

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. Well, this is the second of our spotlight sessions, and it's on the School of Education, Childhood, Youth, and Sports, or ECYS. With me to talk about this is Kate Breeze, who is Associate Head of ECYS, and also Nichola Connolly, who is a Primary Education Studies student who's just completed level 2. And Nichola is also an active member of the ECYS Student Voice and Wellbeing group.

So Nichola, let's start by asking you, what is the most important thing about being part of this group?

**NICHOLA
CONNOLLY:** It's just allows students to be empowered to get their voice out there across the university with, on matters that affect them in their everyday student life. And it allows us to empower students, that it's OK sometimes not to be OK. And obviously, that happens throughout the student journey.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's been really important for you to reduce stigma around mental health challenges and as you say, not to be OK. And you've mentioned this word "empowering" for people to have their voices heard. Has it been empowering for you as an individual, as a student, to be in a network like that?

**NICHOLA
CONNOLLY:** It has. To be able to share your experiences, know that you're not alone, there's a lot of students out there-- yeah, and it's given me resilience throughout my student journey. It's allowed me to build relationships, get the support that I need, know where to turn when I need help. So it has been a really big influence, being part of this group.

KAREN FOLEY: And I know that Sarah said that in terms of watching people develop, the pandemic sort of affected so many of us in really different ways. And it's been amazing to watch people grow and develop. Do you feel you've gained some confidence in terms of being in the group?

**NICHOLA
CONNOLLY:** I have gained so much confidence by being a student from-- because, yeah, I've been with the university now studying for three years, which has gone so quick. But yeah, being part of the group-- it has given me so much confidence. I feel that I can get my voice out there and help other students to get their voice out there as well and be heard.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, yeah, no, it's really, really important. And I think there's something about being heard that can really support our sense of being validated and I guess our well-being as well. Kate, can you fill us in on some of those links that you found around how being heard and enabling the student voice can support both the students' well-being who are involved with that but also representing students more generally?

KATE BREEZE: Yeah, there's lots of evidence that there's a very clear link between participation and having a voice and well-being and that being heard for an individual can make a tremendous difference to a sense of worth and value and, like you say, being validated. I think on a broader level, it's really important that we as the university understand both students-- very positive experience as being a student, but also the things that can create additional barriers or the challenges that our students face that we can provide further support on.

And so again, as a school, we decided to bring these two aspects of student voice and well-being together into one group, recognising that through listening carefully to the experiences of our students, we can provide a more relevant and accessible curriculum and also that we can develop support services for students through student support, through our career service, for instance, and through our tutors, our associate lecturers as well, and do all that we possibly can to build student resilience and well-being through listening to our students.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Now, Deborah is a LAL community buddy. There are different sorts of mentoring, buddying, sorts of pairing initiatives throughout the university, and she's involved with that. So she says, "Will that sort of thing be replicated?" And Donna Marie says she tends to struggle when she's alone, which isn't good. It's always good to talk to somebody. So there's this notion here of support and being heard and also very different experiences going on there, Kate.

KATE BREEZE: Yeah, we have different models of mentoring and buddying throughout the university. And yeah, in LAL, there is a specific model. We have some kind of student mentoring going on at postgraduate level in ECYS in this school, which works really, really well. And it's something we're exploring this year to look to see whether we could roll it out in some of our undergraduate programmes as well.

But I think one of the things we've been trying to work on with the Student Voice and Wellbeing group is to make that a really strong and positive experience for our student ambassadors in their work that they're doing together and the support that they give one another and the mentoring that they give one another and the mentoring they get through our staff's student voice champions as well, but then to share that experience and roll it out through the different student voice activities that we're building and developing.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So the connections, I guess, in terms of mental well-being and health-- I'm just sort of returning to that main line of inquiry-- is really around-- I guess we've spoken about confidence and being able to feel heard and be part of something that supports good mental health. But also, we've seen that there can be times when there can be challenges to mental health, be those diagnosed conditions or reactions to very real challenges happening around us. And so the student voice has been really important in terms of finding out how those experiences have affected things like how we teach, how we provide feedback to students. Kate, do you want to tell us a little bit about what sort of things you found from listening to students?

