

KAREN FOLEY: Good morning everybody, and welcome to the Student Hub Live, The Open University's online live, interactive platform to facilitate academic community. Well, this is our OU-wide Freshers event, and my name is Karen Foley. I'm a lecturer here at The Open University, and I will be presenting today's programme for you.

We've got all sorts of wonderful things in store for you today. If you're a new student, which I know many of you are, we're going to show you all around the Virtual Learning Environment, show you what tutorials look like, talk to some tutors and find out how to make the most out of your relationship with your tutor. And we'll also be talking about things like time management and staying well in your study. We have colleagues from The Open University Students Association joining us today, and heaps, heaps more.

But we're going to start the day by introducing you to some of the key people at the University - our Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. But before we do that, let me just explain to you how today's session is going to work. So a lot of you are new, and you're super excited about your studies. And we've got some things for you to participate in today.

So in addition to my guests that I'm going to have on my virtual sofa here, talking to you about the various topics we've got lined up, you can ask questions to those guests and of each other. And you could do that in our chat pod. So you can talk about whatever you would like to talk about, ask any questions, and use this time to make the most of connecting live with many other Open University students. Just don't disclose any personal information on the chat.

And if it feels a bit too much, because this is your time, you can turn the chat off. There are different interfaces that you can use. So you could make that chat smaller or bigger, or just watch the video stream.

It's really important that you think about how you're using your time today and make the most of it in a way that's right for you. Don't feel obliged to do any more than you would like to.

If you'd like to make the most of talking to people in the chat - and remember that all of the video will be recorded for you to catch up on later - you can do so. And if it moves too quickly, there's a little pin button at the top of the chat.

Now, moderating the chat and asking all your questions to our live panel is the wonderful HJ, who was an OU student but is now captured on our social media hot desk. HJ, how are you? And more importantly, how is everybody at home?

HJ: I'm really good. Thank you, Karen. And I'm so excited. There's so many people in the chat today, which is absolutely amazing. A lot of people are introducing themselves and doing loads of different modules. So I have to say, though, James is very much the early bird, being here at eight twenty-one. I think James has been very excited for this, [CHUCKLES] maybe even more than me. But a lot of people are very excited and happy.

Fiona says, happy Monday, what a positive start to the week, which I absolutely agree. We've got Aditya hailing from India. And Aditya lives in a town famous for sweets, so it sounds absolutely amazing. I don't know how they'll keep me away now I've heard about that.

And we've got other people as well. Jade's hailing from Yorkshire, Laura from Exeter, Alexander from Germany. And we're studying all sorts of modules as well. So Peter is studying childhood and youth. William is doing A113, *Revolutions*, which sounds fantastic.

And Malcolm seems to be doing the sports apprenticeship, which sounds amazing. I've heard it's a great programme. But same as normal, anything goes in the chat. So just any thoughts, comments or questions, our fantastic guests would love to hear it. And me being the typical, not-very-organised student, if you have any fantastic study tips that you've found useful, or things that you are trying out, I want to know. And I am going to put them on the board next to me so I can try out this academic year.

But if you need any help, we've got a little Help tab as well. That's for anything technical. But don't be afraid to say hello, let us know what you're studying, and yeah, we're looking forward to today.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, HJ. Well, I'm delighted you've got a whole range of things there. I can see some to-do lists. We might tackle some of those in our time management section later, but wonderful to hear from you.

We have people all over the globe and all over the UK. In fact, Liz, Tim and I were just saying that some of us are in Wales, except for Tim who is near Milton Keynes. But let's see where everybody at home is right now.

So we've got over two hundred and seventy-five people logged on live right now. And you can see here that we've got some in Europe, some all over the globe - Africa and the Middle East, Asia, et cetera. Not too many in Wales, but that's because we haven't filled in the word cloud, the widget, as well.

And you can also fill in our word cloud to let us know what you're most excited about, what you're worried about, and how you're feeling right now. And we'll take a look at some of your responses to that. Don't forget, when you fill those in, you can also see what everyone else at home says.

