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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back. OK. In this session we're talking about student consultation. You're all students, and we want to hear what you think.

So we have a little activity for you now. We'd like to know your answers to this question. And there's a dedicated chat going on in the breakout room.

I know you've been dipping in and out of the breakout room. You can do this in either room. It doesn't really, really matter. But we have Rachel Garnham who is joining us in that breakout room. And also one of our participants from the studio will be in there later.

Our question is, you never get a chance to make - a second chance to make a first impression. See what I did there. What were your first impressions of the OU, and what could we have done better? So that's that the activity we'd like to know the answers to. Let us know your thoughts on that and Sophie and HJ will feed those in to us in the studio.

So joining me today is Cath, Alice, and Sam. Cath, you're a student. Alice you work at the Open University. And Sam, you're mainly in the library, but you're let out sometimes when you're not filing all the books.

SAM: I have to admit I have nothing to do with books. I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to touch books or online journals or really important stuff.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, OK. That's fair enough. That's fair enough.

But we're here today to talk about student consultation and why that's so important. So we want to know about what students think about OU study. They're often quite vocal and they've been chatting to us about some of this. How do you hear their voices and how do you generate an idea about what students actually think?

ALICE: So we have a couple of different ways, well, more than a couple actually, ways of engaging our students. We have a Student Consultation Office. And from there we run a dedicated University Students Consultative Forum. The forums work in a really similar way to the tutorial forums.

And that goes on throughout the year. And we have a panel of students that are signed up to be consulted on a range of different topics that affect the University as a whole. So for example, last year we had a consultation on the Students First strategy and on online learning, tuition, et cetera.

We also have a nomination forum that's open all the time to all students, no matter whether you're registered to consult or not. And you can find that forum by clicking on the Student Consultation link in the bottom left-hand corner of the Student home page. And anyone can go on there, log on, put forward a suggestion for a topic for consultation.

That then goes to the Consultative Executive, which also has students sitting on. And that can then go through to be consulted on as part of the formal process. So last year we ran 12 consultations on the University Students Consultative Forum, four of which were student-nominated topics.

We also have, we run face-to-face consultation meetings. And they are run in different areas of the country. We have some coming up in spring. They'll be in March. Registration for those will open just after Christmas break. And if anyone is interested in coming along to one of those - Cath, you've been to some, so you can let us know what it's like.

CATH:

Absolutely. They're great fun really, the face-to-face consultation meetings. You have a good mix of people there. You have some experienced students. You have some absolutely new students.

You have OU members of staff. You have some tutors. You'll have some people from the Students Association there just to find out what students are thinking.

And everyone's all mixed up on the tables, so you get to hear from so many different voices. And as well as the actual formal consultation topics, for example, we were asked to talk about tuition last year, there's plenty of opportunity just to exchange ideas and see things from the other person's perspective. And it often opens up a whole lot of new ideas to you, things that you didn't really realise might be worth doing or might be an issue for some people.

So they really are a fantastic opportunity. And in addition to the formal thing with the consultation and getting information from the OU staff hosting it, you usually get to hear from people in the Students Association in the afternoon as well. So really, really would thoroughly recommend it. It's been great fun whenever I've been.

ALICE: And I would say that we are in the process of setting the agenda for those face-to-face meetings. And if there's anything you think should be on there, again we can take forward any suggestions from that Nomination Forum topic.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, over half of our audience are at Level 1, so they're either just starting out or maybe they're in their second module. So for new students, I guess this is a really good thing to know about, how to be part of the consultation.

Now if somebody said, you know, would you like to be consulted about this, it sounds quite official. And I'm not sure whether I would want to be consulted about these or go to a forum, because it sounds, I don't know. I think, well, what's that all about? How would I get involved? What do I do?

Sam, how does it work? Is it that official, and how do people get involved?

SAM: Well, I think doesn't have to be as official as it sounds. I mean, you'll know a lot more about the formal consultation forums than I do. But it's just having conversations in a forum environment. You're just having a written conversation about whatever the topic of the conversation is.

On top of those formal channels, the library itself has a student panel which is dedicated to, instead of consulting, I think we talk about collaborating with us, working with us, because that's often leading some of, students are leading a lot of the work we're doing, a lot of the areas we're exploring. But that's through varying different ways. It might be a very formal consultation in terms of questions asked and of opportunities to respond. But there might be a lot of informal opportunities as well.

