

What help to expect from Student Support

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Freshers Event. So we've shown you the physical library in Milton Keynes. But of course, being a distance learning provider, while we have a physical library, which incidentally, doesn't have too many books, the OU library is one of the best online libraries, where you can access, through your computer, anywhere in the UK, a whole range of journal articles, resources and even ebooks, et cetera.

So there are a whole host of things available and also the library team are there to support you in your studies from an academic perspective, for things like referencing, literature reviews, et cetera.

Vic, I wonder if you can tell us about how the library are involved, how useful they are, I guess, to students who may be studying undergraduate mathematics, and perhaps how you've integrated some library skills within S111.

VICTORIA PEARSON: Yeah, so S111 obviously is an entry level for our students into STEM. We have a number of different activities that students can do to, firstly, familiarise themselves with how to navigate an online library. And so we've actually got activities that the library staff have developed themselves. And we've built those into the module.

And then we get students to use those activities to find different types of information, whether that be newspaper articles, using online newspapers searches, because there's ways to do that, whether it's to access academic articles, so introduce students to journals that scientists might have written, with brand new data in them. So we come to it from a number of different angles. Part of it is actually around understanding how to judge what's a critical piece of information, so we use what's called the PROMPT system to determine what might be credible and what could be used in further studies.

So that's certainly the angle that we take on S111. And the library has got a huge number of resources to support students online, regardless of their subject. And the library website's really straightforward to navigate around, whether it's you want to search or whether or not you want to find out what time the library might open or how you can chat to somebody. So yeah, lots to see in the OU library.

KAREN FOLEY: They're a really friendly bunch, and they've got a live web chat as well. And they team up with them another collective of librarians in the States, so they've got a 24/7 way of addressing web chat problems as well. So if you're stuck on something, they're really, really, really helpful.

So don't worry if you can't get to Milton Keynes, although hopefully, when time permits, it may be the pilgrimage you may want to make. But certainly don't feel that you're missing out on anything because you can access everything online. But now we're going to talk about Student Support. And I am ... Nigel is a big library fan, oh, excellent. And people have been saying how lovely the library is as a space to be. It's very quiet. It is nice if you want to knuckle down and study.

We're going to talk about Student Support, and I'm joined by Liz Shakespeare and Elaine Walker, who are both educational advisors in the STEM Student Support team. Liz is an education advisor who's in the Manchester office, but is currently working from home at the moment because of the restrictions. And she works as part of the Student Support Team, providing guidance and support to students studying across the whole of those areas. And Elaine is in a similar position. She's an educational advisor and has also been a science tutor for many years, so wearing a number of different hats there, Elaine.

And we're going to just talk about some of the support that's on offer. So Liz, can you give me an example of something that you might deal with in your day job? What tends to happen?

LIZ SHAKESPEARE: So I would say a really normal thing for students to do is start a module with the best of intentions, and then something gets in the way, life gets in the way, whether that's personal circumstances, something to do with a new job, work, or something to do with their health happens. I mean, obviously, we can't predict the future. And therefore, it's not unusual for students to contact us kind of midway through a module to say, 'Oh, help, actually. I'm struggling and I really wanted to kind of crack on with things this year, but it's not quite gone to plan.'

So a lot of what we do is kind of having those conversations with students, thinking about ... helping to navigate university policy, how that might work in their situation. It might be kind of looking at additional support we could add to keep them on module. But also it might be kind of having those conversations about whether they need to take a break from study, how that might work. So we're not academics, but we're there more for the kind of support side of things.

KAREN FOLEY: That sounds really, really wonderful and very, very varied. I mean, Elaine, can you talk us through some of the expectations that students may have, some the academic difficulties, I guess, that you would deal with in your day-to-day dealings with students?

ELAINE WALKER: Yeah, I think the first thing to remember is that it's a huge step up for most of you to actually start at university level. And therefore, you might need a bit of a hand because you're learning, not just about the knowledge that comes with studying at university, but how to learn as well. It's completely different, most of you've never been near distance learning before.

