

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live FASS virtual Freshers' Fair. Well, we asked what you were most worried about, and you said, time management. So lo and behold - because it's such a popular topic - we're going to be talking about how time flies when you're enjoying yourself.

And I'm joined by Sally O'Reilly, who you've just had a video about. Sally is a senior lecturer in creative writing, and writes novels, and non-fiction and short stories. But in earlier life, she was a freelance journalist. And she's now working on a new Neo-Victorian novel and is writing a memoir about Stoke - on - Trent.

And we also have with us today Ed Hogan, who is a lecturer in creative writing. And he writes fiction and has a particular interest in short stories. Good for time management, I think. And his latest book is called *The Electric*.

And Rachel Penny is the director of teaching for the school of psychology and counselling and is researching areas in the flexibility of study intensity and also tuition. So for those of you here who are doubling up doing full-time intensity study, Rachel is your woman for the questions. So we've got lots of things we'd like you to fill in at home.

We'd like to know whether your time management challenge is either finding the time or sticking to the plan. We've got a word cloud there about things that might get in the way of your study. Remember, if you can only think of one or two, that's fine. Just put a full stop in, otherwise, your results won't submit.

Some things that might help you manage your time - so this hopefully will be an opportunity to share tips with each other about things that work well for you. We often hear the most ingenious solutions from those who are very time poor and find ways of juggling studying whilst doing many other things. And also, have you created a weekly plan with chunks of study time?

So we've said that this is all an individual journey. And I wonder, panel, if I might start by asking you what sorts of workers you are, how you individually manage your own time? Ed, let's kick off with you. What sort of things do you do?

ED HOGAN: Yeah, I guess I'm probably a Steady Eddie, I guess I would say. So I do sort of little bits every day. So I really believe in the daily accumulation of short, sharp bits of work. So I've got a full-time job at the OU, which I love. And I've got two children, who I love even more.

So that fills up a lot of my day. So when I want to do some writing - some of my creative writing, I'll do that very early in the morning for two hours. And two hours probably doesn't sound like much. But over a week, that's twelve hours. Over a month, that's forty-eight hours. And it soon builds up.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow, that's the sort of person I'm very jealous of, Ed.

[LAUGHTER]

Sally, give me some hope that we're not all as organised as Ed.

[LAUGHTER]

SALLY O'REILLY: I'm naturally a very disorganised person, I think. I've kind of reformed over the years. When I was a student, I have to confess, that I was quite chaotic. And I used to leave things to the last minute, not to the benefit of my peace of mind or stress levels. I did get through, and I ultimately really enjoyed my student days.

But where I really learned to be organised was when I became a freelance journalist. Like Ed, I have two children. And I was a freelance when they were really young. And I had constant deadlines every week. Sometimes, I had three articles a week to finish for weekly newspapers. So it was absolutely essential to do that.

And I learned then the art of prioritising and chunking my work and really making sure I got short deadlines that made me catch up with the longer deadlines. And then I started writing novels, and I used the same kind of technique writing novels, pretending that a chapter of a novel was basically like a feature that I was writing for an urgent deadline.

And I've stuck to that. Now I teach at the OU, and I write fiction as well. And I do have my lists that I stick to every day. And I have great pleasure in ticking off those items every day.

KAREN FOLEY: That sounds very, very nice to hear how you have managed to reform it. Because I think we all do, do different things at different points in our life when there are various different pressures. Rachel, what are some of your pressures and how do you work?

RACHEL PENNY: So I think, similar to Sally, I do a lot of to-do lists. I like to have an everything list I add jobs to as I'm going. And then I have a weekly one to pull things off that I'm going to try and do that week. Sounds great. Sounds really organised. But when things get busy, I have to flex, and I have to adapt.

And so, for me, time management is about having, for me, a strategy, a plan, but knowing that it's never going to go that smoothly, and being okay about flexing when other pressures come in. And similar to Ed and Sally, I have also two children, and life gets chaotic.

Life gets busy. Things come up that are unexpected. And so I just have to flex, and review my plan, and work around it and accept that some weeks are going to be less productive than others, and try and do as much in the quieter weeks, knowing that those busy weeks are coming.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, we asked people at home, Rachel, what they had to say about, how, what their own time management challenge is. And the results are really interesting because only twenty-four percent, which is about a quarter, said that finding the time was the main challenge. The rest, seventy-six percent said it was about sticking to the plan - so very much what we're all talking about here.

The one thing is that with The Open University, the hours that you are supposed to study, while they can be a little bit flexible to some extent - somebody might do something quicker than somebody else, for example, finding the time is really, really important. That's not really something we're talking about today. There can be strategies for trying to find that time when you don't have it.

