

# Tutor support, help and guidance

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to The Student Hub Live STEM Freshers Event. Well, I really hope you are having a good time at this event. I hope you're enjoying meeting other people. I have some great guests lined up for you in this session.

We're going to be talking about tutor support, help, and guidance, and I have Katie Chicot, who is a staff tutor and the CEO of MathsWorldUK, very prestigious. Andrew Potter, who's a staff tutor and equality, diversity, and inclusion leader for maths and statistics and Sally Crighton who is a staff tutor and the chair of MU123.

So, Vic, people have some maths problems. I think these are very people who can help allay some of the fears. What's going on? What's the problem with the maths?

VICTORIA PEARSON: Well, so earlier on, maths experts, we had quite a few people that were saying how nervous they were about maths, frightened of maths, scared, general things that said they were unsure about it. So I'm hoping you're going to be able to reassure them. There's, luckily, also some people that said they really enjoy maths, but we've got an actual question relating to the purchase of a scientific calculator. Is this necessary? This came from James.

KAREN FOLEY: So our panel ...

VICTORIA PEARSON: This is the first question to check in.

KAREN FOLEY: Should James buy a scientific calculator?

KATIE CHICOT: Hi, Karen, yes.

SALLY CRIGHTON: I'll jump in. Carry on, Katie.

KATIE CHICOT: No, no, Sally, go ahead. You're the chair of MU123. You know everything about starting off with maths.

SALLY CRIGHTON: I was going to say I think a scientific calculator is a good idea. You don't need a super special graphic one or anything, but a basic scientific calculator would be a very, very good investment. And you can pick them up for about a tenner or something. And so ... but, yes, if you study MU123, and, of course, we think that would be a brilliant idea, then there's quite a lot of advice about that. But if you would like to, I can join in the chat afterwards to give you a bit more information about that.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So same questions for Sally, and I think, Katie, you are going to pop in as well, and maybe, Andrew, you will too so they can come and talk to you after the session also.

So, Katie, one of the things we've been talking about is preparedness to study, and I wanted to ask about this. But also in general, are there any, I guess, maths resources that may be useful to spend the last week or so before the official data module starts in preparation?



KATIE CHICOT: Yeah, absolutely. I think I do want to just quickly refer to those maths fairs that you talked about. So like the very, very first thing I want say is please, please don't be worried. We're the team that deals with the first module you do for maths. And the OU has been going for 50 years now, and every single cohort has had people who are afraid of maths in it. And it is very much our mission to take you from that position to a position where you would just love maths, and, certainly, you would wonder why you were afraid about it in the past. What has that person done to you to make you afraid of something which is so logical and natural?

But in terms of things you might be doing to get started with before your module starts and what maths resources there are, we do have a subject study site. So whatever subject you are studying has a subject study site, and on that study site, there are a whole bunch of resources that you would do well to look at. So it's like a wrapper that goes around your whole qualification and takes you from module to module. So it will have things like how to choose your next module, some taster materials, some are you ready quizzes so you can feel a bit more confident about being ready for that module, and it also has something for ... to look forward. So it has things to do with your careers after that you've been studying.

It has things to do with general study skills so things about, oh, preparing TMAs and communicating your mathematics well. So it's an all round wrapper to guide you through your studies, so it'd be a good idea to have a look at that site if you haven't already. I wonder if we could ask our students if they've looked at it already, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's see. We've got a few polls that we'd like you to vote on at home. So the first one is, have you visited the studies ... the subject's study site? And the second one is, have you looked at the modules taster material or the 'Are you ready for study?' quiz. Now these are only relevant to some modules, so don't panic if you don't have one.

But we'd like to know at home, and Angela will tell me when the results are in for those particular widgets. So get voting on them. Just click on the option that you'd like to vote on, select the one that applies to you, and then you'll also be able to see what everybody else at home thinks also. So let's see if we have those results in the next second or so. Otherwise, we'll move on. Right. Let's see.

So have you visited the subject study site? Well, 99 per cent of our audience are saying that they have visited the subject study site, which is absolutely brilliant. So, Katie, big thumbs up. That's an important thing. Why is that so important to have done?

KATIE CHICOT: Well, one thing that will often concern us if someone's going for their first module or subsequent modules, we really need to know that people have thought about what they're going to study and they've gone in at the right level. There are two entry points to a maths degree, and there will be other entry points as well for other degrees. And it is important to choose the entry point that's right for you because the last thing we want is for people to start off on their studies and think, 'Oh, maths is too hard for me, I can't do maths', which is something which is never the case. You know, everybody can improve.

But if you go in, if you jump in and try to start doing a PhD from where you are, you might come away with the wrong impression that you weren't ready to study maths or you couldn't study maths. It's really important to go in, to enter slightly in your comfort zone, and then so that you're ready to grow so you're not scared off, and you're not suddenly anxious and



phobic of maths. So I'm really delighted that people have thought about where they start their studies and have kind of got themselves prepared. And there's other things you can do to prepare as well. I don't know if, Andrew, perhaps you'd like to say some of the other things people can do before they start as well as studying the study sites. There's sort of general module things you can do to prepare.

