

Returning to your studies with confidence - 30 June 2021

SANDY BALANCE: My motivations for studying with the OU were to gain a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology. My goals and ambitions are to work in education, and ultimately be a primary school teacher, and then perhaps further in the future, to work towards becoming an educational psychologist. And I've almost completed doing a PGCE. It makes me feel really proud to have got to this point. It's a great sense of achievement. With COVID, it was really tricky finishing off my bachelor's degree. Last year, in the first lockdown, when I had my children at home, and I had to home-school them. And then, also with my PGCE, I had to teach in an environment which was under lockdown. My next step to achieve my goals is to just get as much work experience as I can as a teacher, so once the course is complete, I will volunteer or do some supply work until I find the perfect job. And after that, I will do a Master's in Education.

Advice that I would give to other students is to try to get to know your tutor, even if it is just on email. At the moment, I am thinking more about my career as my studies come to an end. So my focus is on getting relevant work experience that will really help me get a great job. I am also thinking about continual professional development, because that's really important with what I want to do.

JOHANN BLACKWOOD: My motivations for studying with the Open University are to gain a new qualification for some self-improvement, that I could do something completely different, and that I can really actively follow a passion of mine. I am studying a psychology degree. The decisions I've made so far about my career goals have been to look for work experience, opportunities for the future, and also to build relationships with people that are working in my field.

On the one hand, it feels exciting. I'm working towards a career goal. I'm taking an active role in making things happen. On the other hand, I'm quite nervous, too, because I'm having to do a lot of the stuff by myself, which I've never had to do before.

And it's been certainly a baptism of fire in terms of, like, research. I have health issues, and those health issues have impacted in terms of being mobile and getting out and about, meeting people. The next step that I'll be taking towards my career goals and ambitions is to attend any upcoming conferences.

One piece of advice I'd give to other students is, understand the power of communication. Talking to other people can really help with your next steps, and building relationships with people in your area of interest, and also to get support around the things that you find difficult.

KAREN FOLEY: Good morning, and a very big, warm welcome from me, Karen Foley, here in West Wales on a gorgeous sunny day, welcoming you all at home to our Student Hub Live event. Well, it's fantastic to see so many of you here today.

This is a really special event. We're going to talk about returning to studies with confidence. And you've all been chatting in the chat box about the World Cup and where some of you were in 1966 as well.

So I'm guessing we've got some people who may not have studied for quite some time here with us today, and we may have people who haven't studied for a very short period of time. But we're really hoping that during this hour, we can answer all your questions and give you some inspiration, hear from some students and staff at the university about some of the best options for you.

So it's a very short period of time, and I have four very special guests today here who we're going to be talking to. I have two students-- Pierce and Heidi. I have Jamie from our student support team, and Linda from our Open Programme.

So a big, warm welcome to you. We'll come to you in just a moment. I'm also joined by Mary, who is managing our chat desk. So you'll be talking in the chat and answering questions, and she'll be filling us in.

So if there's something you'd like to know from any of our panel today, then please do let us know. But anything goes in the chat. And because I imagine there are lots of questions, particularly if some of you haven't studied for some time, I've asked a special panel of people to come along and join us.

We have Katherine from the library, Paloma from the OU in Scotland, Helena from the OU in Wales, Rory, Lauren, Elly, and Vicki, also from our student support teams. So they will be able to answer your questions in the chat, so please do make the most of this time. But if there isn't an answer to those questions, or for some reason I missed out, then you can email studenthub@open.ac.uk, and we will forward your questions to people so that they can get back to you.

So sit back and enjoy the show. Talk to yourselves. Enjoy meeting other students. But let me introduce you first to Mary, who is on our hot desk. Mary, how is everyone out there today?

MARY KEYS: Hi. Yeah, no, everyone's great. And it's really nice to see. We've got some really lively and engaged students here. We're were chatting about anything from favourite biscuits through to the football yesterday, which I didn't actually get to watch, but never mind.

And then, we've started to even-- people starting to talk about what they might be studying at the moment or what they were studying before. So it's really good to see all the students, kind of, engaging and chatting with each other, because that's what makes this event really special.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Brilliant. Well, that's wonderful. Thank you, Mary. So let me introduce you to my first guest, Linda. Linda works in our Open Programme, but Linda's also been researching the experiences of students who haven't studied for some time, and she's also been a student herself. Linda, big warm welcome to you. Where are you today, and what's the weather like?

LINDA ROBSON: Good morning. I'm in Folkestone today. And although it's actually the second sunniest place in the UK, it's raining-- so not perfect, but hopefully the sun will come out later on.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now, you've been researching some of the experiences of students who've deferred, which means that they've maybe paused their studies partway through and are aiming to pick it up a little bit later. I wonder if you can tell me some of the stuff that you found out about those students, and perhaps offer some tips for the people who are watching here today who may have been in a similar position.

LINDA ROBSON: OK, so there are, kind of, two groups of people that differ, really. There's the people who differ because something happens in their life-- so a home issue or a work issue that triggers a need to take a break, because you just can't fit the study in. And then, there are those people for whom there's maybe not an obvious trigger, but things have, kind of, come together, and for some reason, they've decided that they needed to take a break out of study. Now, that might be-- there's a natural break between modules anyway, so that's a short break, which sometimes works for people.

