

# Being a STEM student – personal perspective

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to The Student Hub Live STEM Freshers Event. Now, our topic of conversation now is being a STEM student, a personal perspective. And we have two wonderful STEM students.

We have the lovely Cath Brown, who is a long term OU addict, who has studied five of the six STEM schools, has been the OU Association's faculty representative for STEM before going on to be the Association's president until July this year. Been very, very busy. And you may well recognise Cath from social media. And she's currently halfway through a degree in data science. Welcome, Cath.

CATH BROWN: Welcome, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: And we have Emma Boland.

CATH BROWN: Lovely to be here. Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Good. And we have Emma Boland, who is an undergraduate studying at BSE in natural sciences, astronomy, and planetary science. Emma's in fourth year of study and has successfully passed S111, SM123, which is physics and space, and MST124, essential mathematics.

And Emma's an OU staff member working as part of the Support Hub for Astrobiology, which is a new unit, which is set up with a massive research budget from Research England within the School of Environment, Earth, and Ecosystems.

So welcome both. We're going to focus on what it's like to be an OU student. And some of the comments that we've had today ... in fact, let me go to Vic who can give us a summary of where we're at in terms of our student comments, which might give us some ideas about the things that Cath and Emma can say to our students to reassure them, Vic.

VIC: OK, so we've covered a lot about maths already. So I won't mention anything more there. We've had some excellent discussions around how to get organised. So how to organise time, how to organise your study. What do you physically do when you study? There's also been a bit of discussions around nerves about submitting TMAs. What is the T... what do you do? How do you write a TMA? How did you get started? And how might you submit it?

And certainly, both of you I think have experience with modules with iCMAs, the interactive computer-marked assignments. And there's some nerves around that, too. So I'm making it sound like everyone's really nervous, which there are some nerves. But I think people are starting to feel the love a bit more. And I just want to hear from you, your experiences.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, so could you tell us then, maybe, some of the things that you wish you'd known as OU students having been successful students for some time now? Cath, could we start with you?

CATH BROWN: Sure, I think probably the biggest one is, particularly given all these nerves that were around, is don't get too uptight about the fact that you will make some mistakes. We're all human beings. We all make mistakes. That's how we learn.

If you think back to when you first started driving, if you know how to drive, and you probably made lots of mistakes. And your instructor corrected you. And you learnt from it. And then you learnt how to drive well. And that's exactly the same here.

So don't get ... don't stress if you make the odd mistake and don't compare yourself to other people. It's your journey. It's not other people's.

KAREN FOLEY: Emma, what do you wish that you'd known when you started studying?

EMMA BOLAND: I certainly agree with what Cath just said. Definitely don't try to compare yourself to others because you will only end up getting a lot more frustrated with yourself because you can't keep up with the same pace as others. Also, being in now my fourth year of study and having studied more than one module now, I realised that I need to adapt my study technique depending on the subject as well.

So the study technique that I used for my science modules I tried to apply to my maths module. And it just didn't work. So that's something I wish I'd known before I'd started that actually I'd need to adapt my study technique in order to successfully pass those modules.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, and for us people at home, what tips they have to share. And I'm going to show you, Cath and Emma, what people at home have said. And then we can maybe expand on those because I think some of them may resonate with you. So people at home said, 'plan', 'don't panic'.

Those are the key things that are coming up. So these are students who I guess have already experienced things ... 'Take walks', 'hard work', 'plan your study', 'be positive', 'persevere', 'use forums', 'ask questions', 'manage your time', 'never give up', 'keep calm', 'drink lots of tea', 'practice', and enjoy. That's really, really important. Cath, anything you'd like to share from this word cloud?

CATH BROWN: Well, first of all, where's chocolate? Why isn't that in the word cloud? I'm really confused.

KAREN FOLEY: It's an omission, a dreadful omission.

CATH BROWN: It is a dreadful omission. To me, I think enjoy is one of the most important things. Personally, I've never been a big, very much structured planner, in the sense of doing the same thing each time. But because I enjoy, I'll let ... my study is me time for me, which means I look forward to doing it.

And I think that can help a lot if you can see it like that. And another thing I would think about is where you can use little snippets of time. So for example, if you're starting cooking a meal, obviously, you're not going to write TMA then. But you might be able to say listen to something if there's an audio associated with your module. You might be able to read one of the lighter things. If you wanted to pick kids up from swimming, that's a great time to be doing some studying. If like me, you're on the buses or trains, that is as well.

And that can actually mean that there's less concentrated time you have to sit down at home if you can use those little snippets of time just a little bit. And then that means that maybe you actually get to see your family and your pets and your friends a little bit more than you otherwise would.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Cath. That was really sound advice. We've also got people's worries.

