

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome to the Student Hub Live. This session takes a look at what it means to be a postgraduate student. And I'm joined by Alison Fox and Azumah Dennis, who are here today to fill us in on this.

And, Alison, you're the chair of EE812, which is the Leadership & Management pathway. And you also hold a national role in the Educational Leadership Special Interests Group for the British Educational Research Association, something I think we're going to be talking about a little bit later today. And you also studied your MEd And PhD while working as a secondary school teacher. So you've had that time management balancing act that so many of our students are talking about.

And, Azumah, you're the lead for the Leadership & Management pathway, which is great, because you've got a lot of Leadership and Management students here right now. And you also have been doing your MA and EdD whilst working in full-time education. So again, I'm sure you got some advice to fill people in on.

Now, going from undergraduate level to postgraduate is a massive shift, in terms of the sort of levels of complexity, et cetera. So can you tell us, Azumah, how you think you could sort of summarise what being a postgraduate student is like?

AZUMAH: OK, well, I think, as you said, it is a shift from moving from undergraduate to postgraduate. But in a sense, it's a structured shift. We do make the assumption at postgraduate that you've done some sort of undergraduate work. And so it's a kind of a natural progression.

And it's much more-- not just a shift in terms of the complexity of the work-- because actually how complex something is is dependent on how comfortable and how confident you feel with the material. But there is the expectation that you might perhaps be much more of an independent thinker, much more used to critical thinking, much more used to scholarly activity by the time you get to postgraduate work. Having said that, we do know that we have students who start off at MA level.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, this whole idea of independent thinking is something we were talking about this morning in our Assessment Boot Camp, where we were taking a look at critical thinking. So if you'd like to take a look at that session, you can watch that on the catch-up, as can you on many other sessions on critical thinking.

But this whole leap from being an independent learner and being able to assess things, would you say that's one of the key differences that that happens at postgraduate level, where you can do more self-directed study?

AZUMAH: Yes. And certainly with the Leadership & Management pathway, many of the students who register on that pathway are working professionals. And so we value the knowledge and the insight that they gain from the fact that they're in workplaces. And we, as much as possible, draw that into the module and we draw that into what they're reading and writing about. So we acknowledge the life experience that they have. And that is helpful for their study.

KAREN FOLEY: Now we emphasise setting an awful lot. And you've mentioned that people will have experience from their professional practise, maybe, or certainly maybe their work setting. How can people start to incorporate some of that within their studies?

AZUMAH: Well, we explicitly invite them to. So we might, for example-- and I'll take an example from Leadership, because that's a module that I'm most familiar with. We might ask them to think about the qualities associated with an effective leader within an organisation. They might be invited to observe how a particular leader goes about introducing change within an organisation and reflect on what things worked or what things haven't worked.

And once they have that life experience, they're also, at the same time, going to be engaging with the academic literature. And actually, what you find is that your experience gives you material to reflect on, and to review and to critically analyse that the academic literature, and to see how well the two things connect to each other or reconcile with each other. Or what's missing from the literature? Or what am I not noticing about my experience, that this literature gives me an idea of what might be happening? So they really do run very, very closely together.

KAREN FOLEY: So taking that idea, then, of incorporating things that you might do with things that you're going to in your studies, tell us about motivation and what importance that has, in terms of success?

AZUMAH: I--

KAREN FOLEY: Do you think students are more motivated and more successful? Or do you think the brighter ones are more successful?

AZUMAH: Absolutely not. I mean, this is-- absolutely not. I think what makes students successful in their

study is the amount of time and the amount of energy that they put into their work. I realise, of course, if you're a mature student and you're working, and you've got a whole load of responsibilities, it is a really-- there is a moment of time management. And you've got to manage your time really carefully.

But actually, what makes the difference is not how bright or intelligent or smart somebody is. It isn't even whether you've got a third or a first for your undergraduate degree. It really is a matter of the time and energy that you put into your study. And if you're quite organised about it, if you're quite-- you know, you set aside that weekly time and you focus on the reading, the study and the analysis, and the writing that you have to do, then you will do well. There's no sort of trick formula to it. It really is, I think, quite straightforward in that way. If you're motivated and you do what you need to do, then you'll do well with that.

KAREN FOLEY: We asked people at home what being a postgraduate student means to them. And motivation featured very highly in this. So let's see if we can take a look and see what you completed at home. Think we're just getting that ready for you at the moment.

The other thing that we asked, while we're getting that ready, is the idea about student community. And this is something that I wanted to ask you about, Alison. Because community is very important to a lot of people. And I think it's something that can make a massive difference at postgraduate level. Because undergraduate level, you know, often we're panicking, and we can sort of be together in community. But at postgraduate level, that community tends to be more supportive than just the fact that other people are out there, in terms of exchanging ideas, and actually building a critical community.

