

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences virtual Freshers' Fair. Well, we've told you that there was a lot of support for you as a student at The Open University. And now I'm going to introduce you to some people who can explain what sort of support is available.

So, I am joined by Njabulo Moyo, who is a student support advice and guidance representative from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. So Njabulo is one person who you may call if you phone the Student Support Team. And Njabulo specialises in psychology and counselling and works across all levels.

Now, again, you don't need to worry too much about some of these job titles, et cetera. You call. You'll get triaged into the right place. But I'm just introducing you so you know a little bit about what these fine people do.

Madeleine Knightley is a staff tutor in Psychology and Counselling. And she's responsible for all of the Level 1 and 2 psychology modules in the East of England, and is also a tutor or associate lecturer's line manager. So Madeleine will manage a lot of the associate lecturers and make sure that all of their time tables and development needs are all up to date and that.

And she is very familiar with the ranges and challenges that students experience. She's heard the lot. So I'm hoping that she can offer some solutions here and tell you how wonderful we can be in terms of supporting you in your studies.

And Alistair Brown is a tutor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, from Level 1 interdisciplinary arts and humanities modules, all the way through to English literature modules at Levels 2 and 3. And Alistair is the moderator, which means that he will oversee and answer a lot of questions on the induction forums. So these are often forums that are there specifically at the beginning of a course or module. And that forum is the arts and humanities students. And he's got a good sense of the combination of both excitement and uncertainty that so many of you have already talked about.

So welcome to my fine panel. So let's talk a little bit about what sorts of support are available for students at the OU. Alistair, from a tutor perspective, we've had already how tutors are one of the key relationships that students have.

And typically, a tutor will have between, say, fifteen and twenty or so students in a group. So there's a really nice opportunity to get to know your tutor pretty well. What can they offer?

ALISTAIR BROWN: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. The OU is such a massive institution. But the thing about a tutor is they're the individual behind the scenes.

They're the person who is going to guide you throughout your module. So we'll be there right at the very start, making contact. I've just this morning been making contact with my students on the Level 3 literature module.

So they'll introduce themselves right at the start of the module. They will be there for you in tutorials and on the tutor group forum that you share with those fifteen or twenty other students. We'll, of course, be marking your work and assessments.

And we're a constant kind of presence, sort of a phone call away, an email away, a forum post away to address any issues that you might encounter. So if there's a question you've got about materials, or something you're not understanding, an issue with time management, you just don't know where to go within The Open University because it's so big, your tutor is the person waiting behind the keyboard to support you.

KAREN FOLEY: And if they can't answer something, like I often can't answer questions that students will have about their computers, for example. But I do know that I can then point them to the Computing Help Desk, for example, or I'll know where to send them if students are stuck. So that's brilliant about being a first port of call.

The other interesting thing I think about OU tutors is that they often do this because they really love OU students. And many of them have many other jobs that they're doing. So they're not full time employed by The Open University. They're often doing this in addition to other roles, which means that very often they may reply not instantaneously. So whilst they're a constant presence, it's not always that literal, is it, Alistair?

ALISTAIR BROWN: No, that's right. We're not a call centre. You probably see I'm sat here at home, like I'm sure many of our students are as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Now you're not available to the students.

[CHUCKLING]

No.

ALISTAIR BROWN: You know, I don't think our rampaging five-year-old is going to make an entrance today. But I have other needs as well, which of course is a good thing. It makes me very sympathetic, and all tutors sympathetic to the diverse needs and a work-life-study balance that - oh, here we go.

I said - I did say -

[CHUCKLING]

KAREN FOLEY: Aww, cat call, excellent.

ALISTAIR BROWN: Cat call - that students face. So we won't - we understand that students have different issues. But students also have to understand that tutors aren't there all the time.

But sometimes that can be an advantage. I teach across four different Open University modules. So although that means for any one module, I might not be available a hundred percent of the time, it does mean that if the student asks me, well, what's this other module like, I can offer some experience of that. So that breadth of knowledge kind of compensates for the fact that we're not just concentrating on one single module twenty-four/seven.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And I think the other thing about tutors is that they're facilitating the lifelong learning of students. And so whilst there be a lot of contact, I guess, at Level 1, that sort of level in terms of time and also in terms of, I guess, hand-holding does decrease as students are more confident and able to support themselves. And that's often what

tutors are after is enabling students to be able to be self-guided, so they can achieve what they want to.