Some people have deferred, so they've got part way through a module, they've taken a break, and they'll be returning to that same module. And then, the third group of people is those people who decide maybe to take a year out, maybe take two years out, three years out. And it's all-- you know, it's flexible at the

OU so that you can make these decisions to have a bit of a break, and then pick up your studies again when you're ready. And when that is will be different for different people.

KAREN FOLEY: I mean, the one thing about the OU is that sometimes-- and I remember when I was an OU student, starting that degree seemed insurmountable. It seemed like six years, which I-- you know, when I did my OU degree, I was in my early 20s, and that seemed like a really, really long period of time. And my goodness, it wasn't.

But I mean, Linda, you run. And I often think that studying with the OU is a bit like a marathon. It's an endurance event. It's not a sprint. And because of that, there are certain things that students may benefit from, in terms of keeping, I guess, the end goal in sight.

LINDA ROBSON: Yeah. It's a very similar thing, really. Some of the time, you're going along and it's working quite smoothly. And then, some of the time, there's a bit of a bump or you trip over, and you need to re-evaluate sometimes.

One of the things that I've heard from several of the students I've spoken to in my research is that they found taking a great break really useful, because then they have really thought about why they're doing what they're doing, and are they on the right path, and are they going the right speed. So it's an opportunity to reflect on what you've done so far, and consolidate some of that, and then decide on the next step, which might be returning to the path that you were on, or it might be deciding to do something different.

So it is a real decision point, I think, when you decide, yes, I'm going to pick it up again. And then, obviously, around that, there's the whole infrastructure around it of deciding, how do I make this work? What interrupted things before? Has that changed? Can I manage it differently? So a little bit of preparation to really get into it, know what your goal is, and know how you're going to achieve it. So very much like marathon training Programme, really.

KAREN FOLEY: And often, there are different obstacles that get in the way. I know people at home are talking about juggling children and studying. And I think the pandemic has been one of those cases, particularly with home schooling, where some people have found a real opportunity to have a break and to really focus, because they're not doing other things, but for other people, it's been a real challenge. I know, for me, trying to get the homeschooling done was really, really quite difficult. And I think there have been a lot of impacts for people right now who may have just thought, actually, I need a bit of a break from this while all of these things are happening.

LINDA ROBSON: Yeah, very much so, and I found that. As soon as they announced that schools were closing, the first thing I did was apply for a study break from my research degree. So I very much understand that. Whereas some other people-- they've maybe been on furlough, they've not had so much to do, maybe they haven't had children to home-school, and so that's been an opportunity to really crack on with things.

So yeah, it's a very different situation for different people. But we've come through as best we can, and now is a good time to think, right, where do I go from here? And for me, that was coming back to study. And although I officially came back in September, I've, kind of, drifted in.

So I think I'm fully back now and just, kind of, heading off on that path again. So for some people, you might have deferred, and your module is starting again in October. So you might want to think about, well, how am I coming back in? Am I going to start again at the point where I stepped out, or am I going to start

again at the beginning of the module and gradually ramp up to that point where I, kind of, more formally rejoin the course and start doing the assessment again? So there's quite a lot of planning to do.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm going to talk to Pierce a little bit later about that in terms of what the student support team can offer for those students who may want to think about picking up. But Linda, before we move on, how interesting, though, that you're researching the experiences of students who may have paused their studies, and then yourself as a student, you've had to pause your experiences. I wonder if you might share some of those things for you, and perhaps talk a little bit about what that experience has been like? It must have been difficult to put something that you care about on hold.

LINDA ROBSON: Yeah, it's actually been really valuable for my research to have had this break.

Because when I did my degree originally, I wouldn't say I sailed through, but I went through continuously and didn't take a break. And so actually, to have had the experience of taking that break like the people that I'm doing the research into, is really, really valuable.

Because although I had empathy with them before, I actually know how it feels now. And I did find it very, very difficult to stop studying. It felt like I'd given up. I felt like a failure. So it was really difficult from that respect.

But on the flip side, it was also a case of, well, I've got no choice here. I have to do this, because I have to home-school my son. So it was a, kind of, mixed bag of emotions, which was quite challenging. I knew I was doing the right thing, but equally, it felt like the wrong thing in many ways.

And then, picking up again, you know-- I'd filled my time with something else. I don't really know what it was, necessarily, but suddenly, I had to find time again to fit the study in. And that does mean giving up some other things.

So watching less telly-- I didn't watch the football last night, although I'm not a football fan, so I'm not bothered. But I watched the highlights of the tour rather than the whole of the tour. So it's about making those judgments as to what things are really important to me and which ones I'm going to give up to be able to do the study.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. And the tour is very exciting, I must say. I watch the highlights also. Much better than the football. But differences of opinion there, and I certainly imagine that would be there for our viewers at home also.

I mean, Penelope's raised a really interesting point. She's got three under-sevens. So she's deferred because of the home schooling. But what she says is, it's given her a really good opportunity to reassess things, and she's going to go and do a different module.

And Linda, I'm going to talk to Pierce about that in a minute, because he's had a very similar experience. But you've done this also yourself. You've, sort of, changed your directions in terms of your own study, and here representing the Open Programme-- and Mary also is one of our Open Programme colleagues as well. This notion of flexibility, not only in terms of when you're studying but also what you're studying, can be really appealing to people, especially when we do have different directions in our lives.