ANDREW POTTER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, things like looking at people's ... having a conversation with your tutor, honestly, is probably the best way to start because your tutor is the person who is tasked with bringing you through the module, and they're going to be ... they've seen it all. Believe you me. I've had students from all walks of life when I was a tutor as well ... people who have not done maths for 30 years, people who have just come straight in from school.

You know, we've seen it all, and they are just such a good resource. And, really, it's really important to remember that your tutor wants to hear from you as well. They want to speak to you and start that conversation.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, Andrew, I wonder if we could talk a little bit about this because we've asked ... by the way, also, Katie, just before we sort of finish on that thing, 93 per cent said that they had looked at the module taster 'Are you ready?' quiz, so I think people are really geared up on those two aspects, which is wonderful. But, Andrew, only 7 per cent of our students have been contacted by their tutor yet with 93 per cent saying no, and when we asked have you applied to your tutor's introductory email, 28 per cent said yes and 72 per cent said no perhaps, again, reflecting this. And we know that modules haven't quite started yet. There have been some late registrations. And should people be panicking by now if they haven't heard from their tutor?

ANDREW POTTER: Absolutely not. No. No, as you say, this happens kind of on a rolling basis, so some people will know who their tutor is going to be, and some haven't been notified yet. And that's totally, totally normal.

If you have heard from your tutor or you know who your tutor is, you've had an email through that says you know who is going to be your tutor, then pop them a line. It doesn't have to be a long email. It can just be just saying, 'Hello, hi, my name's so-and-so, and I'm really, really nervous' or 'I'm really, really excited' or whatever it is. But just making that initial contact with your tutor is really, really important I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So people will start. If they haven't had those allocated, they will be starting to get those through around about the time before module starts. But, really, when the module starts is a great time to make contact. Sally, why is it so important to make early contact with your tutor?

SALLY CRIGHTON: Oh, OK, well, I think I was speaking, funnily enough, with a collection of some tutors last night, and they were telling me, reminding me, actually, how excited they are to get to see a group of their new students. And sometimes tutors will teach on the same module from presentation to presentation, and the thing that brings the module to life for them is, of course, their students, their group of 20 or so students they have to themselves.



And that's what keeps our tutors in a job that they love. They're here. They work with The Open University because they love working with students and for MU123, which is our module. Just picking up from what Katie said, most people, the overwhelming majority of the students, tell us that they enjoy it, so I think maths is definitely something that we persuade you to enjoy. But for your teachers, it just brings the module to life for them. And for students, everybody gets module materials, and you've got fabulous resources on the website. But your own teacher can make the most marvellous difference to your experience of the module because not only do you bring The Open University to life for them, they can bring The Open University and mathematics to life for you.

They are there excited about hearing who you are, and it makes it a much, much better place for all of us when we talk. It's the human face of The Open University. Really important, so please, please contact your teacher because they're really, really interested in hearing from you.

KAREN FOLEY: They are, and very often, they have jobs at other institutions. As you said, they work with The Open University, so many of them work part time. Although, some may have a few different groups, and for them, then it's a full-time job. But, typically, they do have other things on, so drop them an email. And, typically, they'll reply in a sort of maximum, I think, of a couple of days.

So don't panic if you sent that introductory email off and your tutor hasn't responded quite yet because they're often juggling like students are. I think this also makes them very sympathetic to the many juggles that we have in our lives. So that they will get in touch with you, but just be mindful that they do often have other commitments as well. So that's important.

So these sort of things, Sally, you're talking about here, I'm getting the sense that this is about a learning and a supportive relationship as opposed to being right about something or getting it spot on. We were talking about early assignments a little bit earlier in today's programme as well. I wonder if our panel have any advice for students who sort of have that anxiety, and particular, I think, with maths, where we can think, well, there must be a categorically right or wrong answer, which is we know there often isn't in that sort of sense and that there's a lot more to it than just one plus one equals two. But I wonder if you could sort of talk us through about that learning, that feedback that's so unique to the university in terms of how assessments are marked specifically by that tutor for that student to develop their own learning.

Katie, do you want to pick that up?

KATIE CHICOT: Well, yeah. Sure. Yeah, because it just reminds me of what you were just saying then. So that's partly the reason that it's really nice to be in contact with your tutor is because as you're building that relationship with them, it's more and more comfortable to be able to do something which you feel is like silly or wrong.

So the point is you start with what you know, and we know you don't know everything. Otherwise, why would you be on the module?

So you don't know everything. And you're learning, and you're growing. And, honestly, if you never made a mistake, how would you ever grow? So we definitely want people to develop a comfortable relationship with their tutors. Their tutors really like working with



you. And for all you were saying about tutors might be busy, they might get back to you in two days, there's never a bad time to contact your tutor.

If your tutor is not available to talk to you, they can always call you back. It's OK to phone your tutor. I'm not talking about three o'clock in the night. But if you are making a reasonable request to your tutor, just they want to hear from you. So please, please get in touch.

