

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, hello. Oh, we're back on air. Oh, thank goodness for that. Sometimes I think the only thing you can do is have a good old cuddle with your dog. HJ, we've been really plagued by the internet and servers going down today. Is everyone at home back with us?

HJ: Yes, we're all getting back in, which is fantastic. I know we've been so looking forward to the Student Association session because there's so much that we can do and so many clubs that people have joined and are looking to join, but we're still not sure what it is. We don't think it's the wet cats. We haven't said anything bad about the cats since the last incident, so that should be fine.

We've heard there's some type of virus going around. We're not sure if that's affected the computer servers, but, hopefully, we'll stay on air. And any thoughts, comments or questions you have about the Students Association or how to get involved, our guests would love to hear it, so we'll let you know anything that we have in the chat for you.

KAREN FOLEY: No, that's absolutely brilliant. We hope no one's opened any of those suspicious phishing emails or anything like that, so you never quite know. But anyway, welcome back. Thank you for staying with us and thank you for staying tuned. We're going to hang on because we've got some really good sessions, and we didn't want to take them away from you today.

So our next session is about your Open University Students Association, and I am joined by Sarah Jones, Matt Porterfield and Ray Adcock to talk about this. You've got some great opportunities for people to be involved, so thank you for coming along and filling us in today. So, Sarah, what is the role of the Students Association, and how can it be of value to students?

SARAH JONES: The Students Association, every single student of the OU is a member of the Students Association, and it's of value because it gives students a voice in everything. It gives students the chance to have their say about modules. It gives students a chance to volunteer. It gives students the chance to mix with each other, to join societies, to join clubs, just to really get involved as part of the student community, and it's a fantastic place to be and very, very welcoming.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you, Sarah. That's a really good overview. We're going to get some widgets back and running as soon as we possibly can, but in the meantime, do feel free to ask any questions in the chat. And HJ will let me know if there's anything urgent. But in the meantime, Matt, what opportunities are there for people to get involved in the Students Association?

MATT PORTERFIELD: Ah, there's a lot of opportunities. We always need student service volunteers to sit in Open University committees and give the students' view. It's what we call the Student Voice. There are various government, and academic committees, and working groups, and they all welcome contributions from the student representatives that sit on those committees. I sit on my faculty's teaching committee with two other students, and we're able to put our view on any proposals, for example, a newer replacement module that's being suggested.

In Law the route to becoming a solicitor is changing, so we had to make sure that the new Law module was now aligned with this external change. We're always looking for student hosts who help us build a sense of community. Sarah mentioned we need that sense of community amongst the student body. Now whether that's in your own faculty or school or more socially by hosting chats, bingos and quiz sessions online, or perhaps hosting something for students at a particular location.

Now before the COVID-nineteen restrictions, we used to have area face-to-face meetings hosted by trained volunteers. For whatever you do with the Association, the training is always provided for every role, or you may actually want to consider joining the student leadership team because we've got vacancies, which we need to fill in our by-election coming up very soon. I first joined the leadership team as a faculty representative through a by-election last year in twenty-nineteen. All it involves is writing an election statement, doing a short video, and answering any questions that students ask through an online forum or hustings, but once again, there's support and training available.

Ray, for instance, has just come on to the leadership team, and he may want to say something in a second about it. But you may just want some support in your journey with the OU as you do your studies, or to join in the student community, or feel you're able to support other students, and we have various support services and volunteer roles, which you can find on our website. And if you haven't found that yet, it's just OUstudents, all one word, .com. And that also has details of all the societies and clubs that you might be interested in. Under the Support tab on the website, there's a link to all our support services, like peer support, and there's Togetherall, which is a service that used to be called the Big White Wall.

We also have three specialist groups. PLEXUS is our LGBTQ group. We've got a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Society, and we've got a Disabled Students Group. And there are many other clubs. If you haven't been able to find one that covers your particular interest, of course, you can always start one with support and help from the staff.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's absolutely wonderful. Thank you so much, Matt. I think we've got some more technical gremlins in our machine. I think that the chat's disappeared. Has it, HJ?

HJ: Yeah, so the chat has disappeared, but as always, you can still connect with us by lots of ways. You can email us studenthub@open.ac.uk, or we're on Twitter as well @StudentHubLive. But the Students Association as well, there's plenty of ways to get in touch.

Their Twitter page is always active, and I do find funny, some of the things they post as well. It does bring a little humour when I'm studying so @OU_Students. But like all our events, there are some things that we think of later on or we might want to get in touch later, so contact either ourselves or the Students Association. I know we all - our fantastic Students Association would love to get in touch with you and help you become more part of the community and get involved.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, HJ. So, Ray, I wonder if we can go back to that because community is something that has been mentioned here and also a lot today in our discussion. So how is the Association trying to develop a sense of community, and how is this different to other initiatives that, I guess, the OU generate as distinct from the Association?

