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**INTERVIEWER:** We're now going to have a video, and I had a chat with John Perry about his Student Stories project on Skype, so we're going to take a look at what he had to say about that and then we're going to come up and tell you what final aspects of your induction for primary studies are in store for you. So this video is about 13 minutes. The chat's still running. So do ask us any questions and we'll try and cover any things that we haven't already done so in that last concluding section in about 13 minutes.

I'm now going to talk to John Perry, who is a senior lecturer in education and early childhood at the Open University, about a project he's working on called Student Stories. John, thank you for talking to me today about this project. Can you broadly describe it?

**JOHN PERRY:** OK, well I think I'll give you a little bit of background first as to where the project came from. About a year or so ago, I was working with a group of colleagues at the Open University. We're looking into the astute retention and progressions on how students stay with their module studies throughout the course of their learning with the OU and how they progress. And we were obviously confronted with reams and reams of facts and figures-- mainly figures, to be honest-- about the numbers of students who would progress, how they progressed, the numbers of students who drop out, what groups of students drop out more than others.

And within that working group, we decided that we really wanted to engage with a few students and hear what their learning journeys really were, especially before they came to the OU. What did they bring with them when they started their studies? So that was the sort of germ of the idea, really. And so we did a few pilot interviews with some students who volunteered to just tell us about the learning journeys that they from even through school and after school to come in to study with the OU.

And for the people that did those sort of trial interviews, the interviewers, they were very not just revealing but had some sort of impact. They made us think a little bit more that actually students aren't just people who come and go and leave because of difficulties and all that sort of thing but they actually bring things. They bring a huge variety of skills and experiences with them.

And as academics, you're part of module teams. We thought, would this be worthwhile--



people on module teams-- the academics who are in module teams-- having the opportunity to talk to students on their courses before they start regularly. So the idea of the Student Stories project is to involve a group of academics in doing just that and then getting their views on how useful and revealing it is for them.

**INTERVIEWER:** So it's about academics having contact with students, understanding the different perspectives in the learning journey. But you mentioned early on that this sort of came out of a retention and progression initiative, so what were you looking at as researchers? Were you looking at parts of that journey that may be positive or problematic for students or were you looking at it in terms of an overall experience?

**JOHN PERRY:** We were really looking at the-- we were focusing on the OU part of their learning experience and looking at-- basically looking at a bit of a deficit way, what goes wrong for students so that they may not carry on. And was there anything that the OU can do better to support students, but by just focusing on the difficulties that students may have and not really just being a little bit more in tune with some of the skills and experiences they bring with them, we were only looking at one side of the picture.

So that was the idea is to just sort of shift the balance a little bit and see whether that is useful for the people who write the course materials and who design the support materials and to be just more in tune with that sort of broader idea of what a student brings to their studies, rather than a student hasn't studied for a long time, for example. Therefore, they may find studying very difficult. Well that's not necessarily the case. It's much more complex and probably much more sort of involved than that because learning is not just about reading books and studying things in the academic way, as we all know.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you're getting very rich data from this different way of looking at things from these interviews with students. Tell us, how did this work over time? Were you tracking students' progression throughout? And is that part of the plan of this project?

**JOHN PERRY:** Well, I mean, this part of the project is very early. This gathering of learning stories and involving academics in that. So it's a very-- it's early stages. At the time, we were looking very much at statistical data around student progression and dropout within courses. So not really engaging with anything qualitatively at all.

So the idea is, will adding a different dimension to academics, looking at this issue of student



retention and progression, which we all want to support and make sure happens, whether adding a different dimension to that will have an impact or not. So that's why it's a research project. We're in the early days and we're involving a group. It's going to be 10 academics within the faculty who are going to experience interviewing two or three students each in the next couple of months at their very early stages of study, and then those academics are going to get together as a group and not talk about the stories as such but talk about what it taught them about engaging with real students and real students' learning experiences before they get studying with the OU.

**INTERVIEWER:** And without wanting to preempt any of the findings, what sorts of things are you hoping might emerge as part of these dialogues with the academics that sort of result from some of these stories? Are there any areas that you're going to focus on in these semi-structured interviews that might lead you to sort of consider specific instances for students or relates to retention and progression as you sort of set out early on?

**JOHN PERRY:** What tends to be found with more qualitative research with students around these sorts of issues is that their learning styles are much more varied and their learning experiences are very varied. And therefore, the support we offer and the materials that we present-- the way we present teaching materials-- need to reflect that variety. Everyone learns differently. Everyone experiences language and communication differently.

And so it's about hoping to widen participation and make materials more inclusive. You won't get this definitive details but it's just trying to shift the mindset of us people who write materials and expand the mindset-- not shift. Expand the mindset of those people who are writing materials to always be thinking about widening participation so that this broad range of learning experiences and the gifts and skills that students bring to their studies should be something that should be utilised and not seen as something that's a barrier to them progressing and staying with their study journey.

**INTERVIEWER:** You've been a long-term advocate and campaigner for inclusive education and right now you're talking about how finding out about students' experiences may lead to some sorts of change in terms of making things more inclusive and accessible for some sorts of students. Is there anything that you could sort of indicate that might be a potential outcome, I guess, from some of these stories? We do a lot at the Open University. We've heard a lot in today's programme about the various ways that we support students with various different requirements, so I'm wondering, is there anything that you sort of think is a focus-- maybe in



particular with distance learning-- that could be improved for certain students to make it more inclusive?

