

(re)Freshers - 1st February 2023 - Welcome + Finding your way around

ROB MOORE: Greetings everyone, and welcome to Student Hub Live. You're here with Rob in his study shack in the middle of Leicestershire. And today we really want to give a great, big welcome to all of you who are joining us for the first time. We've got a lot of you in the room today who are joining the OU and about to start your first module.

So this session, it's not a lecture. It's not us telling you what you need to be doing. This is just a welcome to you to hopefully help you get over that first sticky couple of days as you're getting used to what the Open University is all about.

So you will have been taking part in some of the discussions already. So we've got our chat box. And we're seeing that lots of you are sending us some messages. And we also have some quizzes and some widgets for you to take part in.

So I'm going to start very quickly by introducing Heidi. So Heidi, can you tell us who have we got in the room? And what are they talking about at the moment?

HEIDI: Absolutely. Hi. Well, welcome to everyone. It's so lovely to see so many people with us and lots of people engaging in the chat.

And we really do encourage that. Please do let us know your name and where you're joining us from. So I'm going to say a few hellos.

We've got Swasey joining us from a cold and windy Swansea but is sitting next to the fire, which sounds lovely. And we've got Jody in Caerphilly. Leanne's joining us from Whitby.

We've got Sinead in Nottingham. Michelle is joining us from Glasgow. And Erin is in the Scottish borders. And then we've got Lina. I do hope I pronounced your name correctly, "Lee-nah," from Aberdeen.

Antony's in Leeds.

Edward is in Derbyshire. And then we've got Michael from the Wirral and Joanne from Liverpool. And we've got Heidi in Plymouth. And we've got Julie who is joining us from Geneva.

Within the chat, we've got quite a few people that are studying DD102. So Zoe, Heidi, and Casey have already said that they're studying DD102. So also let us know what you're studying as well. It's really nice to pair up and see who else is doing the same course as you.

ROB MOORE: Oh, fantastic. So there's so many of you joining us already. And it's great to see you.

Just a quick comment about the chat box. Please remember that this is a public recording and that anything you put in the chat box will be visible. So please don't put any personal information in there. But we do encourage you to have a chat, have a natter. And there are definitely bonuses if you can make us laugh during the session.

So alongside Heidi, we've got Sinead and Georgia. And they are looking after the chat box. And they are going to be answering some of your specific questions there. So moving on to the first of my guests, I've got a number of guests today.

And I'm really pleased to welcome Nick Barratt, our Director of Learning and Discovery Services. So Hi, Nick. How are you today?

NICK BARRATT: Oh, hello, Rob. Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm really excited to be here. And I know what you mean about starting on a piece of study, that tingly feeling of anticipation and nervousness. It's like I'm back to school. And my kids have just changed schools recently. So I know what they've been telling me about. So I'm really delighted to be on today.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. So Nick, you're one of our seedier members. So you look after us. And you direct us very effectively. Why do you think the Open University is a good place to study? Why is it a good choice for students?

NICK BARRATT: I think the OU is just irreplaceable. And we need it more now than ever. Well, that's a good question. Why have you chosen to study at the Open University?

Well, I believe that it's innovative. It offers a very different learning experience. Now I'd say that because my unit helps create those learning experiences with our wonderful academics and brilliant associate lecturers.

So we build in the latest research, the latest ways of studying. We make sure our virtual learning environment is up to date. But we also encourage our students to tell us what they think.

So it's not just we innovate, you do. It's a proper conversation. It's a community in many ways. And that means we can be really flexible.

We're flexible in the amount of time we set aside for study. We try and understand how you're performing, again using our associate lecturers, to really support you throughout the journey. I personally believe it brings learning to life in a way that traditional courses possibly don't have the time and space to do so. But best of all, what you study, you can apply in your daily lives, whether you're already at work or want to change career. If you want to learn new skills as you study a subject, the way we set it all up delivers all of that and so much more.

ROB MOORE: Oh, absolutely. It's such a great way to learn. And as you say, I studied three different degrees with the Open University, which is what prompted me to come in and get involved being a tutor. And just as Angela reminded us there, we have the ticker questions. So in the chat box, tell us why you've chosen to come and join the Open University. So Nick, we're not a traditional campus university. We've got a campus. But strangely, it doesn't have many students on it at all. So what would you say the biggest differences are studying with the OU compared to a traditional campus university?

