

FASS Freshers Event 2022 - 27 Sep 2022 - Where to look for support should you need it

ISABELLA HENMAN: Well, welcome back, everybody. Hopefully you found that video useful. I've got three new guests with me in this session. I've got Ieman. I've got Bláithín. And I've got Njabulo.

Now, I was going to be going in a particular order. But I'm actually going to change this a little bit because we've had a question come in about support for international students. So I'm actually going to come to you, Njabulo, because we haven't mentioned much about it. We were talking about sensitive topics. And we were talking about some people might have different needs.

Now, we've had a student from India ask us about what support is actually available for them in India. So Njabulo, you're part of the student support team. Could you tell us a little bit about that if that's OK?

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah. So did you want me to start on the generic student support or just specifically--

ISABELLA HENMAN: Specifically for international students for this question, if that's OK.

NJABULO MOYO: Yeah, that's fine. Thank you. Thank you, Isabella. So as long as you are an Open University student, you should be able to access all help that is available via your student home page for every Open University student, whether you are UK or you are international. That help is available for everyone there. But what you might want to do individually, if you've got a specific question, an international student in India, what you might want to do then is speak to us in the student support team. What we might want to do is get an understanding of what the situation is, of what the difficulty is before we are able to recommend what the next steps are.

It could be what is available via student home page may not be sufficient for you. In that case, then it will be recommending what other services are available to you that you may be able to access locally, in terms of where you are.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Lovely, Njabulo. Thank you for that. Sorry for springing it on you in a slightly different order than planned, but we always like to be responsive to our students.

So just for those of you who might be just joining us, we're in a slightly different system today. So you can still see us. But where we've got the widgets, and we've got the questions for you, they're not underneath the video like they normally are. But you'll see them in the tab on the right-hand side next to the chat. So you see there's a new widget there in the session two tab because we're now in session two, that have you visited the being an OU student?

So that's a particular course that one of my colleagues Rob was involved with. And it's about a lot of basic information about starting off with being an OU student. And we'll have other widgets there later. I'll try and remind you.

So if I go back to my order, so I've got Ieman. I've got Bláithín. And Njabulo, who you've already seen. So Ieman, you are a Module Team Chair. And often, many of our students they might now have had their allocated tutor. But what we want to talk about is once the modules start, we often have these big welcome forums, don't we? So many of our students have probably been seeing the welcome forum.

So can you tell us a little bit more about how they work and what they're trying to do for our students?

IEMAN HASSAN: Yes, absolutely. Yes, so I'm a Co-Chair on DD102, who I know some people have put on that previously on the word cloud. So the welcome forum really is that big, initial first base for students

to engage and find out a little bit more about their study on that particular module, to read some of the threads, they can ask questions of the module chairs, and they can just find out a little bit more. They can also engage with students in their own areas and just really just find out everything in the first few weeks of the module.

Then, once the welcome forums close, as they get allocated to their tutors, they will have access to cluster forums and tutor forums. So they're the next steps. So probably most students by now have already had access to those other two main forums.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Thank you, so it sounds possibly some of our students might be thinking that sounds a little bit complicated. Can you explain why we actually have different forums? Why we have the module ones? Why we have the cluster ones? And why we have the tutor group ones?

IEMAN HASSAN: Yeah, absolutely. So they serve different purposes. So for example, for a module-wide forum, very often that's something which perhaps the module team put on, and it's a module-wide discussion. So for example, on DD102, we would have members of the module team who have written some of the material who would engage students and present some work that they're doing that's related to the module, material, and the content.

In terms of cluster forums, very often students are put together in clusters. So that is groups of tutors and students. They're students all together in a space. So there could be a number of different tutors. And that's a cluster forum. So anything posted on that cluster forum will be something that group of tutors are engaging with their students on.

And then, there's a smaller space, which is just a tutor forum. So that's just for your own tutor and the students in that tutor group. So that's a smaller version. And each module might have a slightly different way of engaging that. There may be some formal tutorials in those different spaces, the cluster or the tutor. Or there may be informal opportunities to engage, as well, in those spaces.

So it depends on the module, and obviously tutors will make sure that students are aware of how they're using those different forum spaces.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. That's really helpful. Thank you, because I know sometimes people go, I don't know which one I need to look at. But they're there for different purposes. Think of them I guess if you were going into a physical room somewhere. You might go into a room for one session. You might go into a different room if it's a bigger group and that type of thing.

And I know from my own experience as a tutor that don't worry if you can't see all of the different forums at the moment. I know that with some of my modules, the tutor group forum opens when the module opens. So it might not open until Saturday the 1st, or Saturday the 8th, depending on when that is. But often these big welcome forums that, Ieman, you were mentioning, they've been open for a couple of weeks yet haven't they. So That's what--

IEMAN HASSAN: Yes, and they also stay-- sorry. Yes, they also stay open for a little bit after the module starts. So you're not going to be left in limbo between forums. Sorry to cut you there.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Thank you. No problem. And I just wanted to say, Njabulo, Mobita is very thankful because you gave her the answer that she needed earlier or that they needed. Sorry I'm not sure whether that was a him or her. But thank you. Thank you, Njabulo, for that.

