

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences virtual Freshers' Fair. Well, we've had a wonderful day so far - well, I certainly have - talking to many of my colleagues across the university in a variety of different departments, all of whom have the concern of students at their heart.

And now, I'm going to introduce you to some colleagues across the isles. So we're going to be going to Scotland, and Wales, and Ireland in this session. I'm going to be talking to Hayley Ness, who has worked at The Open University for eleven years and is a psychologist and has worked as a central academic for eight years but is now a staff tutor. We just found out a little bit about from Madeleine what they do.

And her interests are in forensic cognition, but she's also training to be a counsellor. And Hayley is a lover of everything vintage, which I think is very obvious from your wonderful choice of clothes. And you've got your cat there with you, haven't you, Hayley?

HAYLEY NESS: Yes, I've got my cat Biscuit here with us. Thank you. Hi, everyone.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, we haven't had our study buddy fix today. My dog's just gone AWOL. She's taken a little walk. And we have Sharon Davis, who's also a staff tutor for psychology and counselling in Wales, managing several modules and the core psychology modules at level one, two and three.

Sharon has tutored on most of the psychology modules in her time. And her interests are looking at human error in obstetrics from an applied occupational psychology view. Sharon, how are you? And where are your dogs? Are they in your office today or not?

SHARON DAVIS: No. They're a bit excitable, so all you'd hear is them yapping. So we've locked them downstairs for today. They may intrude at the last minute. Hey, nice to sort of see everybody if I could. Welcome.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, brilliant. Thank you, Sharon.

SHARON DAVIS: [INAUDIBLE]

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, absolutely. Jennifer Shepherd is a staff tutor in the Department of English and Creative Writing and is based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and manages the tuition on A111. We've had lots of A111 students. The module title for that is 'Introducing Arts and Humanities', in Ireland and Wales. Welcome, Jennifer. How are you today? And have you got any animals with you?

JENNIFER SHEPHERD: No, I find it hard enough to manage kids, to be honest. So I've just got kids. We've got squirrels out the back if that counts, but no. Doing the best we can. There'll be no animal loving on the screen here. Nope.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, well that's okay. That's all right. I actually think that the animals are easier than the kids in my opinion. But anyway, we've been asking people where they are. We've got lots of international students, lots of students everywhere. So let's take a look and see on our map what's the hot spot.

Lots and lots in Europe actually, but all over across the country. Although slightly less in Northern Ireland, but all across the globe - Africa and the Middle East also, students studying with us all over. So thank you for filling those in.

We've also got a word cloud. What is your nearest big town? Now that's a single statement with three answers. So you could choose three or you could just put one in and a cross or a full stop. It's the only way, we're limited by technology, but not our imagination. So you can put some local things to where you are in our word cloud, which would be wonderful.

So, you guys are all in our nation's offices. Now what's different for students who may be in a nation - Scotland, Wales, or Ireland? What's different for students studying there, Jen?

JENNIFER SHEPHERD: Well, I guess - I'm thinking the reason we've got the four nation's offices really is to be a physical presence in each of the places where students are studying, because The Open University is not just an English university, it's a university in Ireland, in Wales and in Scotland.

So we've got physical buildings there that students can go to. Not now unfortunately, sorry - because it's pandemic time. We're usually very welcoming, but the offices aren't really open for drop-ins at the moment. But most of the time, we're a physical presence in those nations.

So we've got an office in Edinburgh, and in Cardiff, and one in Belfast, and a really small one in Dublin because we also are there for the Republic of Ireland as well. So, really what we're doing in each of those nations is we are working with local governments. The boring answer to your question about nation's offices, and why they're there, and what students get differently there, is that actually universities are funded through devolved governments.

So the nation's offices are there, in part, just to work with the governments to make sure that the funding - we get the best deal for local students, for part-time learners. Also that we help to fulfil our mission as The Open University. So we are working with local governments to make life better for local communities.