So it's very much about, how do you do that? And I think one of the key things is, if you're not quite understanding something, then ask a question because that's a normal thing to do when you don't understand and not to be frightened to do that because a lot of students, I think, feel a bit reticent that we'll be thinking, well, this person doesn't know what they're doing. But nobody knows what they're doing. That's the beauty of it.

All the students I knew expect you to know what you're doing either. And I think probably one of the important things is that you actually engage both with the [AUDIO OUT] and with the teaching material as well. It's there to work with you. And one of them was daunting things, I think, that students do.

It's so simple, in some respects, is sending in that first TMA. I've got one here. My TMA is all ready to go. And you might have doubts about it and things, well, and you've sort of

virtually screwed up that bit of paper and threw it in. The most important thing is that you don't do that, that you just sent in to the tutor.

They're not expecting something perfect. They're expecting from you, and they'll then tell you how to do things better next time. That way, you're learning and you're engaging and you're starting to work. And the good news is, for students that do that, they're likely to pass. They're likely to pass the module, and that's got to be good, hasn't it?

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. It's really heartbreaking when students say, I had done half of it, but I just hadn't completed it, so I hadn't put it in. In fact, this morning, we were doing the exam boards in my role as module chair. And one student had written and said, I'm sorry, I had only done some of this.

And they could have passed if they put in just half of an answer even, or just a sketch of something. They only needed a few marks to get through. And it's really heartbreaking when that happens because those expectations can be really, really high. Let's see what people at home had to say.

We've been asking people about, if they were experiencing circumstances that had an impact on your studies, who would you contact? Let's see what people at home said. So 69 per cent said they would speak to their teacher about that. And tutors are very often the first point of call. And then 29 per cent said the Student Support Team. Two per cent said a fellow student. What's our response to this, Liz?

LIZ SHAKESPEARE: I think ... I was expecting less people would go to the Student Support Teams. It's always good to know that there are certain people who think ... who are aware of us. And I think nearly a third is quite good innings.

Now, what I would say is, obviously, who you're going to depends on what nature of the query is. So I think if it is an academic question, going to the tutor is spot on. But if it's something more to do with your circumstances, it might be more appropriate to go to the Student Support Team. That being said, it's not unusual for tutors to contact us if they've had a referral from a student and if it is more appropriate for us, the tutor has a mechanism to contact us as well. So I suppose, if it's something to do with your personal life or kind of where you're up to with the module, maybe us, but if it is your tutor you go to, it probably will find its way to us eventually, either way.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. In my role as a tutor, I always welcome students. Even if I can't give them the right answer to something, I'm always happy for them to let me point them in the right direction. But I know that some students, for example, have said I didn't want to talk to you about this because I was really struggling. And actually, I appreciated having someone else to talk to.

So they might go to the Student Support Team and say, I've had this change in circumstances. Things aren't going so well. And that's completely understandable also. Sometimes that can be helpful. So we were talking a little bit about feeling anxious earlier, about starting to study, in particular around maths, and we'll talk to Sally about that a little bit later. But what sorts of things, Elaine, can people do to prepare themselves to study? Because we're not quite at module start date, so what might be a useful use of time for students right now?

ELAINE WALKER: For a minute, you were going to have to explain maths to everyone. But no ...

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, don't worry. We're all terrified of maths in this set, and it's the next one we'll sort that out.

ELAINE WALKER: I think there's a lot. And there's a lot you can do to prepare. One of the things sometimes people don't think about is the space that they need for study. Where are you actually going to do the study? You need to sit down, think that through, so that you've got a good connection to the internet. The stuff that we do in science is via the internet.

You need a comfortable place to have your computer and be looking at the screen and be taking notes, whether you're typing up the notes as you go or good old-fashioned handwriting. It doesn't matter, as long as you've got that space around you. My other tip is to bribe the family and friends as well, with whatever it takes on that front because it's critical they understand that what you're doing is really important to you and that when you sit down to study, they need to respect that.

It's not time to come up and say, 'Oh, can you do this for me? Can you do that for me?' It is important. Bribe them with whatever it takes on that front, my tip, it's money worth spent on that side. And the final thing, but probably the most important thing, is planning your time to study as well because of all the problems students have [AUDIO OUT] hub, it's not about the learning, it's not about the understanding. It's about, something has gone wrong, and they doesn't have enough time to study.