RAY ADCOCK: Well, I think, firstly, that it's right to recognise everyone's different, aren't they? We all have different wants and needs, so the Association tries as much as possible to offer a myriad of opportunities for engagement and different sorts of communities at different levels of intensity for different reasons. So, I mean, Matt mentioned earlier the idea of clubs. Anybody can start a club with support, normally on social media, and it's usually because people's academic interest coincides with their hobby interest. So if you've got an interest in languages and you're studying languages, there's a language club.

Engineering, there's an engineering club and so on. If you want a closer connection to students themselves, societies are affiliated to the Association. And here you've got things like ballet and opera, and in normal times, if you can remember when they were, the Ballet and Opera Society used to actually go and see ballet and opera. I suppose you can do it online at the moment.

The change-ringers, all used to go around the country, ringing bells. So, mountaineering - you can guess what they used to do. So there's lots of different ways. And you can choose because it's your similar subject to your community. You want to join the people studying the same thing, or you've got a shared interest, or you've got similar circumstances. I mean, we've got a Carers Club for instance, or you live in the same region, and there's International Students Club, which is critically important I might say as the European rep.

But anyway, so the point is, all of these things encourage students to link with each other, and you get a sense of well-being. And in that way, I suppose, it contributes to the chance of academic success. But the other thing I must point out, the Association needs this quality informal contact to go on because I think it's important that the perspective of the Association when it represents the students' views to the University has some legitimacy. And all of this informal contact helps to inform that, so I think it's very important in all sorts of ways.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's absolutely wonderful. Thank you, Ray. So we've been talking to people today about whether or not they'd heard of clubs or societies and a lot earlier in the day said that they hadn't necessarily joined any OU Students Association clubs or societies.

But I think we've certainly raised the profile of the Association in this session, as well as many of the others that we've got today. So as OU students, I wondered if I could ask you for some advice for our new starters and what your thoughts would be in terms of making the most out of your studies. Sarah, can we begin with you?

SARAH JONES: Yeah, I mean, for me, it's a case of jumping in and just getting stuck in. I came to the OU, and all I wanted to do was sit in front of my computer, and not talk to anybody, and not join in. That was in September twenty-seventeen. November twenty-seventeen, I was going to my first Students Association event. I have found amazing friendships and support, and I've challenged myself by getting involved with things.

I've come out of my shell quite a lot. I was a stay at home mum. I had severe post-natal depression. And I needed something to really pull me out of that, so my studies and my links with so many people have helped me with that. So I would just encourage you just to get stuck in.

There's so much to have a look at. Have a look around. See what it is that actually calls you, I suppose. Find - something that Patrice said in an earlier session was about finding your people, and I think within the Students Association, that's what I found. I found my people. And that's what's helped me to support me through my studies, so I'd really encourage people just to get stuck in.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you so much, Sarah. Matt, what's some advice that you would give new students?

MATT PORTERFIELD: I think Sarah has said a lot of it. It's - don't be on your own. It's quite daunting when you first come to The Open University because there you are staring at a screen rather than sitting with actual other students, but they are out there. And they're all feeling the same as you, so there are plenty of opportunities with the Open University faculties who will help you.

But the Association is there, not just on the social side, but can help you with study tips and videos. They're online. If you need pointing to them, we're always happy to help, so both the social side and the study side. Use the Association. That's my tip.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you very much. Ray, I wonder if we could ask your opinion, and I know that we've had a lot of international students who've been with us today who find it really wonderful to get connected live in real time with people throughout the world, other OU students. But you might have something different on offer. What would your advice be?

RAY ADCOCK: I suppose it's a bit like Matt was saying. We're all together because we are alone, so explore, explore, explore. Find your level. Find what you're comfortable with. Find the people you're comfortable with, the subject you're comfortable with, and it just helps enormously to be at ease with the whole process rather than sitting alone, worrying alone. So the Association is there, but the Association after all is students, so it's we are there for everyone and each other.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's absolutely wonderful. Thank you so much, all of you. Really, really lovely session. And for those of you who haven't visited the OU Students Association website, do make sure you Google it. Not only will it tell you about all of the events in store for you, the meet ups, the societies and clubs, but you can also find out how to get your TOTUM card to get discounts on great things, past exam papers, and there's the OU shop where you can get a whole host of merchandise if you would like to have your OU stuff on you as you are out and about or in the house. So, thank you all very much for that wonderful session. I'm going to take a short break now and be back very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]