

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**KAREN:** Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live Open Day for new and prospective students at the Open University. It's been brilliant. I hope you've been enjoying our campus tours.

And there've been loads of people around here today. We had some fant-- oh, in fact, there's my friend, Peter. Let me just go and have a quick chat with him before I introduce you to these next lot. How are you?

**PETER:** I'm very well, Karen. How are you?

**KAREN:** I'm good. It's really nice to be able to roam around. What have you been doing today?

**PETER:** Well, I've just come out of what we call an exam board, although it's a bit misleading because it's for the third level sociology module, DD308 Making Social Worlds, which doesn't actually have an exam. It has an end of module project.

So we've been looking at the student results for that. Everyone's done fabulously Well.

**KAREN:** Have they?

**PETER:** There was almost 16% first class results I think.

**KAREN:** Because some students might not know about how all these exams-- they're not just marked by somebody saying, oh, this, that, and the other. Everything is very much standardised. And it goes through a very rigorous process, doesn't it?

**PETER:** It goes through a very long statistical process, yes, that makes us all weep. But when the students get good results at the end of it, that's what makes us happy.

**KAREN:** --only find out in a few weeks the ones who are on the day presentations. So you know the results for all your students.

**PETER:** We know the provisional results. And then they go to another, yes, another board. And they have to be ratified.

**KAREN:** So this is why it takes so long, isn't it?

**PETER:** They have to go through several boards for everything to be nailed down finally.

**KAREN:** So what would you say to students waiting on their results? I know there's so many of them are saying, oh, I can't bear the days.

**PETER:** Well, it's nerve wracking. If you put the work in, I'm sure you're going to be fine. Most people, or very, very few people, have problems. And usually those people who've had problems, it's because something's gone wrong in the year. And they know, and they're going to do a resit anyway. And everything's going to be all right.

**KAREN:** Aw, thank you, Peter. I better get back because I've got some guests to interview about how studying is fun.

**PETER:** Enjoy.

**KAREN:** But nice to see you, yeah.

**PETER:** Nice to see you.

**KAREN:** All right, I'll see you soon. Sorry, guys. I just think, I know so many people on social media who are so obsessed with exams and things like this. And I know Peter's been doing all of the work for it. So I think it's nice to show you how why it takes such a long time.

Anyway, Paul, Marion, and Suzanne from the Department of Religious Studies, we asked you to come along. And you've said, we want to talk about why studying is fun for students and some of our experiences, which is a lovely thing to do on a nice summer day.

**PAUL:** Yeah, isn't it fantastic? We don't want to talk about exams. We want to talk about why studying is enjoyable, why studying is challenging, why it's exciting, and why the Open University is a great university to take your education and develop yourself and get to know the world around you in a deep and interesting way, yeah?

**KAREN:** So you've all got different experiences. And you've been students. You're teaching students. And there are various things that you want to talk about. One thing that you all have in common is that you're all in the Religious Studies Department as well, which I know from a lot of experience, tends to deal with everything other than often religion.

Religion is something that holds things together. But often you're doing history, anthropology, sociology. And I think that's why religious studies are such a interesting interdisciplinary angle

to tackle this from. But that's not really what we're going to talk about today. But I think it's nice for people to meet the academics behind some of those modules.

**PAUL:** Thanks for the plug, Karen.

**KAREN:** All right.

[LAUGHTER]

So learning is fun, but it is a challenge. And I think many of our current students know that. So one of the things that I wanted to ask is what is the most fun thing that you've experience when you were studying? Something that's maybe held you in something when times have got tough. Is there something you can remember when you were a student?

**PAUL:** OK, it's me first. Well, it was a long time ago. So it's difficult to dredge those memories up to the surface. But what I really enjoyed when I was doing my undergraduate studies was I was doing a dual honours degree. And I was doing a course on new religious movements that was about Scientology and ISKCON and all these various groups.

And I was also doing some stuff about southeast Asian cultures and societies. And there were lots of religious movements in that stuff, too, groups addressing colonialism and political and economic marginalisation but through religion.

And that just got me really questioning the role of religion in allowing people to make sense of the world around them and come up with solutions to the troubles that they were facing. And that has pretty much defined my career, really, since, those kinds of interest.