Plus, if you can only think of one or two things, that's absolutely fine, but you do need three things in the box, otherwise, your results won't submit. So just put a full stop or cross in there, and then you can see what everyone else says. And welcome, those of you who are just joining. We've got over three hundred and fifty OU students with us online right now, so a very, very warm welcome to you.

Let me introduce you to our Vice-Chancellor and our Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students). I'm joined by Tim and Liz. So thank you very much, Tim Blackman and Liz Marr. Tim is our Vice-Chancellor, and Liz Marr is our Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students).

So, if you've got any questions for them, they've said that they would try and answer them. So do let us know in the chat. But I know you're just getting to meet everyone, and it's all very exciting. So I have some questions lined up.

My first question, Tim, is many universities now with this pandemic, are doing distance learning right now. And in some institutions, they sort of see distance learning as inferior.

There's been lots of debate about this. So my question to you is, why should students be confident in the OU?

TIM BLACKMAN: Hi, Karen, and hello everybody. I'm really pleased so many of our new and many of our continuing students are joining us this morning, so a huge welcome to the OU. And it's terrific just to see how excited you all are about starting study or coming back to study. That's fantastic.

Yeah, it's been quite interesting just watching this kind of wave of online learning, not just in universities but in colleges and schools as well. And in the OU, we've actually got alongside and supported quite a few other institutions with developing their capability to teach online because we are the experts. And I think the straightforward answer to your question is, we do it best at the OU.

Much of the online learning that we're seeing developed elsewhere in the sector, is basically re-versioning face-to-face teaching for online. But we design online from scratch. And I think our secret of success is that we build in the whole learning process as part of the design of the course. So it really scaffolds the student's learning, takes them through step by step; gives them plenty of opportunity for feedback, taking quizzes, and so on; uses multimedia so it's interesting and engaging.

And we've also got our analytics in the background, so we can see where students are having some trouble with a topic. And we can actually go in there and fix that. So, that's incredibly sophisticated stuff. But it's all about getting alongside our students and helping them to learn successfully. And we design that in right from the start.

And then, of course, on top of that, we have our fantastic associate lecturers who get alongside with the tutorial support, the group tuition. So, the model is pretty unique. It's incredibly successful, and I think it's a quality that's just unmatched elsewhere in the sector.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Tim. No, you're absolutely right, and I think that, that range of modalities are so important. So many universities are just thinking about how we can deliver lectures. And as you say, it's that interaction between video and text and audio that make it so stimulating, isn't it?

TIM BLACKMAN: Absolutely. And we're always working on that too. We're always looking for student feedback. We're always doing research on this. So, we're getting better and better at this all the time, and always looking at it from a student perspective.

What works for the student? What's the appropriate technology? How can we help students who may be struggling with a particular topic in terms of coming in and thinking about how we're teaching that?

And it's really great too, when we get peer-to-peer learning going on, when you see in our various forums students supporting each other. And if a student is struggling, another student comes in and says, have a look at it from this direction. Or have a look at this other source on the web or a textbook. You might learn it better by looking at it that way. Everybody's got a slightly different way of learning. And when you see the students supporting each other with that, it's absolutely amazing.

KAREN FOLEY: It is. It is. And I think that's what's going on in the chat right now. So many students are getting together saying, oh, I hadn't looked at it from that perspective. I'm feeling the same as you are. And there's something wonderful about sharing those experiences. Yeah.

TIM BLACKMAN: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a lovely segue into your role, Liz, because you're PVC (Students). And one of the key things in your role is that dialogue between the University and the students. So can you tell us a little bit about how you go about doing that? How do you include student voice, as Tim says, in the learning for students to make it better?

LIZ MARR: Oh, thanks, Karen, and good morning to you. And good morning to everybody who's joined us. And just to follow up a little bit on what Tim was saying, I think it's quite remarkable that - I would suspect that The Open University is the only one where its new students are able to listen to, and ask questions of, the Vice-Chancellor and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor on the very first day. So I think that makes us pretty unique and very supportive.

