

(re)Freshers - 1st February, 2023

- Being a successful Student

ROB MOORE: And welcome back, everyone. We hope you found those videos informative. In this session, I've been joined by three colleagues and friends today.

I've got Robert and Margaret, who are fellow tutors, who I've been working with for quite a few years. And we've got Kirsty. And Kirsty has obviously been very naughty in a previous life because I've been Kirsty's tutor for the last 2 and 1/2 years. And she's going to tell you some of her experiences. So really good to have you all with us guys.

You now have a widget on the screen. And it's asking you about that Being the OU Student course on OpenLearn. And we want to know if you have studied the Being the OU Student course yet or if you didn't know it was there. If you have, give us the vote and tell us what you thought of it in the chat box.

And we've also got a couple of questions there. And you can ask us some questions you've got as you're beginning your studies. And also, you'll get the opportunity later on to tell us about your coping mechanisms. What helps you cope?

So we coming back to Heidi in a little while. And Heidi will be picking your comments up there. So first of all, Margaret and Robert, like me, you've both been tutors for quite a while. We won't say exactly how long.

MARGARET GREENHALL: Thank you.

ROB MOORE: Well, you can if you want to. I'm just coming into my 28 year. What about you, Robert? How long have you been—

ROBERT CRAW: I'm in my 17 year.

ROB MOORE: And, Margaret—

MARGARET GREENHALL: Yeah, I'm also 25. But I've had a bit of a break to bring up my children, like a lot of my students. So I've had 13 years of bringing my children up. So yeah, but 20 years if I add it all together.

ROB MOORE: You see, Margaret-- you see, it is possible to start tutoring at the age of 14. So—

MARGARET GREENHALL: Thank you, Rob.

[LAUGHTER]

ROBERT CRAW: Smooth as ever, Rob. Smooth as ever.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. Absolutely. So we've got quite a lot of our students today are doing access courses.

And this is the first time they've studied with the OU. So we all work with students. And we encourage them when we have these questions. So what sort of questions-- we'll get to Robert first. So Robert, what sort of questions do you get from new students when they first start? And more importantly, what do you tell them to make them feel better?

ROBERT CRAW: Well, the usual first question is, how do I get started? Oh, I'm overwhelmed. So much information-- don't know what to read, don't know where to go, don't know how to go about it.

So after calming the student down, then pointing them to, in my case, the module website and the study planner. And the study planner runs down the middle of the module website. And it's a week-by-week guide as to what you should be doing and where you should be going. Some modules have printed material. So maybe they shouldn't have got the books in front of them.

And some of them are totally online. But the study planner-- that study guide really becomes your best friend. And you just have to work your way through it.

There's all sorts of forums. There's all sorts of interesting information that you're pointed to. And it's a case of trying to get started with the study planner in week one.

And then as you become comfortable with that, then start to look at the other things. If you start to look at the other things, you can become distracted. And I think it's good to make a start on week one. And then it's amazing how quickly you get into a routine.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. The shiny things, that's what we like, the shiny things in the corner. Let's go and have a look at those. Much better than studying.

So Margaret, we get quite a lot of comments about referencing, Margaret. So when a student starts, of course, we've got a great big stick with a nail in the end to bash them with if they're referencing is not right from day one. Is that correct?

MARGARET GREENHALL: Oh, no. Not at all. I mean, the main thing for the first TMA is the tutors just looking to give you support and help you learn how to do it. So whatever feedback you get from that first TMA, make sure you read it for your second TMA.

And they'll give you the format. And basically, it's like a little recipe. If you follow that recipe, you're going to get your referencing right.

And it's just every time you're using somebody else's thoughts that have come from somewhere else, that was when you put a reference in. And as I say, really that tutor really helps support that referencing. And you get the hang of it pretty quickly.

ROBERT CRAW: It's one—

ROB MOORE: Absolutely.

ROBERT CRAW: --of the things I always—

ROB MOORE: Sorry, carry on.

ROBERT CRAW: One of the things I always say as well to students who panic about referencing is that if you don't do it, I've got nowhere to go in terms of telling you what you've done wrong or what you've done right. Have a go. If you get it wrong, great. That's learning.

