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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. We've been having a really good event so far on Open Justice. And this is the last session of our daytime programme if, indeed, you're here watching us in real time.

This session is about developing public legal skills. And I am joined by Francine, who is a lecturer for the Open Justice team, Emma, who's also a lecturer for the Open Justice team, and Marie, who's one of our Careers and Employability advisers who's linked to the faculty of business and law.

Now Francine, this is a half an hour session, and obviously, there are a lot of legal skills that our students are going to be learning through their journeys. But we're going to focus on a few of them here. What are we going to cover?

FRANCINE: So we're today going to look at practical legal research, because that's quite different from doing academic research. And we're going to talk about legal writing, because again, there's a difference between academic legal writing and professional legal writing. And we're going to think about that in the context of the pro bono project through their legal studies. And then we're going to link this to employability, because that's a really important area that we need to think about.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And for so many students who don't know what they're doing with their degree, recognising the employability that they're achieving with their degree in terms of those transferable skills are something, Marie, that I know that the Careers and Employability Service work a lot with students on.

MARIE: Yes. Yes,

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely. So firstly, then, Emma, why are we going to look at legal research? Why is it particularly important?

EMMA: It's basically something that, in practical terms, is used in loads of different ways if you're thinking about a career in law. So I've just got a PowerPoint to illustrate this a little bit. So if you're training to be a solicitor or a barrister or anything to do with law, within your training, you will get asked to deal with lots of different problem scenarios to give you practise.

When you go into practise, you're going to have clients coming to you with a wide array of problems. They won't be saying, this is a tort issue. This is a contract issue. They'll be telling you the facts, and you're going to have to work out what issue or issues are actually involved.

If you're going out on our module or in other areas of life, volunteering, doing pro bono work, you might well be going to do presentations to people. You're going to have to research the area of law that you're presenting on so you give them accurate facts and guidance.

And also, part of practical legal research is also knowing what's out there. So for example, if someone came to our law clinic and we couldn't help them, it was a family issue, or it was an issue to do with wills and probate, which we wouldn't be covering perhaps, then we could signpost them to somewhere else. We would know an organisation or a website or an address or an email, somewhere that we could signpost them to. So practical legal research is really, really key to all the pro bono activities and to a career in law.

KAREN FOLEY: So what would your advice be then for somebody who wanted to undertake a piece of practical legal research?

FRANCINE: So the first thing to do is really plan your time and resources. And I know this is a big issue for any sort of piece of work you do. But you really need to think about how long you've got to do it in. Are there any important deadlines coming up, if you're advising a client, say?

And just the fact of how much information you actually need to find, because you have to bear in mind, practical legal research is about the end user. So if you're researching it for a law clinic, for a client, it's about how much they're going to need to know. And they're not going to want to know everything on a topic. They're going to want to know exactly what is relevant to them. So you need to be careful to limit what you're researching to those areas.

The kind of approach we use, which is one that law students will know from problem scenarios, is the IRAC approach. So first of all, it's finding out what the actual Issue is, because, as I said, the client won't tell you the issue, necessarily. You need to work it out from all the information you get from them. You need to ask them questions.

Just find out as much as you can to really pinpoint that. And that might mean discarding quite a lot of the information they give you, because they might want to really tell you a lot of information that's just not really completely relevant. And they don't know what's relevant or

not. And that's fine. That's your job to pick it out.

Then you have to go away, and you have to look at what the legal Rules are in any situation. And this is a case of often-- nowadays, we're quite lucky. When I was a law student, you had to go to a law library and pick up a book. Now you can go online and you have the OU Library. And you have loads of resources at your fingertips to go away and do the research. You do have to be careful with online resources, but maybe that's something we'll talk about in a while.

Then you apply the rules to the issue. And that's where it comes in that you look at the legal Application of the rules. But you also need to think about the practical situation.

So if you think you've got a claim against a company, but that company is in administration. It hasn't got any money. It hasn't got any assets. Then the reality is, however strong your claim might be, you're very unlikely to get any money back. So you do have to factor in these practical kind-- when I was a solicitor, the first thing we'd do if there's a potential claim, we'd search against the potential defendant to see, have they got any assets? Because it's really important to factor in that kind of thing.