LINDA ROBSON: Yeah, indeed. And sometimes, just different things become interesting at different times. Six years is a long time that we generally study OU degrees over. And during that time, things change.

So there are often reasons why you might think, suddenly, well, actually, I'm done with that bit. I want to move on to something else instead. And so you know, I would strongly say to people, do consider seizing

that opportunity, because study is so much easier if you're studying something you're interested and passionate in.

So you know, that re-evaluation, I think, is really useful. And from the students I've been speaking to in my research, quite a few of them have said they found that break really useful, because when you're coming back, you recommit somehow, in the same way you did when you very first started. It was a very big step to start in the first place.

And so that coming back-- it reaffirms that that's definitely what you want to do, or you've made the decision to do something else. And they found that very motivating and really valuable in going forward with their study further on as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Linda. That's absolutely wonderful. We're going to leave that bit for now, because I'd like to introduce Pierce to everyone at home. Because Pierce has a really, really interesting story. Welcome, Pierce. Where are you, and what's the weather like?

PIERCE HOLLAND: Good morning. I'm in Mansfield at the moment. The weather is quite overcast, but there's no rain-- fingers crossed-- for now, at least. Yeah, so it's a lovely day.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, excellent. Well, thank you for joining us. Do you want to share a little bit about your story? You've had quite an interesting experience with your studies, and I imagine that a lot of what Linda's been talking about really hits home with you.

PIERCE HOLLAND: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And I think, again, it's that-- like what Linda said with the stop-starts, that's played a massive, massive impact in what I'm studying now and I have studied previously. So when I finished school, when I finished my A-levels at 18, the typical path was to go to bricks-and-mortar university.

I had an ultimatum at that point as to whether to do that or whether to go in and work full-time. I chose work, and ultimately thought, I'll pick up with the Open University. All of my A-levels were in the sciences. I studied biology, chemistry, physics and science.

So when I moved to the OU, my initial thought was, well, why didn't I study science? So I took on natural sciences. I ended up deferring twice when I was studying that course, because my heart just wasn't really in it.

But eventually, through one thing and another, I ended up finding the right course, and now, I'm just about to go into my fourth year. So it has been a bit turbulent and a bit up-and-down, but I do really resonate with that taking a break, especially to find the right path for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And it's been hard for you, I think, because you were one of the first in your family to go to university and study at this level. And you're young, and coming out of school and thinking about what you could do. I imagine having money and the opportunity to do something must have been quite hard for you.

And I guess, in terms of what Linda was saying, focusing on the end goal and what you wanted was really important. And I think what's interesting for you, Pierce, is that you've, sort of, found something you're really passionate about, and you're talking about the sciences and things. And you've, sort of, emerged into quite a different area now, which is really exciting for you, and it's just had a massive impact on your life.

PIERCE HOLLAND: Yeah, yeah, definitely, definitely. And I think, like you say, when people are 18, or when they're young and just finished school, there's a massive expectation for people to have to almost

set out their entire life. As soon as they hit 18, decide where they want to go for university, what career paths they want. And I think a lot of the time, we don't take that break, we don't take that time to think about where we really want to be in ourselves.

And quite rightly, as you said, now, it's moved away from doing something that I studied just because I was good at it, to something that I'm studying because I'm really passionate about it. And it's ultimately worked out that I have the best of both worlds. I'm in full-time work, and able to earn that little bit of something to help savings goals, things like that, but I'm also working towards a personal goal of achieving my degree.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, you paused your studies. Tell us a little bit about what happened there with that. I mean, because one of the things Linda was saying is, it's important to, sort of, think about, I guess, what the barriers have been, or whether they're different. And you had a couple of false starts, didn't you?

PIERCE HOLLAND: I did, indeed. Yes, yes. So the first two years, it was natural science that I was studying. The first one, I think I ended up submitting a couple of the online assessments and one of my TMAs.

And I just-- I never carried on. It just got put on the back burner, I forgot about it, I didn't think about doing it, and to be quite honest, at that time, I didn't feel the want to have to take that time out of my personal life to have to try and study. So I ended up deferring.

Unfortunately, the same thing happened with that second year as well. My heart just wasn't really in it. I didn't come home from work and think, right, I need to sit down and study now.

I would have rather gone out and socialised or played games or something else-- anything not to study. And it wasn't until I had a conversation after that second deferral with my student support team, where we had to sit down and think about where I am, where I want to go, and what I'm doing this for, that I ended up actually completely changing my path to something that I now really enjoy and really want to do.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And we'll talk to you a little bit more about exactly what you're doing in a moment. Richard, I'm afraid I can't play the cello right now. I'm just returning from a wrist injury, so I've had to have nearly two months of that and doing various other things as well.

But Mary, let me come to you and see how everyone's doing at home. We've asked people about some of the reasons why they're thinking about returning to studies right now. I imagine there's lots of chat going on about variety of things. Tell us how everyone is.

MARY KEYS: There is loads of chat going on, which is great. I think what's been really nice is, everyone's, kind of, sharing their own reasons. Some of them, sort of, had to stop their study for reasons that-- it wasn't maybe their choice. Others made an active choice to stop their studies.

So I think all of that's coming through, and that's quite good to understand the wide variety of different reasons as to why students may have had to pause their study. But there are some really good conversations going on between the students as well, and our great advisors as well, about how to, kind of, take that first step.