I can point you in the right direction. If you don't have a go, I'm stuck. I'm not a bad tutor. But I'm a terrible mind reader. So unless you give me that information, I can't take it forward.

ROB MOORE: We do need a course on mind reading definitely. I think you're absolutely right. One of my common comments early on is you're referencing the right things just not in the right way yet. We just need to tweak it.

And you're absolutely right. If you have a go, and you've taken a few steps forward, we can help you. We definitely don't expect you to get your referencing right for your first assignment.

But we definitely want you to get it right by the end of the module. And I think that's the way to view it. We want to help you. That's our job to get you from the start where you don't really know to the end where you're getting it right.

So the other things we're getting a lot of questions about is time management. How do you juggle family life and study and work? So Margaret, you first. How do you-- what do you tell students if they're struggling with the work?

MARGARET GREENHALL: I think the main thing is to have a slot of time where you're actually going to work and allocate it rather than just randomly trying to fit it in around the rest of your life, and to try and make sure the environment that you've chosen to work in fits with that timing. So if you've got kids, make sure your time that you're going to work is after they had gone to bed.

If you've got lots of other people in the house, make sure you've got a quiet space to go to, and just actually saying, like, this is my time when I'm going to work and letting the whole of the rest of your family or the world know. Another important thing is distractors like phones and gadgets should be out of your way. So don't have your email available so you can check it. So you can just focus on what you're studying.

I know you've got to be online because most people's courses are online. But just make sure anything like Facebook and Twitter and all these sort of things in your phone are all out of your reach. It'll make a huge difference to your time management.

But the other thing is to make sure your time breaks. If you've got a two-hour block to work, try only work in about 20 minute segments because your attention starts to drop after that. If your attention goes, your memory goes.

So work in 20-minute segments, then get up and move around, come back to it, another 20-minute segment. And I mean, you keep fresh. The biggest danger is you've done a busy day at work.

You get home. You've dealt with everything else you've got to deal with. Then you're trying to work late in the night. And you're falling asleep. So you need to look after your energy levels and make sure that you move around-- [AUDIO OUT] little breaks, actually move around and looking after yourself-- [AUDIO OUT] really makes a [AUDIO OUT]

ROB MOORE: That was so funny then because you-- oh, as you can say, you got to the point where you said move around, and you froze on the screen. It almost looked like we did it on purpose. Sorry. Carry on, Robert.

ROBERT CRAW: Yeah, the other thing I would say is I'm going back to my old friend, the study planner, on the middle of the module website. That's your week-by-week go-to.

Now, when you start at the beginning of the module, along the top, you can see current weeks. Or, you can see all weeks. And another tip is to look at the all weeks and see just exactly where things are due to happen, particularly your assignments.

And sometimes it's a good idea just to print that or write it in your own calendar and see where the high spots are. And therefore, that can perhaps give you some forward notice as to what's coming up. And so if you're having to juggle life as often does get in the way, then you know that perhaps every six weeks or whatever you've got an assignment due, and so you can perhaps move ahead a wee bit. It's always better to be a week ahead than a week behind if you possibly can because if you're a week ahead, that gives you that bit of a wriggle room if stuff does happen in your life, whether it's childcare or whatever work, or whatever gets in your way.

But remember, you're not alone. You have to talk to your tutor. If things get really bad, and you're struggling, and you need some support, then ask. Just contact your tutor. And there's usually a way to work around these things.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And this is the same message that was in the session before this, which is ask. If you've got a problem, ask. The only thing we can't deal with or we can't respond to are the things we don't know about. So I'm going to bring Kirsty in here. So Kirsty, here you are.

KIRSTY BRADD: I've been trying to keep quiet.

ROB MOORE: No, no. You jump in. It's difficult when you're in a room full of tutors. We are just professional chatter boxes.

So Kirsty, you're 2 and 1/2 years into your degree now. You're heading towards your last seven months. [CHUCKLES] Sounds like an evil laugh.

If you could go back and give yourself some advice right at the start, what would it be? What would you advise the Kirsty from 2 and 1/2 years ago?

KIRSTY BRADD: Definitely. I mean, I'll touch on what Margaret was saying around giving yourself time and setting aside a particular block of time to do your studies. I didn't really do that to start with. And I found it quite difficult.

