, with their studies?

LOU ROACH: There's a variety of ways we help students, from-- for residential schools, online tutorials, face-to-face tutorials. A student could take somebody along with them, especially if they have anxiety. Sometimes they just need family friend or member of the family who knows them, who

knows their condition, maybe just calm them a bit if they are a bit anxious.

Students might ask for extensions to their TMAs, which we try not to encourage, but we understand. Every student is different. Some students like to study in bite-sized chunks, especially if they have fatigue. So there's lots of different things we can put in place. But we do need the student to disclose, first of all, before we can organise anything.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. And one of the things, I think, that might be quite helpful for students is knowing how many students have a disability of some sort. I don't know many people who don't-- including myself, when I'm teaching-- feel a little bit anxious about going to tutorial, because you think, well, I don't know what they're going to ask me and what they're going to do. What would you say to students who may not have a disability but may be meeting other students in a tutorial? I mean, I guess, you know, what I'm getting at is that we will have our things going on in our lives, don't we, and our challenges, depending on what they are. What support would you say other students can give to people who might--

LOU ROACH: I personally would talk to the student with a disability-- never, ever talk about a student or anybody with a disability as if they're not there. Talk to the student. If that student wants to be involved in a conversation, they will.

But just, obviously, wheelchair users, people who use walking aids, give them a bit of space. And maybe somebody just seems a bit edgy or just different, you know, just talk to them. Sometimes, a hello can go a really long way.

KAREN FOLEY: I think that's good advice for any student, actually, whether they identify as disabled or not. I think everybody's an individual, and having a disability is just part of your characteristics. And that's something that the OU wants to welcome and accommodate, yeah.

Now, one thing I did want to ask about is, you mentioned disclosing this on record to the Open University. And then that gets cascaded and managed appropriately, so that students can have that support. I know, for me, a lot of students will, when they're allocated their tutors-- so, just before the modules start-- they might get in touch with me and say, this is me, this is what I'm hoping to do with my studies, and I've got this that prevents me from doing this. Or they might say, I feel really anxious attending tutorials. I don't want to come to them. Or, you know.

And so we might walk through some of those anxieties and sort of say, maybe if I talk to them about what's going to happen beforehand, they might feel a little bit more confident about

coming along, et cetera So what would you say to students about the other areas that they should reach out to for support?

LOU ROACH: The study support teams are there to support you in your studies, as are educational advisors. Some students maybe feel that perhaps their particular health conditions may prevent them from fully participating and getting the real student journey under their belt, so to speak. So, speak to educational advisors. Speak to us, in the disability support teams.

And, dare I say, we don't have a crystal ball. If we don't know, we can't put the support in place.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Yeah. No, exactly, exactly. And until tell you ask, and until you sort of try and articulate what your needs are, you don't know whether they're going to be met or not.

But there are lots of ways we do this. And, Paul, I wonder if we could sort of talk a little about some of the alternative formats. Because, as I said before, many students study with a disability. And there are some brilliant things that can really, really help.

I see you've brought a comb-bound book, which I know that people who have trouble holding things find really invaluable, because those books never stay open. [CHUCKLING] If you've got, indeed, printed material, which some of our students might have. So what are some of the alternative formats? And how might they help students?

PAUL WILLIAMS: Well, the Open University aims to make its teaching and learning available to all students, by providing alternative formats. This includes PDFs, Word versions of files, and e-pubs that are available on the module websites, which students can access. They also produce other formats, such as comb-bound books, which you mentioned, and large prints, which are made available to students on request.

There are also transcripts available for audio and visual materials, on the module websites. And, in addition, there are over 100 modules provided as DAISY books. So this is audio text that the students can access. And it has a navigational structure within it. So it can be followed with the course content. And so we can provide to students, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Do they need to have gone through the process, then, of having a Disabled Students Allowance? Or can they just say, I'd really like one of these books? Because I'd like one of those. [LAUGHING]

PAUL WILLIAMS: Yeah, so, for disabled students that require alternative formats, and they need to request it by the disability support form on the web site, and-- or contacting their student support teams. So that's how they go about doing that.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, brilliant. OK. So you've mentioned the DAISY books. Again, there's over 100 modules, I think, isn't there, which is a lot, that have those. And they can be really good for students.

Now, you've mentioned the module websites, as well, in terms of getting hold of these. What's the sort of time process? So, a lot of our students are just starting studying. They've been filling their forms in. I'm sensing that, with a DSA, that takes a little bit of time, because it's not associated-- well, not because of that, but it's a separate body, isn't it?

SARAH MCDONALD: Yeah, absolutely. If there's one single piece of advice that I had to choose to give to any student, I would say apply early, apply early, apply early. You need to allow at least 14 weeks before your module starts.

You can apply at any time. Some students acquire a disability partway through or perhaps only decide to disclose a disability part-way through a module. But the earlier you apply, the better, because the better the chances are of having the support you need in place from the moment your module starts.

KAREN FOLEY: Now I knew someone who was diagnosed with dyslexia, who hadn't sort of actually realised it was a difficulty. And he did this process and then got a Disabled Student's Allowance. And he got some brilliant things that really helped him that he didn't know about beforehand. And again, this sort of process, I guess, is really tailored and suited to a person.

Would it be, then, that we shouldn't really expect students to know about the comb-bound books or the DAISY readers or this, that, and the other? Does the DSA process sort of say, you might like this, you might like this, and sort of work with the students and their learning styles and their condition to suggest things that are appropriate?

SARAH MCDONALD: Yeah the idea of the DSA assessment is to do something like that, to talk through the different options, and to discuss with the student what the DSA scheme itself may be able to help with. Because the DSA scheme is never intended to cover everything, it might make little suggestions that this is what your university may like to provide, or we've identified this need in your assessment. You need to go and discuss that with your university and see what precise things are available for you.

But I would always say to a student, go through the process. You would be amazed by the kind of stuff that is out there now. I'll never forget the first time that I saw voice-recognition software, about 10 years ago. I had no idea how advanced it already was then. It was like stepping into the set of *Star Trek* or something. It's really good.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And, finally, is there anything in particular that you would like students to know? I know you've mentioned the forms and the importance of getting those in early. Any final advice?

LOU ROACH: I think I can say, we're all here to help you.

SARAH Yeah.

MCDONALD:

LOU ROACH: Please contact us, if you need assistance.

SARAH Yeah.

MCDONALD:

LOU ROACH: And we all love what we do. Otherwise, we wouldn't be doing our jobs. So--

SARAH Absolutely, yeah.

MCDONALD:

LOU ROACH: --bring it on, I say.

SARAH I would say the same thing. I would say, you know, we want to know about your disability so

MCDONALD: we can offer you the help and support that you need. That's why we're asking. Yeah.

PAUL WILLIAMS: And, if any alternative formats are required by disabled students, it is provided free of charge, as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, brilliant. So excellent. Well, Sarah, Lou, and Paul, thank you so much for coming along. And you've shown another friendly face to the Open University.

I hope you've enjoyed meeting some more of our wonderful colleagues, here, who are there for you in your studies on campus. We're going to have a very short video break, where I'm going to ask Dan about the Gardner Building. And then we're back with our Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Learning and Teaching Innovation, Hazel, who's also a volcanologist. And so I'm

going to ask her about how her research is going, in this next session. We'll see you in a minute.

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