So you know, they were saying-- somebody was saying that actually-- that they're finding their website quite difficult. And there are some great resources that we've got that we've been able to add links to, to help students get tips about navigating around their module sites. And I think what's also come across is about reaching out for help.

The student support team are there, and also people have really said that their ALs have been great at, kind of, helping them through, making those first steps back into study, and giving them good advice. So

there's always support out there. And that's really come through in people's stories and what they're sharing in the chat.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. And it's not just about what you're studying. I mean, Alexa, as you know, Linda's 100% correct. If you want to succeed as a mature student with lots of responsibilities, you really have to be passionate about what you're studying. Because that just helps to keep you motivated and committed.

And also, there are comments about looking after well-being being really important. One of the things I think is so interesting about the Open University is that there is this pastoral element as well. So in addition to, sort of, learning the content, there are heaps of people, like we have here today in the chat, who can support people in their studies.

And for some people, it's very reassuring to know that. So let's go to Pierce, who is working in our student support team. Pierce, hello, where are you today? And what's the weather like with you? Oh-- Jamie, sorry!

I did this the other day, and I knew I'd do it. I keep calling Jamie, Pierce. I'm so sorry. How are you? What's the weather like?

JAMIE IRELAND: I'm not too bad. I did watch the football yesterday, and I was ecstatic with the result. I'm in Manchester. It's overcast, like it was with Pierce. But it is warm, which I'm very glad of, especially with lockdown almost ended. It's nice to be stuck indoors when it's at least warm.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. It makes such a difference, doesn't it? It really, really does. But I often-- when I used to study, it was always, I'd start in September, and then I'd have the summer period off. And I'd think, oh, it's going to be awesome! It's amazing. And then, it was only like six weeks or something, and then it often just tended to rain. But it does fill your heart with hope, doesn't it? So you must listen to these stories all the time from people. What-- I mean, tell us a little bit about the student support team, and some of the stuff that you might do to help students who are deferring. I mean, you know, like, Pierce had issues where he was talking to the student support team, and in fact, it was them who said, hey, listen, if you don't keep going, then you might not be able to keep going, because of the way that things are funded.

So I guess sometimes, you're having hard conversations. Sometimes, you having nice conversations. What can you share with us today?

JAMIE IRELAND: Yeah, it's definitely a mixed bag. It can be quite a hard job at times, but it is very, very rewarding. Just riffing off some of the things that both Pierce and Linda said-- there was some really good stuff.

So what really resonated with me was when Linda said, one of the feelings that she had was failure. One of my key, sort of, aspects in my job is helping students reframe that. I'm actually a student of engineering, so it really, sort of, comes into my repertoire to change that attitude to say, you know, don't see it as a negative. It's not a failure. It's something to learn from, and we can move forward from it. Don't dwell on it.

So I have a lot of students who I will talk to where they are deferring their study. It's a case of-- they're in a bad place sometimes, and it's about, sort of, getting them to see the light at the end of the tunnel sometimes, to say, look, we can stop this time. We'll come back with renewed energy.

That will work with the motivation, because they won't be feeling on the back foot, and it can be a really useful tool. And again, sort of, jumping on from that, that can lead into fitness for study as well. So you can see what might have been going wrong at that time.

So again, learning the lessons, it's, sort of-- was time an issue? Can we plan for that in the future? Was the area that you study-- and sometimes I've had conversations with students, and it's maybe their first module. They've been out of study for a while.

They've come to us. And the flexibility is definitely there, but you do still need some kind of rigidity. So stuff like having a desk to work at, or a dining table, or somewhere to spread out and really get stuck into study is a big thing.

And again, coming off both of what Pierce and Linda said-- it's about motivation, you know. You need to want to do what you're doing. And my role is very much to try and really make sure that you are enjoying it still, and that we can move on successfully with stuff.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So tell us at home, what made you think about returning to study in the first place? So Jamie, you've mentioned two things here. One is, I guess, the practicalities, and this notion that-- sometimes, I mean, times are really, really hard.

I've just been doing some of the exam boards and looking at some of the special circumstances from my students, which had me in tears yesterday. Some of the stuff people have been dealing with has been monumental. And sometimes, I guess we just need to, sort of, re-prioritise and say, actually, I need to pause.

But I know, I mean, when I was studying, I also had a moment when I had to pause my studies. And I kept thinking, oh, it's not an ideal time to start. I was thinking, what factors have changed? And what's still there?

But also, I think because life had gotten in the way, I, sort of, felt a bit nervous myself, thinking, well, something else might happen. Something else might come up, you know. It's never ideal. And I can imagine that for some people, waiting for that moment when it might look like the coast is clear could mean that the years can just, sort of, inadvertently go by. Do you find that?

JAMIE IRELAND: It can do. I think more often than not, we do have students come back sooner rather than later, because we do have certain incentives. So when you defer a module, if anyone here has done that before, you'll know that we have things like fee credits to try and encourage people to come back sooner rather than later.

We also have campaigns where we will actively contact people who have been away from study for a while, to talk about what plans they've got. Do they want to continue studying? Can we help them consider their options? And that comes into, as well, knowing the landscape.

So something else I'll probably come in to talk about a little bit more later is, if you've been out of study for a year or two, if you've already started especially, our qualifications can change. And it's also, sort of, just saying, this is what's on the table. Can we help get you back into things?