And then you're going to come to a Conclusion, which is what you're going to explain to your client if you're giving legal advice. That's what you're going to tell them. And it's got to be accessible, and it's got to be clear. They don't want to know lots of subsections or case names. They just want to know in a clear jargon-free way.

And then, of course, I've put "Or is it?" on the PowerPoint, because you might think you've answered the question. But then there might be more questions coming back. There might be other facts they think about that actually might change what you're saying a little bit. So it can be an ongoing process of then going back to planning any issues, and so on, and going back and forth like that.

KAREN FOLEY: So you mentioned these online resources earlier. Can you tell us more about how students might engage with those?

EMMA: Yeah. So the OU Library is fantastic for law resources. And it does have quite a lot of practical resources. So I've put up a picture of Lexis Library there, because students probably use that quite a lot. But they might not see that down one side of the page, there's actually a lot of practitioner textbooks. So they're much more focused on a particular area, say, construction

law. So there are loads of resources within the library.

But the reality is students are going to need to go outside the OU Library as well and probably will start by googling an issue. And that's fine. That's an OK thing to do, as long as you're wary of what sources you're looking at, because you do a search, you might get 1,000 results.

So you need to look at them and think, are these sources ones that are reliable? Are they up to date? Are they accurate? Are they actually speaking about English law and not US law or some other kind of law? You need to always be evaluating your sources really carefully.

Then it's fine to have a look at these different online sources. And lots of charities, and lots of organisations provide really helpful sources. But you then need to go back to the OU Library, and you need to check the facts on those are correct.

And if they've given a piece of legislation, you need to actually go back and read that legislation. And that's what sets what you're doing as a practical legal researcher apart from other people, because you're actually then going back, taking that information, finding the law, and really being thorough about checking it.

KAREN FOLEY: So lots and lots of sources there. And the OU Library is one of the best. And the library team also help a lot with searching. So once students have gone and done all of this research, I guess the next stage is the writing, isn't it, Francine?

FRANCINE: Absolutely. It's taking your research and explaining it to a client. So there are a number of things we want to think about. If I can just pop the halfway into long.

And so you think about what students need to think about for effective legal writing. So you write for universities. So our students have got lots of experience about writing. They've been writing essay questions probably for over 3, 4, 5, 6 years, which is great. But that's a slightly different type of writing.

And what we asked students to do on their legal law degree is to do problem questions. So this is more similar to answering a problem question. But we need to get rid of academic jargon, because as Emma talked about before, our client doesn't want to know about a case name or a complicated piece of statute. So we need to write in plain English, so in a really clear and concise way. We don't want pages and pages of information, because a client will be able to understand it. They won't know what we're talking about, and they'll get very confused.

So students need to really be able to hone these skills of writing clearly and concisely in plain English, taking their skills from academia and using them in professional context, and thinking about the end user. Who is my audience? And how do I write for my audience?

KAREN FOLEY: And writing your own words, I think, is one of the most challenging things, especially when things get very complicated.

FRANCINE: Absolutely. And just the ability to write without-- in plain English. So hopefully, we want to give people some real good strategies for legal writing.

And again, it goes back to the planning. I think every student, no matter what discipline they're doing, they're always being told to plan. So whether you're writing an essay or you're writing a problem question, it's exactly the same for legal writing, for writing a professional letter. Plan what you're going to say. You need to think about it really carefully. You can't just launch into a piece of writing.

And then you need to say what you mean to say, so really clearly and concisely. Clients are not going to be impressed by big words. They don't need to know a complicated word. What they want to be able to do is understand the message.

And then you need to edit and revise. Students sometimes feel that more is better. But actually, less is more. So the more clearly can say something, the less words you can use, the better it will be. So you need to go back, edit and revise.

And one of the ways that we're going to work in Open Justice through the module is getting to constructively criticise our work to other people. So ask someone else to read it. Ask them where we can find points you could edit and revise.

And the really big thing is writing in plain English. Lawyers have a terrible, terrible reputation for writing in-- using big words and not clearly. But plain English is exactly what we're asking for students to be able to do. So no legal jargon, no technical terms.

