

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this session, we're going to show you all about your module websites and the Virtual Learning Environment, or the VLE. The OU's full of acronyms, and like any new thing, we're often inducted into a new language, and there are plenty of these acronyms going around which you'll become very, very familiar with. Long and short of it is they do help us speed up time, and sometimes the unfamiliar needs to be explained in some detail.

So, I have Tammy Alexander, who's going to show us all about the Virtual Learning Environment. Now, Tammy is a product development manager in the Online Student Experience team. In addition to the lecturers and student support teams, there are so many people at The Open University who keep planning and making your world a better place. So Tammy, welcome, and thank you for joining us.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Hi, Karen, how are you?

KAREN FOLEY: Hi. We've got nearly four hundred really super excited students here, many of whom are brand new to The Open University. Now, I'm hoping that you can show us about the module websites. And one of the things we've been talking about, Tammy, is time management and planning studies. So, how do the module websites help students to plan their studies?

TAMMY ALEXANDER: That's quite interesting. I did catch the tail end of the last conversation. So the key thing I think students need to remember about module websites is the study planner. Because there's like thirty-something weeks in a standard module, it's the planner that keeps you on track. It's the key thing that module teams use to split up all your tasks on a week-by-week basis. So by using the planner and keeping on top of that, you can see where you need to go on a weekly basis.

On the study planner, there are things like progress tracking, so you can tick off your activities as you're going through it. And you can also see the progress bar. So you can kind of get - remember where you are on the website, remember what you've done, and tick off your tasks as you're going through it.

I think there's a slide showing at the moment that shows all the key features. The planner also has all your assessment dates and your tutorial dates. So everything you need to know that week is flagged up. The one thing that you need to remember when you first log onto your module website, is that all your assessment dates will be there in the first instance, but your tutorial dates will only show once you've booked on your tutorial. So I think Zoe, who's on after me, is going to talk to you a little bit more about that in a bit more detail.

Other things about the planner, at the bottom of the planner, there's some links. And you can export your calendar, your study planner, to your Google Calendar if you've got one, to your outlook planner. So they take all your key dates, your assessment dates, your tutorial dates, and you can subscribe to them elsewhere, and you can also print it out, so you can stick it next to you if you need to and scribble all over it if that helps. So that's one key thing.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So everything is populated in that one place. And like you say, Zoe's going to talk to us about the tutorials. You book on the ones you want to go to, and then it all feeds through into this lovely plan. And you were showing us there the three-week view, but there's also a view you can have for all weeks if you would like to as well. So you can just click on those tabs. And of course, at the top, there was the Assessment tab, which is one that we're going to be covering a little bit later as well.

Now, we've got some links to some of the things that you might like to know about. HJ is going to put a link in, our fantastic computing help desk. They're really, really good at talking through things. And also, our Student Support Team can also help you with anything that you may be stuck on computer-wise.

So tell me, what sort of content, then, is on the module website? We've looked at the time planner, I guess, and some of the key functionalities. Tell us about the content, then, the bulk of it.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: So the bulk of the content will depend on what module you're studying, but most of the teaching takes place in web pages. So then there'll be a screen coming on showing you what that looks like in terms of module content. And in those web pages, you've got things - you've got video, you've got audio. They're interactive activities. They're forms and things that you need to fill in. But most of the content will be available there.

Now, a useful thing to know, at the bottom of all of these pages is a download button. So if you're not able to be online all the time, you can actually go and download that content, and you can download it into an e-reader format, like EPUBs, or MOBI files, or PDF, or Word documents. So you don't necessarily need to be online all the time.

And there's also a printer-friendly view of all the content as well. So if you click on that, you're able to print it all out. So there's a range of ways you can engage with your content online on the website.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's brilliant. There's some really, really top tips. One thing I just wanted to point out, which I didn't know about for some time when I was a student, was that when you fill in those boxes, they're just for you, aren't they? They don't go to your tutor or go to anybody else. They're there for your own learning, and you can look back on them, can't you, Tammy?

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Yeah, you can look back on them. If you filled in the boxes, you can extract them back. Most of them are saved. Some of the content's saved. But there are some quizzes and stuff like that, that you can go in and they can be there to jog your memory.

The other thing as well is, as well as the web pages, every website should have a Resources section. And in that Resources section, you'll be able to get all the downloads from across the whole website. So if you ever need to find anything, or download any content, that's a key place to go to. And it's also got an easy link for you to get to the library resources for your module. So in there, they'll probably curate library resources specific to your module, or easy links to get through to the library.

And the other thing as well -

KAREN FOLEY: I often use those PDFs - I often use those PDFs for - if I want to search something, like if I've got the book, but I'm interested in something like inequality, for example, if I'm writing an assignment, then I might use the PDF, even though I have the book, just so that I can use search functions and things like that. So those resources aren't just there in case your cat spills your cup of tea over your book. They can be used in different ways, can't they?

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Yeah, they can be. The other thing about the VLE, it's mobile-responsive, so you can get it on your mobile phone. And I think Davina's talking after Zoe about a new companion app for the module material as well. So there's a range of different things that you can use to support your study, and I think because there's so much there, you got to find the right thing that works for you as a student, whether it's PDFs, Word, printing stuff out, or actually just studying online.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now, people are going to get the hang of this, and the thing is, is that you can't break the VLE, so you can go around and play with it as much as you want. But, Tammy, we've been talking a bit about tips, and I wonder if you can give students some tips. You've already mentioned quite a few, like printable versions, three-week or different-week views, and the downloads, et cetera. But what are some of the other tips that you can share with us from your experience as an online designer?

