

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. Oh, isn't it so exciting to have so many new people here? Well, I know that you're all getting busy introducing yourselves, saying where you are, talking about WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and all sorts of things. But I'm going to introduce you to some students. Now, some of you may know Tala. Tala Al-Shafee is an OU Health Sciences student. She's one of our Student Hub Live ambassadors, is currently, often at Student Hub Live sessions. And she also is an OU Students Association volunteer. She's doing some brilliant work on the International Students Club. And she is also an essential committee representative for the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Welcome, Tala.

TALA AL-SHAFEE: Hi, thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Hi. And James, James Markey. I met James, actually, when we were doing some work for the Faculty of Business and Law School. James is a business graduate. He won an amazing award. James, do you want to tell us a bit about what you've been doing?

JAMES MARKEY: Hi, Karen. Yeah, and it's good -

KAREN FOLEY: Hi.

JAMES MARKEY: - to see you again. Yeah, so recently with the OU Entrepreneurship Competition, I set up a business called Universal Simulations. We're building simulators for universities. And I've actually got half of them behind me, where we're trying to build them and get them ready for shipment next week.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Amazing work. And, yeah, James as he said, he entered one of our competitions. Got heaps of support, both from The Open University and an external company, and is really, really thriving in these current conditions. So thank you, both of us, for joining. Tala, how are your studies going so far for you?

TALA AL-SHAFEE: They're going well. It's been so interesting to be able to study biology in more depth, because that is my favourite subject. But also, I found out that I like chemistry more than I thought I did when I started studying health sciences. So that's good.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Excellent. Let's take a quick trip over to HJ and see how everyone at home is as well, because we've got lots of people in the chat. We've got over three hundred and seventy-five -

HJ: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: - people. And everybody is saying, 'Hi, Tala'.

HJ: [LAUGHING]

KAREN FOLEY: They can all see you now. So thanks for coming on. HJ, how is everyone?

HJ: It's absolutely amazing. And it was so great to hear from Liz and Tim. Everyone's so thankful and feeling quite inspired and getting a lot of confidence starting off, which is fantastic. A lot of people did notice your very cute cat in the background. We don't think she realised she was online. So -

KAREN FOLEY: [CHUCKLING]

HJ: Maybe we'll teach her some camera skills later on.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, she's a monkey.

HJ: But, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: She's stolen the dog's seat and, yeah, that's it.

HJ: Oh, dear.

KAREN FOLEY: - my cat.

[LAUGHTER]

HJ: But I know we've got some naughty animals at home. I heard someone's dog ate their ornaments while they were trying to concentrate on watching Student Hub Live. So maybe some nice, loving discipline is needed so our animals don't distract us. But I don't think that'll ever happen. I know a lot of people have been coming to our workshops as well, which is fantastic.

So Lisa says 'They've been a great preparation for doing my studies'. So that's great to hear. Kitty says 'That's why I love the OU. As a first-year student, I've learnt to believe in myself and gain confidence already', which is fantastic. And a great comment from Fiona, as well, saying 'It's natural to worry at the beginning of something new. Let's not be hard on ourselves'. And I think if we worry, that just means we care.

And I worry a lot. I worry about worrying or worrying whether or not I am worrying enough. But I think it always means that we care about what we're doing. So normally worry is a good sign and, hopefully, we can alleviate some of that today. But I know there's so many people in the chat and so much going on. So if there is anything that we miss, you can ask it again or email us - studenthub@open.ac.uk - and we'd love to get back to you.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. No that's perfect. Chantelle, thank you for saying my cat's really cute. Wait till you see my dog, who I will put her there, in her rightful throne very, very soon. So Tala and James, it's wonderful that you've come here. And, Tala, you're an international student. Many students logged on today are also from abroad. What's it like then studying far away from the UK? How do you find it?

TALA AL-SHAFEE: I was more worried about how it would be, but I found that if you're proactive and you look for your community and you look for other people that are also international students, then it really helps - which is why I ended up setting up The OU International Students Club. So it's been great so far.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And I think we've got a picture of what that club looks like as well. So we can take a look at one of your screens. We've got a lovely little slide here to show you where the societies and clubs are.

TALA AL-SHAFEE: They're all on the Association website. If you go to the Community Section, then you'll find everything. There are so many clubs that you can join. You can meet so many people with similar interests. So, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And, Tala, you've come along to lots of our Student Hub Live sessions because, it seems to me, that learning with other people really matters to you. We're all very different in terms of how we get through our degrees. I went through my OU degree, I think I met one person and pretty much avoided everybody else. So everyone's really different. Why is talking to other people so important for you?

TALA AL-SHAFEE: I love getting involved, and I love meeting people. And I feel like when you're able to reflect ideas with different people and discuss things, then you'll learn so much more than if you're just reading through your books or through your module materials. I think it's really useful. And it's also really fun to be part of a community.

