

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to our Student Live Freshers' Event. Well, we're meeting some fantastic people and that's not going to stop now. Let me introduce you to some members of our Student Support Team. I've got the lovely Frank Farley here and the lovely Sian O'Reilly to meet you. Frank, if I may say so, what a fabulous hat you have there.

FRANK FARLEY: Thank you. I thought it might just be a bit distracting. But I thought I'd just get it out especially for you, Karen, and the audience.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, thank you. No, we always like a nice hat, we do, almost as good as a piece of cake. And Sian, welcome. Now COVID's like brought some challenges to our Student Support Team. But on the plus side, I guess, you can wear hats like that, which may not go down so well in the office. Tell us how it's all been talking to students and how your lives have been for the last few months, Sian.

SIAN O'REILLY: It's definitely a lot more comfortable. I couldn't - apart from today, fully in a dress. It's nice, I can still do my same job working from home in comfort sitting on my sofa, so here to help.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's absolutely wonderful. Lovely flowers there, by the way, also. Frank, how has it been for you?

FRANK FARLEY: Yes. I mean, it's been a challenge in listening to how our students have been impacted, some of the challenges that they've been presented with since lockdown. But no, working from home, yes, it's been really interesting, gives us that freedom to structure your own day, but also able to support students. You can just give that stronger support, I feel, if you feel you're in an environment where you're more comfortable. So, yeah, hopefully the students have felt that.

KAREN FOLEY: It's been amazing times actually. And the OU's been so very, very agile adapting to things. But I guess one of the difficulties have been that the Student Support Teams are often in some of our regional offices with call centres, et cetera. So, I guess, you know, diverting all of those to, to people's landlines and working from home has been quite challenging.

But we're talking very generally now, because you talk to students in a range of different ways, on the phone, web chat, et cetera. One of the things we've been talking about is when students would, sort of, seek support. So when should they come to the Student Support Team? When should they be in touch? Can we start with you, Sian?

SIAN O'REILLY: Yeah, of course. So we always say straight off the bat, just pick up the phone, give us a quick call, anything can kind of happen, especially with online distance learning. You can plan and plan and plan, but there's always something that's going to kind of pop up or kind of disrupt your study plan.

So we just say, give us a quick call. We're more than willing. Never be scared. We will have a conversation with you, make you aware of all the different support options, and, so you can go forward and make an informed decision. As long as you're happy, obviously, we can give you all of those answers, and then you can go on and feel comfortable with your choice and know that, that's the next step plan. So we say straight away really, the best early intervention definitely leads to better outcomes. So just pick up the phone and just give us a quick call.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's wonderful Sian. See the thing Sian about you and I, we're being perfectly sensible, lovely settings et cetera. I've even got my dog to come and join me. Yes, everyone's obsessed with Frank's hat. Rakula says, nice hat, Frank. Sasha says, wow, that hat. Jane loves it. Aditya says, is that a King Kong hat? Samantha says, love the hat. Bianca says, loving the hat.

So there we are, Frank. My next question's for you now. What sort of things could students do in terms of the Student Support Team? One of the things that everyone's really worried about is falling behind in time management. So we're talking about tutors sort of being a source of support. But the Student Support Team could be another source of support. And sometimes it's really useful for people to have a different voice from the one who is marking their work. Do you ever get involved with helping students with time management?

FRANK FARLEY: We do. Yeah, there's some - actually, yeah, I mean, that's a very good question. And we appreciate it. The tutor is, obviously, always the most important person within a student journey. But sometimes in the Support Team, we can supplement that support as well. And in terms of time management, there's lots of resources available through the Help Centre.

The best one that we would probably suggest is a calculator, so you can really break your day down by the hour, how much time for sleeping, eating, studying. And try and plan ahead so, yes, on paper we can try and support you to try and work out where can you find the time that you need to keep on top of your studies.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. No, that's absolutely wonderful. And as we said, there are a whole range of ways that they can connect with you. But some students - we know that many students actually choose The Open University because they've got various disabilities. Some have social anxiety. We've seen people today who felt very anxious about things. And some people don't necessarily want to talk to somebody.

So, what sort of support can people get if they don't necessarily want to phone or chat to somebody? Is there online support that people can get, Sian.

FRANK FARLEY: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: Sian, let's go to you first and then Frank.

SIAN O'REILLY: Yes, definitely. So like you said there's multiple different ways to speak to us, especially for students that are anxious that don't predominantly like that face-to-face communication. I myself, anything kind of outside of work, it's like if I can just send a quick email, I will, rather than have to speak to somebody.

But with something such as, as important as your studies and having those support options, one of my absolute favourites is our Help Centre. I tell all the students that I speak to, it's literally your best friend. Sounds cheesy, but it is. It has so much information on there. It goes between stress management techniques, study skills, IT support, library support, preparing, completing, how to submit your assignments.