One example of that is with COVID-Nineteen. There were lots of furloughed workers. And so here in Belfast, for example, our nations-based team worked with Stormont to create free online learning opportunities for furloughed workers. And that's just sort of part of what the nation's office does.

But maybe more interestingly for students who are tuning in, the less official answer is we help you with student support. So there's all kinds of things that are specific to each nation that we help you with. So, for instance, in Wales with you Sharon, if students want to speak in Welsh or they want to make enquiries or get responses, we make sure that we have Welsh language options for them.

If you're getting disability assessments done, that's done more locally with the local team. If you're looking for student funding, you really want to talk with some experts who are local, who can make sure that you're getting the right kind of fit for you. I'm trying to think - we do students support right through from the beginning to the end.

So, employability - we've got employability experts in each nation office that help link students with local opportunities, and showcase our students' abilities, and find out about apprenticeships and stuff locally. And graduation - not to forget that.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely not. The graduation ceremonies are wonderful. So you've mentioned lots and lots of different things and the importance of working with governments in those devolved locations, et cetera. It's not only about working in terms of fees and funding but also in terms of the needs of the students and the cohort, and the needs of that community in that particular area.

From the bottom up, The Open University's mission you sort of touched upon is to really make society a better place and to do things. Jen, can you tell us a little bit about how that actually happens?

JENNIFER SHEPHERD: Oh, well the COVID-Nineteen one is an example. I think probably - I don't know. Maybe Sharon would speak to that a bit more because I'm thinking of some of the stuff that you've been doing with psychology in Wales.

SHARON DAVIS: Yeah. Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Sharon, you've been working with the British Psychological Society.

SHARON DAVIS: Yes. Yes, and I'll talk a little bit more about that in a minute. But we do work - I'm on the committee for BPS Wales, as we call British Psychological Society. And so we make sure our students in Wales are catered for in terms of what BPS can offer. So yeah, we do an awful lot of regional national type of activities.

KAREN FOLEY: And also, Jen has mentioned that sometimes we advise students to the office, but not right now. And we do things like induction days there, et cetera, when we're allowed - so getting students off to the best start. But also, in Wales, there are specific things for students if they would like to receive contact or communication through the medium of Welsh.

SHARON DAVIS: Yeah, one of the jobs of a staff tutor in Wales is that if a student requests that their work is assessed in Welsh, then we have that capability. We have Welsh speaking tutors who will mark their work in Welsh, which is quite important really. And that's part of the devolved government requirement is that we actually have the Welsh speaking act, which we need to make sure that we adhere to. Is that Megan back?

KAREN FOLEY: It's Megan back. And Megan has a toy here, which she's proudly presenting me with. But it's not playtime yet Megan. We'll have to do that in a little while, beautiful thing.

The other thing that - oh, my microphone. The other thing that I know you've been involved with Sharon, and if I could sort of come to you - I know this isn't technically your area, but some of our students are in secure environments. So a staff tutor may work with particular prisons in the localities to make sure that students can get the right support. And that's been really, really important in the pandemic, when things have, sort of, declined a little bit.

So you're working in terms of those things, but also doing career-specific advice with things like GO Wales. So they've been very detailed initiatives that people have done through various things like careers and employability.

SHARON DAVIS: Yeah, and we're working, for example, especially in COVID and our students that are in secure environments, it brings a lot more challenges. So we have to work with our tutors in order to make things sort of work for our students there. In terms of GO Wales, I'm working with BPS because that's a careers-driven thing, and with all the other universities in Wales.

So, it's not just about the OU, it's working with GO Wales and the University of Bangor, Swansea, Cardiff and Trinity Saint David's, for example. So we tend to work sort of across the nation. And I think you'll find that Haley and Jennifer do the same. This is one of the things that the nation's offices do, is we are very involved in sort of national engagement projects. And that's often driven by the devolved government.

So the Welsh Assembly, or the Senedd as we call it now, has a particular policy, especially with COVID. And we're involved at the OU actually, in the psychology department, at looking at supporting governments with work or training for employers who are trying to deal with COVID.

