

(re)Freshers Orientation. Becoming a confident academic learner - 22 Sep 2022

ISABELLA HENMAN: I'm actually going to start off with Gina today. And we know that lots of people are quite nervous starting out, and I completely empathise and understand that one. I'm now all sort of on edge because of the technical issue. So we know that they happen.

So Gina, what kind of things would you say? You've been a tutor for quite a while. What would you say to people who are nervous starting out? What's your top tips?

GINA MAY: I think being here, that's a fantastic start to really get involved with what's going on with you and all those sources of help that have been put in place for you by people who have worked with students for many, many years and kind of get what you're feeling.

So the first thing, I think, would be to have a good look around the website. Have a look around your student page. Click on all the buttons. You can't break it. Just click on, it see what's there. Find out where your assignments are. Find out when your tutorials are going to be so that you're really familiar with the feel of what you're going to be doing as the course progresses.

ISABELLA HENMAN: That sounds great. So That's a tutorial. Tutorials are really useful thing, aren't they? So they might be something that's a little bit different than some people are used to, particularly those people who are brand new. So their only experiences might be school and a bit more lecture, people explaining.

Do you want to say a little bit more about what we mean by tutorials at the Open University?

GINA MAY: Certainly. Tutorials are a way of getting together with your tutor. A lot of will would be recorded. So if you can't actually get to them, don't worry. You'll be able to access recordings through your student home page but it's a chance for you to get to talk to other students in your group but also for your tutor to lead on a particular topic that'll be something that you're studying, something that you're going to be looking at in your-- called it a TMA, but that's your tutor-marked assignment. So whatever your assignments are, it gives you a chance to discuss the topics in a bit more detail.

So it's quite interactive. It's in a format called Adobe Connect, which is a bit like Skype, in as much as you should be able to put your cameras on and see each other. There's a whiteboard where your tutor will maybe do a PowerPoint presentation, or will just talk to you. There might be all kinds of demonstrations going on, almost as if you were in a room and the whiteboard is in front of you and your tutor is in front of you.

So it's really interactive, not a lecture style. No one's going to be talking at you. It's kind of talking with you, and you can ask questions and really get involved in the material. And rather than just reading it by yourself, it gives you a real opportunity to talk about it, as well, with others.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And there's also phone calls, as well, isn't there? So for instance, on access, the main tutorial support is actually one to one phone calls.

GINA MAY: Yeah, so there's phone calls, but also you've got your forum groups, where your tutor may put things up there for discussion with other students in your group. You'll have a tutor group forum, particular just to the guys in your own tutor group with that one tutor. But there will probably be a module wide forum, which will go across the module, and you can talk to other students.

Phone calls are brilliant, because it's that one to one contact with your tutor. And it's really helpful, actually, if you're going to call your tutor, to maybe email in advance just the things you want to talk about, because then they can be really prepared and have all the resources to hand so that they can help and they can answer your questions for you. But it's a really good way of breaking down that distance.

That's the one thing about distance learning. We want to try and break down the distance, either by tutorials by phone, emails, forums. You might have a Facebook group. So lots of different ways of trying to minimise that distance as much as possible.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. I just need to tell you, Gina, we're getting lots of love for your bookshelf here. So Marita thinks it's absolutely fantastic, as does Emma, who's now got bookshelf goals.

And we also had a lovely comment come in from Adam, who wants to acknowledge the magic of what we're all involved, in the university of the air. I'm eternally grateful for the opportunity to achieve a lifelong ambition. That's so nice, isn't it, that we're helping students achieve this lifelong ambition?

Now, I know one of the things I really wanted to talk to you about today, Gina, I know we've just been talking about tutorials and things, but just bringing it back, we were talking about confidence and learning skills. And students might notice that there's a widget there about how confident they're feeling about their study. And we want you to talk a little bit about how students might be able to increase confidence and work out what their learning strengths are.

So now I know that you've done a bit of work on this. You've done some writing about this, haven't you? Can you a little bit of information for us?

GINA MAY: Yes. So I've recently done some research on what it is that students feel, so what are the things that they don't feel confident about and how you can gauge that confidence in lots of different things, whether that's in working with the material, researching online, simply just the IT of getting into the right place on the website itself, so increasing your confidence.

And I think you said right at the beginning, push all those buttons. You can't break it. And the more you see, the more confident you're going to become. But within your modules, and you guys who have done that are doing access will have seen that, there's lots of skills inbuilt in there, so you can use those. You can build confidence by going into the OU library website. There's lots of areas in there that you can learn and handouts to help build your confidence, so not just confidence in the actual academic practise skills but also just confidence to come back into learning. I think that's one of the things, Isabella, that I struggled with, for example.

I didn't do a degree first time around, the traditional route. I came to studying, really, in my mid-40s. And I have to say that first year-- it's a bit of a laugh, but I said I actually spent a lot of the first year crying—

ISABELLA HENMAN: Oh, no. I'm not going to laugh, not at all.

GINA MAY: That was because there were just things I didn't know how to do, and that I didn't actually understand what it meant, and what it actually meant to create an academic argument, what referencing meant, what all of those things actually meant, never mind how to do them. And so by accessing lots of different help-- and there's so much out there. You've got your tutor, who is your first port of call, and they will always want to help you, fellow students. You've got things on the website, all of those things to help you, firstly, understand what it is you've got to do and what those things mean.

But I think I kind of-- I like to think I'm a better tutor for having been a really scared and very, very nervous student right at the very beginning, coming back after leaving school a gazillion years ago and not really even understanding how to study. That was one of my biggest worries, as well as understanding the information and the data being given me, how to use it. So asking questions, I think, will certainly build your confidence as you go along.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Absolutely. Now, we asked you earlier, we asked students earlier about how confident they're feeling, and we've got the results of that widget to show. So let's have a look at how people-- oh, so we've got quite a mix, actually, then, haven't we?