And a big one, a really basic one, is no spelling and punctuation errors. This is a professional letter. You are advising a client. So they will be really unimpressed if it's full of spelling errors and punctuation errors. So it's really important to create a professional image by writing without those errors in there.

And one of the things that we put on there is templates. So in the clinic, we're going to be

using templates to help students. So it's quite common in legal practise to use templates. So you have a clear structure of what the letter is going to look like. And so we're going to get students to use those. So if they decide to go into practise, they'll have lots of experience of using templates to work with.

KAREN FOLEY: Just so you know, we've had a couple of technical problems. I'm sorry if we're being chucked out. If that happens, just press the Refresh screen. And hopefully, you can join us back in a second. I am sorry about that.

That's really interesting, Francine. And I'd like to go back to what our audience was saying, because we asked them about the differences between academic writing and legal writing, because a lot of this, to me, sounds very familiar in terms of what I tell my psychology and science students to do.

So we asked people, is academic writing different to legal writing? And let's see what the results were from that. So a lot of people have said yes, it is, which is really where the continuum is.

But equally, there are a lot of things in common as well. So I appreciate that these things are all very, very important, as they are in many, many subjects. But how could students who were developing effective strategies for legal writing really focus on these? And what are some of the key distinctions that differentiate this from writing that somebody else might do in another faculty?

FRANCINE: Yeah, I think it's-- let's talk just a little bit about the way it looks, for a start. So when they're used to writing an essay and a problem question, you're structuring it in a very specific way. So you've had lots of guidance about how you structure an introduction, and the main body, and a conclusion in an essay, or in a problem question, how you set it out. But in a legal letter, that's a very different style of writing.

So remembering these really basic things that are very important about the heading of the letter, so setting it out with a proper address on it, making sure that you address people correctly. We want to create a professional image. So writing "Dear Karen," we wouldn't say is a professional-- we want you to write "Dear Miss Foley," and making sure that you check how a client wants to be addressed.

And having the main body of the letter just like you would in an essay, thinking about your

paragraph structuring. So thinking about breaking it down into different areas so it's easy to follow. So taking some of those skills you've learned in academia and use those in your professional writing. But keeping those paragraphs to the point, one issue per paragraph, which I'm sure students are very familiar with hearing, and making sure it flows very clearly.

And this ending is very important, to make sure that you're ending it appropriately. So things like whether you're using "Yours sincerely," or "Yours faithfully," how you're ending it with your own name or your full name, not just ending it, Francine or Karen. Thinking about the impression you're creating.

So when a client opens that letter, what kind of impression are we creating with that letter? As they look at it, do they feel confident? Because we want clients to feel confident in our advice. So students want to be creating this idea of confidence. And that is translated through their writing.

KAREN FOLEY: So this might be one of the templates then that students would use?

FRANCINE: Exactly. This is very basic, how a letter looks. And then we'll have things where we'll pull-- we're going to be using something called a case management system. And that will have information about a client in the system. And the letters from the template will draw in information, so the client's address and things like that.

But it's getting students very used to checking information, checking that they've got the correct spelling. Obviously, if we're sending a letter to someone, we need to make sure that we've addressed it correctly, so double-checking spelling of things.

And when they're doing interviews, checking how a client spells their name. Don't presume that you know how it is. You need to double-check these things, because these are really important about creating a professional impression.

KAREN FOLEY: So a lot of this, like you say, is the impression management. But then some of it will be conventional-- is complying with these conventions. How often do those change? I mean, when I used to write letters, I've known to do things on the left or the right. There are various sorts of styles, aren't there, that sort of happen. So how important is it to be up to speed with some of those?

FRANCINE: Well, what we're going to do is, through the templates, we're going to help students with that, because obviously, things do change. And actually, I think what we-- a fascinating question is,

how many letters do students actually write? Because we're so used to writing text or email, that actually, the art of letter-writing is a dying art now. So actually, for a lot of students, they may not have written letters for a long time. The last time, they might have written a thank you letter for a birthday present or something like that.