As you know, Karen, I myself was a mature student, and I started studying with The Open University when my daughter was really, really small. So I know exactly what it's like and what the challenges are. And I went into a - joined a face-to-face university, and I kind of just lived with the problems. It never occurred to me that I might be able to challenge them.

So when I became an academic, what I really wanted to do was to make sure that people like me, and others, were able to succeed and enjoy their studies without all of the barriers that get created by life and other things. And so this is where Student Voice comes in. It's absolutely critical for us to be able to hear the experience of our students. And this is just one way in which we can get that student voice to feed back to us about what people are interested in, what excites them, what worries them.

But there's lots of other ways that you can do it. So we have lots of feedback mechanisms where we want students to talk to us about how they're feeling, what's working for them, what isn't working for them. We have lots of consultation panels. We've got representation on our committees.

So we want to involve students, at every level and in everything that we do, because the student experience - what you experience as a student is better than anything I can do or say, because I don't know what it's like. I don't know what it's like to have a disability and to study. I don't know what it's like to live in a remote - well, actually, that's not true. I am in a fairly remote community at the moment, and my broadband is holding out. But there are occasions where technology gets in the way.

So we really need to know, to hear from students, about what works for them, what doesn't work, what we could do better. And that's what, really, my role is about. It's about listening to that voice, hearing it, understanding it, and then feeding that back into the University so that we can enhance the student experience. What we want is successful students and happy students. You tell us how we can help you succeed and what will make you happy.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now some of these questions are very simple, what we can do to make you happy. So Liz and Tim have both designed some word clouds that we would very

much like you to fill in at home. Liz, what are the questions that you would most like to know from everybody here today?

LIZ MARR: Okay, so my first question - and I hesitated over this a little bit - was, what are the things you're worried about? And the reason I hesitated was because I went on a fear of flying course a few years ago, because I was really scared of flying. And we started off the session with a psychologist asking us what we were afraid of.

And somebody said something. I think, I hadn't thought of that one, and I added it to my repertoire of things to be afraid of. So my worry is that if I asked you what you're worried about, you'll say, oh, I'd not thought of that. I'm going to worry about that as well.

But actually, sharing those worries is a way of kind of recognising that everybody is nervous about the same things. And actually, it's probably not necessary to worry. But until you tell me what you're worried about, when you tell me rather, then I can reassure you. But I also want to know what you're excited about.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's see how everyone's feeling. Okay, so let's take the first screenshot and see how everyone is feeling right now. So this was one of the things that came through right at the start of the session, just before we went on air. And people were feeling a range of things. Excited was the thing that was most prominent here. But people were also feeling nervous, anxious, unsure. So this is before we went live, and you got to see what a lovely bunch we all are here at The Open University.

Some people are full of cold. Some people need coffee. Others are engaged, eager to start, feeling wonderful, enthusiastic, keen to learn, and overwhelmed. Well, I hope that we can make you certainly feel a lot more happier, more relaxed and more informed about what an exciting journey you're going to get into.

So Tim, one of the things I did want to know about is - we'll come back to those widgets in just a second - lots of people know a lot about their module. We've been asking students what they're studying, and they're studying a whole range of things here. And so, what are some of the things that they should also know about The Open University? Because as you know, we're so much more than just the modules that students are engaged with.

TIM BLACKMAN: We are, and of course, our students are focused on their modules. But one thing I often say about The Open University is we are much more than a university. We're a whole social movement.

If you look at the range of things we do, from the amazing programmes we put out on the BBC, TV and radio, to some of the work we do in international development - we have huge programmes in Africa that are helping to train teachers and health care workers, helping to educate girls. We've done a huge amount during the COVID crisis to get our free courses out there that will help people who are facing unemployment or furlough to reskill, upskill, think about a career change.

So we've got so many - the remarkable thing about The Open University is we're so multi-channelled. We're doing things through just about every digital channel you can think of. And a lot of it is free. And the rest of it is, for example, a lower fee than elsewhere in the sector.