So if you actually come up with a plan, it might all go out the window at some point. But if you have that plan, if you plan to study. And only you can work out for yourself because only you know your demands on your time. Something that you're doing now has to stop. That time to study magically appear out of the air. But something has to stop.

You need to decide what it is. Is it Strictly? Probably not, but you have something. [AUDIO OUT] that is. And if you've got a plan, then when things go a bit awry, you've got something to go back to [AUDIO OUT] help, and you can get back on track again. So those are my big tips: space, family and friends, and time for study.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful. And Vic, I wonder if we could talk to you quickly because lots of people are saying in the chat, I'm really worried about asking questions that may seem silly. And one of the things I think we all know in distance learning, like with anything new, is why should you know something that's brand new to you?

So for many of our new students, they're doing new things for the first time. They've successfully logged on. They're engaging and participating in all sorts of things. We can sort of trust by what Nick and Carlton said that these modules are designed by very eminently sensible people. But Vic, what would you say to students about this whole nature of questions and feeling silly about asking them and who to ask?

VICTORIA PEARSON: Well, really, that's what STEM is about. I mean, we want to train students so that they ask questions. Many of us went into science subjects because we were the people that asked questions. We want to find more out. That's really what science is about. It's certainly what other parts of STEM are about too.

So we would expect to hear questions from students. We want to hear questions from students. I'm also an associate lecturer, and I also welcome questions from students on a regular basis because that's really how everyone challenges the way that they think, the types of ideas. That's really how STEM progresses.

So if it's a question about how you've been supported, it may be that there's something that needs to be done to remedy that that we haven't thought of. If it's about the content of a module, it may be a really valid question and nobody's thought to ask it. So I think all questions are valid. A lot of people in the chat are saying, there's no such thing as a silly question.

And I know that gets said a lot, but it's absolutely true. Please, everybody, just ask questions. And you wouldn't be annoying to your tutors. That's exactly what they want to hear from you.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, but it's like, I guess ... I have to think that like, distance learning is almost like being a fabulous cook, but having to cook in someone else's kitchen. You don't know where they keep all the ingredients. You don't know maybe how the hob works, et cetera. You might know some of the stuff, you might be very competent, but it's finding out and managing that organisation of things.

And so you just need to ask. And our event on the 28th of September, we'll show you all of the basics. But in fact, in more serious news, I mean, my study buddy, my dog here, has been snoring the whole way through ... in fact, the last three days of my broadcasting, lulled by my dulcet tones. But some students want to know what do they do in a tutorial if, for example, their young puppy starts playing up or they've got a ghost kitty that walks all over their keyboards. What happens in these online tutorials? And is this something they need to be worrying about?

VICTORIA PEARSON: No. If nothing else, the last six months have taught all of us to be extremely tolerant of what goes on in people's houses. But certainly in a tutorial, it's expected you're doing that at all. You may have children in the room beside you. And for a lot of the time, you may not have the microphone turned on to talk.

But you can put your hand up in a tutorial and ask to speak. Elaine has a wealth of experience at tutorials for students too. And I'm sure she'll vouch for this one. But I'm not say anything goes. But tutors are completely understanding of people's household arrangements. I am a little concerned about the ghost kitty that keeps appearing in the chat. I'll get to the bottom of that.

KAREN FOLEY: Don't worry. It's a cat ... it's a kitten that goes on the keyboard and types random things sometimes in our Adobe Connect workshops at Student Hub Live. So it's a bit of a thing. But you're completely right because unlike now, where the cameras are zoomed in on our homes, at an online tutorial, you don't have a webcam on. You don't have your microphone on.

So all hell could be breaking loose, and often is. And you can concentrate with one ear. It's better than nothing. Certainly don't go thinking, 'Oh, my house isn't clean, and the kids are still up', or whatever. It's always good to be able to attend. So please don't worry about that also. Elaine, I wanted to ... oh, sorry, Liz, actually. I wanted to ask just quickly before we

close about disability support. This is one key area that really is useful for students to know about, and it's under utilised by so many students. So how does the disability team support work, and what should students be mindful of in this regard?