KATE BREEZE: Yes, I mean, this year has been a particular challenge, hasn't it, with the pandemic? It's been a huge challenge. And we know it's been a big challenge for our students in our school, students who work in schools, students who are carers, who have had children at home. And it's been really important that we've listened to that experience and that as a university, we've tried to adapt what we do and our assessment of students, et cetera, to try and break down as many barriers as we possibly can to keep students going and keep them engaged in their studies and succeeding in their studies.

At a school level, we've provided additional student support services. We've provided our associate lecturers with additional resources to share with their students. And our associate lecturers are absolutely brilliant in making themselves available, listening to students, trying to work with them to be flexible and adapt, and help all our students get through this year and succeed through the year. Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: And people succeed in different ways. Jessica says, "Music, et cetera, everything." I hope you enjoyed our session earlier, Jessica. Martin says, "Did I mention chocolate?" Well, that's a bit late in the day, Martin, to mention that right at the end of the session. And also, Kitty says, "the student support team are always here for you."

Oh yeah, Martin's popping up with some sensible advice, getting good sleep. A good sleep is very important, actually, especially during assignment weeks. And it really, really does. Beverly likes dancing, and Sarah has also asked if anyone's listening to some of the ECYS playlists which are made by students, which is music to study to, which I think is a lovely idea.

KATE BREEZE: Yeah, yeah. In fact, each of the pathways put out a little call to students to say what music do you like studying to, what music keeps you going, uplifts you? And yeah, these playlists have been put together, and they're available on the subject websites. They're brilliant.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And "Don't Stop Me Now" I imagine is one of them. So let's see. What have we got in terms of support for studying and well-being? So we asked everyone at home, do fill in our widgets if you haven't already, what do you do to support your health and well-being as you study? And also during challenging times, what mental health and well-being support services might you access? So you can let us know your thoughts to that in just a second if you haven't already.

So students have engaged with various activities, haven't they? Kate, maybe you can talk first, and then, Nichola, you can join in a little bit about what those have been and also what the experience has been like as a result of engaging with those. So what sort of stuff is some of the stuff you've done?

KATE BREEZE: Oh, there's a number of different activities, really, from the fun activities like coming up with the playlists. But for me-- and I think Nichola will probably pick up on this-- one of the things that we've introduced this year is students actually participating in staff appointments. And we've had two examples this year where we've been able to prepare students to be part of the whole interview process for new staff.

And I think that's particularly significant because it really is having a very strong voice and an influence on who teaches, who manages, the whole student experience. And I'd like to just pass that one over to Nichola, really, to tell us a little bit more about her experience about being part of that.

KAREN FOLEY: Nichola, how was it being part of the panel?

NICHOLA
CONNOLLY: It was fantastic, a brilliant opportunity. I was lucky enough to be part of two panels, so one with two other students, a student panel for staff tutors back in November. And then more recently, I was the student on the panel for the Head of School.

So it was fantastic. I was made very welcome. I felt that my contributions were valid, validated. They were very interested, all the staff members, to hear my opinions and who I thought I should be appointed, so it was a fantastic experience. And yeah, I'd welcome to do it again. I'll be more than--

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

NICHOLA
CONNOLLY: --happy to get involved again in that.

KAREN FOLEY: It sounds really rewarding, and it sounds like all these opportunities are kind of opening up for you and giving you different insights and experiences, but also really developing your own confidence and connections, I guess, with other people at the university.

NICHOLA
CONNOLLY: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I know so many members of staff now and other students. And yeah, getting involved has been life changing. It's allowed me to build my confidence, my resilience. I've met so many just fantastic both students and staff across the university. I'd recommend anybody to get involved.

KAREN FOLEY: It's a whole massive range. Brilliant.

NICHOLA Yeah.
CONNOLLY:

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you. And we've got some links in the chat as well. I'm sure Sarah will put those in there as will Eric as well. So if you'd like to find out more about ways you can get involved, we do have some links there for you also.