NICK BARRATT: Well, there is that sense that because we're not mingling and socialising with our students, it feels a little bit different. And because a study period with the OU can be over a good number of years compared to a short, compressed, undergraduate degree elsewhere, you have to manage your time quite well. So you're already learning self-management juggling work, alongside life, alongside study. It takes a lot of dedication. So I think that's one of the big differences. You need to manage your own time quite effectively.

We tend to find that a lot of our students tend to be a bit older. So they bring with them life experience, which I think helps when they start to meet others, like we're doing today, talking to each other. People in your course share stories, share experiences. That's a fantastic way to help us learn together.

But we do tend to be a little bit older as OU students. And as I've mentioned already, quite a lot of us are in full-time work. You've said, Rob, you've done a variety of degrees. And many of my colleagues within the Open University are also students as well.

So they know what it's like. And therefore, that makes them really empathetic. We still got deadlines and assessments and various exams that you need to hit deadlines.

But we know what it's like. We study with you as well as help create learning experiences and support you. So there is that empathy that I think might be a little bit different to very traditional universities.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And I can see we're getting some messages in from students who've telling us why they've chosen to study. So Miriam, starting your new module MA in Translation. Excellent.

And Karish, you've come to us because you want to work at your own pace. I've got to say that's really important. So again, we don't force students to get through in three years, do we?

NICK BARRATT: No. No, absolutely not. It is about balancing your life and the study that you want to do. And a lot of people find that the degree is almost the added bonus as opposed to the goal because they're learning so much that they can apply. But that means they have to balance their time. So we are able to shuffle workloads around, particularly if you are looking at transitioning from one particular area of study to another one, our open degrees, for example, allow you to explore a wide range of areas. So we try and build that flexibility in.

Like I said, we're very mindful of your concerns of work-life balance. So it does take longer. And you can stretch that time a bit more.

And as a result, I genuinely think that we get more out of that learning experience. We're not just cramming it into three years and it's done as though that's it. You don't learn again at that same level in the rest of your life.

Of course, we learn all the time. And the OU in many ways really does provide you with that learning hook that you keep coming back to. And that's why-- Rob, I'm sure you can speak more than me. But that's why you've come back and done three degrees. And now you're part of the OU family.

ROB MOORE: Oh, absolutely. I work with the OU because for me, the ethos, the fact that you're not written off when you get to the age of 18-- if you haven't achieved at the age of 18, you're not suddenly put into that box that says won't go anywhere. I had a pretty dreadful couple of years at college, came out with no qualifications for my a-levels.

But I was able to come back at the age of, I think, 27, started studying with the OU. And now I'm sitting here with three master's degrees. Now that would never happen with a traditional university.

And I'm not saying that because I think oh, I'm great. I've got three master's degrees. It's because when I got to that point at 19-20, a lot of places, they won't give you the opportunity. And that's why I love working for the OU. That's why I'm here.

NICK BARRATT: It's an open entry.

ROB MOORE: I think we're going to need to have a quick-- oh—

NICK BARRATT: No. No. No. Sorry. I was just-- It's open entry. But also, you say 18, but also 80. It's the whole spectrum. And—

ROB MOORE: Absolutely.

NICK BARRATT: --we've had many people looking at our open line courses, getting the bug for learning in their 70s and 80s as they're retired, and really getting that rigour. So yeah, all-- everybody is open and welcome to be here.

ROB MOORE: I was just going to say quickly we've got the map widget to show where everybody is from today. So I think if we have that up on the screen, and while you have a look around and see where people are joining us from, I'll let you read that. Well, I just mentioned the open degree because I don't think there's another university that has a similar degree to that.

So for those of you who don't know, the open degree is a build-it yourself degree. You choose the elements you want to study. And you can bring a bit of maths, a bit of teaching, a bit of science, a bit of business. There are some restrictions because sometimes our modules follow on. And you have to have studied a previous one before you can study a certain module.

But actually, you can build a degree that interests you and focus on the things that interest you. And I love that. I love the flexibility.