ALISTAIR BROWN: Yeah, absolutely. And it's absolutely fine, and expected at a Level 1, a student might get in touch and say, I have an IT issue, or I can't find my way round The Open University library, or I have an issue with my student finance. And because the tutor is often the sort of immediately recognisable face or voice on the end of the phone, the student will make contact with the tutor to ask for that.

But we do sit within this wide team of other people, including the two colleagues who we're going to be chatting to in a second. And we can, very much, at Level 1 direct students appropriately. But as you say, by Levels 2, Level 3, students themselves know, actually, I've got an issue here with finance or a disability issue. I need to pick up the phone to my Student Support Team, to the likes of Njabulo, rather than coming to the tutor direct. So, yes, students do become more independent as time goes on.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. But it's always good to have someone to reach out to. And tutors can certainly triage the way and recommend where students go to in terms of that support that's available.

But typically speaking, tutors handle all the academic support for students. So as you said, Alistair, it's the marking of the work, feeding back, et cetera, but also advising and guiding students, and not expecting them to be perfect. But I've heard many students have called the Student Support Team about things like time management.

Sometimes, in particular if your student's marking your work, you may not want to disclose the chaos in your life that's surrounding you. So sometimes it can be nice to talk to somebody else. Njabulo, what happens in the Student Support Team? And do students find it useful to have another ear to be able to listen to when things can get a bit challenging?

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, thanks, Karen. I think what we normally find is we are normally the first point of contact for all students when they reach out to us through the university. Nine times out of ten, they are reaching out to the Student Support Team because they have got a question, and they are not sure who to ask. They need clarification, and they are not sure where to go. Or sometimes it could be they just need information, advice, and sometimes guidance, and are really not sure where to go.

I would encourage them the Student Support Team is the first point of contact for the student. And we are also -

KAREN FOLEY: Now, Njabulo--

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, go on.

KAREN FOLEY: Can I ask you this? Sorry, because I'm just getting the results of one of the polls that we asked for, for students. And we said, when do you ask for help? So let's see what people said about when they ask for help.

So very often it's when they're in hot water, or when the situation is absolutely critical. So only a quarter of students are sort of doing it, I guess, just as they're getting into that hot

water. What's your experience of this? And how is it okay, I guess, for students to know that they can speak to you, and about what sorts of things? What are some of these trigger points?

NJABULO MOYO: I think our preference really would be for this - for students to contact us at any time, particularly when there's still plenty of time, for whatever issue it is, for us to look into. But at the Student Support Team, we do understand that most of our students are not only studying, but they've got other things going on as well - life, work, jobs, and the like. So we do know that sometimes things can go wrong. And we're always prepared to pick up calls to students, or from students, when it is that pressure point there.

So during the course of the year, there's different times during the year when we're busy, we're not able to get to the student there and then. Sometimes we can get back to the student within a couple of hours or within a day - within a couple of days or so. But generally, what we tend to do is towards submission of TMAs, we do get quite a lot of communication from students.

Towards the end of the modules, we do tend to get a lot of communication from students. And sometimes nearer a tutorial or some tutorials, some students might be finding it difficult to actually log in. And we do get quite a lot of contact then.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. So there are some key times. And I guess you've got those expectations there.

But very often, I know that colleagues at the Student Support Team are trained to really be able to listen to individual students. And while there can be, I guess, workarounds or interventions that can be helpful, it's really about the individual and their specific situation. And I know that for a lot of people, just having that friendly ear to talk to, and really thinking, what is right for this specific individual right now, at this moment and time, can really help.

Some of the things that people have said at home about things that can help, in our word cloud, are quite interesting. And right at the top of this list is the tutor. So tutors are a key thing. And I think that message, Alistair, has come through loud and strong.

But other things that people have said can really help them are things like their family. And we've talked about the importance of getting family and friends on board, peers, partners, fellow students, absolutely, and study friends, clear communication, having a plan, a strict schedule, one-to-one support worker, a quiet environment, using forums, personal motivation. Biscuits, yes, absolutely.

On the subject of one-to-one support, Njabulo, you don't just speak to students about some of the things that are stressing them out. But you also do practical things, helping them with things like disability services, and creating profiles, et cetera. It's one of the really important things that some students don't really recognise how helpful those things can be and what might that happen when they create some of these profiles for us. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

NJABULO MOYO: Thanks, Karen. I think some of our students may not necessarily be aware what they're entitled to, particularly in terms of making adjustments for students. So although information is available on student homepage for each and every student to access

there, but we do recognise that some individual students have individual needs. And they may require adjustments for them to be able to study successfully.