VICTORIA PEARSON: So it can be a little bit confusing if you're new to the OU, how the different areas of support work. So there is a disability support team, which is where it gets confusing. But they are kind of in charge of things like your alternative fallback arrangements, making sure we've got all the information recorded.

Now we in the Student Support Team are much more kind of involved in the, I suppose, this on-module support element of things. So I've got a little diagram here of how things all fit together. So we've got all these different areas that can provide disability support. So we've got the tutor, who speaks to us. We speak to the disability support team.

And the disability support team might speak to DSA. Now, DSA is doing student finance, so that's something that you can find more information about on the Help Centre if you want to apply for that. But basically, where we might get involved as educational advisors is if you've got a student who's midway through a module and either has a new health condition or something that's starting to impact things that wasn't impacting things before.

So we kind of get involved in that more general support, but we kind of work with other teams, I guess, is what I'm trying to say. So usually, if you are having an impact or it's causing you challenges or a barrier to your study, if you let us know in the Student Support Team, we can basically sort you out with everyone. On this beautiful example, we can kind of be the middleman there, OK? So there's loads available, and you can find more on the Help Centre.

KAREN FOLEY: Fan away all your worries That was wonderful.

LIZ SHAKESPEARE: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. I'm a big fan.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, yes, very good. Elaine, many of the seven modules, in particular at level one, cover so many different broad areas. Why are they so broad? Why can't students who really want to study math just go on and get on and do it?

ELAINE WALKER: I think one of the big advantages of the modules covering a very wide variety of areas is that you think you know exactly what you want, but sometimes you're not 100 per cent sure. This gives you a [AUDIO OUT] idea, allowing you to go in and taste the different parts that are there. It will allow you a chance to see where your strengths really lie, what you are really good at, because you might have a subject that you think you really enjoy, that you think you'd be interested in, but actually, once you actually get to study it, it's not quite what you thought it was. But then you find these other bits that are really fascinating that you haven't any idea about.

And as Vic [AUDIO OUT], science is about asking questions, and it's about being open to a wide variety of [AUDIO OUT]. You quite often find things might surprise you that you need best of different disciplines within science and technology and maths and all come together. And they're there, helping each other out. And their approaches help standing overall. So it gives you a really good chance, find your strengths, but also explore science and learn

different aspects of science discipline, science skills, all of those sorts of things. It's wonderfully rich, I think is the idea there. And don't worry if there's bits you don't like.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's wonderful. Sorry if there's any sound interference, some people at home, coming from Elaine, there. We've just ... internet's going a bit doolally. Obviously ghost kitties are running up that particular line right now. Liz, what about past Level 1? So we've talked about some of those broad areas and why it's important to get a flavour or taste of things. What happens past Level 1? Why are there so many broad areas?

LIZ SHAKESPEARE: So I'd say the reason that Level 1 is so broad when you're looking past Level 1, and I'll use this beautiful plate of oranges as an example. As you can see, we've got a pyramid. So it's really important to have these blocks of knowledge at the beginning because if you don't have that, this is where it's supposed to fall over. You don't have that, oh, oh.

And so I suppose something like science, you need that kind of broad knowledge of all the different areas. And like Elaine said, really good to have that kind of broad range anyway in terms of kind of knowing what your strengths are. But it also means as you kind of go to the top of that pyramid to reach the summit and kind of what you're really interested in, you've got that strong foundation because you can't build a pyramid without a strong foundation. So you will pinpoint later, but you just got to be patient and kind of get through that broad foundation first.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful. Well, Elaine and Liz, thank you so much. It's been a wonderful session. I hope that answers some of your questions at home. We're going to play you a couple of videos now, and the first one is how our educational biases can help, and then top tips from careers and employability. And again, at our generic event on the 28th, which you can get tickets for from the Student Hub Live website, you'll find out more about these general areas of the University that can be really helpful in supporting you in your studies. But I'll see you for the next session about tutor support, help and guidance, just after this short break.

[MUSIC PLAYING]