And apparently, 60% of our visitors have looked at the being an OU student course so far. 40 haven't. It's not essential, but actually, it's really useful because it gives you lots of tips, particularly if you're a fresher,

and you're starting out. It gives you lots of things, including details about student discounts and all sorts of things like that.

We've had a question about things like joining WhatsApp groups. Now, Ieman, can you tell us a little bit about social media groups? Are they something that are specifically the module organised, or is it a little bit different?

IEMAN HASSAN: It's a little bit different. I mean, obviously, students if they want to individually. If they have access to social media, and they can engage students there. I think the only thing that we would say, and certainly on our module we put up a little bit of information about that. And some of the computing help desk resources, and some of our policies around using social media, and how to engage in that. And that you're still in a space with students. And it goes a little bit back sometimes to the topic that was spoken before about sensitivity, and everybody's coming from different places.

So we just-- we try to encourage students to be cautious and to not-- only share what they feel comfortable with sharing. But the module spaces are where you have that access to tutors. And sometimes, you can find that people may say, oh, you have a question, and you get given an answer. But it may not always be the right answer. And not that people are-- people may be trying to help and support. But sometimes, it's always good to double check with your tutors in your tutor spaces. So I think just use it as support, but be cautious.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Fantastic. Thank you. That's really helpful. I think I would probably echo that because I know it can be really useful. But some students might find, and I've had students say to me before, I'm studying with The Open University at distance because actually, I find it a bit challenging to deal with other people. And I prefer to manage myself. And that's absolutely fine. We don't-- there may be some parts of your module where you do need to interact with other students. It will be clear. But it's always a good idea to have a chat with your tutor.

So as if by magic, I'm going to come to Bláithín now, who is one of the tutors within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. So Bláithín, like me, you've probably recently got some of your tutor groups, and you've had your allocations. So as a tutor, what do you do? How do you introduce yourself to your students?

BLAITHIN HURLEY: Well, every student or every tutor has their own method. But what I usually do is I just send a very general welcome and hello email to all my students in the first week or so, just so that they know who I am. They know where I am, and they have a contact email immediately that they can contact me on if they want to. And I sent that a few days ago. And already some of my students have started to come back to me and are introducing themselves, and telling me their backstories, and where they want their degree to go next, and what their interests are.

And it's just been amazing for me because I teach A111. So I teach that course. That's that very wide course that Richard was talking about earlier and where I have the six subject areas. I have two areas of my own, which are art history and music. So I was delighted to see those showing very well on the word cloud. But it doesn't mean to say that I don't know anything, or I can't help students with all the others. We cover, as I said, six subject areas. So it's lovely at this stage to just start to get to know students through an email is the easiest way just at the very beginning. And people can tell me about themselves, and ask me questions about myself, and about the module in preparation. And then, next week once the module is up and running, we'll be prepping for the first-drop in session. So that would be the next thing happening for me and my students.

So next week, we will have a drop-in session. And that's an informal session where we get to see each other, potentially, if people are happy to turn on their cameras and speak, if they wish. They don't have to. It's up to them if they would like to. And we get to meet one another and talk about again, about what it is we're going to do. And it's also an informal way for me to start to introduce people to the modules and to what we're going to be studying in the coming year. And again, to answer any questions. And just to let people see that I am a real human being.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Being a real human being is quite important, isn't it? Yes.

BLAITHIN HURLEY: Yes, very important.

ISABELLA HENMAN: It's a quite a useful thing because obviously, Bláithín is a tutor. I'm a tutor, as well. We do do things in different ways, as we mentioned. Now, you'll see we've put a ticker question up saying, what was my wording? What are you expecting from your tutor? With some ideas. So Bláithín has given you some ideas and some information about what she does. So drop in, not all tutors will do drop ins. So please don't feel that you've been disadvantaged. It's just something Bláithín's found particularly useful.

And we've also got another question for you, another widget question, which you'll find in the session two tab, is what areas of support have you looked at? Because obviously, we've mentioned the module-wide tutorial-- the module-wide forums. See, it's so easy to get the wrong words, honestly, the module-wide forums. We've mentioned cluster forums. We've mentioned tutor group forums. We've mentioned tutors. And there's lots of different support available. So it's actually quite interesting for us to know. So Bláithín, one of the other questions is in terms of your role for students, what do you see your main role is for your students, your allocated students? You've mentioned a number of things you do. What do you feel is your role?