KAREN FOLEY: Because one of the things is the nice help, and then as Pierce said, the, sort of, threat. And I wonder if you could tell us about-- people are asking in our chat-- students who got this dreaded restricted status system. You know, because sometimes, you, sort of, get restricted in your studies, and you may not be able to-- what can you tell us about how to move forward and get back to maybe studying full-time with, like, 120 credits?

JAMIE IRELAND: So it's obviously going to depend on everybody's individual circumstances. And if you ever get into a situation, I would strongly recommend giving us a call at the student support team to talk things through. But the restricted status is something that I speak to a lot of people about, and the emails that we send automated don't help things unfortunately.

But it's not something to fear. It's actually quite a good thing, because again, when you're looking at it in the right way, the restricted status just means that you have to apply to continue studying. It's basically asking for permission, which-- again, wording's a bit tough. The process is that you speak to one of our educational advisors.

So they're a step above from me. And they're basically there to look at you as an individual. What are the things that are potentially holding you back? Are there any barriers that we can help with? Is there any support that we can put in place?

So a big one might be, you might suffer from a disability that you've never told us about before, but it is affecting your study. Can we help to mitigate that with our disability support? It might be that you just want to talk about some of the things that you are struggling with in terms of time, in terms of motivation. Can we help with that?

Like before, are you on the right degree? And after that conversation, it is purely there to stop you pouring money into something that isn't going to work necessarily. It's very much there to point you in the right direction, sometimes whether you know it or not.

But it is. It's always in your benefit, and it's not as bad as it seems. So obviously, any emails that you get-- or if anyone is telling you otherwise, just follow the process. It's there to help.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And we're going to hear from Pierce a bit later about how he dealt with that particular issue as well. Jamie, that's absolutely fantastic. People are also asking about mental health resources.

We have something called TogetherAll, which used to be called the Big White Wall. And there are lots of other resources. I think some of our colleagues from our student support team can maybe put some of those resources in the chat. Because the Open University does have access to lots of things.

So in addition to talking to somebody like Jamie about some of the ways in which you can perhaps manage your study, et cetera, there are lots of other things that are available there for people to look at. So we've heard Karen is doing an access module. I'm delighted, because I'm chair of Y032, which is one of our access modules.

And she says that they're a really great way to help return to study. And in fact, our access modules are specifically there to help people get in the rhythm of study, to upscale, et cetera. So perhaps if you are looking at returning to study, that may be something to look at also.

Natasha says she wants to make a career for herself after a few years of break dealing with family stuff, and is ready to start. She's scared but ready. And I think that's something that so many people will identify with, Natasha.

Vicki is going to return to study because the girls are in uni, and so she has a new phase in life. She's lots of motivation to study for herself, and that's wonderful, Vicki. Antoinette says her son and granddaughters moved out last year. So also, like Vicki, she can focus on completing last year's module for her Master's in Mental Health.

And Chloe has had to stop due to pregnancy and the side effects of that. But since the baby's being born, she's been dying to get back into studying. And again, I know so many of my students on my modules do have very, very young children and are juggling and balancing, but also are thriving and succeeding. And one of the things I often think that OU students really do is manage to keep going. Despite all of these challenges life throws in the way, you keep going, you keep putting one foot in front of the other. And no matter whether you need a break or you need some support in that process, it's all about keeping on that path. That's what makes a difference, I think, between success and failure. It's just keeping going with all of that.

So let's hear from Heidi. Heidi, you've had a very different story to Pierce. Heidi is another student. Heidi, where are you, and what's the weather like?

HEIDI DANIELS: Good morning. Yes, I'm in Cardiff, and the weather is lovely and sunny.

KAREN FOLEY: Ah, brilliant. Thank you. And tell us a little bit about your journey. You started studying and just, sort of, kept going, didn't you?

HEIDI DANIELS: Yes, that's right. I left school with very few qualifications, and went straight into work. And then, I was around about 40-- certainly in my early 40s-- and I thought, I think I might try and see if I can get myself some qualifications.

And I started just signing up for one module and looked at what I thought I enjoyed at school, and thought, yes, OK, I'll sign up for a Beginner's French module. And that's what I did. And I thoroughly enjoyed doing the module. Didn't put myself under any pressure.

I thought, when it's finished, if I do well, maybe I'll sign up for the next module. And that's what happened. And I did do well. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And after my second module, I was awarded the certificate in French, which for me was incredible. I was amazed that I could achieve that.

And then, student services advised me, by taking on another course, I could get the diploma in French, which I did. And then, after that, it was, well, you've got half a degree. Have a look at these options to combine with your French to get your BA honours degree.

So then, I started with the business studies and carried that on. So now, the very proud recipient of the business-- BA honours in French, with Business.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So a whole range of things there that really, sort of, suited your own interests. And I guess, for you-- well, many students now, I think partly because of the way that the fees and the funding work, means that you're often signing up for that end goal. I'm doing this, I'm doing that.

For you, it was almost a case of actually having those qualifications along the way. But I guess for some people, it may be a case of thinking about what those qualifications actually mean. For some students, achieving a certificate may be absolutely ample in terms of their aspirations, and that may be good enough. And just maybe completing a couple of modules that will, sort of, make that complete can be a real driving factor.

