

[INTRO MUSIC PLAYING]

**KAREN FOLEY:** In this session at the *Student Hub Live*, we take a look at supporting disability. And I'm joined by Lynda Culley. Lynda, you are a disability support advisor in the OU's disability support team.

And thank you for coming along today because I wanted to talk to you about why valuing diversity was so important and really about how we do it at the OU. So we've got the statement, right, which is the OU statement on equality and diversity. And it is, we anticipate and respond positively to the different needs and circumstances so that everyone can achieve their potential. Was a wonderful statement. So tell us, how do we implement this idea?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** OK. So that is for everybody. It's not just for students with disabilities. But certainly in the team I work in, it epitomises everything that we try and do by anticipating sort of barriers and helping students to overcome those barriers.

And we work on a social model of disability. So it's basically the barriers that society puts in place rather than any disability or health difficulty itself. And so we can make adjustments, all sorts of adjustments in our teaching, in the way students learn in all sorts of provision so that, I suppose, students are on a level playing field-- all students on a level playing field.

And that statement just goes to illustrate part of what we try and do as a university. But I think it particularly epitomises what we do in our team.

**KAREN FOLEY:** It's interesting you say the word, the barriers that society puts. Because there are often very obvious ones, such as ramps on foot paths, for example, crossing the road, for example, can lead to all sorts of complexities of the traffic signals, old-fashioned or in certain places. So there's a lot of obvious things that you can see for physical disabilities.

But as you say, these disabilities can either be disability or not. It's all about reaching true potential. But what about unseen disabilities? How does the team that you work in support those kinds of things in terms of allowing students to achieve their potential?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Well, I suppose the first thing is we need to know about it, really. And that can be a barrier in itself because students are perhaps reluctant to disclose the fact that they might have extreme

anxiety, they might have other mental health difficulties, they might have other unseen disabilities, problems such as, I suppose, things like epilepsy maybe, or autism, lots of things that you wouldn't necessarily know go on.

And if they're given the opportunity to disclose, which they are at every station. I mean, from the minute they pick up a phone, they go on the website, there's always that possibility to tell us. And then we can start putting support in place and helping them. One of the things is a disability support form that they have access to where they can start to tell us about some of the difficulties they have and how we can help them overcome them.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So your team really focus then-- as you say, this is about all students-- but your team in particular focus on students who want to disclose that something that's going to impact on their studies. And you really work with those students to make reasonable adjustments to support them in their learning.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Yes.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And as you say, one of these ways of doing things as a disclosure form. How does that process work? And is it sort of categorical? I mean, some people might have a period of depression that then may lift. So some things can be a little bit fluid.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** They can.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Tell us how this process works, and, I guess, what the advantages are of engaging with that?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Well, I suppose the first thing that happens when a student decides to-- they don't have to fill in the form, anyway. They can just tell us. And if they've told anyone in the university, then they're deemed to have told the university unless they specifically don't want anyone to know. And even then, we have to just make a confidential note.

They would tell us how they think it would impact on their study. But it might just be for a short term, so that happens quite a lot. So we would write a profile. That's essentially what the forms for. Our team spends an awful lot of time writing disability profiles for tutors really, but anyone else who's involved in that support.

It's a confidential profile. It's owned by the student. So they get the chance to see what we've written. They can change it at any time, so as you say, if somebody has got a short period of ill health, or it's very fluctuating. And sometimes it's useful just for the tutor to know that, though

that sometimes they might not be able to access their studies as easily as others. So it gives the opportunity to put something very brief or something really quite extensive if necessary.