So there's a few people that are feeling very confident or very uncomfortable, but quite a few people in the middle. And I'd like to say that we're a bit shifted towards the very confident end, which-- and confident, or feeling nice. So I quite like that one.

But don't worry if you're not feeling confident, as Gina just shared. Honestly, we don't want any of you to be in that situation where you're crying every day. That's horrible. I'm so sorry. I know when you told me about that, Gina, before. It made me really sad because I know what it's like.

It is a distance university. I remember when I started-- I was saying to some people when I started studying with the university, we were talking about digital skills and stuff. And I started studying before a lot of the online resources were available. It is really challenging, isn't it? And sometimes what we have to think about is what can we bring from our lives to study, and how can that help us in terms of those skills. So I know that some people have their own little mini superpowers at home. Now, I happen to really, really like strong men. It is one of my passions. I love watching it. And hopefully it doesn't spoil it for anybody, but Tom Stoltman is World's Strongest Man 2021 and 2022, and he's got autism. And he describes that as his superpower, and it's something that really helped him.

Now, we have a lot of neurodiverse students. And some people, some students who are coming in with disabilities actually are feeling that holds them back. It doesn't always, does it, Gina? Sometimes you actually do turn things into a superpower, don't you?

GINA MAY: Absolutely. And it's finding those things that you do really well, because we're all different and we all learn in different ways. I think that's the thing to remember. And that's what the OU are so good at, actually. There's no kind of one size fits all package that the OUT expects you to squish into at all, and our tutors are really experienced in working with lots of different types of students who work in different ways.

So it may be that you're really good at critical reading or you're really good at writing or really good at analysis, or really good at timekeeping. So whatever skills you've got, whether that's other parts of your

life, whether it's a job, whether it's through caring responsibilities, you have a massive amount of skills that are transferable.

And I was talking to a very new student yesterday, for example, and he was really nervous because he said I haven't studied since I did my O-levels back in the 1970s. He said, and I don't-- I can't study. And I said, but you can, because he was actually an analyst before he retired. He was used to looking at things really closely. That's his superpower.

So think, what do I do in my life? I mean, timekeeping, that's a huge part of becoming a student. So it might be you organise your family, you organise the local scout group, or that you're good at-- you do lots and lots of reading that you enjoy. There's lots of superpowers that will be transferable into studying.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Absolutely. Thank you, Gina. So I know that we asked people the question. So I'm going to-- there's a two part thing here. First of all, we thought it'd be really nice to show where everybody is studying from, so we ask people on a map-- I know we had somebody from New Zealand and that-- so oh, so that's the map of the UK. So all sorts of places. Oh, lovely, somebody right at the top in the Scottish islands there, and all the way down to bottom, and Australasia, that would be the New Zealand one in continental Europe. We've got people in Africa and Asia, as well. That's lovely.

And I know Heidi, Heidi on our social media chat deak, we ask people about learning strengths and so on. So Heidi, what kind of things have people been saying are their learning strengths that they want to share?

HEIDI: Well, actually, we've been having a few questions in the chat just about some initial apprehension from some of our students. They've just got a couple of questions. So Caroline, for example, has let us know that she hasn't had her tutor allocated yet and the books haven't yet arrived, and she's starting to fret a little bit. She's autistic and says that she can't plan things, so she would like to find out when that information is going to arrive.

And Judith and Carmel have also asked when they're going to find out who their tutors are. So this seems to be something that's coming up a little bit in the chat at the moment.

ISABELLA HENMAN: OK, and that's a really good question. So I mentioned this in the session on Tuesday, as well. I'll mention it again now. So what happens is we call it tutor student allocation, and it's happening sort of around about now towards the end of this week. So for instance, I've had two of my groups have been allocated me so far, but I'm still waiting for most of mine.

Those of you who are studying at Access and Open, you may be slightly later. You may actually be the beginning of next week, because the deadline was extended a little bit due to everything that was happening in the country. But most people, you will get your tutor towards the end of this week, today, tomorrow, possibly Monday or Tuesday.

But please don't worry if you haven't had your tutor yet, because most modules don't start until the 1st or the 8th of October. We know everybody is incredibly enthusiastic, which is fantastic, but you won't be disadvantaged. You won't find that you don't have a tutor at the start, unless there's some really weird glitches. As we've already discovered today, we have glitches all over the place. But don't worry about that with any tutors.

And now I completely understand those people who like planning. So if you like planning, you don't have your tutor yet, that's fine. What I recommend you do is start making a list of things that you need to do. Tick off things that you can do, looking through your module website. So you'll have access to a number of things. You'll have access to the induction resources, the module guide, some parts of the assessment guide, so start having a look through them. Start putting some of those deadlines in your calendar. So you know Gina was talking about time management. I have-- you can't see it, but I've got a big calendar up on the wall there and I've got all my little colour coded dots of the different deadlines, of tutorials, and things like that. So you can start doing things like that.

And there's a little bonus. As a student, you're entitled to a free student card. And various different things like that and you get all sorts of access to different resources. And because lots of different universities are doing freshers at the moment, there's discounts available. So I happen to certain stationers do discounts on stationery, including calendars, because I've made use of it as a student before, so you could always be looking for that.

And being an OU student gives some great advice like that. I know the link is available in the event description, and hopefully one of the people in the chat will be also able to share it, as well. And we have some students who are ongoing students who've been able to share that. So that's some of the things that you might like to do. You could also start making a list of questions you might like to ask your tutor. So Gina has mentioned a few things so far about strengths and things she was doing and things. So she said about time management. She said about thinking about what you do in your everyday life. What are the kind of things, Gina, do you think people could start thinking about that they might like to discuss with their tutor once they have that tutor allocation?