I've heard a lot of students complain about being lonely or new students that are worried about being lonely once they start. But if you go out there on Facebook or on forums or all of the different clubs that we have and start talking to people, then I think it really helps with the loneliness.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Yeah. No, absolutely, it really does. And as you say, there are heaps of places you can go to - including Student Hub Live - but lots of other groups out there as well. The important thing I think, is just to think about what's right for you and get what support you need out of those spaces.

Some students I know say they've joined everything and then all of a sudden it gets a bit much and they have all these notifications going on. And at that point, you might like to think about what you're wanting out of some of these relationships and how to make sure that you're safe online within those.

James, your experience has been quite different though. How did you get around studying and did you meet many other people or not? How was it for you? Because you've finished your qualification now.

JAMES MARKEY: Yeah. So I've just finished my degree in business management, but I'm just about to start an MBA in technology management as well. So I'm in the same boat as a lot of people, and I've got all my books here.

KAREN FOLEY: [LAUGHS]

JAMES MARKEY: But I was like you, Karen - at first. It was only in the later years when I really started making contacts, I guess, within the OU, the other students. I was very much heads down because I was working full-time throughout the whole of it. So it was very much work, and then study in the evenings. Study, work, where I could squeeze in an hour or so here and there. But, yes, the first couple of years was heads down.

And then later on, I started meeting some people at the tutorials and, more recently, the entrepreneurship competition. And, yeah. I mean, it's opened my eyes to a little bit to it because - I don't know about everyone else, but everyone I've met so far has been so

interesting - their story and where they've come from. Like people have worked for the UN and stuff. I mean, it's amazing, just getting to hear those stories.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And you make some amazing contacts as well, because one of the wonderful things about The Open University is that many people are studying in addition to the other roles. And you can make phenomenal contacts often, if you're a similar area of interest. You've used Twitter a lot, haven't you?

JAMES MARKEY: Yeah, absolutely. I'm quite active on Twitter and LinkedIn. And, yeah, that's helped me - especially like, say, with the entrepreneurship competition. There's people I've reached out to, who I was either with that, doing that with them, or I was in the tutorial group with them. And yeah, I mean the support's incredible.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And having that one thing in common, I think, doing an OU qualification and for people to really appreciate how challenging and how motivated you need to be, can be something that can bond you, and then you can really make the most of those networks in other ways. Let's take a look, both, and see what people are struggling with right now, and maybe there's some advice that you two can give them.

So in our word cloud, we've asked people what they're struggling with. And here you can see that time and time management is coming up as the key thing people are talking about. Sabotaging, speaking out, fear of failing, essay planning, juggling my life - so there's - oh, stopping snacking. There's lots of things here that are around, I guess, key study skills, and then there are some things here that, I guess, may be things that we can't change a huge amount of. Let's pick up this time management thing, because it's an issue that so many people really struggle with.

Tala, you are studying pretty much full time. You don't have many, sort of I guess, of the traditional obstructions. You don't have a farmyard going on here. [LAUGHS] But time management is something you've really worked to get to grips with. Tell us about how you manage your own time.

TALA AL-SHAFEE: I think one of the most important things, before I get into time management too much, is allowing yourself to be flexible. Things don't always go to plan, and you have to prepare for that, because that helps a lot with feeling stressed later on. But in terms of time management, the best thing I found is using a wall calendar and an electronic calendar. My wall calendar was filled with all the events I had, all the deadlines, any other commitments that I had to complete that had strict deadlines or strict dates that they were on.

So it was really nice to see everything in front of me. It allowed me to prepare realistically. So rather than thinking, oh, I have two weeks to complete the assignment, I can take into account all of the other things that I need to do. And the electronic calendar is really useful as well, because it gives me notifications, and my memory has been terrible lately. So I like the fact that I get pop-ups every day when I have something.

KAREN FOLEY: That's brilliant. You're very organised with your time management, something that I am not. [LAUGHS] But, James, you have been really, really phenomenally busy, and one of the other things that's come up is fitting work in with study on our - what are you struggling with. You were doing this as well. How was it for you, fitting the time with work and to study, and also, I guess, when work really escalated?

JAMES MARKEY: Yeah. Absolutely. Well, first of all, I'm really envious of Tala, how organised she's able to be with her wall planner. I mean, for me, it was very much heads down, squeezing it in when I could when there's an hour or so. I mean, the truth is, you have to be quite, I guess, strict with yourself and motivated for it, which - I mean, it's part of the reason I love meeting people from the OU, because everyone I've met is motivated to do the course. It's not like they've had their parents pressure them to go to university, which sometimes happens.

So yeah, so there's that motivation you need to keep going. And then like I say, sometimes there is the unexpected. I mean, I started a course and then I got given a project to open a shop in Scotland, and it just landed at the exact same time that I did this module. And at the time, I was heads down. I got swamped by it. And then when you start getting behind, you get more behind.