So we use social media a lot in terms of having conversations with students. It might be a conversation over the phone, a one-to-one chat. So not all opportunities are very formalised and structured. It kind of depends on what the topic is and that sort of thing.

CATH: Maybe it's the name that's the problem. What if we just said, please tell us what you think? Would people find that less scary, do you think?

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I don't know, because that's what we're sort of doing right now is telling people what they think, asking them what they think even. And Sophie and HJ, they're telling us, aren't they?

SOPHIE: Yes.

HJ: Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: We'll leave you to it. OK. So there's lot of things going on, and Sophie and HJ can pick up a couple of little highlights, because I gather there's an awful lot going on.

So basically, this is about talking about real things that matter to real students. And Sam, you've picked up on the fact that the library are making a lot of active changes. And I guess the main idea from all of this consultation is to make changes, so can you tell us about some of the things that people have said, and how those have then had an impact on what we've done?

SAM: Well, certainly some of the conversations we've had with students, for example, we introduced a new library search tool recently. And we worked with students right from the very beginning in terms of scoping what it is that the tool needs to do. So it wasn't just at a final stage of can you test this for us and tell us what you think. It was, how do you like to look for information? Let us come and observe how you search for information. What functionality is actually going to help that?

Then we built prototypes. We worked with students to assess those. And then we assessed other tools. Then they worked with us on the tool we bought, making small incremental improvements as we went.

Without having worked so closely with students, actually we wouldn't have had such an effective search tool. And we continue to, we still continue to improve it. I wouldn't say it's perfect.

KAREN FOLEY: It is a lot better, though, to be fair. And I think it's one of those things that often, especially, when you've got such a professional lot of librarians or collaboration of librarians as I think they like to be called, when you've got people who do things professionally, they've got different ways of doing things.

And like you say, sometimes it's not always intuitive. And we can think, OK, how are people doing things and how has it changed? And it certainly has become a lot easier I know for my students, a lot easier to use.

SAM: I think what's important is we don't make assumptions about how something works for

students. I think what's really important it is that we understand their genuine experience. You talked about the student experience. And I think we need to really understand the process students are going through in whatever service that is, whether it's searching from information, whether it's referencing. That's always a hot topic, isn't it? We need to understand what the real experience is and what their genuine needs are, because only then I think can we improve services, would build new services that actually meet those needs.

ALICE: Yeah. You're absolutely right. And I think it's important not to underestimate the importance of smaller changes and suggestions that might seem small. So you might be sort of thinking, oh, you know, well, I don't think the button for this is very well placed. I really struggle to find it, and I think it would be better on this part of this web page. That's the kind of thing that isn't necessarily something we would think of, but from a student perspective, it might be something that could make a real difference. And that's something that is picked up on quite easily.

It also could be something really, something more fundamental. So for example -

KAREN FOLEY: Are there any examples in these lovely things you've bought?

ALICE: These are some quotes from students and staff. I was going to say that our arts team ran a consultation about what the new Level 1 module should be. And it was students who came up with what that was. So that's quite a big change. Our law consultation asked -

KAREN FOLEY: Can you turn it round for the camera?

ALICE: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: We're all dying to see what's on it.

ALICE: So this is "I don't want to just share my views. I want the OU to listen and change." This is a student quote. So this is all about what the point of consultation is. And it is about students letting us know what they think about the student experience, about their course, about the way the OU operates, and us listening and changing things to make it better.

CATH: I do think one of the really important things about that is it's not until you actually consult you realise the huge range of student approaches, student needs, and student views. And that must be very true with the library, that the way I use it might be quite different to the way somebody else uses it.

SAM: Yeah. But even that itself is a really important bit of learning, that there isn't one size fits all, so services have to take into account different needs, different requirements, and different ways our students are interacting with services or resources, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: HJ and Sophie, you're so busy. You're typing a lot.

SOPHIE: Frantic.

HJ: Yeah. There's loads of great things that people are saying about the OU. I think some people say, website has too many links on the pages. It's easy to get lost or they're frustrated calling some of the help desks. Some people are saying they'd like a freshers' pack, which I think *Student Hub* is your freshers' pack. We'll say that.