And I'd like to show you both this as well. And Emma, maybe you could pick up on some of these as well. So the key things that are coming through are 'lack of time', 'failing', 'maths', we've already talked about being a big worry for people. But other things like 'misinterpreting the question' or 'procrastinating', 'taking on too much', 'not reaching out', 'not understanding things', 'forgetting', finding it 'too hard'.

There are two things I'd like to pick up in particular here. One is around pacing. Emma, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about something around that? And Cath, I wonder if you can pick up on this idea about forgetting and the extent to which, I guess, you need to remember what you're reading and maybe learn certain skills that you may be more important than actually the content behind them. But Emma, could we first start with the pacing idea here?

EMMA BOLAND: So I guess to pace myself throughout the year, I'm a very organised person. So I like to write down in front of me my deadline dates for all my assignments, for all my iCMAs that are coming up as well. And then look at the calendar and see what else I've got going on during that week or that month. But like Cath, I also take advantage of these snippets of time that I can use to complete the studies that week, or for the coming weeks.

I mean, for example, so my next module, I now have my textbooks. I've already started reading those mainly because I enjoy the subject so much. And also it gets me, I guess, a little bit ahead for when if something does crop up in, I don't know, November or December time, so if my son comes down ill, I know that I've got a little bit of leeway there in regards to my study time. So yeah, definitely take those snippets of time, make use of them because it will pay off in the long run.

KAREN FOLEY: And, Vic, we have a question for Emma.

VIC: Emma will be pleased it doesn't come from me. It comes from Liz. And it's, 'When you said that you wished that you realised that you needed to adapt your technique to move from maths to science, what did you mean by that? What did you do?'

EMMA BOLAND: OK, so when I ... so my first module with the OU was a science module. And my study technique is to read the text and effectively rewrite it in my notebook, highlight key words. And I find to me that I take that in a lot better.

Now when I went on to MST124, the maths module, I tried to apply that same technique. So reading the text out the text books, highlighting key words. But I quickly found that I wasn't remembering the key equations or, I guess ... yeah, I just wasn't remembering those key equations.

And so I quickly became frustrated with myself because I didn't understand the questions and how to answer them. So actually I went back to my tutor and said I'm really not understanding this part of the math module. How do I do it?

And she gave me some really good tips like, she said, look at the objectives at the end of each topic. What do those objectives cover? Go to the part in the book that that objective covers and focus on that. And I found that I also, with the maths, I needed to practice more. I think that was probably my downfall. I needed to practice more. But I didn't realise that until I started getting frustrated with myself. So yeah, that's where I realised that depending on the module, I realise now that I'm prepared to adjust my study technique for future modules.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, has that answered Liz's question, Vic?

VIC: It certainly sounds that way. If there's any further comments from Liz, I'll come back to you.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, and anybody else also? Anybody could ask questions. Cath, picking up from that this idea about some things are important to do and understand processes and procedures, some things are important to remember. Can you tell us a bit about your experience?

CATH BROWN: Absolutely, I mean, I think the first thing I would say is you do not have to remember every single word that's in the module books. I don't know anyone who's got a memory like that who will know every single little detail. It's not ... that's not what human beings are like, by and large. You do need to understand some absolutely key principles. But a lot of what you're doing is going to be about applying those key principles, not about just learning something for the sake of it.

And as Emma just mentioned, things like practicing. I mean, certainly if you're doing anything mathematical, practice is absolutely key. That's where you get the muscle memory for math so to speak, that you actually get ... use those skills. There are some subjects where you do need to do a bit of memory. I mean, things like biology, for example. You have to remember some of the details and that sort of thing. But again, you can do that with practice. It's not going to be there straight off.

It's quite natural that we reinforce our memories by going back over things. It doesn't mean that it's a failure if you have to read it again. It's actually really strengthening your memory by doing that. And likewise, when you do your TMAs, that's using those ideas. And that's going to help them go into your memory as well.

And as Emma's already highlighted, you'll find different ways of studying things. I mean, for Emma, she found lighting things out again helped her remember things. That might not be what it is for you. But you will find a way to experiment with different things. Level 1's the place to experiment or to find out the best way for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, thank you, Cath. Now, I wanted to pick up on one question that I had, which was that I know that things don't always go smoothly for many students. But my own experience is that many students will often feel like they're the only ones for whom things aren't going well. So has it been for you ... have things ever not gone according to plan? And if so, what happened? What support did you get, Emma?