But yeah, the tutors are the best people. I mean, reach out for them. They're quite flexible if you need to be, if you have real reasons for it. And that allows you to give time to pause and then reset yourself. And that's, I think, really important, especially when you're working and there's so many unknowns, stuff which crop out up, and opportunities and stuff like that, for sure.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And I think you're right there, James. Tutors do - they are flexible when things do get in the way, but assignments are all pretty much scheduled into the study calendar. So somebody said, we all start at the same time. We all end at the same time. What happens in the middle is a bit of a variable.

But some people may say, oh, I'm going to open a shop. Other students may say, actually, I'm really struggling with my mental health. I can't really think straight right now. And so, while there can be some very big reasons that may be blocks in terms of studying, there can also be other things. So it's really important that, I guess, people reach out to their tutors.

What advice would you two give our new students who are starting to study with the OU? What are some of the things that you wish you'd known when you were here at day one, right at the start of a module?

TALA AL-SHAFEE: I think one big thing -

KAREN FOLEY: Tala.

TALA AL-SHAFEE: I think one big thing is, being nervous is normal, and you're not alone. There are so many people that are worrying right now. Do reach out to other students. Do keep in contact with your tutors. They're really understanding. They're really helpful.

But I've seen a lot of posts on Facebook, and they seem to get really, really helpful and supportive responses. So don't worry on your own. I think that is the main thing that I'd say.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you, Tala. Let's see. We've been asking people whether they're involved in clubs or associations. Most people said no.

But let's take a look at this slide. Here we can see that forty-eight percent say that they are not involved with any OU Student Association clubs or society. Well, we'll be filling you in on

some of the options later in today's programme, but we've also asked people, are they involved in the social aspect of the OU? It's really interesting, actually, because when we do one of our surveys, we ask people whether they feel part of a community, and some people think that needs to be a practical community. But we're all part of a very wonderful virtual online community.

So let's see what you had to say. Most of you said, no, I wasn't aware there was so much going on at the OU. I hope you do think there is a lot going on. There certainly is. We have all sorts of sessions from the library, webinars from the career service, et cetera. There is often something live going on, and your tutorials. You do have to manage your time effectively, because there is a lot of support on scope as well. So yeah, it's really important to make the most of those.

James, now you're starting to do a master's level, and thinking back to your undergraduate level, what do you wish you had known when you began your undergraduate degree first time at the OU?

JAMES MARKEY: Well, it's a little bit like you just showed there. I completely fall into the category of not being aware and not going out to find out about it either. I guess, I wish I'd spent more time finding out about stuff like this, about freshers week, about all this stuff that's on that student portal. I very much just used it for that middle part, which has all the planning on, but there's so many - like on the right, you can get the news feed that comes through for stuff you can get involved in. And yeah, I wish I got involved in that.

And actually, something to add, which is something Tala said to me before actually, was celebrating the little wins as you progress. I mean that, I started doing as I progressed through. And I thought that was super important, actually, because there's so many times when you have to tell someone, I can't come to that party tonight, I can't do that this weekend, because you have a TMA or whatever else to do.

And I think it's so important that once you do get those things done, go out and spend some time with those people. Just go for a drink or some food and just celebrate, I did it. I'm one step closer.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And I think you're so right. Yesterday it was a really sunny day, and I had to say to my friend, I'm really sorry. Could we meet up in two hours? Because I need to do some referencing. But when I'd done it, I said, then I can relax. Then we can really enjoy time together, and I can really chill out. That will be my reward for doing those things.

And you're right, it's really important to get other people onside, because it is hard. There are sacrifices. And it is really important to do that.

And I guess, James, a community's going to be so much more important for you on a Postgraduate level. Some students here are at Level 1, but others may have credit transferred. So they may be coming to distance learning with already a degree and they may be doing something new, or they may be postgraduate students as well. How are you planning to use community and other people to support you in your postgraduate studies?

JAMES MARKEY: Yeah, absolutely. Well, for me it's literally the first module going into my MBA, and I'm getting all those original feelings I had when I first started again, because

there's been a - what, about a year break in between. And a lot of it's reaching out to people I've met throughout when I did it for the tutorial, and then just picking up the phone, sending a little tweet or something online, and just reaching out to them. Because everyone seems to go through this similar sort of journey. And you come to it, you disappear for a little bit, and then you come back. And that's just life, I guess.

KAREN FOLEY: It's all cycles, isn't it. Well, James and Tala, thank you so much for coming and sharing your experiences with us. That's been absolutely wonderful. Tala, are you going to hop back in the chat all day?

TALA AL-SHAFEE: Of course.

KAREN FOLEY: Good, excellent. Thank you very much. James, you're very welcome to as well, but I know you've also got a massive to-do list. So, James and Tala, thank you so much for joining me. That's been really, really wonderful.

We're now going to show you one of our campus tour videos. We made these when we were allowed on campus. Of course, we're not right now. But for those of you who don't know, The Open University is an open campus in normal times. We've got a lot of academics there, hardly any students, but you're very welcome to come and join us.

Although it's not necessary. All of our things like our library and career services are all online. But it's a very nice place. Let me show you around, and then we'll be back for our next session very soon. See you in a minute.