And we do our best to widen access across the whole range. Whatever type of learner you are, whatever type of learning you want, we're about, essentially, universal higher education.

KAREN FOLEY: And there's been so much going on in terms of COVID, as well, that we've been able to reach out, from things like colleagues in the chemistry laboratories making hand sanitiser for the hospital in Milton Keynes, to some of the international development work, and also things on TV and radio. I mean, the support and help have been phenomenal, which is because of the OU mission, isn't it?

TIM BLACKMAN: That's right. And we're the only university in the country that has in our Charter not just providing great courses and doing great research, but actually serving the educational well-being of society at large. And that's one reason why we do all our work with the BBC, for example, is that we can get to millions of people and inspire them. Many of them do then come on and choose to study with us. But others just start thinking, thinking in a different way, thinking about an issue in a different way. If you take what we did with *Blue Planet II*, for example, the OU was essentially responsible for sparking a whole movement to stop using plastic straws when they saw David Attenborough explaining what it was doing to wildlife across the planet. And we've got that ability to engage the public, and for the public to start thinking about some of the big challenges we have and getting out there and acting on it.

KAREN FOLEY: It's been amazing. And things like that, often when we see the end of a programme, we see that OU logo and the academics, consultants who've helped support that range of programming. It's amazing to think of the impact that The Open University is having on the whole world.

TIM BLACKMAN: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Liz - all right, sorry, Tim. We've got your widget ready, Liz, here. And also, Tim would also like to know about why people are studying at the OU. But first, let's look at what are you worried about. And let's see, Liz. There's lots of things coming up here. The main one is failing and time management and falling behind. Other things like age, meeting deadlines, collaboration, my workload, bad memory, can I do it? Low grades, writing essays, planning time, studying full-time, limited vocabulary, feeling isolated.

Liz, there's lots and lots of worries here. What do you - how do you react to this?

LIZ MARR: I'm thinking, oh my goodness me, what could we do? Actually, my answer is, first off, don't worry. We're here to help, so anything that you are worried about, you talk to your SST. You talk to your tutor. You talk to each other in forums, help each other, reassure each other, engage with the Students Association.

There are lots of worrying things in there, and I was slightly disturbed to see failing, quite high in the list. You are not going to fail, believe me. Get the time management right. Keep up to date with your study skills. Make sure you're on track with your reading. You will be great.

The thing is to enjoy it. Don't let the worries get in the way of what you need to do. You've done the hard bit. You've signed up. You've joined. You're starting to get your materials.

You're starting to study. Embrace it. Enjoy it. Don't worry about the things that are further down the line. You will be fine but talk to us. Talk to us, and we will help you.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And we are going to be covering many of these things in today's session. And also, at Student Hub Live, we do lots of workshops on things like time management, essay writing, answering the question, et cetera, because these are very, very common things. So as Liz says, there's heaps of support out there for you.

Tim, let's just take a quick look, before we wrap up, about why people have chosen to study at The Open University. So we've asked them some reasons why they've chosen. And you can see here that the key thing is distance learning and flexibility. And we know from so many areas that flexibility is one of the key things that can be both a huge enabler, but sometimes can be a bit of a hindrance, which is why time management is important.

Other people say they're working full-time, it offers more guidance, the fees are reasonable, they enjoy the format, it's easier, it's got positive reviews, they've got no qualifications. So there's lots and lots of different things here. But ultimately, it seems as if the ability to fit study into life is key. What are your responses to this Tim?

TIM BLACKMAN: Well, in many ways, there's no surprises there. We know why many of our students study with us. But it's always interesting to see the new generation coming in, and whether anything's changing.

We know flexibility is a huge USP we have, and we work hard to get that right, making sure our courses work across all sorts of different platforms. And you can use them on your mobile phone or on your PC, et cetera, mixing.

When we weren't in the COVID crisis, we had - some of our tutorials are face to face. Many of them are online. So having that mix of ways that students can engage is very important.