EMMA BOLAND: Yeah, I'm probably a really good example of that, especially the last couple of years. So I ... it would have been last year. No, year before even. I took on two modules at the same time. Again, a science and a maths one, I quickly realised that I couldn't do both at the same time, because I was getting frustrated with myself. I couldn't ... I felt like I couldn't keep to those TMA deadlines, all those iCMA deadlines.

So I ended up speaking to my tutor. And I ended up actually deferring one of the modules. Initially, I was disappointed in myself. But I realise now that that was completely the best decision that I had made because I reenrolled on the module September, just last September and successfully passed that module this summer. So it was definitely the best decision for me.

My tutor has been exceptional. I've had a lot of family things gone on over the last couple of months. And they've been really supportive in regards to extending TMA deadlines. So don't give up hope. There's always support for you. You just need to ask for it.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful and really reassuring if I may say, Emma. Because when you came on thinking, saying I'm a really organised person. I thought I'd bet that everything has gone according to plan for Emma. Cath, what's your experience been?

EMMA BOLAND: Well, I've had quite a few occasions where I've needed to defer. I mean, one of them was due to some very difficult family circumstances involving ill-health of my parents. And like Emma, I did feel a bit bad about it at the time because I didn't see myself as the student who needed to defer. I saw myself as a successful student. And so it was a bit of a ... it felt like a bit of a kick in the teeth. But it was absolutely the right thing to do. I couldn't of coped with my studying. I needed to focus on my family, and that was fine.

And other things, I've had occasions where something has gone wrong. I mean, just to give you a few specimens of things that have gone wrong, things like I had horrible backache. I couldn't sit to do my work. I did the absolute really stupid thing.

I hadn't backed up my laptop. And my laptop died. I had unexpected things happening at my workplace. And in all of those cases, I've managed to get an extension from my tutor.

And they've always been really kind about it. I mean, they're not just going to say OK, you can have six weeks. Don't worry about it because then you'll get behind with the rest of the module. But they've been very flexible about it.

And I felt so embarrassed about that one with a laptop because it was such a numpty thing to do, wasn't it? But my tutor was really nice about it. He didn't laugh at me too much, actually gave me the extension to let me sort myself out.

So please, do talk to your tutor. Your tutor wants you to succeed. They're there to try and help you do that.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, no, that's absolutely true. Very, very wise words of advice and reminds me I must back my own laptop up, because I think these things do often scupper our plans in ways that we're not expecting. So that's absolutely wonderful. Well, thank you both for sharing your experience.

Cath, if I might just ask, we've already had a lot of discussion about this today. And I think Tala's has been putting a lot of links in about various clubs and societies to meet other students. But could you just give students a plug about where they might want to go if they want to get more involved in the University or meet other students?

EMMA BOLAND: OK, so big plug. OU Student Association. This is your OU version of a student union.

I'm afraid we don't have a face-to-face bar like most conventional ones do. But we do have lots of clubs and societies. In normal times, we have face-to-face meet ups. For example, where I live in Birmingham, we normally have one a month.

We have other activities like quizzes. We've got a virtual freshers. So it's [oustudents.com](http://oustudents.com). If you go along there, you can find out about the clubs and societies. You can find out about volunteering.

There's lots of great ways to volunteer. You can find out about the meetup spaces to meet other students. So [oustudents.com](http://oustudents.com). Have a look on the community tab for those sorts of things and the volunteering tab. And just normally have a bit of a browse around.

I would also say, I know not everybody uses Facebook or other social media. But there is a lot of new students around who are on social media. So that's quite a nice place to connect up with them. Just make sure it doesn't completely take over your life when you do still have time for study.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, well, Emma and Cath, thank you so much. Just to answer James' question about doing a dummy TMA and whether that's a good idea, James, I'd say definitely yes. It's really, really reassuring to know that you've tested the system with a document and often just with your name or your personal identifier on it. Send it through the eTMA system. Your tutor will make a comment on it and send it back.

And that's really important to do because one, it shows you can use the system. And two, it just checks that you can read your tutor's comments. Sometimes you might have to turn on a read preview, et cetera. So it's a really, really nice way of just checking that system. So it's definitely worth probably five or so minutes it would take to submit one.

Our next video is going to be about doing PhDs and professional doctorates at The Open University. And it's going to feature Hannah Sargeant, who's one of my next guests actually. Very often when we start an OU degree, we think it will never ever end in many, many moons. But very often, it does. And we might want to do something else. And some students actually work on campus in some of the OpenSTEM labs and in many other places. So I'm going to talk to them about what happens after you've got your degree after this video break. Join me then.

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