GINA MAY: Yes, I think that's a really good point, to start making that list of things and admin-y like getting a student party card. I also know some online shops give a discount, and a major online bookseller gives you a student discount on next day delivery.

So I think things that you might want to talk to your tutor about, ask them a little bit about how they will be running their tutorials, how they're going to manage those, what will you be doing in them, gives you a heads up, but also things that you might like to tell them about the way you study, or perhaps commitments that you have that might interfere with your study plans.

It may be that you work shifts. It may be that you have autism. It may be all of those little things that will affect how you study. I mean, for example, you may have young children in the house. So there may be lots of things that mean that you're not going to have the luxury of being able to have set hours every day where you study things that might get in your way, things that might help you.

So talk to your tutor because we want to get to know you, as well. We're all really excited when we get our student list, just to get to know our students. So anything you can tell us about yourself that might help us to make your learning experience as good as it can be and to provide learning for you in the way that works well for you, so things you might list like that, things-- work commitments, family commitments, that type of thing.

But also, start thinking about books that might be useful, your set books. Make sure you've got those, that they've arrived. Your module book should be out soon, but if they're not, you can have a look on your Resources tab on your student home page and they will be there, and you can download them. So that's

something you can start having a look through to see what's going to happen the first few weeks, and you may have questions there.

One of the things you could start thinking about is for when your tutor group forum opens, what kind of things you want to be saying about yourself in there. How will you introduce yourself? Choose maybe a photo for your profile page. It's always nice to see people's faces on a profile picture, but if you're not comfortable with that, that's absolutely fine, as well. You might have a little image of your dog or just a little meme that you put up there, and that's absolutely fine, too.

So all those things getting started, all lined up, the lists, what you're going to do, how are you going to do it, when are you going to do it in anticipation of that all opening up.

ISABELLA HENMAN: I think it's quite useful to mention-- we mentioned it in our first welcome session on Tuesday, but it's worth mentioning that not all modules have module books. So I know some people are concerned that they haven't had their module books. It's probably worth looking at the module description in the first place to see whether you actually get them. And quite a lot of modules don't actually have printed materials now, as a matter of course. But even if you do, as Gina says, everything is available online, so you can always get started early.

Your module will say if there's printed materials. When you registered, it will say whether you get books or not. And there's all sorts of resources. You can have a good look there.

I wanted to come on to Trish now. Trish is another tutor. You've been a tutor on science modules for six years. So Gina has given lots of tips there, and I know that you also feel strongly about lots of things about students starting. What kind of tips would you add for students to start successfully?

TRISH: Yeah, thanks, Isabella. Well, to emphasise, a lot of the things that have been said already by Gina absolutely transfer over to science. It doesn't matter what subject you are studying. The main thing to start off with I really do believe is just getting out there, putting yourself out there, which can be a little bit scary at times. But be brave. Say hello to some people. Say hello to your tutor, because we are all real people.

And I think it can be quite easy to almost cut yourself off, not on purpose. But if you've got your books and you just read the books, fine. That works for some people some of the time, some people all of the time, I guess. But if you get stuck on something in the book, if you've already made your contact with other students, with your tutor, it's a lot easier to ask a question.

I don't mind as a tutor having a phone call, as we talked about. But even just emails is quite easy to just drop an email and say, oh, I've got a little bit stuck on this section. What does this mean, please? And I will happily talk you through it, whether that's by email, whether it's on the phone, whatever works for you. But it's much easier if you've broken the ice in the first place and just made contact because yeah, we are real people sitting at home doing our work, as well, just like you are.

And while we do have our-- I guess our serious hats on, when you think we're grading your papers, and I guess we are marking and giving feedback, we're not trying to be critical. We're trying to help you get along. And we also have things going on in our own lives. We understand when plans don't always go the way you think they will. So yeah, just communicate.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And that communication is actually a really important, I think, because I know we've got a number of students who are concerned. We have a lot of students where English isn't their mother tongue. It isn't their first language, and sometimes they feel their English isn't going to be good enough. What would you say to students who are feeling like that, Trish?

TRISH: Well, first of all, I will say a lot of students who worry about this actually have really, really good English, and I have full respect for anybody who could do a course or a whole degree in a second language, I find amazing. But if you do feel like you're struggling, there is support with the university, as well. We do have special tutors. It would be a different tutor, but special tutors who can help you if you feel your English is not quite up to scratch, if you feel it's just, for example, with the scientific work that we do, the science writing, there are module tutorials and things that will help you with that, as well. So whether it's fine tuning or whether it's a bigger issue, just again, get in contact either with your tutor or directly with student support at the university, and they can point you to extra support as well. You don't have to just struggle along.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Absolutely, I think. And that's the key thing, is it? It's not about struggling along, is it? Not at all.

TRISH: Absolutely

ISABELLA HENMAN: Now, we did ask, as a widget earlier, about how to communicate. We talked about a number of things. So we can see, so oh, lots of people are saying they like to communicate via email, but some phone, some text, some form. I think that's a useful thing, email, isn't it? Because what are some of the benefits of communicating by email, would you say, Trish?

TRISH: Benefits for students and tutors I think is just fitting it in with your day. So I know a lot of people will be studying but will have a job or caring responsibilities or whatever. And if you can quickly send off an email, obviously you won't get an instant reply, but your tutor can get that, they can find out whatever the answer is for you, email it back to you. It just fits in a lot easier in your day.

And I think a lot of people are now preferring that kind of communication, although it does have its disadvantages, as well, I have to say. So you have to be a bit careful with email-- well, I guess read and reread your emails to make sure you actually get your point across, because sometimes there can be miscommunications.