But I would really encourage those of you who are struggling to find the time maybe to come to one of our time management sessions or seek help online, or speak to the Student Support Team and think of some creative strategies where you can claw back those odd two hours in a way that's manageable. For example, I would never get up at six o'clock in the morning to write. However, I would get up to go swimming or something like that. So it's all about when in the day you can fit those things in and what you're prepared to give up and what would work.

So let's talk strategies then. Ed, I'm going to come to you first. What are some of the strategies you've learnt to increase productivity? I guess what we're thinking about is squeezing time into slightly smaller chunks.

ED HOGAN: Yeah, absolutely. And it's taken me a long time to find those strategies that work for me. One moment that was really important for me was when I was doing my MA. And I was the first person in my family to go to university. And they're real grafters. And people in my family work very hard, and they work nine to five. And I thought when I went to do my MA, that's what I must do too.

But there's a certain amount of energy that you've got to work with. And it's usually limited, especially when you're studying, or you're doing creative work. And what happened with me on my MA, was my money ran out, and I had to get a job cleaning roasting pans in a kitchen, which wasn't great for the complexion.

But it was good for my time management in that it narrowed the day. And I thought, right, you've got this moment. You've got these three or four hours. You've got to really go for it. And that was a way of sort of narrowing the focus and making it more intense and quality time rather than loads of time.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. Let's see what people at home said. We've asked about things that get in the way of your study. So let's see if this can inspire any talking points from our panel here. So there's some things that are obvious that we've talked about, like family and work. But another big one here, which I think everyone's nodding about is procrastination.

"Social media," but procrastination is coming up a lot here. "Low mood," "home-related issues," "unexpected problems," and "exercise," "late nights," "avoidance," "a new puppy" - oh, yes, I know. I want one of them, but I've got to wait a bit - other commitments, et cetera. So there's so many things here that can be challenges.

Some of those things that may be immovable, like family for example, but others that there are strategies we can work around, things like procrastination. Before we have a look at that, let's hear from the students about things that can help with their time management, and then if we can come together and draw these from our panel and think about some of the strategies.

So things that help, people say, are things like "planning" and "lists." We've mentioned a lot of these before. "Study plans," "I need to commit," "set space" "prepping," "family scheduling time," "prioritising," "doing it when everyone's out," "audiobooks," "setting spaces," "daily planners," "breaks," lots of mentions of different types of planners. "Sunshine," yes, that always helps me.

"Getting enough sleep," "setting own deadlines" - so we've all had a chance to read some of these. I can't read them all out now, but wonderful ideas. "Switching phone off." Yes, actually that is a really, really good tip. I've started doing that because so many, in fact, of my students had said, the one thing is that I sit there and then I'm always looking on my phone. And it's so easy to do.

But actually, I do now turn my phone off or turn my emails off and try to not get those distractions, and think, I don't need to respond to anybody quite as quickly, and that's really helped me. Penny and Sally, any tips and things there that you can think about, about this whole idea about strategies that you've used that have helped you and things that students are saying in terms of what may get in the way and what may help? If I come to you first, Sally.

SALLY O'REILLY: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, I was a terrible procrastinator. Whole years might go by, and I wouldn't really achieve very much it felt like. I think that working with the person you are and what energy levels you've got really helps me. And so when I've got things I'm not looking forward to doing or that I know will take a lot of energy, or focus, or creative initiative, I'll do those things first.

I've become increasingly a morning person as I've got older. I'm not good before eight. I can't get up at six and start working at six. But as soon as I am up, I'll do the most urgent and demanding thing. And then once you've ticked that off your list - and it might be the new piece of work you've got to work on for submission.

For me, it's often a piece of creative writing. Once I've done that, the rest of the day can kind of fall into place because I feel, yes, that really important thing is done. Plus, I've worked with my best energy at the start of the day.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's knowing when your energy levels are there and being able to, I guess, identify - students have been speaking about preparing and planning. And I guess knowing what you're going to do, perhaps as you're racing around getting things ready, you can still be thinking in your mind what am I going to do in what order? How am I going to do that?

Rachel, I will come to you next, but I wonder if Ed, you could just talk us through the Pomodoro Technique because I think this can be a very nice way, in particular, of getting those - I think like they say, "eat the frog first" as a sort of term for it, in terms of getting that horrible job done - not that we advocate eating frogs or anything like that. But how does this technique work? I've heard it's really helpful for students. And it might be a good one, at this point, to mention.

ED HOGAN: Yeah, and some students might have heard of it already. But it's simply a way of chopping your time into twenty-five minute periods in which you work very, very strictly in those twenty-five minutes. So you set a timer for yourself. If you can do it on something which is not your phone, all the better.