Adjustments may be required for a number of reasons. Like you mentioned there, for example, it could be a disability. Or it could be a learning issue, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia.

And if a student is not sure what kind of support is available, the encouragement would be even if you're not sure you will be entitled to anything, get in touch with The Open University Student Support Team. What we will do is listen to your requirement as an individual and provide advice and guidance for you there in terms of the next steps to go forward.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Many of our students are studying with the Open University because they have disabilities. And as you say, it's really important to be able to ask for help. I'm very pleased that ninety-two percent of students here today say that they disagree with the statement that asking for help is a sign of weakness. So our students here are prepared and keen to ask for help.

The other thing that's important is that while some things can be very fixed, I guess there may be things that may be unlikely to change over time, sometimes students may have caring responsibilities for a specific time period. They may intensify, et cetera. And so working with that Student Support Team to be able to reflect what's going on in your life means that there can be particular adjustments that are made.

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, I think the other thing, Karen, that our students might want to know is although they are studying with us, there's a lot of other things going on there. What we try and do in terms of listening to students, particularly when things go wrong, particularly on a personal level, it could be bereavement or anything that has impacted on their studies, what we encourage students is talk to us before you make any decision in terms of dropping off your studies or giving up at all. Talk to the Student Support Team about what your options are during that difficult time. For example, it could be we are able to negotiate on behalf of the student some interim adjustments while they are going through that difficult period for them to see their studies through.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So you may liaise with various other parts of the university to help simplify that process for that student at that difficult time, which I guess is just what people need. But very often when you're in the thick of it, it can be hard to pick up the phone and ask for help. There are a variety of ways, though, that students can get in touch. And one thing I really like that many people don't know about is how flexible the opening hours are, because very often, people just think it's a nine-to-five weekday thing, isn't it?

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, I mean, during the current term with the COVID-Nineteen situation, we are open eight in the morning to six in the evening. So you can contact us during that time on the phone or via live web chat with one of our advisers there. But apart from that, we are available seven days a week, twenty-four/seven, by email.

You can contact us at any time. We will get back to you as soon as we can. Depending on times of the year, during our peak times, sometimes it could be as much as three or five days

before we get back to you. But otherwise, during the normal times of the year, for most students, we do get back to them within hours or within a day or so.

KAREN FOLEY: Great. So we've gone through the various things that you can do to support students. You can be an ear for them to talk to you. You can help make adjustments, et cetera. But one of the things we were talking a little about earlier is qualifications and how there can be very specific qualifications.

So students may pick up a particular interest along the way. You also support them in making choices in terms of modules. And this is why the specialities, I guess, are so important, because you have an understanding and an insight of the particular qualification routes that students may go through. How might students get in touch to talk about their choices in terms of maybe selecting their next module or perhaps changing their qualification pathway?

NJABULO MOYO: Thanks for that, Karen. Again, we do recognise that students' study motivation may change from time to time. For example, a student may sign up on a course with the intention of taking route A or B. But after a couple of weeks or after a couple of years on that module, students may decide, actually, I want to be - I want to change direction there.

So what we do at the Student Support Team is, obviously, listen to the student and chat with the student through their options. Again, earlier I said we are the point of contact. And we have got links throughout the university, for example, such as our Careers Department there. So if a student is really not sure about what to do, the Careers Team and the Employability Service are there to be able to pick that up there.

In terms of some of the specialist courses and specialist requirements, some of our courses, for example, all our psychology courses at undergraduate level, are accredited by the British Psychological Society there. So it does mean that for students studying on those courses, there are certain requirements that they have to meet in order for them to meet that minimum requirement for graduate basis for registration there, for example, such as one studying an accredited course to ensuring that at the end the aim is to achieve that degree with a minimum of a 2.2 and higher in order for you to be eligible for that graduate basis there.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. No, that's very sound advice. We've been talking a lot about that today. Damon, are there any questions that we've got on the Hot Desk?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, there's a couple of things. Just picking up on the disability support aspects, people are asking whether the SST can really help with helping diagnosis or advising on diagnosis if people are struggling with that, and also following up with DSA registration. There's also some concern about how the tutorials actually work. So Adobe Connect, how people get into that and who they'll be having their tutorials with.