**KAREN:** --that meaning, is it, that sense of why what you're studying actually matters.

**PAUL:** Yeah, why it matters. And you can see the importance it has for people in different contexts. And that certainly connected with me in the way I felt about the world that I find myself in.

**KAREN:** Do you think, then, that on this idea of meaning, a lot of people will be wanting to study for some sorts of reason. And often that's to make the world a better place. How important do you think the whole meaning sense is. And is that something that can be fun as well as--

**MARION:** Absolutely, I think one of the joys of working for the Open University is the number of times I've met someone on a bus or a train, and I say, I work for the Open University. And they say the

Open University changed my life. And you think, that's what we're here for. But it's so good to get that confirmed.

People have done all sorts of different subjects and so on. But nevertheless, it was just seeing the world in a different way, being able to have different perspectives on things, had opened up whole new worlds for them literally in everyday life. How do they see the world?

And I think that's one of the things that we are passionate about is you study, but you get a different perspective on the tiniest thing in everyday life to understanding maybe the big issues in the news or whatever, even better. And that's why we're passionate about it.

**KAREN:** Well, I know Matt and Georgina, from social sciences, they often say that as soon as you start studying with the OU, you can never read a newspaper in the same way. Suddenly everything starts changing. And the way you start making meanings and interpreting the world takes on a different place even from day one.

**PAUL:** Suzanne?

**SUZANNE:** Well, following up from Marion, the big questions, we're like, how could someone believe that? Why are they doing that? And what really inspired me is looking around you and looking at the strange things that there are in the world and having an interest in what's going on here.

And one of my first loves as an undergraduate was I grew up in America. And we went on road trips, and there was this 40-foot tall cement garden of Eden with a cement Labour crucified. And this was the focus of my first research project.

And I discovered actually Kansas was a hotbed of populism and radicalism and socialism in the late 19th century. And it was all intertwined with religious belief. And what I think's so fascinating about studying religion is it's not just studying the main religions. It's about looking at why do people believe what they believe in the widest sense of the word.

And I think word-- and our new courses are designed to make you think about what does religion mean for you. What do you see in your communities that might be associated with religion? And why do we do what we do?

**KAREN:** This is a really interesting point because sometimes you can have these questions. You get these different ways of interpreting material. So you're going off, and you're on a Walk, Or taking the kids to school or whatever. And you're starting to think about things differently.

And this is the unplanned learning that doesn't appear as a 20-minute activity in your study planner. But it's often the most profound.

**PAUL:** Yeah, I think that's right. You referenced Georgina and how a newspaper is never the same again. I think that's exactly what happens. It changes the way you are engaging in an everyday way with what's around you. So you read something in the newspaper, a story about contemporary affairs.

And the meaning that has for you shifts. And your understanding is deeper and more, I think, satisfying as a result. And it changes the way that you're able to engage with the people around you, your family, your friends, and also your peers, your students, your co-students.

**KAREN:** So how do you think people find the time then? If this is something that's very, very good but not planned for, what's the best way of doing it? I actually find talking to somebody who doesn't know my subject area. And I might say, I've read this. And then they'll say, what did it say? And then I might remember that I've forgotten half of it.

And sometimes being able to talk and articulate things is really useful. And that can also be sometimes a challenge in a distance environment because you don't see everybody. You can't just nab your tutor and walk down and say, by the way.

So is there anything there about how people might process things or advice you might give people about how they can mould these things over to develop that learning? And I guess then make the connections about where things matter to them.

**SUZANNE:** I think it's always really personal. A lot of my students talk about having the conversations over the dinner table with their teenage children. And what do these subjects mean in their personal lives? I think you've just got to bring it into your own life.

**MARION:** And I think it is that's one of the things that people gain from learning is that you start off thinking, I'm going to study this module. And you do that in a quasi-formal way. But it is the overspill that I think often does take people by surprise but a delightful surprise because it's not just that your knowledge doesn't stay in this little box.

You can see. You can apply it to just the material culture you see walking down the road or what's in shops or what's in the newspapers or what you're seeing on television. And I think that's often the delightful surprise coming out of learning is you start with this formal module.

And you spend a lot of time thinking what you're going to study.

But it's the overflow because it's that learning to see the world in a different way. There's a religious study scholar, Ninian Smart, who said, you know you've got the hang of it when the familiar seems strange and the strange seems familiar. And that's it. It's learning to look at things through new eyes really.