You also mentioned open access, Nick. So open access-- basically, you don't need to have achieved a certain qualification before you can come on. So how does that work for our students? Aren't they going to struggle when they start because, well, you haven't checked they've got a certain level first?

NICK BARRATT: Well, that's why I love the Open University again. And look, I'm a historian, slightly earlier, 13th century. But I'm fascinated by the reason why the Open University was created when it first appeared in 1969. And that was to get rid of some of this them-and-us approach.

If you haven't achieved a certain amount, you clearly don't have the skills to go on and do a degree, which I personally believe is utter nonsense. We learn at different paces. We get experience in different ways. And the benefit of an open-entry is that you can bring all of that life experience and that lived-learning, if you like, through a profession or a career or circumstance, and then you can start to formalise that through studying with the OU. It does mean, though, that some of the rigour of academic life and some of the way we write or present things, some of the digital skills we need are going to be tested. And that's why our level-one modules tend to focus on some of the basics of how to study as much as what you study.

And I think, again, therein is the benefit of that approach because you're learning skills as well as learning about the subject matter. But I might have mentioned OpenLearn, which is, as the name suggests, an open-learning platform where we provide bit-sized chunks of modules, which in many ways whet the appetite, not just if you're already part of the OU programmes and want to try a different area under the open degree, but also give you a flavour of what to expect.

Now, I've been pushing my kids towards these as well to help them as they start to think about university. But there's a lot of really great material. Being the OU student is probably the best of these open courses because it takes you through all the requirements, all the skills, some of the challenges you're going to face, but how to get around those challenges.

So have a look at being the OU student on OpenLearn. And there are lots of other resources such as digital skills, working for assessments and assignments. So all of the tools are there. We provide all of that free for anyone, regardless of whether you sign up or not.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And the being the OU student-- I was actually part of the team who did the first iteration of that way back when. And the brief for that short course was basically what are the questions that I was being asked as a tutor in the first six months that students need to understand? Because we do speak a different language at the OU.

It does feel like we've got our own words and our own phrases and loads of TLAs, three-letter acronyms. They fly around all over the place. The thing is they're really daunting at the beginning. But once you've been using them for four or five months, you're fluent. You become fluent in OU.

But absolutely, the OpenLearn courses, we can't promote them enough. And as you say, you don't even need to be a member of the OU to access them. It's free to everybody.

You need an account where it's a free account, and it's brilliant. So if you haven't come across those yet guys, make sure you look them up. Laura's agreeing with us there.

OpenLearn is brilliant. The reason I've ended up doing the module is because she started with OpenLearn. That's-- I mean, it's a great resource.

It's also great marketing because it shows what we can do and where we should go. So as well as being a university that delivers degrees, Nick, we also work with other partners. So what partners do we work with? Who do we get involved with outside of delivering the teaching and the degrees?

NICK BARRATT: Look. I'm biased. And I will be quite open about that in the spirit of the conversation. My role means that I look after a number of these partnerships. Not only do we create the content, the learning experiences that you'll see soon enough and also on OpenLearn-- that wasn't a sneaky plug. I genuinely believe it's fantastic. But we look after the relationship with the BBC.

And this is unique across higher education. And it showcases our research. We are a leading and highly acclaimed research organisation as well.

You might have seen programmes such as Blue Planet II or Green Planet. They're co-produced with the Open University, using Open University academics. So it's not just about creating amazing thought-provoking and challenging programmes, which reach millions of people around the world. But also, we use that to create material that goes into our courses as well.

We have the OU connect platform where people, a bit like Oprah then, come off the programme, learn more about the subject. And if they want, they might then start to study with this as well. But with this unique relationship with the BBC, we create material explicitly for our modules. And best of all, we have access to the entire BBC-back catalogue.

So you may well encounter familiar clips or bits and pieces from TV shows that you've seen, not just the big-ticket stuff, but really important material across a wide range of subject areas. And as I said, that's unique to the sector. I mean, we do a huge amount of work with other organisations as well.

We're working to support the NHS with some very new immersive technology. You've probably seen VR and AR, so virtual and augmented reality. We're going into extended reality. And we can help create almost sort of sim lab-style experiences. So you can learn and manipulate the various bits and pieces, which helps training.