ISABELLA HENMAN: The number of times I read something after I've sent it and I go, how? That's not what I said. How does that work? So yeah, we understand. Everybody would, I think. But I also find emails quite useful, because it allows you sometimes to stop and think, doesn't it? It gives you a little bit of a thinking time and going OK, did I actually say-- and you saying that checking it and rereading it. And actually, we were talking on Tuesday about accessibility features and getting your computer to read it out to you. Get your computer to read your email out to you. Does it actually say what you thought it said, or does it say something random, which is often the case for me, because it's not quite the same? So we've also got some students who even-- they're even worried on a more basic level that they haven't chosen the right course for them. So Trish mentioned your student support team there. And it might be--

being honest, it may not be the right course for you, but it also might need to give it a bit of a chance to have a look through. But you can discuss with your student support team.

Remember that whenever you're starting a module, there's usually something called are you ready for, isn't there, Trish? Could you tell us a little bit about the are you ready for it?

TRISH: Well, are you ready for is usually well a set of questions sometimes or a list of the kind of things that you're going to go through in the module and the kind of knowledge you might need in approaching the module, but also just the skills you'll need. So that sounds a little bit waffley.

For example, S294, which is a second level module, so I know a lot of you won't be taking that, will go through the main topics, just listing them, the kind of background information you might need, what you might have needed to study. And a lot of people won't necessarily have done the exact courses and things like that, but it just gives you an idea.

It also tells you the amount of time you'll need to study, which is really important because especially when people take on multiple modules, they sometimes underestimate how much time it will take and how much organisation will be needed to fit that in around your other commitments. So it's important to consider not just the knowledge and the skills, but also the time that you'll need to do the course.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, I think that's a really important thing because Gina was saying earlier about planning and things and particularly those students who were saying, if you don't have your tutor allocation, you want to start planning, literally thinking about when you're going to put those hours in a week, because we know we have an increasing number of students who are choosing to study full time. Now, I found this very interesting. I was talking to a friend and she said, oh, I'm doing a full time course. I went, oh, is that 40 hours a week? She went, no that's 15. I went, no, no, full time study for the Open University is 40 hours a week. That's a long time, isn't it?

I mean, not being negative. We have students who manage fantastically, but you have to think about that. You have to think about when those hours are going to be, don't you?

TRISH: Absolutely. We have an increasing number of students who do very successfully study full time, but that's the thing. You have to realise is full time. So if I have my student allocation come through and I see that a student is actually doing a full time course, I wouldn't try and put them off, but I would introduce that question and say, oh, actually, are you working? Are you working full time? Because occasionally I do have people say, oh yeah, I work full time and I'm going to do this course full time. And I think, OK, there aren't actually enough hours in a week to do that. You might want to consider it.

A lot of people do say, yeah, I've actually cut down my work hours. I know when I'm going to do this. Perfect, that's fine. But it does need the consideration because of course, you get halfway through those modules and realise you've run out of time and it's a lot of effort.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And we don't want students to have a negative experience, do we? We want the experience to be as positive as possible. But it's about being realistic and thinking about what can you manage.

I know I wanted to do another module again. I really, really want to as a student, but I'm thinking literally, I wouldn't be able to ever go out in the evenings. I would be studying every single evening and all day Saturday.

TRISH: Yeah.

ISABELLA HENMAN: I don't know if I can. So it is actually sometimes being a bit realistic.

Now, we've got a number of things coming in from students. So actually going back to our email thing, Steve saying email is good for something to refer back to. Yes, absolutely. That's a really good thing because then you don't have to think, oh, scribble notes on the phone.

And Alana says you can set it so the email's sent 10 minutes. Oh, that's a good thing, isn't it, so that you can stop and check it, and make sure it's actually gone. But we've had some realistic things.

Caroline says emails are no good for me, as I'm curt and nonflowery. Tutor thinks I come across mean, but those familiar with autistic people get it.

I would say it might not be that tutors don't think that you're mean. Sometimes, actually, when we're talking about scientific writing, I know, Trish, we've talked about this quite a lot. And when we do tutorials, scientific writing is curt, isn't it? It's nonflowery, absolutely.

TRISH: Yeah, absolutely. You probably get on much better than some other students, yeah. Different style of writing. But with that, when you said-- no, I was going to say when the student said that the tutor thinks I'm being mean, just explain that. Be upfront at the beginning and say-- I've had students say that to me, look, you know, I don't really like posting on forums because I think people take it the wrong way. I've even had some who said who've said, I'm going to have a go, but if you ever think that it comes across in a different way to what I've meant it, could you let me know? And just with that little sort of safeguard of me saying OK, sure, I'll read it, I'll check it, and I'll let you know, they got on perfectly well. So again, it's that communication. Just let us know if you've got any worries like that, and we can help you out with it and help you to actually achieve posting on forums, sending emails. However, if you really don't want to email, then I'm sure your tutor will be happy to talk on the phone or whatever works best for you.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, and that's the thing. It's the method of communication. And part of it is a study journey. I haven't mentioned this idea of a study journey yet today. It's something that I talk about a lot, but everybody has a different study journey, don't they? And sometimes it's working out which way is going to work for you.

And Francesca has said, my Nan always says give something three months before you decide if it's for you or not. And that's actually quite an important thing, because that's part of the working out your study journey. You're not going to know immediately whether or not it is ideal.

But practically, just thinking about it from the finance point of view, there are different issues in terms of paying for the study, but we're not going to talk about those today. But yeah, don't just sort of have the first glance and go, oh, no, no, this too-- but give it a little chance.

Now, I know, Heidi, we've been having lots and lots of discussion in the chat pod and people have been coming back to do other things. What kind of things did you want to add to what we've been saying?