And we've just start a big research project from that. So we'd be developing OpenLearn resources that we can put on OpenLearn, to enable local employers to sort of work with their employees in these particular times.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's wonderful, Sharon. We'll hear a little bit more about that later. But Jen, you mentioned the graduations when we're allowed to congregate, and how wonderful those are, and how nice it is for the students to be able to celebrate their success with friends and family. You've had some fantastic local honorary graduates in your neck of the woods.

JENNIFER SHEPHERD: We have indeed. The President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins came to address the students. It was about a year and a half ago in Dublin at our graduation, which was really special. Very exciting.

I teach literature, so I'm always excited by Irish writers. And we've got a number of really famous Irish writers who are honorary graduates, who've come to speak to us. My favourite is Colm Tóibín. I was thrilled when he came to speak to students at our Belfast graduation a few years ago.

It is the icing on the cake. It is such a special thing to be a part of as a nation's office, to be able to be local and have those local ins. Very exciting.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. That's wonderful. So Sharon, we've talked a little bit about some of the things that we're doing in terms of government levels. Actually, let's just quickly take a look at what students have said in terms of the local towns. Because this is actually populating really nicely, and I'd like to see what people say.

So, let's see where everyone is. All sorts of different places. Gosh. Wow, that's absolutely wonderful. What a wide variety of people. It's interesting actually seeing a different map and

places and also how, I guess, distinct you can sort of have a map with a dot on it. But some of these places can have very different fields and yet be miles apart, et cetera. So that's wonderful. Well, thank you very much for filling all of those in wherever everybody is today.

So, Sharon, this whole idea then of working with governments is really important, but also it's working with the localities and those different situations. I know that, for example, it's very difficult to say, oh, you could drive here, particularly in Wales. That's only, you know, a hundred miles away.

But actually, if it's over the mountains, it's really not achievable at all. So having local knowledge can really help make sense in terms of knowing that, for example, certain localities on match day may not be a good tutorial venue, et cetera. How are you, as staff tutors, working on planning some of that tutorial provision and support for students in the nation's offices?

SHARON DAVIS: Well, it's really important that we understand where our students live - just even internet in some areas. In certain parts of Scotland, middle of Wales, and I suspect the same in Ireland as well, is that sometimes internet is an issue. So we need to make sure that we take care of our students who may be having issues with their connections, for example.

When we are sort of timetabling - and we've just spent the last month timetabling, all our wonderful tutors and ALs, it's been hectic and really busy. So when everybody's been having a quiet time, we've been having a really stressful time. That's all I'm going to say on that.

[LAUGHTER]

But it's also about making sure that, as you said, I certainly wouldn't timetable a tutorial in Cardiff on an International Rugby Day, for several reasons. One is, we might all like to be at the rugby, and you couldn't even get a car or travel, or train, or anything through, or find a venue that is worthy of going to on a match day.

And also the weather and the state of the roads - for example, North Wales to South Wales is a hundred and fifty odd miles or so. But it's four and a half hours in a car and four and a half hours on the train, so we have to be careful where we timetable, and look for venues for when we hopefully get back to face-to-face.

And the other thing is that there are certain sort of local issues that affect student studying. And so being able to offer support for them and work with them in their environment is often really important, making that reasonable adjustment. And if it's something we don't know about, we really want you students to come and let us know, so that we can pick up with it. Because we don't know everything, although we like to think we do sometimes.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: And some things are very important, like there are differences, for example, in the PGCE. There'll be different requirements being in a different nation. And it's really important where there are things that are qualifications held throughout the university, that some of them are very specific and meet those specific requirements.

SHARON DAVIS: Absolutely. PGCE, if you're in Wales, there are certain set rules. If you're in Scotland, you're in Ireland, and England, they are slightly different.