I was catching and trying to do an hour each day. And it wasn't enough, really, to get stuck at it. It took me 5 or 10 minutes to get my head in to log in on and get in on the system.

And then once you start reading through everything, that hour disappears. So I think definitely setting a block of time or a particular day has really helped. And that's what I try to do now.

I've got a family. I've got two young children and a dog. And they take up a lot of time.

So it's quite difficult for me to find that time that's quiet. And again, exactly what Margaret said, and I completely agree, is to turn the telly off, turn any distractions off. Do not try and watch Happy Valley whilst writing an assignment, which I did a few weeks ago. And it doesn't help.

ROB MOORE: I remember that assignment.

KIRSTY BRADD: Yeah, I didn't tell you that, Rob. But yeah-- so yeah, without a doubt, have that time and make that time, study time, is definitely something that I've learned over the years. And I think for me, it's not to worry too much.

Like you know your TMAs are coming up. And you know you've got to-- right. It's quite daunting when you read the questions and you read through all the guide notes. And you think oh god, I'm never going to be able to do that.

And I think not worrying about that and really just taking that step back and thinking, right, I want to plan this, and write down even if it's just little bullet points of what you going to cover, you can just work through it slowly rather than-- I mean, Rob, you know I've had many times where I've emailed you, saying have you got 10 minutes because I've gone blank, blank-page syndrome.

I'm staring at this blank page. I haven't got a clue what to write. Yeah, definitely. Take the time to plan your TMAs because they're actually—

ROB MOORE: And also—

KIRSTY BRADD: --not that bad.

ROB MOORE: Sorry to jump in there. But we also have conversations where you say, actually, I'm not going to be available. We're going away. We've got family commitments.

So we also plan ahead. And it comes back to what Robert was saying that if you look at the full planner, if you know you're going to be out of the country for two or three weeks because you're going away, don't think oh, I'll catch up. Think proactively and try and get ahead and talk to your tutor about what you can do.

We can have a quick look at the widget that you've been filling in, students have been filling in, looking at whether or not they've done the Being an OU Student course.

And then I'm going to ask Heidi if we've got any questions for the panel. So 57% of you have completed it. That is fantastic.

I've got to say it is a really useful resource. It's structured as though it's something you can work through in a number of hours. Or, it can be used as a frequently asked questions resource.

So if you've got a question, great place to go. You probably won't go there once you've been studying for six months because you will know everything that's in there. It's designed to get you over that first couple of months. So Heidi, what questions have we got coming through? What are students talking about at the minute?

- Well, it's just picking up on that conversation there that we were just having, so about planning ahead. Fantastic. And Robert was saying it's always better to be a week ahead than a week behind. Of course, wonderful.

But we have had a couple of questions from people asking about how far ahead they should try and be.

So Anthony has asked, can we work ahead of the schedule in case something pops up?

And then Robin made a comment saying that a few people in my course, have worked through as much as five weeks' worth of the work. And the course doesn't even start until Saturday. So do you recommend trying to get ahead before the modules start? Or, did you just prefer you wait until the module has started?

ROB MOORE: Right, I'm going to bring Margaret and Robert in a minute. But I would just say if you've got students that are saying, oh yes, the course starts tomorrow and I've just finished TMA one, ignore them. That is not right.

The reason we have the current view on Student Home, which basically shows you this week, last week, and next week is it gives you a nice ballpark of where you should be. If you're too far ahead, then the forums and the discussions we're having as a group won't have started. And you can't get involved in them. So I normally suggest that three-week view that you see on Student Home, try and stay in there. So Robert, what would you say to-- what would you add to that?

ROBERT CRAW: Yeah, it's not a competition, guys. You're only competing with yourself. It's about what you do. And there will be perhaps a module chat room that will probably be a Facebook chat room that will probably be some other social media chat room. Believe nothing in those chat rooms other than what you can see in the OU chat rooms because people say things in those social media chat rooms that are not true.

Yes, I finished the whole module and it's only week one. And I got a class one degree. Rubbish. Just concentrate on week by week. It's not a competition. And that's the only thing I would say.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, Margaret, what would you add to that?