But, I'm hoping that we also start to see quality up there, because we tend not to push our quality message because we push a message of being flexible and accessible. But as I said right at the beginning, the quality of our courses and the thought that goes into how they're designed and how we can help students succeed is, I really think, second to none. So I think quality will increasingly be a message we're getting about why we're not just - we're often seen as a second chance university. But an ambition I have for the OU is that we become a first-choice university.

KAREN FOLEY: So Tim, bearing in mind that we're closing now, I just wanted to ask about your day job. And you're talking about this ambition. We've all got massive challenges this year. What's one of your biggest challenges? And what are you hoping to achieve in your day job as Vice-Chancellor?

TIM BLACKMAN: I think - I'm going to mention two things. One is, I've got to have a real concern at the moment about the well-being of our staff and of our students. Things are really tough at the moment, and we've got to make sure that when staff or students need that extra bit of help, that that help, and that support is there. And that's a big priority for me.

But a second thing I'll just quickly say, is that we're working on our new strategy. We need to develop our new five-year strategy. And we're going to be doing that over the next few

months. What direction should we be going in? How should we do that? How do we stay ahead with our innovation and support for students?

And we'll be working closely with the Students Association, OUSA, on that. So I hope our students will get involved in OUSA. And through that, you can have a real say, not just about the day-to-day of how your course works, but also the future strategic direction of the OU.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you so much, Tim. Big job for you there, so everyone at home worried about some of the things, just think of Tim and the strategy. But also, bearing in mind, it's been so important for The Open University to always be innovative. I think sometimes we forget how innovative the OU is. And at times like this, when other people are doing distance learning, we really do see the strengths of the OU.

Liz, I'm going to ask you, but I'm going to show you as well what people are most excited about, just to take the edge off that worries widget for you. And then I'm going to ask about your most challenging thing. So you'll see here, there's lots more words that people are very excited about. Let's take a look.

Learning is key here, meeting new people, getting started, knowledge, some wonderful things here, Liz. I'm not sure if you - oh, making friends - that's nice - achievements. So there's lots and lots here. Anything you'd like to pick up on, Liz? And what's your biggest challenge in the day job as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students)?

LIZ MARR: So I'd like to pick up on the fact that there are many more words in this one than there are in the worries one, so that's really good. So there's clear excitement there.

I was thinking about my challenge. And actually, my biggest challenge during home working is not eating cake. I know cake is very important to Student Hub Live viewers, so that's my challenge.

But I prefer not to think about challenges in my work life, because I believe that we can do what we need to do. So I think about objectives. And my objectives are - student success, I'm really focused on. Objectives for this year are around access, participation and success, so ensuring that those students who perhaps have come from more challenging backgrounds, who might have not had the access to opportunities that others have had, to see how we can make sure that they succeed.

I'm particularly concerned around equality and diversity and inclusion and how we can ensure that we are an inclusive community, and that we're an inclusive - we are an inclusive welcoming community, but I think there's always more we can do. So that's my other one, really. So yeah, they're not challenges. They're objectives.

KAREN FOLEY: It's all how we frame these things, isn't it? Well, Tim and Liz, that is absolutely wonderful. I don't think there's any other university that would live stream from your own homes at ten o'clock on a Monday morning to welcome all of our excited new students. So thank you both so much for coming on. I think this has been absolutely wonderful.

And good luck with everything, and you're doing an amazing job. And I think all the students are super grateful for the ways that you're making the University an even better place. Thank you.

TIM BLACKMAN: Thanks, Karen, and good luck everybody.

LIZ MARR: Yeah, good luck.

KAREN FOLEY: So, I hope you enjoyed that. We're going to now take a short video break, and then I'm going to introduce you to some wonderful students, some of whom you may recognise, some of whom you may not. And we're also going to go to HJ and see what's been going on, on the hot desk. There's lots of you here.

And we're going to show you a quick video break. If you haven't already, grab that cup of coffee that you're so desperately in need of, and we will be back very, very soon for more live chat. See you then.

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