And it's also got, obviously, our biggest at the moment our COVID support page. So any updates that kind of come in. It's got all the information on there. And even if it's just a brief

overview, it will then say, please contact your Student Support Team for more advice. We use it in the office. We use it working from home. And we can recommend little thumbs up pages for you, as well, just so you can get direct access.

And there's so much information on there that nine times out of ten, if you was to call us, we'd say, have you checked your Help Centre? Have you had a quick look, because it's on there. So, if you do find that actually, you're not one for face-to-face and you kind of prefer to be able to find those answers first, and if you can't then contact us, have a look on your Help Centre.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's wonderful, Sian. HJ have we got some questions for Frank?

HJ: Yes, we have. But a lot of people do like Frank's hat. So I thought I noticed that. Raluca and Nicole think it's absolutely amazing. And Sachin does reckon there's a story behind your background, so maybe we could find out about that one day. Samantha says, there is some people on my module quite far ahead of me, and I have only just begun week one, should I be worried?

KAREN FOLEY: That's a very good question. I've seen this on social media. Frank, what's your opinion on all of this?

FRANK FARLEY: I would always say speak - if you're worried about your progress, probably speak with your tutor just to make sure that you're on track and where you need to be. But certainly, do not be worried. Sometimes that pressure we can put on ourselves can sometimes be a bit of a distraction. But, no, it's - you need to study at your pace and that's right for you.

So, if you speak with your tutor, I mean, speak to the Support Team, if it's a time management issue. But certainly, just focus on those areas that you need to that week. So, hopefully don't allow yourself to be too pressured by other student's progress. It's your progress that's important, and your tutor can make sure you're on the right track.

KAREN FOLEY: I've always found that the students who are, sort of, as up to speed on the timetable as possible, often produce the best work, sometimes because it just takes time to mull things over, to learn the material. So there can be those differences. But some students get ahead because they may have an operation, or they may be going away or some reason may mean that they need to get ahead. And so, for some students, that's a really helpful strategy. HJ, there are more questions, though.

HJ: Yes. So there's a couple of questions that I'd like to just group into one nicely. So one question was, who should we inform if we have any health issues, should it be the Student Support Team or our tutor? And, kind of, linked to that, someone said they had a statement of health and adjustments last year, will that go to their tutor this year?

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, who'd like to answer those?

FRANK FARLEY: So the first question HJ with regard - Sorry.

SIAN O'REILLY: Go on, you take it, you take it.

FRANK FARLEY: I recall - the first question was regarding - I'm sorry, HJ, I didn't recall the first question.

HJ: So the first question was if we have a health issue or disability, should we tell the Student Support Team or our tutor?

FRANK FARLEY: Thank you, yeah. Great question. It's always best to keep your tutor informed of your circumstances and how that may impact your study, but certainly do contact us here in Support. Maybe you didn't feel comfortable speaking or sharing what the circumstance may be with your tutor. But certainly, call us here in the Student Support Team. We can go through the raft of options.

Sometimes if your circumstances allow you to maybe remain in the module, but with a short break, we can explore that. If you feel that you need to take a break from that module, revisit that in the future, we can have that conversation with you as well. And if it does need to involve your tutor, we can either speak on your behalf or encourage that conversation between yourself and the tutor if need be. But certainly, give us a call. Always share those circumstances with us here in the Support Team.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And you often would create a profile for people as well. And those can be around things that can either be sort of continuous issues or it may be something short-term, like looking after or caring for a relative or somebody at home. Things may get very intense, things may calm down, et cetera. So things can fluctuate and change. But having that profile is really important as well, isn't it?

FRANK FARLEY: Absolutely, the profile is absolutely key, because that dictates what kind of support we can offer a student. So, if you haven't declared a profile with us, please do get in contact with us here and make sure you've got a profile with our Disability Support Team. That allows us to then understand what support and additional requirements may be needed.

But most importantly your tutor, as well, can be made aware of those. And as you said there, Karen, if it's not something that's a permanent, you know, it's just a - you're experiencing that temporarily, then as long as we can evidence that, then please do share that with us, because we can explore the support that can be offered to you. We have a duty to make sure all students have that equal platform. So if your study is being impacted, please get in touch.

KAREN FOLEY: Well I'm glad to say that I'm seventy-five percent of people say that when things don't go to plan, they feel comfortable in asking for support, which is absolutely wonderful. It's really, really important to do that. And seventy-four percent have already looked at the Help Centre page as well. So that's again, a really important thing for you to have accessed and done.

HJ, what was the second question? I've forgotten it now. I hope you've kept tabs.