MARGARET GREENHALL: I would say pretty much stick with the planner. But if you've got a course where you've got some group work, and you want to get a bit ahead, it's OK to jump ahead and do a little bit ahead of where the actual planner is. So be looking at where you are with the rest of the group.

There's no point in doing group work when you're on your own, like Rob was saying.

If you get out of sync on the forum, you're just not going to find it useful. And the other thing I think like Robert was saying. The ones that do get ahead, shout about it the loudest. And they're very rare. Most students' work pretty much to the planner.

So don't get scared that somebody else is saying, hey, I am on a week 10, and we're only on week three-type thing. They are an exception. And as a tutor, they scare us because we're kind of just trying to stay one step ahead of the students half the time anyway.

ROB MOORE: Oh, absolutely. Don't talk about that yet. I haven't posted it. Yeah, we're definitely in that area.

So some questions in the chat actually. How does a dog eat the online TMA? Well, they don't eat it. But we've definitely had examples of cats walking over keyboards deleting them.

Zoe says my dog ate the computer. And the internet ate my TMA, which is a really nice one from Swasey. Actually, a serious point on that one, so Swasey, you have made a point there that TMAs can disappear. If you've only used your computer hard drive to store your assignments, and something goes a bit strange and it catches fire, you leave it on a train or something, you've lost it. My advice to students normally is either email it to yourself, using a cloud email address. So there's a copy kept there, or use your Office 365 one drive to keep things on.

So I'm going to bring Kirsty back in. I say, Kirsty, we have lots of chats about tips and tricks for writing things. And I know you've got a few that you blame me for. So what are some of the things that you've picked up that when writing assignments that you use now?

KIRSTY BRADD: Oh, I think the best thing, Rob, that you've taught me, and my kids look at me a bit gone out when I use this, but using the dictation on Microsoft Word has been a godsend. So yeah, you do feel a bit silly to start with talking to a computer. And you do have to proofread because it does change some of your words to some random words and some naughty words.

But yeah, I've found that it does help because you can just talk your thoughts rather than try and write them down and then read it back and rewrite it again. Certainly, I use it on every TMA that I write now. And I think, definitely, I go back to the referencing. I still get referencing wrong even now. But Rob, you pointed me to the referencing guide that's in the library. And that is fantastic because it tells you if you referencing a website, if you're referencing a module material.

And it tells you and it shows you examples of what those references should look like. And Rob, you give me lots of tips, every TMA, on how I can reference better. So yeah-- and another thing I've sort of learnt as well is I started off in my first year. So I had some written textbooks to read through.

And I sat, and I got a pad and pen. And I wrote down all my notes. And I was sat there scribing for hours, going through thinking oh, I'm going to need to know that. I'm going to need to know that, and write it down and write it down. You don't need to write down everything.

I think I wasted a lot of time. It's-- definitely, you'll find as you go through, you'll find the things you need to pull out and the things you don't. So don't get too hung up on writing lots and lots and lots of notes because you do tend-- when you come to your TMA, you tend to read through it all again anyway. So—

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. So we've got a few suggestions coming in for coping mechanisms from students. So keep those coming because we're going to go to Heidi. And we're going to pick some of those up in a minute.

So just before we do that, Robert, Margaret, tutorials. Do students have to attend tutorials because this is distance learning? Why should we go to tutorials?

And are they face to face? Are they online? And why should they do them? So lots of questions in one there. So Robert first. So Robert-- oh, sorry.

ROBERT CRAW: Yeah, OK. I was happy to let Margaret go. But yeah, no problems. No, you don't have to go to them.

They're not compulsory by any stretch of the imagination. Some modules have face-to-face tutorials and some have online as well, or some modules only have online tutorials. There are some benefits, though.

If you go to a face to face, and you're able to go to a face to face, that you get a chance to at least meet a tutor in the flesh and meet other students in the flesh.

And sometimes you might not get much from the tutorial materials. But the experience of sitting beside other students and sharing some questions and finding out that you're all in the same boat, so people-- most students come with the same concerns and worries. And when they get into the tutorial, they find they are not alone in their common problems. So that can be beneficial.