It means you don't need live patients to practise on at times, which many live patients are quite happy about. But these are the sorts of partnerships we can forge because not only do we have that link into career-based learning, but also we have the research that underpins it, working with police forces to undergo particular levels of training. We work-- the I think we are the largest apprenticeship supplier in the country.

And I think you mentioned OpenLearn. We've got FutureLearn. We've got massive open-online courses. Again, free learning.

We are just everywhere, literally everywhere. So once you've heard about these parts, which you can't help-- oh, that's the OU production. You look at the end credits at the end of a programme, you'll see us there, as well as our researchers.

ROB MOORE: We pop up everywhere. And I get a sense of pride when our programme fits in there, and there we are, creating in partnership with the university. And you do feel like you're part of that family. So you mentioned MOOCs there, Massive Open Online Courses. Again, we'll probably touch on these a little later.

Well, that's one of the partnerships we've got with a lot of universities around the country. And it gives students the ability to study short packets of learning free of charge. And we can look at things you're interested in. So we'll pick that back up later.

Unfortunately, Nick, that's the end of our session. I could have just spent the entire hour and 40 minutes talking to you. But I'd just like to say thank you very much for joining us and fitting us into your really busy schedule.

What the guests don't know is you're actually on hold from another meeting. And you've stepped out to join us. And we really appreciate that. So thank you.

NICK BARRATT: I know where I'd rather be, Rob, and that's here, having this fantastic conversation. But the day job does call unfortunately. I'm going to have to go back to some of that later on. And I mean, I'm in Senate this afternoon. So it's a busy period.

But I mean, I just find the opportunity to talk with you, the student so important to my role and that of my colleagues because you are why we're here. We do everything for you. That might sound a bit trite. But genuinely, that's where the passion comes from. So I really hope you enjoy your learning journey with us.

ROB MOORE: Thank you very much, Nick. Cheers. And we're going to go back to Heidi for a couple of minutes just to see what you've been saying in the chat pod and see what sort of message is being passed on. So Heidi, what are people talking about? Have we moved on from cheesy jokes yet?

HEIDI: Yeah, we have moved on from the cheesy jokes. This is honestly the bit that I just love most about this job, just being able to get more of an understanding about what inspired people to join the OU, why they're here. So just from my perspective, I joined the OU as a student in 2009.

I was a single mum. I had a new-born baby. And the OU was the most amazing experience. And I then fell so much in love with the OU that I then came to work here. So I'm very, very fortunate. But I've been through that journey as well as the OU student.

I know how intimidating it can be in the beginning, particularly when you're working. And you've got caring responsibilities. And just seeing some of these stories that people are sharing with us is just so inspiring. So there's just a few that I would love to pick up on and share. So Casey said that they struggled to stay in school due to mental health issues and ended up leaving without a single qualification. But Casey wanted to prove to themselves that they can do it and heal their relationship with education, something they're really passionate about. And I just love that quote, healing that relationship with education.

Catherine is studying around a full-time job and has got two small children. Rachel was made redundant back in September and is looking forward to a changing career, not entirely sure what to do or where to go right now. It's been a long time since Rachel studied and was in formal education but is starting an access course. And I just love that idea when you have one of those points in your life when you're just like, I'm not quite sure where to go.

And Rachel's decided I'm going to come back to learning. And I'm going to redirect myself, and that's wonderful. And then lots of fantastic stories--

So Emma, I love this finally fulfilling her dream of studying the stars, was never able to afford university before. So being able to work and study at their own pace is brilliant. And Jodie is a full-time carer to her daughter, who's disabled. She's now 20. And Jodie wants to continue with her own goals.

And then finally, Yondra says, the Open University has made it possible for me to follow my dreams. So it's just such an inspiring group. So thanks to everyone for sharing their motivations for joining the OU. It's wonderful.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And keep those thoughts coming as we move into this next discussion. So I'd like to welcome Matt Corral and John.

So Matt has joined us from the student support team. And Carol is one of our learning-and-teaching librarians. And John is the Director of Teaching in the School of Computing. So welcome guys. Great to have you with us.