HJ: I have kept tabs. I'm very good at that. So we did want to know if we've had a report or a statement of health showing adjustments before, will that be given to our new tutor in our next modules?

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So this is where people have maybe created that profile we were talking about. And then where does that go? Does that be seen by the next tutor?

FRANK FARLEY: Indeed. It cut out a little bit there, so hopefully I got the question. But yes. Once you've created a profile, that profile is based upon evidence. So if the evidence indicate it's a condition that's going to remain, then, of course, we will keep that in the profile, and that profile will be shared with your tutor. If there's any change to your circumstances or your profile, then always share that with us and your tutor, of course.

But most definitely, if you don't feel you're getting the support that you need to keep on top of your studies in module by module, then please do get in touch and we can explore that.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's lovely. I think we've got another question, HJ.

HJ: Yes. Just one final question, because I know there's loads in the chat, we could ask you. And I know we've got limited time. So, what we really want to know because people coming in and out as well is, what are the different ways we can contact you? Some of us are a bit nervous contacting on the phone or prefer email or some people in the chat have hearing problems, so would like to know what different types of methods we can use to contact you.

FRANK FARLEY: Did you want me to - well, just very quickly to answer that one. On your home page through the Help Centre, there is a Contact Us tab, and it will outline all the various forms of contact available, whether it's the phone, whether there's web chat, whether there's an email, of course. So they'll all be listed in order in your Help Centre how to contact.

And it's specifically your own Student Support Team, so it takes care of that for you and directs you right through to the most relevant people to contact. So, yeah have a look on your Help Centre. But we're aware that not everyone can pick up that phone. So that's why we do the email, web chat. There's forums as well. So you can engage with forums. So there's lots of ways to try and avoid that phone if you need.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's wonderful. Sian, I wonder if I could ask you about the different skills, because we've mentioned some of the time management skills that you can sort of help with and how you can help if things always don't go according to plan. But what about study skills for those students who've been saying, well, I'm coming back to study after a long time. How can the Student Support Team help with those, Sian?

SIAN O'REILLY: So again, Help Centre being your best friend. It's got a whole section relating to study skills. So, in terms of academic reading, because it's very different from, if you're coming from, GCSE or A-level or if you haven't got those and you're coming straight into a degree based subject, it can be very different in terms of the reading, the writing, the analytical skills, that are required to do well on those modules.

So there's a whole section in terms of what should I be reading, how should I be structuring my work, referencing. Obviously, the library does sessions on online referencing as well. A lot of us may have never done Harvard referencing or SCONUL referencing, various different referencing. So, that's always a key session to make sure you're on - just to make sure you're getting it right from the off.

But there's various different areas on there. And obviously, we do offer Access courses as well. If you feel like you need a little bit of a step-up before coming to degree level. Also, we've got OpenLearn and FutureLearn that provide free educational courses. Some are as short as twenty-four hours. Some can span over eight to twelve weeks.

They're all free. And you can go in and just familiarise yourself with the way the course is going to be presented in terms of online materials, study materials as well. So it kind of, it lets you dip your toes into things before taking that initial big plunge at the end.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's absolutely wonderful, Sian. And just on the final sort of question, Frank, I wondered, if things go wrong for students, is it best for them to talk to their tutor or the Student Support Team or both?

FRANK FARLEY: I will say always contact here in terms of understanding your options and what can be done in that moment, then contact us here in the Student Support Team.

But you don't want to downplay the role of your tutor. So you would always share anything that's impacting you in your studies perhaps with your tutor. You could always contact us here in the Support Team if you didn't want to go through your tutor. And we will go through all your options there with you and support you towards the best option for you, of those, based on your circumstances.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much. And I'm sorry the internet signal - and I've just got my wet cat in from outside. I hope that was the cause of the error. She's trying to get on the keyboard, but she's not allowed to. So I'm sorry if the signal's been fun. It should be all right now. The culprit's well and truly reprehended, very wet. But we'll be back for our next session.

Thank you so much, Frank and Sian, as well. You've been absolutely wonderful. Student Support Team are really great. They're really, really good to talk to, so much more than just sorting out problems. But they know all of the stuff that's on the OU Help Centre, where to look for it. So for example, somebody mentioned before in terms of time management, one technique wasn't working so well, they may be able to suggest others to you.

So do make the most of them. They're frightfully busy right now. But they are always available. And if you can't get through, do drop an email or they'll get back to you at a time that is going to work. So think about when you're using the Student Support Team throughout your module. And do make sure that you're getting the most out that excellent service.

So we're going to have a short video break now. We're going to do another of our campus tours. I hear that these are going down very well. So we'll give you a few more of them. And then I'm back in our next session to talk about your Open University Students Association. So join me for that very soon. See you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]