But let's take a look now in terms of tips for looking after well-being. We asked everyone at home what sorts of things they do to look after their well-being. And this is what you said-- so walking and me time coming up here as the key sorts of things. But other things that are important, the things like yoga, having coffee, relaxing with a video game, making the most of support, watching BBC Four, walking the dogs, medication, meditating-- you know, allotment. We talked about growing vegetables-- dancing and music. I like that. So being closer to nature-- lots of sort of really key things there.

And what are your tips Kate, and Nichola, that you would say are important from your research in general interaction in this area for students around their mental well-being and health? Kate.

KATE BREEZE: Shall I go first? Oh, yeah? OK. I think, first of all, is actually pay attention to your well-being. Listen to yourself and take time to just stop and take stock and think, how am I doing? I think that's really, really important. Secondly, I think it's important to talk to people, whether it's the closest people that you live with and care for you and the people who love you and you love-- it's really important that they understand how you are.

Beyond that, I think it's really important that if you are struggling that you ask for help. There's no disgrace in asking for help. And we're all going to be there at some point. We all struggle with our well-being at different times in our lives. And it really isn't a sign of weakness to say, I'm struggling with my well-being. It's actually a sign of strength when you can actually say, I know myself well enough to know that I'm struggling now. And I'd like someone to help and support me.

And there are lots of support mechanisms in the university. Your associate lecturers are a really good place to start. Not that they're going to counsel you, but at least they can help point you to different resources and also be flexible with you if you need it. And we have fantastic student support services. Every student has a link to the student support team. And use that if you need to. And again, you may talk to somebody straight away that can help. Or again, you'll be connected with somebody who can help. So never, ever, ever be afraid to ask for help.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. We've already heard from people today saying about how supportive the student support team have been for them. And now a multichoice question where we've asked the sorts of places where people are seeking support. The first and perhaps unsurprising result has been that it's really from friends and family. But secondly, it's from their tutor. So that key academic contact that people have in their studies is really providing a wealth of things.

Martin says, "This is such good advice, especially during assignment weeks." You know, walking away and taking a day out out may feel counterproductive. But actually, it really can work wonders. There's nothing worse than trying to think when you don't physically have the capacity to do so.

KATE BREEZE: Yeah, definitely. So definitely, I think that is really, really, really sound advice, that if you hit a bit of a wall, and you're tired, and it's not working for you, then give yourself permission to stand back. Take a walk. Go and do something completely different, and give yourself a break. Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So we've talked about some of the resources and sources of support that we know about, like tutors and student support teams, et cetera. But there's another really key one that a lot of students go to. And I think, Nichola, you've used this. It's called Togetherall, and used to be called the Big White Wall. Can you tell us a bit about it, for those who may not know about it, and also perhaps share some of the ways in which it's helped you?

NICHOLA So right at the start of lockdown, I was shielding, so I was really struggling and the last one in particular. So I--
CONNOLLY: and I had other health issues and things going on at the same time trying to get through my studies. So I turned to Togetherall because it gives you a way of-- it's available to all students. It's available 24/7.

And it's a way of just knowing that you're not alone, that there's other people out there that are going through exactly the same as yourself. So it helped me get a bit of perspective on where I was coming from. And it really helped to be able to talk to other students going through exactly the same as myself.

KAREN FOLEY: There's something really supportive, I think, about knowing that you're not the only one. Because very often, we can think that we're the only ones failing, or the only ones finding things challenging. And actually, we're not. You know, very often, life is difficult, and we're all finding ways around it. Were there things, Nichola, that people were able to share with you in terms of offering you different ways that you hadn't thought about beforehand?

NICHOLA Yes, so, I mean, I'd always use mindfulness and the five ways of well-being in the past. And I got out of the habit
CONNOLLY: of actually using that, so being able to actually be pointed back in that direction from other people's experience was valuable. And I've really embraced mindfulness again and the five ways to well-being. And yeah, it's really got me through.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. No, it's been really good and I think something that many people at home have found as well. Eric, how is everyone in the chat today? I think there's a lot going on. But it's also been quite hectic and full on. So how are we all doing at home?

ERIC ADDAE- Yeah, it's been full on in this last session in terms of exchanges amongst us, among the chat. So colleagues are
KYEREMEH: dropping in links to how students can get involved in various ways but also exchanging tips on how to take care of ourselves, really, which is always very good.