HEIDI: Well, I just want to start off by just sending some love and support to Caroline, who's having a bit of a wobble. At the moment and there's been lots of nice messages for Caroline. And I just want to send some reassurance that Caroline is going to be absolutely fine. I know that you're having a bit of a difficult morning, and you shared that in the chat.

And thank you for having the courage to do that because as other students have commented, there are many others that are going to be feeling a similar way to you. So thank you for having the bravery to put yourself forward and say, I'm really having a wobble. We all have them. I studied with the OU for years. I had more wobbles than I can count, so you are definitely, definitely not alone.

But what's interesting is that we've had a few students that seem to be a little bit apprehensive about reaching out to their tutors. So Francesca, for example, said she was thinking of emailing her tutor but didn't want to disturb them. Lucia said wasn't too sure whether to introduce herself to the tutors before they decide to make contact. And then Laura is worried about how much she should be in touch with her tutor because she doesn't want to seem too needy.

So I thought that was quite interesting. Perhaps we can provide some reassurance there that tutors are super friendly and there to help.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, absolutely. So what happens is, as we've mentioned, so Gina and Trish and I have mentioned that when we get our student allocation, most of us will send-- as tutors, we'll send out our welcome email, we'll send out a welcome letter or arrange the welcome phone calls relatively early on.

Being realistic, not all tutors are necessarily around this week, especially if the modules start on the 1st of October. But most, a lot of tutors are, and we'll start sending them out. For instance, mine will say, welcome to your module name from your allocated tutor, and things like that.

And so you can by all means, if you've got your tutor details, you can send an email and I know I often have students send ones, and that's the first I know that I've got the allocation if somebody said, hi, I'm your student, and that's absolutely fine. You can do that.

Now, Trish was saying and Gina was saying earlier, as well, about being honest and thinking about things. So I know, Trish, when we were talking about the kind of things we'd like to say today, we say you always ask students to let if there's something about them, something about their study that might impact their study, particularly disability. So can you give us a little more information about that?

TRISH: Yeah, absolutely. So as Isabella was saying, we get a student allocation come through for a particular module. And I'll reinforce, if you want to get in contact first off, that never bothers me at all. That's actually really, really good if you're proactive. But what I'll be doing in the next couple of weeks is with my five groups that I'll have coming in, looking through and welcoming everybody as a general welcome, but then looking to see if anyone does have any declared extra needs so we get a little marker. And I will contact those people individually.

But I have to say, sometimes, the information we get isn't actually as useful at all as talking to yourselves, either by email, even, or on the phone. Because, for example, I might get a D marker saying, this person has dyslexia. Fine, that's something I need to know. But I also as a tutor also know that there are many different kinds of dyslexia, so I need to know from you what we can do to help you.

So some people might just need a little bit of extra reading time and maybe an extension here and there if you've had a bit of trouble with a topic. Other people might need a particular font that they would like used. They might need a blue colour background, pink colour background, all those different things. I can't tell that unless-- well, unless you're listing on your student profile is really detailed, but it's easier and

better if it comes from you because you can let me know exactly what you need. And of course, that doesn't just apply to dyslexia. That applies to many different things.

So we kind of get a little notification that you might need something. We need you to back that up. Equally, do make sure if you have any extra needs that you do contact student support and get that updated on your profile so we do know. Or even just tell us so that we can ask student support to get in contact with you because we want to help, but we can't tell if you need help unless you tell us

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, and it's an interesting thing. I know we've got Rebecca saying, I've got an autism and ADHD assessment soon. I'm expected to be diagnosed. Should I tell my tutor? Absolutely, shouldn't she? Yes.

TRISH: Yeah.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And I know I've had students before, they've said to me, well, I've got bipolar or I've got depression, but I don't want it to go on my record because I think people are going to judge me. What would you say if students say something like that to you?

TRISH: I would say nobody is going to judge you at all, and it is just so much more helpful for us to know if there is a problem because if you do then have a crisis in depression, if we didn't know about that in the first place, that comes as a big surprise. It's much harder for us to help you and support you through that period than if we already know and then you get in contact and say, actually, I'm really struggling at the moment. If it's shared, it helps us help you. There's no judgement whatsoever, whatever the issue might be.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. I always tend to say it's never to the student detriment to declare things. And we refer to them, as Trish said, a D marker. That's what it's saying is disability. And it's essentially a term that all universities [INAUDIBLE]. So we're not talking about you being disabled, but it is a disability you can declare.

Some of it is, yes, you have specific diagnoses. They might be medical diagnoses, psychological diagnoses, anything like that. They don't necessarily have to be. If you are affected by something, let the university know because amongst anything else, we can provide resources, and there's so many resources available.

And something as simple as I remember Trish mentioned about these coloured backgrounds, I didn't know anything about it until one of my students with dyslexia said, you know what, actually, if it was a light blue background, that would help me so much. And I went-- we went back and forth and said, which one should do it? This one.

So all my tutorials always have that colour background now because students with dyslexia-- sorry, I can't even say it-- say that's much easier to know about.

Now, we've had a couple-- sort of dialling it back a little bit, we've had a number of questions, some practical questions. So how many tutors, how many students per tutor, that does vary. Access, it's around about 15, up to 20 or so for most modules, sometimes more than that if it's a big group. And all tutorials still online are with face to face.

I'm actually-- Trish and I were talking about this before. I'm going to do my first face to face session this year that I've done since pre-pandemic. I'm really excited, on my Module S112, I actually get to do a face to face. I've never done one on S112 before, either.

So some modules, particularly Level 1 modules, maybe doing face to face, or ones with a professional link to it. But it will tell you, or your tutor will tell you. So there will always be online alternatives, but there might be some face to face, as well. And it's great.