And as we chat, if you can, feel free to jump in and interrupt me. It can be a bit of a challenge but feel free to do so. So while we're having this chat, there'll be a multi-choice question, one of our widgets on the screen. And the question is, when was the last time you visited a physical library?

And then we've also got a change of questions going across the bottom. How are you feeling as you're starting your study? What are you most excited about?

And what are you concerned about from a practical point of view? So in this section, we're going to be looking at some of the practical help you can get. So I'm going to come to each of you in turn and ask you a question. So I'm going to start with you, Carol. And it's lovely to have you with us today.

CAROL WRIGHT: Thank you.

ROB MOORE: So the Open University, distance learning, everything is on computer, students might be surprised to know we've got a physical library. There's actually a library there. So how does that work, then?

CAROL WRIGHT: Yeah, we do have a physical library. And all students are more than welcome to come and visit. So it's on the Walton Hall campus in Milton Keynes. So if you're in the vicinity, please do come and say hello.

If you want to come and visit the library, you do need to register beforehand. So there is a form on the library website for you to fill in [AUDIO OUT]. On the online library [AUDIO OUT]. We have databases of different subjects. And it's all available online.

So the library website is really your first port of call for any resources that you might want to use. The library website on the homepage has a search box. You can search for whatever it is you're into to access. [AUDIO OUT]

ROB MOORE: And what we're experiencing here is one of the joys of distance learning is those network gremlins that sometimes come in. So hopefully, Carol, you'll signal will settle down in a little while. And we'll come back to you on that one because at the moment, we're losing about every other word. But yeah—

CAROL WRIGHT: Oh, I can hear you now. Sorry.

ROB MOORE: Oh, no. No. That's fine. That's fine. This is-- as I said—

CAROL WRIGHT: This is a good example of when the technology fails.

ROB MOORE: Yes, somebody said to me, oh, it must be difficult teaching with the Open University with all these technology problems. You should be at a campus university like me. And then next thing I heard was I'm stuck on the way to a lecture in the motorway. There's been a crash.

So technical problems happen everywhere. So we have the online library. And I think this is fantastic. I don't think we make enough of the online resources with the library. But students aren't just thrown in. How do we help them with the library, Carol?

CAROL WRIGHT: OK, so you can access help from the library 24 hours a day. So we appreciate that students at the OU may be studying at all times of day and night. So you can access webchat with the library 24-hours a day. You can also email us.

You can also call us. And the contact details are on every single page of the library website. And we also provide training sessions. So we provide training sessions on using library search, how to use our databases and referencing. So again, if you go to the library website and find the training session, you can book a live session or access recording of the live sessions as well. So there's lots of ways that you can get help from the library.

ROB MOORE: I've got to say, we've run a session last night with students about how to use other people's ideas. Recordings are available. But a lot of students said, are we running a Student Hub Live session on referencing? And my answer was simple. Why would I run one when the library does such a good one? Just go and join theirs because I can't do anything that competes with that.

CAROL WRIGHT: Yeah, and we do we do run them fairly regularly. So on a rolling basis. But again, if you can't attend one of the live sessions, there's a recording available on the training page on the library website.

ROB MOORE: Yeah, and referencing is the one single thing most students are worried about.

CAROL WRIGHT: It's the one thing that we get the most queries about, definitely.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. We've now got the widget available to see. So when was the last time you visited a physical library? So within the last three months, 41%, within a year, 21%, within five years, 7% more than five years ago.

So a third of you more than five years ago. I would probably come within a year. But that's me going to the OU library. So that's where I fit in. So, but it is a physical library. And Carol's going to be coming back later and introducing you to a scheme where you can access your local libraries if you can't reach the Open University physical library.

I'm now going to welcome Matt. So Matt works in our Student Support Team. And sometimes-- again, a similar question, Matt. Because it's distance learning, students can sometimes feel they don't have anybody to talk to. We have a lot of support in place. So could you give us an overview of the types of things that the student support team can help students with and the sorts of questions that you get.

MATT FIDDLER: Yes, so the Student Support Team are here to support you through your studies. It can feel quite isolating as a student. You might feel a little bit like you're by yourself.