**PAUL:** I think the world becomes richer as a result of this. You have lots of opportunities to learn with other students. And learning is about other people. You learn together as part of a community. And that's the really important aspect to take away I think.

**KAREN:** You mentioned this way that you might pick up on things. And in psychology, we talk about often procedural and declarative memory and the distinction between things. And sometimes I think there's this sense of hierarchy with students with I've got the books. I've got this theory. I've got this, that, and the other.

But actually then when you end up in the pub trying to have an argument with somebody, and you think, where's the evidence? What are you are evaluating that on? Is that really fair to say that that's going to support that claim? Or is it just something that you're using because you're shoehorning it into something?

How might people start practicing, especially over the summer when they're maybe starting to think about studying about using evidence? And I know the library team are coming to talk to us a little bit later. And they often do things on how to spot fake news and various ways that you can do things.

Any sort of things you think students might usefully think about in terms of practicing some of those ways of doing things? Maybe if they're current students.

**PAUL:** Well, a big thing actually in our A332 module is the idea of trust. And the whole idea of fake news is built around this sense that there's been a breakdown of trust in certain media sources. And of course recently, there's that turf Trump-CNN GIF-type thing that's been doing the rounds on Twitter.

And that perfectly encapsulates this sense that there's been breakdown of trust. The key skill that you learn as a student, I think, is to be able to articulate an argument that's based in evidence.

And the important point about evidence is it's something someone else can go and check and see that, oh, yes, I can verify that particular claim about climate change or whatever it happens to be.

And it's that ability to track evidence, verify that it's based on sound scientific sources, sound reasoning. That's the kind of evidence that we want people to use and develop skills in applying to different kinds of scenarios.

**MARION:** The phrase we often use is learning to be discerning. Trackback your sources because all sources aren't the same. And that sounds so obvious. But it is that learning discernment about where you're getting your information from is actually a very key skill.

**KAREN:** All right, now tell me this then because you all I know have been writing a lot of module materials beautifully presented in these lovely books. And students will be highlighting these in weeks to come. And they'll be thinking, this is true because Paul said it.

So how do you recommend students start thinking critically about some of the stuff that looks very sensible, that is in a book, that is presented there? Because we want to think about the extent to which that, I guess, is going to be able to justify a claim, et cetera.

Would you say then that they should start to think a little bit critically about some of the books and the module material and what really is trying to be said? Because everyone's got a voice. Everyone is subjective at the end of the day.

**PAUL:** Some things are more subjective or objective than others. And when we talk about subjectivity and objectivity, I think it's important to try and imagine objectivity as not something one of us can have vis-a-vis a factor or a theory.

Objectivity is something that arises out of the conversation that scholars have. So a big theory in religious studies is secularisation. Secularisation is a theory that religion is in decline in western societies.

Is that happening? What kind of evidence could we use? One kind of evidence that's been used is church attendance figures. There's been a big decline in church attendance. But that only tells me that people are no longer attending church. It doesn't tell you that people are not being religious anymore or are not believing in God anymore.

So it tells you one thing, but there are a bunch of other questions that then get opened out. If

they're not doing that, are they doing something else, for example.

**MARION:** And again, is your point about being discerning and looking beyond the obvious. So the numbers of people ticking the No Religion box is going up. Start to look further in European Value survey or whatever.

The people who are ticking No Religion, it doesn't mean necessarily that they're not religious. They may be meditating. They may be doing all sorts of things. What they're saying is not institutionally religious. And so it's things like that. It's not just taking things at face value. It's digging down deeper.

**KAREN:** And a lot of these things are things that you wouldn't necessarily have to research. You're using your common sense. You're thinking, well, this is a piece of statistical information here. I can make these sorts of assumptions. But what about this?

And one thing we do know about OU students is that they've often got such a wealth of experience. What do you have to say about students applying some of their stuff, their ways of thinking to what is now going to be quite a new piece of learning?

**PAUL:** Suzanne?

**SUZANNE:** They absolutely should. Your feelings and your insight are your first points of call in terms of engaging with the material. And so you've got to find what interests you've got to draw on your past experiences.

And it's about learning how to balance that with evidence and research. So you might have an intuition that something's not quite right about what that person's saying. And then what we hope to do as academics and as your tutors is to lead you into a way to articulate and research your intuition to see if that is the case or if it's not the case and to build a strong argument to support what you believe is true.