As far as online tutorials are concerned, then some of them are recorded and some are not recorded. And again, it's up to the student whether they want to go to the live online or whether they want to watch the recorded. Again, you get a chance to meet other students. You get a chance to hear and sometimes see a tutor.

And it does help to perhaps make you feel as if you're part of an academic community rather than just being alone, trying to struggle away. And sometimes when you just hear others, and you can share your ideas-- and usually, you can pick up some tips and tricks as well as people share their ideas. Margaret, anything you could think about?

MARGARET GREENHALL: I think when you've got your first tutorial, if you're doing it online, make sure you have a little play with the software before you actually have to go in there. So make sure you've got all your connections. So don't think of two minutes at seven, you're going to be able to get straight through because that can sometimes take a little bit of time to set up.

And most tutors won't make you do anything. So if you don't want to take part in the chat, and you don't want to put your microphone on, they're not going to insist that you have to. So if you feel like you just want to watch it, but you want to do it live, so you could ask a question, then that's fine as well. We're there to help everybody. So you don't have to participate.

But a really good thing is in the chat. If you don't understand if you're live, you can actually ask it there and then. Whereas if you're watching on the video, you kind of-- it's not quite the same experience. So it is better if you can get to them live.

And it is nice to be able to get to know other tutor's duties as well because although you can't see them-- that's another thing. We don't have people on video in the tutorials, certainly the ones that I do. You're just doing-- mainly using the chat and occasionally using your microphone.

So don't worry. You're not going to be live on video like we are now. So make sure that you do get along to them. And they are very useful indeed.

ROBERT CRAW: And it can be fun at times depending on who's running them. They actually can be fun.

ROB MOORE: Not if you come to mine, mine and everything.

KIRSTY BRADD: I found the TMA tutorials really, really helpful, especially in the planning of TMAs. Yeah, certainly. And I've used the recorded versions as well. And they've been just as helpful.

ROB MOORE: And that's a really good point, Kirsty. Because for a lot of modules, we run a tutorial to help you prepare. And I don't know about Margaret and Robert.

But if a student comes to me and says, can you give me some help on my TMA? My first response is, have you watched the recording on the TMA prep? And if the answer's no, I basically say, well, go and watch that.

When you've watched it, if there's anything you still don't know, of course, let's have a chat. But that's the first place to go. And unfortunately with this time warps happening again, and we're running out of time, so I'm going to hand over very quickly to Heidi just to run through the coping mechanisms that people have been putting in the chat. So Heidi, a couple of minutes to pick out some of the highlights, please.

HEIDI: OK, so some of the coping mechanisms. So Erin drinks constant cups of tea, which I can certainly relate to. I'm exactly the same, must have about six a day.

Emma says, I find that if I can't see something, it doesn't exist. So I've got an A1 year planner to stick on the wall. So I can clearly see what I need to do. I love that one. Again, I can completely relate to that. Zara sets a timer for 25 minutes and then takes a 5-minute minute break because that really helps keep her focused. Anthony the best thing I've done study wise so far is turn my phone off for the hour. Yes, that's such a-- it's so tempting just to pick it up.

And then you see the notifications. And before you know it, you're down a rabbit hole, and 45 minutes later-- yeah, I do that all the time. I must stop doing that.

Alex-- when it comes to keeping occupied, some black coffee and snacks. Yep. And—

ROB MOORE: Yep.

HEIDI: Robin-- if I'm struggling to retain the info I'm reading or not fully understanding, I find it helpful to try and explain it to someone else, preferably someone who has no idea what I'm talking about. So that it helps me to understand it, too. And then Laura says something very similar that talking to the family helps when she's a bit stuck even when they don't understand a word. My math problems-- it helps just to verbalise it. And again, I can imagine that one is a really useful tip for many.

ROB MOORE: And that's actually a tip we gave yesterday in the session. I'm going to talk more about the Student Hub live sessions later. But yeah, being able to explain a concept or an idea to somebody else and get them to understand it is a really good way to know you understand it. So thank you, Robert, Margaret, Kirsty. You've been stars. It's been great to have you with us. And—

KIRSTY BRADD: Thank you.

ROB MOORE: --hopefully, we'll see you again in the study shack in the future. Thank you very much. And we're going to take another very short break with another video. And we'll see you all back here in a couple of minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]