But there's a full team based at the campus or working from home, like me today, of senior advisors or student recruitment advisors who are here to help you. Typically, people come to speak to us when things go wrong, which is going to happen unfortunately between 3, 4, 5, or 6 years on your qualification, however long it takes you. Life does sometimes get in the way.

I would just always recommend picking up the phone and getting in touch with us because we've got a lot of different ways we can support students. There's lots of information on the Help Centre. But if you read something on there, and you're like, I'm not really sure about it, just phone up for a chat and share details about your circumstances with us. We're really friendly.

We like to tell people that we're not like your school teachers. We're not here to chase you for getting your homework in on time or anything like that. We're here to see you succeed.

And we'll do everything that we can within our power to help you on that. So we'll also reach out to you as well. So during our-- so if we got a quiet period, then we'll proactively reach out to students to see how you're getting on. A little bit of interesting information about that. If you pick up the phone and speak to us, you're statistically more likely to be successful on your course.

So come and have a chat with us because we can give you lots of tips and tricks about your studies as well. So many different reasons to get in touch with us. But I would always say like the golden rule about your studying, if anything goes wrong, if you've got any questions, if you've got any worries, pick up the phone, use the contact of the student support team via student home.

You can do a web form if you don't want to speak on the phone. We also have web chat as well. So lots of different options, lots of different ways to get in touch. And like I say, we're just here to support you on your study journey.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And I think when I talk to students, the thing I try and impress more than anything else is don't wait until it gets desperate to talk to somebody. Don't wait until you can't see a way out. When you start to struggle, or if you start to have some issues, then talk to somebody. If it's about your module, if it's about the academic side, talk to your tutor. If it's anything else, then student support are there. And they're going to help.

So you're mentioning Student Home and the Help Centre. So some of our students will be sitting there thinking I've only just started. What's Student Home then? What's this Help Centre? So where will they find this information, Matt?

MATT FIDDLER: So Student Home is when you first log in. And you have your qualification name at the top of the screen. And you got your modules listed there. That's Student Home.

On a PC or laptop browser, the Help Centre can be found by clicking in the top right-hand corner, just underneath the Search the OU bar, which is the Help Centre. And clicking on that will take you to a big page with a big search bar saying something like, what do you need? Or, how can we help?

If you type something in there, then it will return all the results for you that we've got on the Help Centre. So if you want to know how to improve on your assignment scores, for example, you can type assignments in there. And it will link you across to, like, the study skills e-booklets, for example. If anyone's got any sort of initial concerns about writing their assignments, I can really recommend preparing assignments.

It's a free study skills e-book. It's absolutely fantastic. It was my Bible when I started studying way back in 2015.

So it can really help you start to unpick those questions in the early days of your studying and find your academic writing style as well. But it can be anything. So if you've got exam worries, if you need financial support or anything like that, at the moment, the student support team are assessing applications for our Student Assistance Fund. With the cost of living crisis being on everyone's mind at the moment, like students, can access financial support if you have any unexpected financial hardship for example.

So you can find that through the Help Centre. There is also funding for study-related costs. If you are in receipt of a qualifying benefit or if you receive under a certain level of household income, then the OU can make a contribution toward things like stationery printers. You can get a contribution toward a new laptop, lots of other things as well.

So you can find all that from the Help Centre as well. Everything's laid out into nice convenient section. So if you've got any questions about what the OU can do for you, you might be able to find an answer at the Help Centre. But if you've got a lot of other questions whizzing around in your head from this session, then you can also get in touch through the Help Centre as well with your student support team. We can answer any of those questions for you.

ROB MOORE: That's brilliant, Matt. And later on in the last session today, we've got Sarah from the OU Students Association. And we're going to be talking about some of the ways you can be helped and some

of the assistance. At the Open University, we take the open part really seriously. So we want everybody to be able to study and talk to us.

If you've got problems, if there's something you don't think you can get over, talk to us. I'm just reading some of the comments that have come in here. So what have we got here?

So David, excellent support from the Student Support Team last year. Fantastic. We've got Robin, who's worried about keeping up with your studies.

Well, we've got lots of tips, lots of hints. One of my top tips actually with students is don't feel under pressure to finish quickly. If you decide to take seven or eight years to do your degree, that's fine. Do it at your own pace.