HEIDI DANIELS: Yeah, absolutely. It was for me. I didn't want to put myself under the pressure of signing up for six years or for signing up for a degree. I just thought, I'll see if I can do it. You know, I believe I have it in me. I'll see if I have it.

And the feeling of absolute pride when I got that initial certificate was incredible. And the buzz it gave me-- and I thought, [GASP] I can do this. And you know, I think similar to Pierce, I'm the first person in my family to ever get a degree.

And the immense feeling of pride, the overwhelming feeling of pride, when I put that gown and that hood on and, sort of, walked over to my family was just incredible. And that, for me, was the icing on the cake. And that's what's kept me going, really.

KAREN FOLEY: Mm. Absolutely. And I think it can be a real challenge for some people, especially if they're starting somewhat later in life. I mean, Pierce is a young spring chicken, but the people in the chat are, sort of, saying, they're starting in their 40s. It's the new 20s.

And you've, sort of, had two different experiences, I guess. One is being what we would call, I guess, typically an older student, but the other experience you've had is doing two quite different things. And for some students, they might feel like they can really gel with a cohort. I'm with the psychologists or the business students.

But for you, I mean, did you feel a sense of community and sort of-- how did you feel in connection with other people as you were progressing along your qualifications, both in terms of your age and also the nature of doing two quite different discipline areas?

HEIDI DANIELS: Yeah. I was quite surprised initially when I started the very first module, at how a sense of community was really well-created by the Open University with the virtual learning environment. At the time, we were also having monthly face-to-face tutorials in Cardiff with other students within our module. I made some fantastic friends in that very first module, and they're still very good friends of mine today. And I think people may feel, with the Open University, you may not get that sense of student life and camaraderie. And I would say that's absolutely untrue.

And I think initially, you have to be self-motivated to get started. But once you're started, your fellow students and your tutors and the student support teams become your motivators. Because you know, whenever you're feeling down, or you're not getting something, or you're not understanding it, somebody else will explain it to you in a different way.

And I would always say that if you're feeling that way, plenty of others will be feeling the same. And by voicing that, you'd be amazed, the support that comes back. And today, with the social media outlets that we have as well as what's internal within the Open University, the support network is immense.

And I'm always encouraged when I see other students say, oh, I'm waiting for my first TMA to come back, and I'm really excited, and I'm a bit nervous. And I always say, be proud. Be proud of whatever you've achieved, because you didn't have to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And this is one thing. I think I've been talking to everyone about this-- is that notion that sometimes, when you're in school-- I think, Pierce, you were saying this to me-- you have to do it. You have to do your GCSEs or whatever it is that you're doing, whereas with the Open University, you're choosing to do something.

And that, sort of, involves a whole range of free will and also requires the motivation that you need to continue. Vicki has raised a very interesting point, saying, I just really enjoyed studying with students of all different ages, because it broadens your perspective on life, and you learn from each other because of this.

And it's certainly been my experience. I mean, I think sometimes people-- I've heard anyway that some people can say, I feel too young, I feel too old, I feel to this, I feel to that. But actually, when I've been teaching-- I taught on a science module, and we had paramedics.

They knew so much about so many different things that I had no idea about. I mean, I, of course, knew the module that I was teaching. But the life experience meant that we all were able to share and grow

within that. And I think that's something that we should never underestimate, even when you're somebody who may feel like you're an outsider.

All of our life experiences offer these different insights and lenses and ways that we can learn about the world by, as Heidi says, talking to other students and gaining different perspectives on life. Colin says his body's almost 50, but his mind in his 20s, and they often have disagreements. Yes, I can relate to this, Colin. It's a constant challenge, isn't it? But you know, I'd go with your feeling.

But yeah, age can be a really different thing. And again, we've got a real range of ages on our panel today. Yeah. So let's return to Linda again, and think about this notion of choice.

So we've been talking about things. Heidi has chosen two different options. Linda, in your studies, you've also chosen very different things, as has Pierce. So can you tell us about the Open Qualification and some of the flexibility that students may have?

LINDA ROBSON: Yes, so the Open Qualification allows students to pick modules from across the University. So you would do 120 credits at level 1, 2, and 3, to make up your degree. And it allows you to create your own personalised degree.

So you know, we've got our named degree pathways, and they're really useful. Some students know exactly what they want to do. And the named degree pathway is really useful for limiting the choice for lots of people so that they know where they're going.

But sometimes, we're interested in a variety of different things, or sometimes, maybe it's the study intensity that drives it. For me, most of my degree is made up of 30 credit modules, because at the time, I only had time to study 30 credits at once. So that, kind of, helped me to navigate through my degree, because that was the intensity I was looking for.

So there's a range of different reasons why you might look at the Open degree and want to build your own particular pathway. Or it might be that you're on a named degree, and then you come to a module, and you think, I just really don't fancy that bit for some reason. And so you might decide to swap onto the open degree, and just substitute out one of the modules that you didn't fancy for some reason. So it just allows you that flexibility to really make it your own and pull together different strands of interest. And also that control of study intensity can be really important for students.

KAREN FOLEY: What are you studying, or what would you like to study? Let's take a quick trip to Mary. How's everyone doing?

MARY KEYS: Yeah, people are good. And you can really start to feel the motivation that people have got about returning to study as they're talking about the different areas that they're wanting to study in, and the different modules. And some people are really, sort of, putting on what Linda said about the 30 credit studies.