And then when you're putting in your assignments, it's exactly the same thing. That assignment is there so that your tutor can help you grow. It's not there so that we can judge you and look down on you, so it doesn't matter if you make a mistake because, honestly, we just want to know what you've understood so that we can help you understand the rest.

So you're not supposed to know it all now. Otherwise, you wouldn't be studying, so make the mistakes. If you don't make any ... a person who haven't made a single mistake never did anything. So make the mistake and then grow.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's really wonderful advice. I hope that's allayed fears for people at home and demonstrated how approachable and excited, in fact, tutors are to work with students. There's nothing more rewarding, I think, than experiencing someone's growth and their journey with them, and seeing them overcome those challenges, and perhaps doing the same things over and over again, but finally hopefully overcoming some of those.

So other things I wanted to talk to you guys about because you're very good at time management and time planning, and I think this is very important, many of our students are increasingly studying two modules, so they may be doing full-time intensity study. But we always know that as distance learners, we're often fitting studying into other commitments. We don't have the luxury of being in a nice student flat with nothing else to do but drink beer.

So we've asked people whether they've had a look at tutorials. 73 per cent said yes, and 27 per cent said no. That's a really good thing to start doing, and we'll go through that. But let's see whether they've put their TMA, their tutor-marked assignments, and iCMA. That's your interactive computer-marked assignment.

So this is your assessment. These are your deadlines, your tasks that you're going to be doing throughout the year. Let's see whether people have put those in their diary. So 73 per cent have said yes, so that is very good. So what can our panel say about this in terms of time management and planning? Thinking about getting ready, what's your advice to students about fitting it all in?

ANDREW POTTER: I think I would say that it is great to see that so many of the students have done that already. I was certainly ... I think you said we were experts in time management. That is certainly not the case for me. I have always been a bit difficult. I always take on a bit too much, I think, in the beginning of things.

And I think just being able to know when the TMAs are in your diary just helps you to be able to think, right, I'm going to be really, really busy that week proceeding, and it just helps you to do to see ... well, plan other things around. Maybe you've got school holidays coming up or whatever it is that you can look in advance towards. But everybody has ... it goes wrong. Their plans go wrong very, very quickly.



I've been in that position several times myself as a student of the OU as well, where I've kind of got too busy at work, and I've let my studies kind of drop a little bit. And I think the key thing for me in getting over that was getting in touch with my tutor. And it was the most painful thing in the world having to call up, as a staff member of the OU as well who's supposed to be good at this sort of thing, having to call up and say, I'm really, really sorry, but I'm not going to be able to get my TMA in on time.

And my tutor was so lovely and so understanding, and she just kind of said, Oh, don't worry. These things happen. And, yeah, 'Just let me know when you can get in or what can I do to support you'.

And I think it's just really important for everyone to realise that tutors are not there to crack the whip on you. They're there to support you and help, and if they can help you get back on track, then they will. So always remember the person behind the email address or behind the phone is a real person who wants you to succeed.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you. That's absolutely wonderful, Andrew. We're nearly out of time, so my last point, I'd like to look at our graph here. One comment that I read in the chat a little bit earlier where someone said, I could have done this once, but I'm not sure I can do it now. And we'd asked people whether they believe their intelligence is fixed or whether it can grow, and let's see what people at home said.

So 92 per cent believe that it can grow, and, Sally, could I ask for your final thoughts on this in terms of how this might apply to OU students?

SALLY CRIGHTON: I think it plays 100 million billion percent. Of course you can. I think I've got my piano behind me. If I want to grow, I need to practice. What you have to do as a student is, especially a maths one, start to write.

Don't put it off. Keep writing. If anything's tricky, go to a tutorial. That's where the tutors will help you with things that they know are tricky, but make a good start on things. When you have your assignments, open them, put your name on them, be active, get in there.

There's plenty of support. There's other students, but you have to ... don't be afraid to open the book, to start, to write your name on the tutor-marked assessment, and enjoy it. We all make mistakes. I make mistakes all the time, but we learn from them. Intelligence will definitely grow.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, that is wonderful. Katie, and Sally, and Andrew, thank you so much. It's been an amazing session. I'm sure that many students who may have been a bit anxious about maths have at least met some of the wonderful faces, and seen the passion and enthusiasm, and are reassured by the fact that you are going to teach them maths in a really wonderful and accessible way, which I know you do. I don't think any maths students have died while studying mathematics at The Open University ...

[LAUGHTER]

... and as well, the module material. So although we're not talking to a statistician here so ... actually, we are. But anyway, I must move on. We have our next session coming up, so we're



going to play you some videos. And before we move on to that next session, we're going to find out about the OpenSTEM labs.

So we're going to show you some videos from the library, 'What is Cite Them Right anyway?' a new referencing system and 'Referencing: where can I go for help?'; and an open STEM virtual tour. So we'll see you after those quick videos. Grab a cup of tea or coffee and do stay with us for more. See you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]