But equally, if you want to do it full time and do it in three years, that's fine as well. We've got lots of flexibility, lots of opportunities for you to work the way you want to. Nice comment from Edward there, using the links. He's gone and registered for access to Derby University library while doing this. So that's definitely the type of multitasking we like to see and we expect to move on with.

So I'm also really pleased to have John with us. So John-- John is our Director of-- not exactly the title-- the Director of Computing. So John, I know you've had a lot of involvement with the computing helpdesk. And technology can be quite daunting for students. Why is it that students really need to know about the computing side of their studies, not necessarily a computing course, but just how to access distance learning and how to get involved?

JOHN WOODTHORPE: Yeah, my involvement really is with computing modules and qualifications. So we use computers a lot, not just to study on but also as the thing that we're looking at. But you'll find it so much essential at times to have a computer, not just to access things like this but to access your module materials, to write your assignments, to submit them electronically. It's an essential part of studying these days.

ROB MOORE: So they need-- and students need a computer. They cost thousands, don't they? I mean, if I've got to go out and buy the latest MacBook Pro, that's 2,500 pounds. Yeah, that makes it quite expensive for study, doesn't it?

JOHN WOODTHORPE: Not necessarily. You don't need a really high specification machine. You're not going to be doing gaming on it. Well, you might be, but that's your own choice.

You don't need anything really fancy for OU study. If you have a look at the study at the OU website, it will have a link from the module that you're interested in to tell you what the computer specification is, and that will be a relatively low specification machine. It will tell you the operating systems.

It will tell you the amount of memory. It will tell you the amount of storage space, and that kind of thing. But it doesn't need to be particularly expensive.

It could only be a few pounds for most modules. Some might require something much more sophisticated. And they would tell you that before you register. But increasingly, we're doing what we call virtualisation of computing.

So if you need extra computing power for a particular module, then we're gradually working through providing that online. So you're using effectively somebody else's computer, the OU's computer that we're paying for rather than your own. And you're accessing it via a browser. And you don't actually notice that

it's a different computer. So there are all sorts of ways of handling this. And as you said in the previous section, there are ways of getting assistance with that as well.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. I wouldn't recommend it. But I did actually join a lecture and did some work on a 35-pound Raspberry Pi once. So that I made that work.

So the software can be quite expensive as well. So-- oh, there we go. There's John's Raspberry Pi. It's definitely possible to do most of what you need to do on one of those. So you need a little bit of know-how.

The software-- again, I just wanted to mention this because sometimes students will think, well, it costs hundreds of pounds to get the software. And I just wanted to emphasise to students that when you study with us, you automatically get an Office 365 student account. So that gives you all of the Office accounts-- Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook. And you get a special, unique Open University email address. That's your academic email address.

Really good for communication. But also, it gets you free McFlurrys at McDonald's. If you register for your student NUS card, you can get McFlurrys at McDonald's for nothing, which is, of course, that's why you want it. But it doesn't mean-- you don't have to buy expensive software.

Unless your course needs a specific piece of software, we give you the Basic Office package and a whole range of storage, which means you can borrow computers quite easily. So the only other question I've got, John, is about mobile devices because our modules, our information is all accessible through mobile devices. But can students just use a tablet or a phone to do the studies, would you say?

JOHN WOODTHORPE: It's not advisable. I mean, there is the OU study app, which you can get for Android and iOS. But that's a good mobile view of your module materials if they're there. But it's not the same.

It won't have all of the features. And particularly with our modules, we will often do extra things within the teaching materials that aren't very easy to replicate on a small screen. And you can't really produce your assignments on a mobile phone. People try.

And every year we find a few students who are really struggling to cope with a small tablet or a mobile phone to do their assignments on. It's really difficult. You will struggle a great deal.

ROB MOORE: OK, I've just been informed that Heidi wants to come in. Apparently, there have been some questions specifically for John. Heidi, what are these questions?

HEIDI: They have. John, you might be a bit surprised, but the audience say we've got a lot of love for your jumper. John, can you tell us where you got your jumper from please and how people can get the same?

JOHN WOODTHORPE: My wife makes my jumpers. Sorry. I seem to have frozen here. Am I still—

ROB MOORE: We could hear you, John. Yes, round of applause for John's wife.