There's also been an interesting discussion about age. There's some mature students who are joining us. And I think they have been a little bit concerned if it's been forty-five years since they've studied. But I think people have been reassuring them, that actually, that doesn't matter.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. No, you're very right, Damon. Many people worry they're too old. And then other people start saying their ages, and then they're a lot older often.



But we have a very diverse range of students, all bringing very different things. One of the things that I think makes learning with other OU students so rich is the life experience that people have. But it can feel anxiety-provoking, especially if maybe you haven't had such a good time in education beforehand. But it is very exciting, and do make the most of it.

I'd like to pick up on that question about diagnosis, if I may, quickly because, Madeleine, I'm going to ask you a little bit about tutorials next. But, Njabulo, what happens? Can people - can the Student Support Team, for example, if someone's worried about maybe dyslexia, can they help with some diagnoses of particular issues as well?

NJABULO MOYO: I mean, at the Student Support Team, we can't help specifically with diagnosis of dyslexia. But what we will be able to do is to be able to provide student with the information of where they need to go in order for them to access all that information there relating to assessment and ensuring that they get the support they need.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And a similar thing almost in terms of the DSA, the Disabled Students' Allowance. Many of these things are sort of different organisations. But I guess you're working with them so closely a lot of the time, you know when to worry if you haven't heard, who to speak to, et cetera. So while some of those things, like finance, are dealt with by different organisations, you're used to sort of helping and facilitating with those, but can't actually operationalise those on behalf of the students.

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, absolutely. I think if I was having a conversation with a student, and the student declares to me or tells me about a disability, what I would be encouraging them at that stage is, obviously, beginning to outline some of the possible sources of support, for example, through the Disabled Student Allowance there that is available for the student. And my encouragement, or our encouragement really at the Student Support Team, would be even if you do not feel you will qualify, we still do encourage you to make an application, get an assessment, and then get a decision at that point.

A lot of student end up not receiving the support that they require because they thought - because they will think that they don't qualify, and then don't make that application there. So the encouragement there would be, put in an application. You will get an assessment. And you will get a decision at that point.

Once you have a decision as to whether you qualify or not, then at that point you know what you are entitled to. And you know what you are not entitled to. Then it's easier for you to move on from there as a student then.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. One of my students went through that process. And they found it so reassuring, I guess, that they could actually start to make sense of why they were struggling with particular things as well. And it wasn't just helpful in terms of the support. It was helpful in terms of making sense of their own learning.

Madeleine, I wanted to ask you about your role and staff tutors. And you're managing a lot of the associate lecturers there. We had some questions about people finding their tutors, and also what tutorials are like. Can you tell us a little bit about your role, and also shed a bit of light on what happens in tutorials, very briefly?

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Yes, sure. Thank you, Karen. So staff tutors are basically the tutors' line managers. So that means that I'm responsible for recruiting, and training, and generally overseeing the tutors, whichever module a student's on. I'm responsible for psychology.

So we put together the guidelines and procedures that our tutors work within, and try to ensure that tutors are providing the right level of support and tuition that students need. We're also responsible for the tuition programme on a particular module. In my case, obviously, I'm talking about psychology Level 1 and Level 2 and modules in psychology.

So at the beginning of the year, we have already devised when the tutorials will be taking place, and whether they are online or whether they will be face to face. Of course, in the current situation with COVID, we're not actually having any face-to-face tutorials at the moment in psychology. We are hoping that we'll be able to run face-to-face tutorials from January next year. But, of course, that does depend on the COVID situation.

And as a staff tutor, I will allocate tutors to the tutorial timetable so that they know when they are going to be teaching or leading a tutorial session. Tutors in psychology work in clusters. So that means that while a tutor has responsibility for their own group of students, fifteen or twenty students, for providing the support that Alistair's already mentioned, and for marking assignments and so on, several tutors work together in a cluster to deliver the tutorial timetable.

So students will have the opportunity to go along to a tutorial that is run - maybe run by their tutor. But it may also be run by a tutor that is within the same cluster as them. So, yes, and they're all available online. We have options - evening tutorials and daytime tutorials.

Students sign up to go along, or they can just drop in. It's all advertised in advance. So students know who is going to be running the session, what time it's on, what the session is likely to contain.

KAREN FOLEY: And all tutors are very different. And I think one of the wonderful things about these clusters of tutors is that you can hear from your own tutor. But also different tutors can be very inspiring, because everyone sort of teaches in different ways. But yet there is this consistency of approach. And I think that's very important.