But you set a timer for yourself for twenty-five minutes, and then you work to that twenty-five minutes. And then when the timer goes off, you have a five-minute break. And then you might want to look at your emails or something.

A lot of the time, you work for ten minutes, fifteen minutes. You look up, and you start to think about things. You start to think, okay, who's on Facebook? I've got to do the laundry. Or I'm going to check my emails. But with this technique, when you look up and you see your timer, and it says fifteen minutes, you think, well, I've only got ten minutes. I might as well just dig in and work for a little bit longer until the timer goes off.

And what it does is it also gives you a sense of what's achievable in a day. So if you've got two twenty-five minute periods in an hour, after a while, you'll understand how much you can get done in that hour. And then you won't be so hard on yourself.

You'll think, well, I read twenty pages an hour. That's fine. That's what my rate is, and then you can start to plan even more, I think. It really makes you feel sort of like you can record what your achievement is for the day in terms of study.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. I think the students are sort of talking about the various things that help them. And there are certain apps as well that some people use. Damon, how's everyone at home? And what sort of advice can we add to the discussion?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, there's a couple of things. Well, people are obviously saying they've got kids, which is another pressure that they have. Or they have family members who have additional requirements, which can also impact on their time.

But the module study planner is a, is a good place to start. People are using Excel spreadsheets, good, old fashioned paper notebooks. Some people are using whiteboards. Again, some people up early in the morning before everyone is up to do it or late at night once people have gone back to bed.

There's a couple of questions about how people balance studying two modules at the same time, which I think can be an issue, particularly, around TMA submission time. So if there's any advice on how to cope with that, that would be quite helpful.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, Rachel, could I come to you as the expert on study intensity. You've been doing some scholarship on this. So you've actually been researching various techniques. What can you share with us about what might be useful if you're studying two modules?

RACHEL PENNY: Yeah, so I spoke to a lot of students a few years ago exactly who were studying at full-time intensity - so doing more than one module and trying to balance TMA deadlines, which might be quite close or even clashing, and just working through how they study each module in a way that means they don't get confused and can separate the knowledge they're gaining in each. I think some key things I would suggest that came out of those discussions, they all said planning is so important.

If you can find a way that works for you to plan study slots, brilliant. And that doesn't have to be the same every week. And try some different things, different ways of managing your time work for different people. So don't feel you have to try and fit somebody else's idea of what works for them. And try it, but try other things as well.

I think, ideally, if you can buy yourself a week on each module so that you just work slightly ahead now once you've got your materials and the websites are open, just to give yourself that little bit of wiggle room so that if a child is poorly or you're busy and you've got a work

deadline, or whatever it is, you've just bought yourself that little bit of wiggle room, where you're not falling too far behind. But I think the most important thing, I would say, is ask for help. Billy was talking about that in the last session, and I just really want to re-emphasise that.

Your tutor is there to support you. The Student Support Team are there to support you. They can help you think about what to prioritise, how to catch up if you're falling behind, maybe can help with extensions if you have clashing deadlines. Speak to them about it. Ask them for help. Speak to them about what your issues are.

And the other thing, just from what Damon was saying was coming up from students, get your family on board. My mother did her degree as a mature student when me and my siblings were young. And we used to have family meetings about how - because we all wanted her to get her degree - and so what we might do to help her, and how we would give her that time when she had assignments due and had that quiet time.

And with my own children, I've said this is a crazy busy time for me, just that understanding and letting them know. Because I tell you what - when your family are behind you getting your degree, it makes such a big difference. And you really are shining that light for them as well. So ask them for help. Get them on board. And get your friends to help you maybe carve out some quiet evenings around your TMA deadlines so that it helps you manage your time and meet those deadlines. So your family and friends can help you achieve those goals as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's absolutely wonderful, Rachel. Now we've asked people at home, whether they'd created a weekly plan with chunks of study time. And a lot of them have - let's check out, if we can, the results of that poll. I think fifty-five percent of them - not visual one, sorry.

Let's just have a look at what that poll was. So some people have some idea about whether they've created chunks of time, et cetera. So that could be a good talking point Rachel in terms of where those chunks of time might be. And everyone is really different. You suggested maybe having a week on, a week off. But I know some students who have mornings on a module, or the afternoon, or days, or some way of rotating things.

And you've also mentioned conflicting deadlines. Tell us about some of the ways in which you've chunked time. Because many students think that studying needs to be concentrated at a desk with lovely stationery, et cetera. But actually, as many of us have found out, it can be done on the side of a swimming pool, whilst cooking a risotto, watching a video, et cetera. Can you talk a bit about how some of that quality of time may also vary in terms of managing to find those different chunks when they may not be obvious chunks?