**JOHN PERRY:** I mean, this is just a personal thing, and I suppose it's based on where I come from and the things I've been involved with in my teaching career and also in higher education as an academic, but I think that two areas really. One will be perhaps enabling students to share their experiences with other students and with the module team before they start study, because in that way, the students don't come with sort of a view that because they haven't studied for a long time or because perhaps English is an additional language to them that they're coming with a deficit. They're actually coming with numerous other experiences. It's just a different way that they're presenting themselves to the study. So that's the first thing.

And I think the second thing, going on a bit further through the module presentation and the way that study materials are set up, I think it's the whole thing around assessment and how students are assessed, because if it's mainly through a one-dimensional traditional sort of written medium and that sort of call and response that we set up, is that actually tapping into the rich learning experiences that the students bring with them? Are we enabling them to show in the best way that they can what they have learned if that sort of model of showing what they've learned doesn't fit them?

So it's thinking about the idea of rather than the students having to change to fit in with the assessment model, shouldn't it be a two-way thing? Yes, the students have to adapt and fit into certain ways of working, but also, isn't it about the assessors adapting and changing as well? That's sort of what I've brought with me from my understanding of inclusion and the inclusive education, I guess.

**INTERVIEWER:** And it sounds like even though this might appear to be students telling their story and their experiences to an academic, there could be some very tangible and valuable outputs as a result of this. And it's those sort of dialogues that would then happen internally with the academic team that would help then, I guess, shift and shape some of those future interventions, I guess you may call them.

**JOHN PERRY:** Yeah, I mean that's sort of the hope. I mean, you can't actually define what those outcomes are going to be, as you've said, but obviously something tangible is hoped to come of it. Otherwise, there's no point in doing something. Although I would also add that actually just the experience of people sharing stories and exchanging and then those being shared with other



people, that sort of conversational experience I think is powerful and effective in itself without having to necessarily have to link to, oh, now we must do this, then, type sort of response. So I think that the core of the project around the stories is a powerful one in itself, if you can see what I mean.

**INTERVIEWER:** Absolutely because I guess it's about re-framing some of those experiences. As you said earlier, people can see things as a deficit and neglect to see some of the strengths and valuable contributions that they do bring as perhaps mature students. So, John, what's going to happen, then, in terms of the data? You talked about these stories being shared and participants potentially allowing for their stories to be shared. How are you hoping to disseminate or convey some of the findings and the experiences of students who participate?

**JOHN PERRY:** Well obviously, it will sort of depend on sort of the ongoing funding and things like that. I mean, on an immediate level, I guess it will be within the module teams themselves, and that includes the student body within that module team. So if students were willing for those stories to be shared within the other student group, obviously anonymised and all that sort of stuff, then that may be a possibility.

But the core of the idea is that the student stories would be something that inform module and qualification teams to start with and will be shared at sort of forums where we engage and share in research and scholarship projects and develop things on from there. Then maybe, I mean, I guess if we moved on to another stage and collected another round of stories, you're beginning to collect a valuable and insightful resource developed by students in itself just around the stories, but that would be something I would be interested in but obviously depends on the funding and the impetus within the OU to do that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sounds like a really worthwhile and interesting research initiative, John. I wish you all the best with it and thank you for filling us in.

**JOHN PERRY:** OK, thanks very much for your time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.

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That's the end of our programme for primary studies. I hope you've have a really good day. I'd like to thank all of the guests who've been here filling us in on various aspects that are



important for your studies in primary.

We've had Ian Aes giving us an introduction to the qualification. We've had Linda Colours talking about supporting disability. Cherry Day has given us a perspective from [INAUDIBLE] Students Association. And then Kim Walker talked to us about diversity in primary. Jill McLaughlin gave us an AL perspective. And then finally, we've just been watching John Perry talk about Student Stories.

So if you've missed any of that, you can watch it on the catch up, which will be available very soon on the website, but we've got lots of other things in store for you. In terms of primary, you'll have an induction notice on your module websites and there's lots of other activities. On the 27th, there's a webinar that you can access through your module website, and that's called Contemporary Issues in Primary Education. And this will be useful to all students on all modules but particularly interesting to you if you're thinking about doing the Level 3 module which starts next year. So it'll allow you to complete MBA qualification.

And our final events in the induction programme, specifically for primary, are two more webinar question and answer sessions with the module team. And again, those can be accessed from the website. So do make sure that you check out your module website to find out when those are and see how you can connect with them.

And in terms of the Student Hub Live, well we'll be back next week. We've got lots of events that you can check out on the calendar on the Student Hub Live website. On the 25th, we've got an induction event for the faculty of Business and Law. That's for the Open University Law School and Open University Business School.

On the 26th, we have a sports and fitness and childhood and youth induction and also a boot camp, which is in the morning from 10:00 till 12:00, and that will be on key skills for your study, including things like note taking, which we've talked about today. Then on the 3rd and 4th of October, we have our refreshers orientation event and that's for all students. So in addition to some skills there, we're going to be filling you in on important aspects about your OU study. We'll also be doing things like live science and having some live science chats and including lots and lots of fun content, including our famous [? Willow Ologies ?] quiz, so do make sure you check that out. On the 9th of October, we have a session on assessment and also an induction for post-graduate students.

So there is lots and lots going on. Do make sure you put them in your calendars. It's been



wonderful having you here today, being so diligent, so helpful to each other, and sharing your experiences and support. And we really appreciate that, so thank you. And I'd like to thank [? HD ?] as well for moderating the chat so well. And we hope to see you very soon at another Student Hub Live event. But that's all for us from today, so we'll see you very soon. Bye for now.

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