But I thought I'll pick up a few things to cheer us all up before we go, before we sign up. So Beverly says, "This session today has been the best ever. Fantastic. Thank you, everyone." Donna Marie says, "Thank you all for this session. It has exceeded my expectations of what today was going to be. Absolutely enjoyed every bit of it."

So just to end with that to thank Karen and everybody behind the scenes that makes these happen and all of you who've taken the time to join us today. I think our students are really chuffed. They've enjoyed every session. And thank you, and we hope that when we call on you again to come and join us, you will definitely come. Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you, Eric. No, that's wonderful. And it's lovely to see so many comments there. And I was sharing advice as well about how students can get involved. Kate, I wonder, this particular group, if you could sort of talk about how students could get involved if they want to be included in the Student Voice and Wellbeing group.

KATE BREEZE: Yeah, there are links on the student home through the subject websites on how to get involved in the Student Voice and Well-being group in ECYS. But if you can't find that, ask your tutor, OK? Or put something on your module forum. They'll help you find a way in there. But yeah, there are links on the subject pathways.

We put out a call this last year for students to put their names forward. And we had 13 students come forward who are now student ambassadors on our Student Voice and Well-being group, which is so exciting, and it's brilliant. And each of those students brings something unique and different to the group.

And so if you're interested, give it a go, get in touch, and see what ways you could get involved either as a member of the group or in a member, or part of some scholarship or an activity or whatever. But put yourself forward, because we want to hear from students with lots of different experiences, not just one or two students. So yeah, look out for all those opportunities.

KAREN FOLEY: That's one. And there are different leads within each of the discipline areas as well. So for sport and fitness, it's Jess Pinchbeck. Childhood and Youth, it's Amber, who we heard from today before. Post-Graduate is Alison Fox. Childhood Studies, Natalie Canning, who we spoke to earlier, and Primary Education is Fiona Henry. But as Kate says, you can ask your tutor if you don't know better. Do give that something to think about in terms of considerations.

So we've got a couple of final widgets-- did you enjoy this? And would you come to another event again? So do fill those widgets in. And we've also got our final words here. And so thank you so much, Nichola and Kate, for joining us for that session. It's been really interesting--

KATE BREEZE: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: --and really wonderful to see the value that this contribution has had not only to the university but also, Nichola, to your life and your confidence and your ability to connect to other people.

So what a session, hey? We've had a really brilliant day, and it has been so lovely, as always, spending time with all of you. I've really enjoyed the discussion as I know has Eric and Korina in the chat as well. Eric and Korina have worked tirelessly to put this programme together with several other colleagues.

And I think we've pulled off a really, really great showcase of some of the amazing things that are happening in well-being and education and languages and sport. And really showcasing how these things can have a real impact on our lives, from getting around, moving and doing a bit of dancing, to other things like sort of being reflective about how we deal with children and some of the complexities that they have, how language can be so rich, and how we can all get involved, even if it is just doing something short like an OpenLearn course, et cetera.

So there have been so many interesting things that we've been able to bring to the table here today. I hope you've enjoyed our discussion. If you haven't already filled in our little survey, please do. And if you have any suggestions for things that you think we should be featuring on our programmes, do let us know. That's studenthub@open.ac.uk.

As I've mentioned, we have a newsletter. So we'll let you know about events. We have a whole range of things planned throughout the academic year. We often have-- actually, it probably feels for me like something on every week at the moment. So we do have lots and lots of sessions.

Next week, we're going to do something around motivation and studying. So we're going to look at students who perhaps haven't studied for a wee while. But also, for instance, if you're having a summer break, some of the things that you might want to do if you're going to be starting again in September, which at the moment feels like a long way away, but probably isn't going to be in a couple of weeks' time.

So do join us for that session and also check out the other ones that we've got on our Student Hub Live website. Thank you so much, everyone, for being involved. You've all been absolutely wonderful. And thank you at home for logging in. And I hope that you've found today's session really rewarding, enjoyable, and uplifting. Bye for now, and see you at another event soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]