**KAREN FOLEY:** You've got an example of one of these? Or could you talk us through something that might happen?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Yes, I've got-- well, this is just a printed out version of quite a complex profile. But it isn't terribly long. But it probably tells this student's tutors is everything that they need to know when they're starting their studies. And it will go with the student all the way through, so every tutor-- if they change-- well, they're probably going to change modules every year.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Hopefully.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Almost certainly going to have different tutors every year. And it can be updated. So if a tutor finds that something really helped this particular student, we can put that in their profile for the next tutor. That's an ideal scenario. It doesn't always happen that way.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So this is very complex. But it's a brief profile. It's something that seen by the student, and really focuses on how the tutor can work with the student to enable them to achieve their full potential.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Yeah. So we'd have a summary at the beginning about what the disclosed disability or difficulties are, then how they impact on their study, and then how we can overcome them with adjustments that tutors can make. So we've got-- what here we're saying, Adam will need is a reasonable adjustment for his disabilities, printed copies of module materials where modules are presented online in the form that he'd like those into. Then tutors are asked to offer advice in breaking module material down into manageable chunks to aid, concentration, encourage--

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now, that sounds like something I could do with as well. So to what extent-- I mean, your team do a lot of things. And I'd like you to show the poster of the sorts of things that you do because, obviously, this profile is one of the important things, it's one of the things that, as you say, really benefits both the student and the tutor, enables students to achieve their maximum potential.

However, it is constructed with careful consideration and consultation so that these are right for the students. A lot of people would like to have extra time in exams, for example, but that's not always the most kind thing to do for everybody. So how do your team work with these processes to really make sure that you are doing the right thing to support each individual

student?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Well, I have to say, they are individual. A lot of them, we have sort of-- I'd suppose you'd call them templates, really, so we know that a certain disability might have a certain impact on studies. But of course, every student is absolutely individual. And that's why we encourage them to tell us the nuances of their particular condition.

As you say, it doesn't necessarily-- I mean, we'll often say, tutors need to be quite lenient with perhaps assignment deadlines. But that doesn't necessarily help the student, so we can write that in there. But it's something that needs to be discussed with the tutor.

And if somebody had OCD, for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, for example, it might not be the best thing for them to keep putting it off and putting off it. So we do have to work with those kinds of things in mind, and what's best for them. And I mean, every student will probably say, oh, I want to have extensions to assignments written into my profile. And so that's why it's suggested that might be a way for it, but it isn't necessarily going to be.

And that's where the tutor can come in and discuss it. And they might find that actually there's something else that works better. And then we can update the profile in that way. Things like extra time in exams, that's typically, say, a student with dyslexia. But with them, we'd work with the exams teams, and they discuss and liaise with students to-- there are only certain types of evidence, for example, a formal assessment, that kind of thing, to have that kind of provision.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So you're liaising with a lot of areas of the university, and most importantly, with the students. You've got a lovely poster, so I'd love you to show about what your team does. Because I think it really encompasses the very broad nature of the aspects that you engage with. Possibly the bottom part of this poster there is the most interesting where you tell them about consistent procedures, disabled students allowance, information advisory guidance, profiles-- which we've just been talking about.

Can I do it in assessing needs? So, can I do it? I mean, that's a very important part of picking up. We've been speaking to student support seems about assisting students both with guidance around their study intentions, but also perhaps other areas of their life that could impact on their ability to study.

So how do you actually-- how do you support students, I guess, with going through this process in terms of the emotional side? You're a lovely, friendly, engaging, team. And then I

can imagine lots of students would want to talk with. But briefly, can you students interact with you. And as you've mentioned before, this is an optional thing.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Well, they would probably have filled out one of those forms. And then that would invite discussion, really. It's just a starting point. So they'd call us, and we'll go through the form with them, if we can. Often we can't get a hold of a student, so we'd write a disability profile based on what they've told us and sort of typical adjustments that we might make for that kind of disability.

We don't-- in our team, in the disability support team-- get involved in is it the right course for them, for example. We'd refer them to the student support team, and they would get involved in that sort of academic guidance. But we might have a conversation about are you sure you haven't taken on too much study given that you might need extra support, and it's going to take you a bit longer than other students? Perhaps we might have those kinds of gentle conversations.