ALISON: Absolutely. And as Azumah was saying, you know, actually, every student on the course is a resource for everybody else. And that's why into the course, as Jane and Eric were talking about earlier, we've built in so many activities, where-- you know, the discussion forums across the whole module. So that's where everybody can get together around focused activities, just like the ones Azumah was talking about. So when you're being asked to reflect on your experience, then the people who will be reading about that will be thinking about, well, all that's similar or different to mine.

Built into the module, there's the sort of smaller tutor group forum spaces, as well. So smaller tutor groups with some live sessions and these sort of asynchronous, we call them, where you can interact at different times on a discussion session. And then there's all of the resources

beyond the course, as well. The community that you can build should sort of be extending from your immediate peers to back into the workplace.

Because that's where, especially where we're working, on the Leadership & Management strand, you're wanting to explore leadership. So the best support you can have is to be talking about your course with people in the workplace and finding some people who are interested in your studies there, and getting them to help you, sort of acting as critical friends. So when you're asked to reflect on the workplace, you know, going to talk to them.

And they'll be offering insights. They may have been on courses, as well. There are students in doing other courses that will help you. It may not be the academic content side. It might be, as you say, the study skills side. Like, how do I fit this in? I've got these deadlines at work. How do you cope with this? When you find another student in your workplace, in the staffroom or whatever, that's saying, oh, I'm doing one, as well. This worked for me.

So-- and then there's the professional associations, that you can go out and find people who are working in the same role as you or in areas that you've become really interested in, that are experts. And go and meet them, whether it's through social media, as Azumah and I'll be talking about specifically later, or just actually finding out which of the subjects associations or professional associations are relevant to your interests.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, someone at home has said learning how to learn is the hardest thing you'll have to learn in year one, which I think is very true. Because it's about paying attention to what's actually working, being reflective in your practise, and thinking again about what's right for you.

But as you say, there's so much out there. I mean, including the library, for example, and particularly at postgraduate level, they've got some great things, in terms of the way that they help. Not only with the basics, like referencing, et cetera, but there are some incredible resources. And they can help you search for not only papers, but also books and chapters, et cetera, which can be very useful for methods, for example.

ALISON: Yeah, absolutely. And that's one of the great privileges of being part of a university, is that access to the digital library and all the subscriptions that the university pay for on your behalf. It's absolutely vast, the sort of ability of finding things across the world that are relevant to your studies-- as you say, to do with becoming a researcher or to do with specific areas that you become interested in.

And this is another thing you can do on behalf of your colleagues back in your workplace. Because you can be finding information that's relevant to people back in your work as part of your studies here.

KAREN FOLEY: Now I wanted to just pop over and ask Lee about additional adjustments. Lee, you work in the Student Support Team, and I know that sometimes students will approach us with different requirements, et cetera. And you often can help make those additional adjustments. Very, very briefly, what sorts of things might students approach you about that you can help with?

LEE: Well, anything, anything and everything that sort of challenges a student in a particular way that we can help with. So we've had students who can't leave their homes, for example, and we can arrange home exams. We've had students who have some learning issues or dyslexia, and we can put plans in place for those students, as well. So whatever is challenging a student, we want to make the playing field as level as possible for everybody. So we have a range of interventions that we can put in place to help students achieve and get the goals that they're aiming for.

KAREN FOLEY: And, Lee, briefly, can you tell us about the profile that students might want to add to their record, so that people can be aware of those adjustments?

LEE: Absolutely, yeah. Students can declare or disclose a disability or a mental health issue, or any sort of problem that they might have at any time studying with the OU. So you don't just have to do it in your first couple of weeks. You know, if later down the line, perhaps you become aware of an issue, then you can declare or disclose anything to us at any time. You can do that through the Student Home Help Centre.

I will put a link up on the chatroom as well to that. But it's a really good way of letting us know, you know, what issues you might be facing, what challenges you might have in learning. And then we'll do a profile assessment with you to provide you with any support that you might need to overcome those barriers.

KAREN FOLEY: And, Lee, somebody says that they're not sure about whether or not they will be able to do postgraduate because they'll be 60 by the time they get there. So is there an age limit that we need to be mindful of?

LEE: The age limit is only there if you put one in your head. There's not really an age limit at all. I speak to students every day. The last student I spoke to a couple of weeks ago who might be

considered a mature student was 89. And you know, that lady is still studying and going strong with us. And it keeps her very focused on what she wants out of life.

KAREN FOLEY: Even though she started when she was 60, as is the case that so many of us keep studying. There's always something to learn, isn't there? Which is a testimony to lifelong learning.

OK. So, Azumah, I wondered if you could talk to us about meeting other students in their studies, and also how students can support each other. Because we've sort of touched on this idea about a community, and many people said that a learning community was very important to them. So how can people get to other students, apart from the sort of events?