30 credit path sounds fantastic, because that's a good way to go, whereas others are wanting to go at a faster pace, which is great. So that's another reason why the Open University qualifications are great to provide students that flexibility about how fast or how slow they can go. But yeah, so people are coming through. So we've got Sarah.

She's studying physics, and she's hoping to finish her final two modules this year. And just lots of great stories about where students are-- so some are still at the very early stages, and some are picking their study up again later on in their studies, which is great, after having that break, and then finding that motivation to get back into it again.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Thank you, Mary. And for those of you who are thinking about studying after quite some time, we do these regular events here at Student Hub Live, and we have a whole host of things to get you up and running for module starts.

So there are the various skills workshops that we run in a slightly different interface, but we also do orientation and induction events. So if you are enjoying today's Programme, know that there's plenty more that's all lined up for you if you are going to begin your studies this October. So let's go back to Pierce, then, because we were talking a little bit earlier about how you, sort of, loved science at school, and then thought you were going to go and do the sciences.

And then, you, sort of, thought about what you were doing, Pierce, and you realised actually that you wanted to do something quite different. So tell us about your thought processes then, and how you found the right path for you.

PIERCE HOLLAND: Yeah, of course. So like I mentioned earlier, with science being just something I was good at, that's why I decided to initially study. I just thought, to be honest, for convenience, and because I thought that's where I wanted to be. At that time, I didn't actually know where I wanted my final career goal to be, so it just, kind of, fit well.

But as we were mentioning earlier on with Jamie, it was that restricted status that was slowly, sort of, peering its head around the corner after I deferred my second science year. So I was sitting in a Starbucks cafe in Nottingham just one afternoon, having a coffee, and I thought, right, I need to ring my student support team to get an idea of where I am and get an idea of where I could go.

And that's when they said to me, well, let's take a moment to have a think about where you would want to be, and try changing your module. Is this the right thing for you? Is this really where the end goal is in your mind? And to be honest, no, it wasn't.

So I took a bit of time to have a look on the website, find some other modules, other things that might spark my interest, and I ended up finding the Computing in IT pathway, spoke to one of the tutors in the student support team from that side, and I ended up changing my module. And it wasn't until I made that change, because it was something that I was interested in-- because I thought, well, it's either now or never.

I've made this decision to study. Why not do it for a reason of passion instead of a reason of necessity? I don't have to do this. So why not throw myself into something that I enjoy? And now, here I am.

KAREN FOLEY: And what's happened for you as a result of your studies? How has it changed your work situation?

PIERCE HOLLAND: Well, it has been a little up and down, shall we say. So when I first initially started with natural sciences when I was 18, I was working full-time-- sorry, I was working part-time at McDonald's when I was doing my A-levels. And my manager gave me an ultimatum. She said, well, you can either go to university, continue working part-time and go and do your degree even if it's not something that you're really interested in, or if you stay full-time, we'll make you a manager.

And as I said earlier, it was that pull of the money that made me think, actually, no, I'll stick with work and study at the OU part-time. But when I finally changed my module to something that I was passionate about, I started picking up different skills, whether that be talking to other people or contributing in tutorials, writing TMAs and gaining that sort of analytical stance, that analytical thought process that I'd never had before, the skills to be able to write correctly.

And ultimately, that's now changed my career pathway. And I now have my dream job with my local police force and intelligence, which I really couldn't be happier with. Even though I have not finished my degree, and even though I've not actually got my certificate to say I finished everything at the end of it, all of those skills that I've learned up to now and going into my fourth year have all pulled together to help me develop myself and do something that I love.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow. That is just awesome. So working from fast food to now being in a police environment is something amazing. Did your OU studies help towards that, and did it matter that you haven't yet finished your qualification?

PIERCE HOLLAND: I think they helped massively from a couple of aspects. As I mentioned a moment ago, it did give me the skills to talk correctly, analyse things correctly, and work in the most appropriate way for that environment, yes. But also, when I went for my interview, my managers then saw that as a real achievement.

I always was told, don't talk about your studies, because if you go into a work environment or go for a job interview, they might think, well, you can't put your 110% into work, because you're studying as well. But actually, it's the complete opposite. People see that you've got that motivation and that determination to not only give your 100% into work, but also try and develop yourself outside of your work environment. And they can see that you've got determination, that you've got motivation. Because as we've mentioned on this meeting today, it's all been a choice to study these modules. It's all been a choice to want to develop yourself. And employers see that as, I think, a real positive.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Everybody is nodding here, because I think everyone's a student, including me. But you know, we've got Heidi, Jamie, Pierce, and Linda, who are all studying. I'm also studying. I think so many people at the OU-- Mary, are you studying anything at the moment?

MARY KEYS: Not. But I will be returning to it one day. So the last module I completed was a maths module, which I was very proud of myself for getting through, because it was something about how I wanted to prove to myself I could still do it. And I did, so that was good.

So yeah, it's just now deciding on my next module. Because it's so much choice out there, it's just-- as students have said in the chat box, it's about finding that passion and really wanting to study something that I want to do, rather than something I have to do. So yes, that's quite a nice decision ahead of me, though, so it's good.