SOPHIE: Well, Devon actually said, though, *Student Hub Live* make you feel at ease as you get to natter with students, and so it's really nice that we've had that effect on you. So I'm glad that there's something good come up at least.

HJ: Yes. But Jade said she's a little confused, not too sure what to expect or when I start my course. I was talking about this. I had this when I started my course. I thought something would actually happen on the start date. I didn't realise I just had to log into the website. And I got really confused and really upset, because I didn't realise what I had to do.

KAREN FOLEY: No one phoned you on the date. Yeah. People can think that on the day.

HJ: We've got Rachel in the chat as well, from the Student Consultation, who's helping everyone out, answering questions, and pointing to resources that can help us navigate the website. We've got *Student Hub* sessions on that as well, so hopefully we can help ease some of these questions and nervousness and perhaps frustration.

KAREN FOLEY: Speaking of pain, how's Simon's finger?

SOPHIE: We have had the selfie through, so we're hoping to get that printed off for you as soon as possible. But it looks like he's on the mend. Fingers crossed for you, Simon. Pun sort of intended.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh. That was bad, Sophie. I'm sorry. No, no more.

OK. Cath, you've been involved in some of these consultations. What's your experience of it?

CATH:

I've actually been involved in pretty well all of them, I think, since we started the consultative process. And my experience is it's been extremely interesting. And it's often made me think very carefully about some of my own assumptions that again, I hadn't always thought about it from that point of view. I hadn't realised the way things work in some of the different faculties. For example, I mainly study in science. I found out what happens in other faculties. It's made me explore things about the OU that I really hadn't come across before, which has been a fantastic experience.

When you're actually in the consultation, the way it works is you get a number of specific questions that you're asked about, and everyone can contribute their answers to those questions on the thread, just like the forums work in your tutor groups or your module forums. And even if someone said something before that you agree with, you can indicate, there's a Like button and a Favourite button. You can indicate how good those posts are, that you like them. You can disagree. There's no problem with people disagreeing.

One of the great strengths about it is we have a plurality of voices here. And it's one of the reasons I'd really, really encourage new students to get involved, because to be honest, they probably hear, they've probably heard quite a lot over the years from people who've been around for a while like me. But we have a very different perspective, perhaps, to someone who's just starting now. So it would be absolutely brilliant to get a lot more input from people who are just starting now and to hear what their perspective on the OU is.

SAM:

And don't assume that someone before you will have said this already. I think there's huge value in just saying the things that you are experiencing, whether that's big or small. I mean, like you said, whether it's where a little button is, I think when we learn about these things, big or small, we can action them. We can do something about it. And that's the whole point is about improving the student experience.

So don't think, oh, someone else will have mentioned this or it's just a little thing. Whether it's through saying, certainly for the library, saying something through Twitter or on a Facebook post or whether you want to get involved in one of the more formalised pieces of research, every little bit of information helps us deliver a better service for all students.

KAREN FOLEY:

Thank you. Your final thoughts, because we're out of time, unfortunately. There's so much we could talk about. And you're going to join us in the chat, aren't you, Alice, as well afterwards?

ALICE: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: So do keep asking any questions. And this conversation and dialogue can continue after the session. But what's your final thoughts?

ALICE: I would like to just leave you with one of the overwhelming pieces of feedback that we've had from staff and from students in terms of consultation is that everyone wants more students to be involved and to hear more voices and get a more mix of students. So anyone who's out there thinking, yes, I have a little thought I'd like to let you know, please do get in touch and let us know what you think.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely. Excellent. And if you've got any thoughts about that, you can email us, studenthub@open.ac.uk. And also, if you want to join the Student Consultation Newsletter, just type student consultation in the email, send it to us, studenthub@open.ac.uk, and we'll make sure you're added to that.

Sam, Alice, and Cath, thank you so much. It's been a really interesting session, and we'll continue after this one. We're going to have a short break and we'll show you a little very short video about the student consultation process, which doesn't have any sound, by the way, so don't worry about that, and then show you another little short video.

Then we'll be back talking about BDNF, so that's going to be a very interesting session for anyone who's remotely interested in cognitive neuroscience which I know a lot of you are. We'll see you very soon.

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