So Rebecca said, the majority are online, but I have a face to face one, which I'm so excited about. Honestly, I am. I had the material sent to me the other day. And I was like, oh, I've got to do these things, which is great.

So we've been talking a lot. We've got-- lots and lots of people have been talking. Sorry. We've been talking to tutors a lot. But I've mentioned Access a number of times.

Now, Charlotte, Charlotte is a student. Charlotte has been one of my Access students on a brand new course which we launched this year, which was the Access fast track course on the STEM. So Charlotte, can you tell us-- hiya. Can you tell us a little bit about what your experience was being a new student this year with the university?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Yeah, so I was completely new to the Open University. My BA degree is quite old, 20 years old, and I've been just working in a professional capacity since then.

Yeah, in the last couple of years, I've just been thinking about academic study again, and I have applied to do a Master's in human nutrition. And because that Masters has science and maths and I don't really have a background in that, they suggested this Access module with the Open University, the fast track module, which started in May, and I finished a couple of weeks ago.

So I had a look, also, at an A-level in biology, but the Open Uni sort of package, the fast track option really appealed to me.

Yeah, so looked into it and any hurdles that I came up against, maybe feeling is this the right thing for me, or looking at the time aspect around my job and home life, all those hurdles I seemed to overcome and yeah, just felt really excited about it. And then, yeah, I started in May. And now I'm all done, which is great.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, and it's lovely, isn't it? So you're talking about those hurdles and managing things. Now, I remember-- because Charlotte was one of my students-- that you took your work with you on holiday, didn't you?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: I did. I had a holiday to Cyprus at the beginning of August, and there was no let up on the module work that we had to do. So I thought, no, I'll take my books and my laptop with me in the suitcase. And that was sort of my by the pool reading, but it worked out well in the end. Yeah, it was fine.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. I mean, it's this flexibility, isn't it? And I know we've talked about it when we've discussed things because in Access, it's mostly phone calls, wasn't it? I mean, we did have-- I'm trying to remember. I think we did have some emails, didn't we? But I think it was mostly phone calls, wasn't it?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Yeah. We'd have a scheduled phone call, I think, every few weeks, which was really handy. And that would help me sort of-- I would probably, I think I would sort of pull my questions. I'd have an email with things jotted down or from my notebook that I knew to discuss with you. And if there was anything that I maybe thought oh, I'm sure that's a quick sort of response, I would email you. Yeah, so I felt quite comfortable with both. I definitely like the phone calls. It was nice to have that sort of human contact and just go through some questions that I had. But Yeah, I definitely knew that you would respond to emails and that type of thing. So that was good, too.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. Thank you. That's quite nice to know as a tutor, as well, because those tutors were-- as Trish and Gina were saying, we try. And we've got these ideas, but it's actually quite nice to know that we can help students because I think-- I can't remember. I mean, it seems ages ago, but it's only May, isn't it?

But can you remember, were you feeling particularly nervous? I know you said that you were new to science. So Trish was mentioning some of those skills. Can you remember something about that you were thinking, oh crumbs, this is something I've got to do?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Yes. I definitely thought, oh crumbs, what have I got myself into when I was sent my GCSE calculator. So I've not used one of those for many years.

Yeah, there's definitely times I thought, oh my goodness, am I going to be able to do this? But I was really surprised, actually, that I was able to do it. And the way the Open Uni, it really helps you plan or explain what's coming up and what you'll need to do. So the learning guides and everything were super helpful, really clear. And as long as I made sure I had time set aside, I could just come into the study and just start reading through and take breaks if I needed.

And then I found I was actually quite enjoying using my calculator. And I could remember a few things from my GCSEs. And again, the science side, I think sometimes you sort of forget how much you do use in your day to day life. So yeah, things do make sense. It's not as abstract, maybe, as I thought. So yeah once I got stuck in, it was fine.

And I think the Access module, there were four blocks. So it eased you in quite nicely, as well, so that was good.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, and I know we've got some students doing Access. I'm involved in it. I think Access is a fantastic start. I think, because you said you'd had a degree before, but actually it's this getting used to things. Alanna is very, very jealous of the fact that you got to study on the sun in, the beach. She thinks that was a lovely thing.

There's also you mentioned about studying alongside work. And Daisy said, how easy is it to rearrange study to work for you, to do things with the timetable? So I know that you said about studying while you're on holiday and around your work. Practically, how did you do that? Can you give some tips for students starting out?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Yes. So I mean, my normal working pattern is I work four days. I have Wednesdays off. So at the beginning, I thought, oh, no problem. I can dedicate most of my Wednesdays to my OU

study, evenings, weekends. And then once I got into it, I found actually that was too much. That long day studying, it just wasn't practical.

And the Open Uni module guides give you very helpful planning times that sort of let you know how long they think this module will take or this section will take. Obviously, some sections I might have got through a bit quicker because they're a bit more familiar, but there will be other sections that maybe had to take a bit longer. But they were really helpful.

I actually found it was better for me to break the study down into those chunks that were highlighted in the planner guide. So I could maybe do a few of those on a Wednesday and do an hour in the evening, sort of after 7 o'clock. I've got two children, as well, so it was just managing all of that around. So I think maybe where I had the sort of idea I can definitely dedicate my Wednesday, I can definitely dedicate most of Sunday, actually, I wasn't able to. It was better for me to break it down over those smaller chunks over the week.

Yeah, and definitely, I had to look at the calendar. I think we all have social things that come up. And there were a couple of things sort of over the weekend I thought, I can't really do that. I need to-- I have got my OU study, and that has to take priority at the moment, which I tried to do.

ISABELLA HENMAN: So that sounds like you were very much learning as you go. So you were learning, but you were learning about yourself and your learning style as you were going along, saying, you know what? That big chunk of time doesn't work for me.