KAREN FOLEY: It's a wonderful decision, and there's so much there. There is so much new curriculum that is so exciting. So yeah, you've got a choice there. Well, I hope this Programme is helping you, Mary, today. And do tell us about the goals that you're working towards in the chat.

Brian says, he wants to have new skills so that he can be a job changer. So many people like Brian want to move into different jobs. Brian wants to move from civil service into the IT sector. And this is something, I think, with the cybersecurity.

These are really popular things. There's amazing new curriculum out there that's really relevant for people. I wonder if we might just invite everybody to, sort of, come into our panel and think about this notion about motivation and goals and changing things.

We've all had different sorts of experiences in terms of changing things. Linda, you changed a lot of the stuff that you were doing, in terms of where you started to where you ended up.

LINDA ROBSON: Yeah, so I started doing science modules on my Open Degree, and then I wandered off into law, and then I finished off with some business studies as well. So yeah, I did really just follow my interest. Each year, I looked through the prospectus and thought, well, I fancy that one, and off I went. Although one thing I would say to look out for is, when I got to doing the third-level modules, the choice obviously got smaller, because quite a lot of modules, I felt I wasn't adequately prepared for to take on. So when I got to that point, I did need to look at what I'd already studied before choosing my third-level modules.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And Pierce, you luckily started doing things that then could translate into your other qualifications. So that's the beauty, I guess, of some of these very broad overarching level 1 modules. Jamie, what's engineering like?

JAMIE IRELAND: Pft, difficult?

[LAUGHTER]

The maths has gotten a little bit crazy, but I'm keeping up with it as best I can. But it is. It comes down to that motivation, like everyone else has said before.

I was one of those kids where as everyone else was running to get on the rollercoaster, I was too busy watching it from the sidelines, fascinated by how it worked. So it just seemed natural for me to go into that direction.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And Heidi, we've heard from you also about how you've changed. How did you find the support in terms of making those decisions to add to your qualifications and get more there? Did you talk a lot to people about those choices or read about them? How did you make those choices to go into business then?

HEIDI DANIELS: I think initially, I took a look at the Open University website to see if I could work out what my options were, given that I had half a degree in a language, and what other subjects I could possibly put with that to build a BA degree. But I did speak to Student Services as well, and they made it very clear on the numbers of things that I could do, and whether or not there were any restrictions in terms of time scales-- when I needed to finish it by if I was taking on a particular one.

I know things are slightly different in terms of the policies in the various countries of the UK. And in Wales, it's different to how it is in England in terms of funding and what you can do. So Student Services made it very easy for me to understand what my options were.

And in the end, it was a bit of a no-brainer as well. Business is so widely respected within the academic world, but also within the world of work. And I found it really useful to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, that has been an absolutely fantastic session. I hope that you have all enjoyed it. I hope you're feeling a little bit more confident about your studies, but certainly that you know that there are lots of wonderful friendly people at the Open University who can help you to make the choice that's right for you.

So do keep in touch. Do keep communicating. And also know that we have lots of events like this to get you geared up for modules start. So check out our Student Hub Live website, and you can subscribe to our monthly newsletter, where we'll tell you all about the events that we've got lined up in store for you. Just give us your email on that.

And you can also tell us any feedback. Or if there are questions that you haven't had answered, or perhaps that you haven't asked but that have come to mind later, then email studenthub@open.ac.uk, and we'll triage those onto the right person. But as we said today, the very best people to speak to, who

can put you in touch with the most relevant areas, depending on what's right for you, are our student support team.

So do keep in touch with them through their email. And also, you can phone up at particular times of the day. Well, that's all we've got time for today. Thank you so much for engaging, and I hope to see you at another Student Hub Live event very soon. Bye for now.

JOHANN BLACKWOOD: My motivations for studying with the Open University are to gain a new qualification, for some self-improvement. That I could do something completely different, and that I can really actively follow a passion of mine. I am studying a psychology degree.

The decisions I've made so far about my career goals have been to look for work experience, opportunities for the future, and also to build relationships with people that are working in my field. On the one hand, it feels exciting. I'm working towards a career goal. I'm taking an active role in making things happen.

On the other hand, I'm quite nervous, too, because I'm having to do a lot of stuff by myself, which I've never had to do before. And it's been certainly a baptism of fire, in terms of research. I have health issues, and those health issues have impacted, in terms of being mobile and getting out and about, meeting people.

The next step that I'll be taking towards my career goals and ambitions is to attend any upcoming conferences. One piece of advice I'd give to other students is, understand the power of communication. Talking to other people can really help with your next steps. Build relationships with people in your area of interest, and also to get support around the things that you find difficult.

JANIS VASQUEZ: My motivation for studying at the Open University is my desire to get a Bachelor's Degree in Business and Management. And I'm hoping to get promoted and have a managerial position. And one of my dreams is to one day run my own business.

Given the opportunity to explore the possibility of applying for a job role that will put me in a position where I can develop, I can grow more professionally and personally. I have no bachelor's degree to offer when you want to apply for a managerial role. My plans, in terms of career goals, have not been affected so far.

I can actually probably say that there are two reasons. And one is, financial resources, and the supporting documents. To further explore my career goals and ambitions is to just push myself to graduate and get my degree.

So my one piece of advice is that it's never too late to study. Yes, it is challenging, but it's also fulfilling. So if you have a desire to transform yourself into something better, then you have to go for it.