I've heard students say, oh, my tutor's really nice. Or my tutor does this, that, and the other. But actually behind the scenes, there are all sorts of measures in place to ensure that tutors aren't giving their favourite students the best marks, and that there are quality assurance measures in place. I mean, students don't need to know all about that, but can you briefly sort of tell us what that involves, Madeleine?

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Well, so first of all, regarding the tutorials, we do often drop in as managers to just observe what's going on as sort of a quality control system to try to make sure that the tutors are delivering to the extent that we expect, which a hundred percent of the time they do. But it's reassuring, I think, for students perhaps to know that we are keeping an eye on what's going on. And tutors themselves find that supportive too, because we are there as their line managers - we're there to help support and develop them. So if there is any element that they, the tutors themselves, are unsure about, we as staff tutors can provide the support for the staff tutors - for the tutors, too.



Also, if you're thinking about the marking of assignments, of course, psychology and every module runs throughout the country. And tutors are throughout the country. As you've said, Karen, tutors have different ways of responding to students or marking the assignments.

But we issue marking guidelines to tutors for each assignment so that they are very clear on what points they should be looking for, how they should be marking a particular piece of work. But also, those - the marking is itself monitored. So tutors are then, their work is monitored by a more experienced tutor, who themselves has an overview of how tutors across the country are marking that particular piece of work. So there's - there are very much checks going on at various different levels to ensure that the quality of the tuition that students receive, whether that's a tutorial or through the correspondence tuition feedback that's given, is of consistent quality and standard.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Madeleine. No, that's wonderful for students to know about. It's this delicate balance, isn't it, between personality and a humanness that we often find so rewarding in a sort of computerised digital age. And nice to know that those checks are there.

So I'm going to end by asking each of you what one piece of advice you would give to students. Alistair, what would you say your top tip is?

ALISTAIR BROWN: Well, Madeleine's just mentioned assessment. And I think I would see assessment as part of the process of support. I think sometimes students see tutors as part of a supportive presence, until it comes to their assignment, when we suddenly become the referee blowing the whistle, and waving the red card around, and telling them about the quality of their work.

But actually, from our point of view, feedback and the opportunity to explain to students where they've done well, where they could improve, that's all part of the process of support. So see assessment in those terms, as an opportunity to have a dialogue with your tutor and to receive support for your work, rather than as a kind of judgement and an arbitration on your experience.

KAREN FOLEY: It's all about developing your work. You're very unlikely to be perfect in the first instance. And I think we're all developing our work.

And one of the things that's very bitter to us academics is that we're often peer reviewed. And this process of feedback and improvement is a perpetual thing that I don't think will ever end. Madeleine, what's your piece of advice for new students?

MADELEINE KNIGHTLEY: Well, I think that students have already perhaps come up with this already on the word cloud that you showed earlier. But I would say that it's about planning your time, for example, checking the study calendar, making a note in your own calendar or diary when the assessment dates are, planning your study time, blocking out time throughout the week where you've got to be doing other things, and just being able to find when you can actually study. And I think really importantly, get your family onside so that they know what it is you're trying to achieve, and when you're going to be working on - when you're going to be studying, and not to interrupt you. So, yeah, be organised, and organise your family as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And since we're out of time, Njabulo, I wonder if I could give you your top tip, because it's something we haven't mentioned but I think is vital, which is the Help Centre. And very briefly, can you tell students what they can access there?

NJABULO MOYO: So the Help Centre is the information hub for students. That's where they'll be able to go if they are looking for any information at all. Any link is available on the Student Help Centre there.

That's where students start their search. So nine times out of ten, you are able to find your answer on the Help Centre there. If you go on the Help Centre and you're not able to find the information, phone the Student Support Team.

The other top tip that I have for students from a student support perspective is communication. Even if where you think things have gone absolutely wrong and they cannot be recovered, talk to us. We'll advise you, and then make a decision after you've received advice.

KAREN FOLEY: That's absolutely wonderful. So much support available for new people. I don't think anyone will be worried anymore. And it's lovely to put some faces to names that students will be in contact with.

So thank you so much for joining me in that discussion, Madeleine, Alistair and Njabulo. We're now going to play some video breaks. We've got a who's who. So you're going to meet a FASS recruitment adviser, the Student Support Team, and OU Fit, the Open University Students Association club. See you in a few minutes for the next session.

[MUSIC PLAYING]