RACHEL PENNY: Yeah, I think what's really important is understanding what works for you in terms of a study environment. Sometimes it's going to be you just have to get it done. And it's amazing how that just pushes you to do it. But also, there'll be people for whom sitting in bed with their books, and that's a great way for them to study in a calm environment.

Some people like to have music on and can do it in that environment as well. So I think it's about finding what works for you. I always advise students to kind of look at their week

ahead and maybe identify a few slots that they're planning to study. So you don't get the weekend and then feel like, oh, no. I've got to squeeze it in, but this has come up and this has come up.

Actually look ahead for the week ahead and just think, well, I'm going to use that lunchtime, and that evening, and that morning. But listen to what Ed and Sally were saying about are there times of day that work better for you? Are there places that work better for you?

So, I think work with yourself. You are your own best guide. And you'll kind of know when you feel most productive. And maybe it's short, sharp slots. Maybe it's sitting there and engaging with it for longer. It's just what works for you and finding it. But you do that by trying, I think. And that's really important, just to give yourself that space to try different things.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's wonderful, Rachel. Thank you very much. Damon, people at home - any other advice or questions that we should talk to our panel about in terms of concerns?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, they're taking on board the issue about mobile phones. They're suggesting different apps - the OU study app, I think people are picking up on. The idea of studying with family, I think people think that's a great idea actually. And they're a bit concerned, I think, about other students being further ahead and not studying at the same pace.

But I think people need to understand that everyone studies for themselves and at their own pace. But if they are struggling, then, obviously, the most important thing is to contact their tutor. But, yeah, I think the people are really appreciative of what everyone said today. And they're taking on board all the comments.

KAREN FOLEY: No, that's fantastic. That's wonderful, Damon. Sorry, cat came in and so then the dog gets jealous and wants a little fuss. That's often my common distraction actually, the one thing that does get in the way of my ability to concentrate is the dog really needs a cuddle. [LAUGHS]

But doing things, also, I found walking the dog, and thinking about what I'm studying, and reflecting on things as well, and giving myself a bit of a break. Actually, that was one thing I wanted to ask you about, Sally, was rewards. Because I know this can work really well, and it's been something that you've done. How have you rewarded yourself when you've completed a novel or an achievement?

SALLY O'REILLY: Well, it's good, old fashioned chocolate quite often for me, I have to say. So, sometimes, I literally go out, get my bar of chocolate, and it's ready there at the end of the chunk of work that's Ed is talking about. It might be a chapter of a novel, or it might be some marking for work.

I do think having those very nice, comforting things is good. I also think that treating yourself with things that are also getting out of the house. I know we've been through difficult times with that recently. I've recently started swimming again. And I use that as another sort of reward, and that totally boosts my mood and changes my mood. And sometimes just getting out of the house and having a break, where you literally walk around the block can help.

I do think that sometimes you can get stale - that thing people are saying about not being too hard on yourself. You might just have reached a point where what's really going to help you and boost your confidence and powers of focus will be just having some exercise, getting away from your desk, maybe going to the newsagent and getting yourself a nice bar of chocolate. Highly recommend.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Now it's important that treats are nourishing and good. Actually, we had a challenge in one of my team meetings. We were thinking about five-minute tasks. This would work well with the Pomodoro Techniques - things you could do in five minutes that would boost your mood and make you happy. And they could include things like eating chocolate or doing things.

But my all time favourite - and I love this - is dead heading a plant because you get this immediate feeling of satisfaction you've achieved something. It's one plant, so it's very tangible. And you think, I've done some good for something, and I can see an instant result. So that's my top tip anyway. [LAUGHS]

But Sally, Rachel, and Ed, thank you so much for sharing your advice. And thank you for being so human about this. It's really lovely to see the ways that we all work differently and also the ways that, I guess, we change to be able to achieve those. The one thing, just reflecting on what you're saying in terms of you, Ed, and Sally, writing and wanting those outputs when there's no necessary need. This is something you're driven to do.

That if you want something, you're finding the time to do those things. And you're finding the ways of doing them that work well for you. And that's so similar to people studying. Very often, this is what we really want. Sometimes, it can feel like a luxury. It's my thing that I want to do. But if it's important to you, there are ways of finding the time.

It's just wriggling around, and juggling those various things, and talking to others, and finding out how they do things. And being flexible, I think, is one of the key things that I've certainly picked up from this session. So thank you all very much.

Right, we're going to go to a quick video break as well. We've got another FASS in Fifty. So it's an introduction to more of our academics and the faculty. And then we're going to play you a video about our BA honours in religion, philosophy, and ethics at The Open University, and the BA honours in geography at The Open University. So I'll see you after these quick videos.

[MUSIC PLAYING]