So I know that we've got really useful time management resources. And I know that as you said that often modules have them. But some people like to break it up to the whole day and go, OK, well, these are the hours that I'm sleeping, these are hours I'm sleeping, these are hours. And these are hours available. Well, I don't want to-- the prospect of studying for six hours in a day is just too much for me, so I want to study the little chunks ideas.

And we've got Lucia who said, actually, studying in a cafe or library helps focus because it's too distracting at home. So I think that's quite realistic for some people, as well, isn't it? And and Shelley Lewis said, I study at night. It gets me in the zone I have the sound of nature or running water in the background. That's very interesting, that kind of idea, or changing into suitable attire for study. Have you ever done anything like that, Charlotte, sort of getting yourself in the headspace?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Maybe. I think it's more maybe not like clothing. It would be more-- because where I work for my job is the same place, or maybe I'll work in the kitchen sometimes. I have to have that real break from work. And I found, actually, I thought, oh, maybe I can do some studying very early in the morning. And it didn't work for me because I know I've got my work day ahead, and plus stuff with the family.

And actually, it was better for me to stop work, have dinner, maybe go for a walk. And then once everything was sort of settled at home and I'd done this, I could then come back in, open up my-- close down all my work windows, all of that, and it was just very much any of my work chat windows, and then it's very much this is my Open Uni time.

I have a different learning notebook for my Open Uni notes, as well. And I quite liked where I work. I get the sunset in the evening, so it was really nice time just to study, and that seemed to work quite well for me doing things a bit later in the evenings.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah I think that is a good thing. Sometimes it's learning about yourself, isn't it? So Laura says she's actually most productive first thing, and she get some study before starting work. I'm rubbish in the morning. I can't do that. But some people actually-- and we've got another person who likes the rain noise and that got a specific study corner in his bedroom.

And it's quite a good idea, isn't it, to have it? I mean, it doesn't always work for all people. Some people like to be flexible. But actually having a place where you go, right, this is my study place, can be really useful, can't it?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: And I also found—

ISABELLA HENMAN: No, you say, please.

CHARLOTTE NUNN: I was just saying like on the Wednesday, on my day off, I had this sort of notion I'd be in here. I'd be studying all day, and actually often on a Wednesday I would take my study books and go to a cafe just for an hour and have a nice coffee. And that was sort of quite good to come out of that home environment, as well. So again, maybe things I thought how they would be, they weren't so. But yeah, you just adapt and change things as they go, I think, you can do. Yeah.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. I think that's the good thing, the flexibility. Now, we were talking in the session on Tuesday. A few people didn't watch that. The recording will be available soon. We were talking about the Sconul access card, which allows you access to other university libraries.

So you could go to a cafe, but you can also go to other university libraries, where you are actually amongst other people that are studying. It can be really useful, as well.

And I know, Charlotte, and we've mentioned that we had lots of one to one phone calls. But I think you attended online tutorials as well, didn't you?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Oh, yes. Yeah, I found those one of the best resources. And certainly, because obviously studying with the OU, sometimes maybe you can feel sort of on your own. You forget there's lots of people doing the same module or doing other study, as well.

So the online lectures are really great to see a lecturer, and we could have a chat with some of the other students, as well. And they were really well timed in that they were sort of at the point before you a couple of weeks, maybe three weeks before you were due to submit your assignment. So I could sort of get my learning done knowing that I'd have that lecture then and then the time after that I was very much focused on the assignment piece as well.

So Yeah, they were really helpful, and then as well, I quite often would have the recording there while I was doing my assignment, as well, to fast forward sections that I could come back to again, so that'll be good.

ISABELLA HENMAN: That sounds beautiful. So you both, you did the live and you did the recorded. So I know we've had some students. We were mentioning what we call synchronous sessions, so live

sessions or face to face. And we know that some students were saying, I can't get to them, am I going to miss out? But the recordings can be really useful for that, can't they?

Because if you can't attend, if it's kid's bedtime or if you're working or whatever, the recording, as you said, you just have it there ready, don't you?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Yes. And I think initially I thought, oh, if I miss the online, the live session will I have missed out the opportunity to ask anything? And yes, you do, but actually, I realised that although there was definitely that, you could input and ask questions. It wasn't really about that. It was very much Christine going through the materials and what you needed to focus on and that type of thing.

So I think that don't worry too much, if you do miss them, they're recorded. And I don't think I felt that I would have missed out if I'd not been there, because then I can just email you, or I know we'll have a phone call. So anything that comes up whilst watching that recording, I could ask again at a later date.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And I think we have this idea. I think I probably mentioned it to you before. Lots of students who are starting now, they've got their September thing. So you've talked about things you've learned.

So if you went back to the before we started, so your April self, given the fact you started in May, what would you like to go back and say to your April self? What would be your biggest tip to go back and say?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Just to really go into it with an open mind. Obviously, there'll be subject areas that you might think, I don't know anything about or I won't be able to learn that, or how am I going to fit all of this in? And just know that many people have gone before you, and it's just an amazing opportunity to just learn something new and do something for yourself.

So Yeah, I think where maybe I was got sent the pack and my module book, and then, obviously things moved to-- the materials moved online. And yeah, just to try not to feel too overwhelmed, and everything is set out very step by step.

So you don't need to think, oh gosh, I've got to read all that right away. It's very well laid out and just-- yeah, just have that sort of open mind that makes sense, hopefully. Yeah.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, it does, absolutely. And I think there's lots of key points there. For students now, thinking so that was what you would go back to say to your April self. So all the people that are starting soon, these are things. So the keep an open mind.

Bear in mind that you will change along the way. And as you said you'd change the way you actually-- study worked for you, and you learn about yourself. You're learning about yourself, your reflection. Those of you who access are in a really, really privileged position because there's lots of reflection on Access, and you get to think. You actively have to think, don't you, Charlotte?