So that's why we're going to use templates, so the students know about the structuring. We don't want them to get worried or concerned about that, and to get them into good practise. So there are lots of conventions that we will be using that we will talk to them about. But they haven't got to worry about how it should be. So they'll know where to put things in the information. And we're going to help them and support them through that process, because that's part of doing this project is learning this information and learning the art of letter-writing again.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. No, thank you for that. And I can see how that would be really useful and very reassuring for students as well so that they can really focus on what matters, the writing in your own words, and those conventions being embedded within their learning alongside that.

Marie, we've been talking a lot about some of these skills here that we've been looking at in terms of researching and both writing. Firstly, going back to Emma's discussions about online resources and locating those, finding those, I mean, searching is something that is so transferable and so valuable for students. How might that then feed into employability?

MARIE: Well, I think all employers nowadays are expecting graduates to be very proficient with a range of IT skills. So using those IT skills and then also being able to research as well. So I think in a wide range of careers, employers would expect graduates to be able to research for whatever sector they're working in or whatever company, et cetera.

So their skills are highly transferable, whether it's in the legal environment, if they're going into a legal related career, or whether they're doing a research role, research assistant positions that come up in different sectors and areas, or whether they're working in another sector altogether. They will often use those skills, so both a combination of their IT skills, being able to use a range of different platforms and devices, but also having those research skills, too.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a really good point, because in addition to some of the things Emma was talking about, the more formal ways of searching-- using the library and various resources-- she was also talking about using some of the more common things that we would use every day, things like

Wikipedia. And indeed, grey media is becoming so much more important as people want to research things that are topical here and now as well.

Often though, students might think, well, the more formal things are easy to identify in terms of my employability. I can say, I can do literature research, as I can find out x and y and z. How do you help students identify the skills that they're actually building up, that they may not be aware of? So things Emma was talking about like being able to research on Google, et cetera, and collect that information, identify sources as being more or less credible. How might you encourage students to tap into those and promote those on their CVs?

MARIE:

Well, I think the key thing we would suggest to students is to look at the opportunities that they're interested in going into, so whether that's job vacancies, internships, placements, whatever, and actually look at real examples of what are employers looking for.

Also, a lot of legal-specific websites for students will have lots of articles and information about particular skills that they're looking for, and giving them advice on that. But an area that we often find with careers is that students struggle a lot with actually articulating these skills and experience that they have and sometimes underestimating the skills that they have, thinking that an employer won't be interested.

But I think the key thing for students is to be able to see how or learn how to make the skills and experience they have relevant to the sector they want to go into. So if their experience is in a totally different area outside of law, how can they make that experience relevant to demonstrate the skills an employer is looking for?

KAREN FOLEY:

We asked our students which resources they were using most, and 71% said they were using Google, 29%, OU Library and other websites. So students clearly are using a lot of that more social media.

Now the Career Service offer current students and students once they've graduated, for a limited time, access to various forms of advice and help to support them in those. Do you want to run through a couple of those options for us?

MARIE:

Yes, I mean, our website, most of it, is on open access to prospective students, current students, and then graduates. Some of the resources, such as webinars and forums would be exclusively for our current students. So there's a wide range of materials there that we have that students can tap into.

We also have a section on different careers with your OU degree. So there's a section there dedicated to law, so looking at skills and career options related subject and a couple of alumni case studies as well for law. And students then, if they want any help on a one-to-one basis, they can access that through our website as well.

And we've also put up in a resources section here, a number of other external websites that we would recommend that law students particularly look at, because I think there's an awful lot of information out there in this specific area.

KAREN FOLEY: So those resources are on the website. you can find those back on the studenthublive.kmi.open.ac.uk section on resources.

Before we end, Marie, there were two things I wanted to ask you. And the first one is about things that legal employers are looking for. And the second one is if students aren't going on to study law, some of the transferable skills that they might then be able to promote that they've gained from their law degree.

So firstly, if we could look at some of the things that legal employers are looking for. What matters right now?

MARIE: Well, I think there's a wide range of skills that legal employers are looking for. Just to give you three brief examples, I would say, skills in commercial awareness, or business skills, are always sought by legal employers, again, because it's a very competitive market. And so I think OU students are quite well-placed for those if they're working maybe in a business environment or in commercial sector, to be able to use that knowledge to demonstrate those skills.