AZUMAH: Well, within the framework of the module, there are various forums. So you have a module forum which will allow you to talk to any student who is on the same module as you. And you can sort of post things online, and they will post things through the module website, which you can then respond to. And hopefully other students will respond to what you're saying.

But equally, you have a smaller group, which is your own tutor group forum, which will be about 15 students within that. And those will be the students who you will learn with. So not only will you perhaps post general comments-- this is what's happening in my workplace at the moment, or a general introduction to yourself-- you'll post your views on perhaps something that you've read. And likewise, other people will post their views on the reading that they're doing. And you'll get a chance to interact in that way.

So the courses are set up on the expectation that you will interact with the tutor, but also with other students in the group. That's part of how the courses, actually, are set up. And there are several spaces, as I've described-- the module forum, the tutor group forum-- for you to do that.

In addition to that, we do have social spaces which run alongside it. There are several Facebook groups, including an official faculty Facebook group, which is another way for you to interact. Less with tutors, but certainly with other students, and perhaps with central academic staff as well. And then we also have a Twitter presence, as well.

So there are-- you may choose not to be completely social through the course, but that will be a choice. There are several opportunities for you to be meeting and talking with other students.

KAREN FOLEY: And perhaps we should mention the Live spaces as well. So throughout the life of a module,

there are some sessions that are ones that you can join in real time, like we are today. And they're usually recorded as well, so people who can't make it, and they're also run at different times to accommodate different time zones and people's availability.

Sometimes they're in support of specific assessments. And sometimes they're there to sort of discuss key ideas within the module. But that's a sort of more direct way that people can get in contact with each other to discuss the ideas.

Now, when coming into contact with other people, I know that for a lot of students, there's this level of anxiety. Like, what if I'm not good enough? What if everyone's writing these profound, incredible things, and I'm not quite up to that level? And I know it's an anxiety, in particular, around forums for people, especially when somebody will get there bright and early with something really good.

So what would you say to people, Azumah, who may be worried about the level that they're at, in terms of being "good enough" for postgraduate study?

AZUMAH:

Yeah, I mean, what I would say is that if there are 100 students on a module, I would suggest about 90 of them would be feeling something along those lines. That's not an unusual thing for anybody to be feeling. And the only way to get over it is to take the plunge and to make a comment, and then to see the response that you get.

If you don't necessarily want to be the one who starts something, you can look at what other people are saying. And the minute you look at what other people are saying, you can see, well, OK, well, these are very similar thoughts to the thoughts that I'm having.

And after all, this is a learning environment, and you are allowed to learn. And you are allowed to hold an opinion. And you are allowed to hold that opinion but nobody else agrees with. This is quite legitimate.

I also notice, on one of the forums that we have along with this module, that one of the threads is "There's no such thing as a silly question." And I think that that's quite true. There is no such thing as a silly question. And of course, that's the space for you to ask what you might feel would be a silly question. But you know, it's entirely legitimate.

KAREN FOLEY:

And often, you know, I know from my own experience, when I've gone on to Facebook things, sometimes there's such a relief in someone saying, I'm really struggling. I'm really finding it

hard to fit things in. Things haven't gone to plan this month, and I'm really up against it. And everyone else goes, ah, so am I, so am I, so am I. And so sometimes, actually, just sharing how you're feeling can be as valuable for other people, even if you think everyone else is sort of on track with things.

So Alison, can I ask you about the time management side, as we close the session now, about what advice you give to students in terms of keeping on track and staying on track, and maybe when things don't go according to plan?

ALISON:

Well, I know Eric was sharing what the website looks like for each of the modules. So I think one of the first things to do is to really go and look at the study planner that's on that page. And it's got the overview of the whole year. And you can look at where the assessments are placed and where the times before the assessments are placed, and where they place in your diary. And we know that people are working professionals and we know that you'll have set things in that diary which also might sort of cause known contradictions with those periods that are going to be busy for your study.

So it's planning for those in advance and talking to your tutor about those, if you know there are some conflicts. So getting started earlier on some of the assessments is a strategy that I know works for some students. But also just, as Azumah was saying earlier, just creating some regular time in your life, and creating that space for it, with agreement with your family and friends, that this is a time that I need to sort of keep it going, rather than sort of working towards pressure points and then it becoming more of an issue further down the line.

KAREN FOLEY:

Excellent. Well, thank you both very much for coming on. You're going to be back later to talk about social media. And if you haven't already, you can search on Facebook groups, "Postgraduate studies WELS"-- that's W-E-L-S-- to join the Facebook group. But Azumah and Alison, thank you very much for joining me now. And I'll see you a little bit later on today

We're going to play a very short video. Do keep any questions that you've got coming in the chat. And we'll take a look at Your Journey Starts Here in our next session in a couple of minutes. See you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]