JOHN WOODTHORPE: I am her living knitwear model. So I have a whole sequence of them, which I wear in rotation. And occasionally, I have been known during a meeting that's gone on for a long while to change jumpers just to see if people are awake.

ROB MOORE: Thank you. And in the chat box, Sinead has just popped in the information for the TOTUM card, which is the card you need as a student to be able to get your discounts and your free things from various fast food outlets. So check that out.

The TOTUM card is excellent when I was a student. And I managed to save quite a bit money. I won't say what I was buying.

But it was at the co-op. It was Christmas. And it saved me a significant amount of money. But the totem card is really worth looking at.

So thank you everyone for answering those questions. Is there anything you'd like to add? So I've pointed things to you. So you've heard the discussion. Is there anything you want to throw in? Because I'm-- I want to give you a chance to say your thing there.

JOHN WOODTHORPE: Yeah, if I can just talk about, perhaps, some of the accessibility issues that folks might have with accessing things on a computer. Talk to your student support team, talk to us generally about any particular needs you have. If you're struggling with dyslexia and you're having difficulties in reading content from the screen, let us know. If you have printed material and you're finding it difficult because you need it to lay flat, you can't hold it, let us know.

I'm standing. I have a standing desk because I have back problems from time to time. And it's painful to sit for a long period.

Let us know about those kinds of things. And we'll assess your study environment and try to recommend things that will make life a lot easier. Some of them will be very simple, very easy things to do, some of them will be a bit more sophisticated. But don't sit there thinking this really hurts.

I'm finding it difficult to concentrate for whatever reason. Talk to somebody about it. And be sensible about how you use your computer.

Just because it's called a laptop don't necessarily feel you have to keep it on your lap. Find somewhere comfortable and quiet to work. And try and keep the rest of the family away from it when you need to study. The last thing you want when you're trying to do your TMA is sticky fingers coming along and, daddy, can I play games, or, the inevitable cat walking across the keyboard, which seems to be a hazard in most meetings that I take part in these days.

ROB MOORE: We definitely have the cats and the pets popping up. And as always, we keep running out of time. I'm sure that we must be in some sort of a time warp on this because 25 minutes vanishes in about 15. I don't know how that happens.

Just to let you know, John, Antony reckons that your wife should be opening a jumper shop if she hasn't already. If she has, stick the link in. I'm sure there'll be some orders coming. So thank you, Matt, John, and Carol.

JOHN WOODTHORPE: She knits by hand. And it takes a long while.

[LAUGHTER]

ROB MOORE: Excellent. So Matt, Carol, John, thank you very much for your time. And of course, Carol, you're popping back to see us again later.

CAROL WRIGHT: I am, yes.

ROB MOORE: So it's been a pleasure having you with us. And I just want to give Heidi a chance. Is there any comments, Heidi, any comments that have come through, any thoughts in the last few minutes before we go into a very short break?

HEIDI: Just a few, yeah, just a running theme going through that our students have been sharing with us that the TMA seemed to be the thing that they're most apprehensive about. So it links very much there with what John was saying about what platforms you're using and what equipment you're using to write your TMA. And some of our guests are saying that there's no way they would even try doing that on a mobile phone.

They need to have a large screen. And the other key theme that's coming through-- so Swayze was saying this particularly, that concern about staying on track, that concern about getting perhaps overwhelmed, getting a little bit behind with work. But then lots of people are super excited about their OU studies as well. So it's really nice to leave on a positive.

So Erin is really excited about learning new things and sharing environmental issues with other people. And then Kara says she's very excited about learning after having some health issues, which has meant that she had to leave education. But she's looking forward to gaining her life back slowly, which is really, really lovely to hear.

ROB MOORE: Brilliant. And hopefully the message is coming through to everyone that you won't come across a problem that we haven't seen before. We've seen almost every single problem that you are likely to face.

So don't worry that you're going to come up with something we can't handle. The only thing we can't handle are the things you don't tell us about. So talk to us early, get in touch as soon as you feel there's an issue, and I'm sure we can help. So I think we're going to go to a short break now. And we'll see you all back in a few minutes. And just thanks again Matt, Carol, and John. It's been great.

[MUSIC PLAYING]