The second example I can think of is related to communications skills, and that's both spoken and written. So we've touched on legal writing earlier. But I think through the Open Justice activities, students are going to get some fantastic opportunities to develop their communication skills.

So whether that's speaking to different types of audiences, and whether it's on a one-to-one or speaking to groups, so those skills are highly transferable and sought after by legal employers, and also their writing skills, obviously communication via email, letters, et cetera.

And the third example, I would say, we've touched on some of the points that Francine and

Emma have made. It's about that professional part. So attention to detail and accuracy are extremely important. So again, students will have an opportunity to develop those skills through this module and in other parts of their studies.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. And what about if students aren't going on to study law? Because we know a lot of students are doing this for fun and to enhance their career options. So what are some of those transferable skills then that they might be well-advised to promote?

MARIE: Well, a lot of the generic skills they will be gaining with it. That's the communication, teamwork, problem solving, analytical skills. All of those would be highly transferable, because I mean, generally, law graduates are very well regarded by employers. And a lot of opportunities in the graduate job market are open to students of any discipline. So effectively, the skills that they're gaining on their degree can be transferable to a wide range of careers.

But there might be areas where the skills and knowledge that students have gained through their law degree could be useful. There are also graduate routes into, say, social work, for example, where knowledge of legislation there can be useful.

Also areas like HR, knowledge of employment law. If somebody's going into maybe working or training accounting, again, taxation legislation. So there's lots of different areas where having the understanding and background from their degree could be very transferable and useful in a wide range of different careers going forward.

KAREN FOLEY: And I guess there are other things even, like marketing or politics, even, where you shouldn't go around saying things that you can't commit to.

MARIE: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Also, yes, we'd been having a discussion about Brexit earlier. So yes, there are lots of things and, yeah, a controversial point, I suppose.

What about the more emotional side of things? I mean, if people are not practicing law and there's this worry about the UK being a litigious society, do people feel comfortable then with people having knowledge of the law, that they might be able to be more moral people and safe within that society? Is that one of the things that students might feel as part of their law degree, do you think?

MARIE:

Well, that would be a very individual question. I mean, I would suppose if you think about it in an application situation, it's probably quite unusual to be asked something like that, because generally, you're looking at somebody's motivations, their interests, and effectively being able to demonstrate that they've got the skills, the experience and knowledge, et cetera, required for a job. So I'm not sure how much that would manifest itself in that sort of situation.

KAREN FOLEY:

Yeah, excellent. All right. Well, thank you very much. And so find out more about what the Career Service can offer from those. Those have been some really, really good skills, though, just going back to that. And I'm sure students will find those really, really useful.

And I guess the take-home points from this are being able to identify where you're going in terms of searching and resourcing things, and then being able to develop an argument about writing in your own words, and being very mindful of the facts that you are able to convey in the right format and convention that is necessary to communicate. Lovely.

Well, Marie, Emma, and Francine, thank you very much for that. That ends this afternoon session. But we will be back this evening from 7 o'clock tonight. The chat room will open at 6:30.

We have some sessions this evening. Paul Catley, the head of the law school, is going to give us an introduction. We're going to look at public legal education in prisons. We're going to take a look at some student experiences as well, of how they've gone out and given legal advice, and lots, lots more.

So join us this evening for that session from 7:00 till 9:00 tonight. We're going to replay something now that we did at the Faculty of Business and Law induction event, which was from the law society, where we did a moot. Now this is a bit of fun, but I hope you enjoy it.

The chat room will remain open while this is going on. But if there are any specific questions that you would like to feed into this evening's discussion that we haven't covered today, you can email our Student Hub @open.ac.uk. The Twitter hashtag is #studenthublive16, and the handle is @studenthub.

Sophie and HJ, can we just have a quick goodbye from you before we wrap up this afternoon session?

HJ:

Yes, well, we've had some great chat. I think we're just looking forward to seeing everyone--

SOPHIE: This evening.

HJ: --this evening. Yes, and--

SOPHIE: So thank you for joining us. And hopefully, we will see you all very soon.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you very much. All right, bye for now. We'll see you at 7 o'clock this evening.

[MUSIC PLAYING]