Yeah you do. Definitely. And like I said, it's just last year I wouldn't really have thought about doing an Open Uni module, and it's definitely just opened up some new doors for me, potentially a new chapter with my Master's.

Yeah, and I think the time management thing is key, because I think you have preconceptions about what you'll be able to do, and life gets in the way and things change. But I think, again, it's very much

structured that I didn't feel too overloaded as long as I just kept coming back to that study planner and things would change during the month and that type of thing.

But yeah, just to try and be on top of that time management, I think if you can nail that down, then you're in good stead, really.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Brilliant. Thank you very much, Charlotte. It's been incredibly helpful to hear all of those things. So I know we've asked lots of questions, Heidi, and I'm sure you've got loads and loads of things that students have been saying. What kind of other things? Have there been any questions? Have there been any answers coming up in the chat?

HEIDI: We've had some questions, actually. Holly asked whether there's any good Spotify playlists that people can recommend. So yeah, if anyone's got any ideas, please do pop them in the chat. I know with my Spotify, I tend to go on to the music for concentration. And that really helps me when I'm doing my studies. And Hannah said that YouTube have some excellent mindfulness playlists, so that's something to have a little search for, as well. Some people are saying that having that just that background noise is helpful for them when they're studying.

And so Kamala has made a study corner in their spare room and play rain noise on the Alexa, as that background noise is needed. But then it doesn't distract them when they're studying. But Joseph said that that wouldn't be possible, because he would need to be taking too many loo breaks if there was constant running water, which did make me smile.

Hannah says that she will take her stuff down the hill in cooler weather and study on the beach, which sounds absolutely divine. Very different to where I used to study. I actually used to study in the cupboard under the stairs, which sounds a little bit unusual, but I had enough space to put a very small IKEA table with a lamp and my laptop and then my son would be in the other room when he was little and I could go to him if I needed to, but otherwise, it just gave me enough peace and quiet. So lots of different places that people study.

Laura says that her work and study desk are the same. So if she's reading a book, she will take that away to the dining room table to have a change of scenery. And then Lucia says she uses sound cancelling headphones when studying in a cafe, and then genuinely forget that there are people there.

But I also really enjoyed studying in a cafe, as well, because you can-- as long as you've got the headphones on or you've got your music in the background. But it's just nice to have people around you. I just found that it helped just kind of reduce that slight sense of isolation you have sometimes if you've been studying on your own for too long.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. Now, I just want to mention, we originally were going to have a student, Jen, and she's not been very well, so she couldn't join us today. But she mentioned it's similar to that music and the headphones thing. And she mentioned to me something called smoothed brown noise. Apparently, you can have smooth white noise, smooth blue noise. It depends on the frequency. And she explained to me. It was totally new to me. But again, you can go to YouTube, and it will be a certain frequency of music, noise-- I'm not quite sure how it works. And she found that it was really helpful because it worked for her and it cancelled things out and it allowed her to really concentrate in the same way as Heidi was saying about that. And that sounded really useful for some people.

I think she said that it cancelled everything out, so you couldn't hear anything at all. So I think apparently there's a frequency that allows you to block out children's voices, which I don't think would have been very useful for you, Heidi, because you wouldn't have been able to hear your son at that point. But maybe get the right frequency for you.

So we have got a feedback form, which apart Student Hub Live, we like to know that we are meeting. What you need us to do. And we're doing everything that we can to help you in a nonmodular way for about the study skills.

So you'll see in the chat pod at the moment, there is a link to a feedback form. And if you could fill that in, we would be very, very grateful for you.

So just to finish up, what I want to do is for each of my guests. I want to give them to give their little one sentence summary recommendation. So Gina, what would be your one sentence summary recommendation to our students starting out?

GINA MAY: I would say hold your nerve.

ISABELLA HENMAN: I thought she was going say naughty nose, then.

GINA MAY: There's no magic button that when you sign up to do a module that suddenly all these skills that you're going to need during the course of the year or the following year though your degree are suddenly going to be you're ever going to be able to do them, you will get to learn them as you go along. It's our job to teach you so hold your nerve.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Brilliant. Thank you, Gina. What about you, Trish? What's your one sentence summary?

TRISH: I think I'm going to go back to the communication. So keep up the communication, whatever module you're doing. We're here to help. So just keep us up to date with what's going on.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Brilliant, thank you. And Charlotte, what would be your one sentence summary, saying out to new students?

CHARLOTTE NUNN: Just to absolutely go for it-- just that's it. Yeah, go for it. That would be mine.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Thank you. That sounds brilliant. Now, we get everybody to do a confidence how they're feeling about confidence to begin with. We've asked you to do it again. So let's have a look whether that has changed at all. Let's see what it's showing up for us now. I'm just waiting for it to come through that confidence widget of how people were feeling.

I don't know-- apparently, we can't show it for technical issues, unfortunately. We obviously having lots of gremlins today, I had them at the start. I had the coughing fit while we were talking earlier, but hopefully, you'll be able to see it if you're in the chat anyway.

So hopefully this has been a useful idea for you, helping you to become a confident academic learner, so thinking about planning, thinking about communicating thinking about how to make yourself proud. You've

gone a study journey. You're doing different things along the way. We've given you lots of resources in the chat. So the chat will carry on for a little while after we finish, and you can answer some more questions then.

But we've got our final event in this main freshers series tomorrow evening, where we're doing a social. We talk about hobbies, we've got different people, and we might even have a guest knight in shining armour appearing when we work out the practicalities of that one. But hopefully, this has been a useful one too for you today, and it will be lovely to see you another session soon. So bye for now.

[AUDIO LOGO]