We would always encourage students who feel that they'd like to, to check whether they might be eligible to apply for Disabled Students Allowance. And we can help them through that process if they get really stuck. Because it's quite a form, as all these things are. And a lot of students think that if they've completed the disability support form to tell the university, that they've also applied for the Disabled Students Allowance, and that isn't the case. It's a completely separate government funded support. But we do encourage them to.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And you must know some tricks about how to get the forms filled in and support students in getting those through.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Well, the university has to fill in part of it anyway to confirm that they're studying for the funding bodies, so we can do that bit for the students. And so we can talk them through it on the phone. Mostly, I think, once they realise it's-- they don't have to do it all in one go, they can get someone to help them and so on. But we are always available to talk students through it if they get really stuck even though it isn't our form, so to speak.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. OK. So a really good source of advice and support with the profiling. You spoke also about reasonable adjustments, and you mentioned printed materials for your student, Adam, who we were looking at as an exemplar. But you've also brought some comb-bound books. And you assist students again with aspects that are suitable for their individual needs.

But these comb-bound books are one physical example that we could, I guess, bring in to show students. So can you tell us about this way of adjusting for students, and perhaps more broadly the kinds of things that you do in addition to this?

**LYNDA CULLEY:** OK.

**KAREN FOLEY:** That's upside down.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** Is it? Oh, sorry.

**KAREN FOLEY:** That's all right.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** It's because the other one's upside down.

**KAREN FOLEY:** It tricked us.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** So that's just a standard OU textbook that's have-- it's basically the spine taken off and spirally bound. And the reason that students might prefer that format is perhaps if they want to use a magnifier, for example, they can lay it flat for scanning. If they're lying in bed, perhaps it's easier to proper up on a stand or something in bed. Dyslexic students might use it to use their coloured overlays, and so on.

So that would-- a lot of these come from the warehouse. And they can be-- they're available on some modules. And students have access to find out which modules have the comb-bound versions.

And then these are the ones we do ourselves. So this is a module that's entirely online.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Right.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** And a lot of students-- it shouldn't be a preference, it should be a need, but there's so many reasons why students-- so though they can study online, they don't want to exclusively. They might not be to sit at a screen for very long. They might have migraines that are triggered by glare, epilepsy. They might-- a lot of students with dyslexia, especially before they learn other strategies, will think that they want everything printed, and so we'd be happy to do that for them.

And so they're not as pretty. And they come-- but they come spirally bound. They can come how they want them, but that's the standard.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And as you say, this isn't a preference. It's something that is, after an assessment, deemed appropriate for that particular student.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** It's usually after a discussion with somebody like me as to whether that is the best thing for them actually. Because sometimes, I mean, it might not be. And the fact they can change the screen resolution, or change the background, or the fonts that they don't know might mean, actually, that solves all their problems. It isn't really online.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And my next guest is going to talk about the disabled students' group and how they support students. And I also know that she uses a variety of ways of finding out the best solutions for her, which as you say, are not always the most obvious ones that one comes across. It's really about focusing on the individual, thinking about learning needs, and also being flexible to change because different strategies can work at different moments.

**LYNDA CULLEY:** That's right. And we need to anticipate as well. With the module teams, they're always anticipating what barriers might be, so we have a variety of formats these days that should suit everybody.

But there will be-- we still have to make adjustments that we couldn't have anticipated, or perhaps we didn't, and we should have. And so we do have to sometimes react rather than anticipate. But that's what we try and do. And we'll do everything that's reasonably possible to support every individual student to make sure they have the best learning experience.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Wonderful. Well, Lynda Culley, thank you so much for filling us in on what the disability support team do with the Open University. I hope you found it useful. And do connect with them and fill that form out if you think that this is something that's appropriate for you.

We're going to come back into the next session with some of your comments that have been happening in the chat. But before we do that, we're going to show you a short video, which is something all students need to know about the online library. And then I will be back with Cherry Day to talk about the Students' Association and a student perspective. See you in a minute.

[OUTRO MUSIC PLAYING]