**KAREN:** OK, so this takes us onto the second-- but we need to wrap up very soon-- part of this, which is we were talking about learning is fun. And I think we've talked about that. And we've talked about the ways in which you might be able to do that in a fun way.

But you also wanted to talk more about it being a challenge. So we can see quite clearly how some of these things might be a challenge, especially as you're learning both new skills and new knowledge and combining the two together and applying what wealth of experience you



bring to that situation in the first place.

What would you say students look out for in terms of challenges?

**PAUL:**

When I pose this to you, this idea, the thing I was thinking of was in my own research, I'd form this research proposal to go to a particular site in the Philippines to do my PhD research.

And that research was in the Philippines Catholic country. I was interested in local religion. I hadn't thought about Protestant congregations. I hadn't thought about Protestant missionaries. The first people I met were all Protestants.

And I suddenly had to think again about what my assumptions were. And then I have to reset and completely rethink how I thought my planning and my schedule was going to proceed.

And it's not hugely different to planning a TMA or an EMA, or you may have an exam in front of you. You have to think carefully about the questions or problems that are in front of you and make sure that you've covered as many bases as you can foresee so that you're well-prepared for what lies ahead.

And that's the challenge, studies always throwing up things that you're not quite ready for. Challenging your assumptions, challenging your preparations, you've got to be ready.

**KAREN:**

No, absolutely. And the one thing I think about OU students is that they're very resilient. And often sharing ways of supporting each other through those things that-- it's almost like you start.

And then you think six years later you, you think that something is going to happen. But often you look back and you think, I don't believe I got through all of that. It's amazing what people do. Sophie, how's everything on the hot desk? I hear there's some lovely chat.

**SOPHIE:**

Yeah, it's going really well. There's lots of little hints and tips and software. And everyone's sharing their things to help them get through, which is really nice. We had a really nice comment from Jane earlier as well, saying that the more I watch this and listen, the more I think I have made the right choice to start studying with the OU. So it's been really nice.

**KAREN:**

Aw.

**SOPHIE:**

Everyone's been really helpful. It's a good way of this is how the forum should be within the modules as well. So everyone's sharing tips. And you're not on your own. There's a big group

of you out there. So you've got this.

**KAREN:** Brilliant. And don't forget we've got lots of events coming up to support you in your start for September. If you go into the Student Hub website, there's a Count Me In button.

And you can subscribe to our email list. And then we'll let you know when there are other events coming up. So do keep an eye out for those because we're going to do lots of important things on getting prepared for module start possibly inside when the weather is a bit less wonderful for us.

OK, so we need to wrap up now, guys. What one piece of advice can I ask you would you want to give our new students who are very excited about their studying?

**MARION:** Hold the enthusiasm. Keep loving it even when it gets a bit tough because you're going to go through it and come out the other side. And you will benefit from it. And it will change your life.

**KAREN:** Wonderful.

**SUZANNE:** Absolutely.

**PAUL:** Yeah, and come in and look at religious studies because we've got loads to offer.

**KAREN:** Actually, you do, to be fair. You've got some brilliance stuff. Supplement your learning. I know that people are really keen to start. But OpenLearn's got so much stuff on it. You've got a lovely series of various spaces and things.

So make sure you check out OpenLearn. There are also loads and loads of MOOCs on FutureLearn that you can connect with. So do make sure that you're keeping your enthusiasm in for the areas that you love by doing that. Suzanne, what would your tip be?

**SUZANNE:** I don't know. It's hard to improve upon Marion's comment.

**KAREN:** Well, her's was quite profound, to be fair. I I think unbeatable.

[LAUGHTER]

**SUZANNE:** I think just practise thinking critically, thinking about reading the newspaper and how are they making these claims. What's the basis on their making it? And what am I curious about in the world? Think about everything as there's more to be known here.

**KAREN:**

Brilliant. Well, thank you all very much for coming along. I hope you'll come back in September when we're getting prepared to start studying in a fun but slightly more serious way. Thank you very much.

Right. We're going to have a short break now. And we're going to have another of our videos of our tour around campus. We're going to have a look at the Jenny Lee Building, which is that one just over there. And then we're going to hear about the online library with Helen Clough. So we'll see in a minute.

[MUSIC PLAYING]