Things like being a counsellor - if you want to be a counsellor in Wales, if you train in Wales, you can't practice in England. Or you can actually rather, sorry. But if you train in England, you can't practice in Wales.

So there's lots of funny little things that we need to make sure that we look at, these employability issues for our students going forward. And that's another strength of a nation's office. Because in England, it's sort of the English Milton Keynes Centre will be able to sort of inform students what it's like in England, but then so will our national offices. We have to do the same for our students in the nations. And that's really important.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And staff tutors are doing a lot more in the nations than just these things. As we found out, we have very full jobs some of our colleagues. You're doing a lot of research and creating MOOCs, et cetera, so there's been a lot there. And there's also, of course, things like our Welsh History course, which is very specific, which could only be made in Wales.

Colleague Richard Marsden, who you may have met earlier and later, is very passionate about the making of Welsh history. So even though that's about Wales, it's actually really popular with students across all of the four nations, because of the way that it's constructed.

But Sharon, very briefly - and I think, Jen, you might want to jump in because I want to allow some time to talk to Hayley, and we're nearly out of time as is always the case. But we've had some local literary and academic festivals, et cetera, which have been really wonderful. Jen, could I put you on the spot?, because I think some of these are ones that you've been involved with.

JENNIFER SHEPHERD: I think you must've said me. Sorry, my internet's a bit [INAUDIBLE] at the moment. Yeah, we are very involved with the Belfast Book Festival and the Dublin Book Festival and The John Hewitt Society up here - up north, which happens every year. And lots of things have had to go online this year, which is - it's a challenge, but it's been really good to be able to access students from all over the world actually. That's been one of the upsides.

So that's something that we're very much involved with. We want to get the good word of the OU you out there, that we're here but also to showcase some of our research. We've got excellent creative writing programmes going on. And that's been a really nice opportunity to be able to showcase some of the expertise of our tutors and our essential academics that way.

KAREN FOLEY: And there's been a wonderful piece of work going on in Ireland with the arts and social sciences and psychology to promote research on sectarianism in Belfast. We've got a picture of a quilt here. So this was a wonderful example of ways in which people were sharing stories.

Sorry, I think we're seeing the picture now. But I'm hearing that some people are having some internet issues. So if you at home are hearing some internet issues, then please do bear with us. So Haley, I wonder if we could come to you now and talk about some developments in the nations going forwards.

HAYLEY NESS: Sure, yeah. One of our key priorities is to look at developing community. We spoke a little bit about geography, and obviously that impacts on communities in the nations. But really we want to understand what community means for our students.

So what does it mean for our students to be a member of the OU? To get that sense of community within FASS. And also, I'm really interested in developing community, obviously as a psychologist, within the School of Psychology. But as well as understanding and trying to build communities for our students, as Sharon and Jen have already mentioned, in the nations, we also look at developing other types of community.

So we develop academic communities in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. So we link ourselves as researchers with other researchers, other institutions within our nations, but also across the whole UK. We also link with other business partners, other agencies - so things like UNISON.

And that's really nice because it's not just about doing research. We also co-create and co-produce new material, new teaching material - so new OpenLearn material, which is lovely.

KAREN FOLEY: It is, Hayley. I just must apologise to people at home because it's so wonderful to hear what you're saying, but not everybody can because I think we're having some technical issues with the internet right now. So I'm sorry if people at home are having issues with the sound quality. I think some people are refreshing or logging off and logging back in and reducing the quality. But the internet, unfortunately, is one of those things that we can't control very much at all, I'm afraid.

So Hayley, I'm going to end the session, but there's lots of other information and advice, because we're going to put that on the website so that students can make the most of it. And, if possible, I'm going to come back to some of those areas a little bit later. But I think it's really, really hard when we want to hear what everyone's saying and the technology is just not there.

So we're going to play a video break now, and hopefully, we'll reboot the system and get back on track. It's another FASS in Fifty introduction to some of our academics, and also Rosie's story, and philosophy, politics and psychology at The Open University as well. So I'll be back very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]