TAMMY ALEXANDER: When we first started - when we redesigned the sites a couple of years ago, I know that there's a lot of content on those sites. And thirty weeks' worth of content is a lot for students to remember where things are. So we started to get feedback from students saying they needed to remember where they were last, being able to bookmark content. So we've added two new features in the website. One's like a bookmark save for later view. So in all your web pages, you've got a little bookmark icon. If you click on that, you can save a link to where you were last, and when you go back to your planner, you can manage all of those links, so you can easily find things in the website.

Also, at the top of the planner and at the top of web pages, there's a last viewed link. If you couldn't remember where you were last, if you click on that, it will take you to the web page that you were in last, and you can easily find your way around. Just a few little tips and stuff like that. The planner also has -

KAREN FOLEY: Let's take a look at how that looks on screen as well, Tammy, if we could, just so people can see what you're looking at, at home. So let's take a look and see how this would look on the screen. Here you go. You can see, as Tammy said, some of the saving for later links, et cetera.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Yeah. There's also, if you're using a lot of collaborative tools, like online forums and stuff like that, on your planner there's a block called Recent Activity as well, and that will show you all the forums and stuff that have had recent activity in. And it's also got a direct link directly to that content on there, so that's quite a handy block as well on your study planner.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now, one of the other things that students will find in addition to the content is, as you say, working with other students in some of these forums. So can we take a look at the module and study websites' forums and think about how engaging with other students could be made easier through some of the tips you can share with us?

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Well, every website should have forums on it. So it's the key place that you go to, to engage with either students across the module or in your data group. They're all moderated. Your tutors are there as well. Everyone's there to support you. The study website has forums on it that are associated with your studies. So that's your study home. So if you click on Study in the top level navigation, you can go to your study website, and there you can talk to students studying on the same qualification as you.

You'll also find forums in other places. The OU Students Association uses forums. So we use them quite a bit around the OU. They're a really good way of keeping on top with everybody.

There are other tools. So Zoe's going to talk about online rooms and Adobe Connect. And then across modules, you'll find other things. Depending on your module, you might be asked to engage with a blog, or a wiki, or some modules have like a tool called OpenStudio, which is a bit like a - it's a sharing tool for sharing things that you're working on with other students and getting feedback.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now, on that note of feedback, Tammy, I wonder if we could just end by asking how you take on board feedback, because Liz Marr mentioned Student Voice is really important, and there are a whole range of ways that students can feed in. But one of them is just quickly telling us what you think of something when you're looking at it online, because sometimes what we think and sometimes what students think is very different. So we have this feedback option on the module websites, and show us what it looks like and what sort things you'd like people to put in there.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: So on the bottom of every page in the VLE is a little feedback button. And we take feedback on everything. We use it - we look at it every month, so please give us your feedback. I'd say the good, the ugly, we take it all on board, and we read it, and we pass information on to people. So last viewed, the bookmarking functionality, there's been a range of things that we've developed off the back of student feedback. So give us your feedback, and we'll take it on board, and we'll see what we can do with it.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And it's really simple things. Like sometimes - I mean, the other day, I'd written something in one of my modules, and I said, go and have a nice cup of tea, and I'd forgotten, of course, that tea isn't something that everybody relates to as a nice calming beverage. So it's the simple things. It could be something like that. Oh, I can't read this because I'm colour-blind or whatever it might be. Those sorts of bits of feedback are really, really useful, because if we don't know about them, we can't make those improvements.

Tammy, it sounds like you've got a lot of fun in your job, making lots of things more interactive and user-friendly for our students. Thank you so much for joining me and for filling us in on that.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: No, thank you.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: No problem, thank you for having me. Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: All right. We'll see you soon, Tammy. Thank you.

TAMMY ALEXANDER: Bye.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I hope that's given you a useful preview to some of the stuff that you're going to meet in your Virtual Learning Environment. As we said, there are some key tabs. Take a look around, you can't break it. But Tammy's given us some really good tips for some of the functionalities are there. So do take a look, not only at what is there, but also the various ways that you can interact with that Virtual Learning Environment.

Now, one of my colleagues, James, who I think is going to come into the chat today, has been working really hard on a little course called 'Building Confidence in Online Forums'. It's a really nice, free short course, because some students say, I get a bit anxious contributing in forums because they can seem a bit academic, or I don't really know what to say. And so some people can find it a bit tricky.

So we've got a course there, and we're going to put the link in the chat to that, so it would be great if you can take that. I know some students who came along the other week have really enjoyed it and gained a lot from it.

HJ, how's everyone at home, very briefly? HJ, have you muted yourself again? I can't hear you. Nope, we can't hear you, HJ. I'm very sorry. We're going to have to come back to you in a minute. I hope you're keeping busy. You certainly seem like you're doing a lot there. But chatting's where it's all at, so we'll come back when we've sorted your audio out in just a minute.

Right, we're going to have a very short break, and then we're going to look at tutorials, which is another very, very important thing. And Zoe's going to show us around what the tutorial system looks like at the OU. See you in just a minute.

[MUSIC PLAYING]