BLAITHIN HURLEY: I feel my main role is to be their first point of contact and to be the place to go to help guide them through their studies in the coming year. So if they have any questions, and even if they don't have questions, but if they're just preparing for an assignment, or they are unsure why it is they studied one topic, and now they seem to be moving on to something else and trying to understand the link between the two.

Now, usually, the way the course is designed, as you get to the end of the year, you suddenly see that, yes, as Richard so well said earlier, all of these different areas speak to each other. And they certainly do. And I try to explain that at the beginning of the year. But I think it isn't until you start working through the year that you actually see, oh, yeah, by the time you get to assignment four, what I learned for assignment one is working in tandem with this.

And so I do see as a tutor it's a way of just guiding students, helping them out if they need help, some students need more help than others in different areas, and just being there. And like I said, being the first point of contact. And if there's something that I feel is outside of my area of expertise, maybe it's something that student support would be better for, and then, I will guide them to that direction or somewhere else depending on the question they have, and depending what I in tandem with the student think is the best course of action for them.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Thank you. That's really helpful. So Simon has said, the tutor is a sounding board for ideas. Being an adult learner, I find bouncing ideas around to be very helpful. Maureen says, my tutor is there to support me tackle the challenges of the module. And I think that's that linking together the bit

about explaining how things work. And George has said, someone to provide feedback on assignments. Yeah, that's definitely important.

And I know I was talking to one of my access students yesterday who's part way through the module because she started in May. And she said when she looks back, she can see how things are changed. And we talk about this study journey. And she said when she looks back now, she's so much more effective now than she was to begin with because she has built up, and she has been doing things along the way.

Now, thank you, Bláithín. That was really useful. What I want to do is I want to come back to Njabulo now because Bláithín actually mentioned the student support team. Now, I know we threw you in the deep end earlier to ask a very specific question. But many of our students might be saying, we don't actually know what the student support team is. So could you actually explain a little bit about what they are and what your role is?

NJABULO MOYO: So I think a good starting point would be to mention that most of you are going to be new to Open University or going to be new to what you are studying. And we welcome you. But one of the key things there is-- yes, you have become students. But life won't stop happening. So life will continue. All the other things that may impact your studies will continue to happen there.

So as far as we're concerned in the student support team, we are there. What we do is work where you have got a question, or you've got a question, and you don't know where to direct that question. We are the people who would be your first point of contact. Most of the time we've got answers to students' questions. But where we don't have answers, we are able to find those answers to those questions there. So some of the things that we are able to help our students with, for example, one of the things that we talk to students is students might say, well, I studied on one degree. But I'm not sure whether this is the right path for me. I want to change. What are my options? You would come to the student support team, and you would talk to us about that.

So some students might say, well, when I started my studies, this was a situation about my health. But now my health has deteriorated. What are my options? I started at full time intensity studying two modules at the same time, but I perhaps now think might not necessarily have been a good idea. What are my options in terms of changing that?

So we'll guide you in terms of what the policies are related to finding later change of your options. And also, what your options are in terms of wanting to change.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Thank you. So it sounds like you're the very practical support. So people like Bláithín is the academic information about the studying, and you are the practical support. Now, we did ask the word cloud about what areas of support you looked at so far. So apparently, that's ready. So let's have a look.

Oh, so welcome forums. There you go, Ieman. That's coming up, which is good. Student applaud. Yay! We're getting study skills. Oh, the library, we love the library. We talked with them in one of our sessions last week. What else? OpenLearn, oh OpenLearn's lovely. That's a sister site of free courses. What else? Academic English, yes. Oh, look, there you go. Student support team, there you are at the bottom there, Njabulo. Not that they're saying that you need to be at the bottom. It's just where I noticed it. And family, oh, that's good. The support of the family, that was a useful thing because actually, we mentioned earlier, didn't we, about talking to family and having different aspects of support. And that's really, really useful. And yeah, we're very proud that SHL, we've got a mention on the word cloud. Yay!

So thank you, Ieman. Thank you, Bláithín, and Njabulo. So Damon, I wanted to come back to you now. What kind of things have people been saying in the chat? And I know some things have been being fed through. But has there been anything else? What have people been chatting about?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, I mean, people are saying primarily about the support that they've got. Some people have found it incredibly useful. One comment was that they find that it's the tutors that make the OU experience. So having a good tutor, it really makes a huge difference. They can be sounding boards and whatever.

So yeah, and generally, people are shying away from the WhatsApp, I think. They're already been into the forums. Lots of people have had contact with their tutors. Some are still waiting. But obviously, that depends on the individual module.

So generally, people are really pleased and really pleased that the support is there. And those that have used it have found it really useful.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. That's really nice to know. So just so some people know, we've mentioned about tutor allocations. So many tutors and groups were allocated last week. But if you are on Access, so for the access or open modules, that might have only happened yesterday. So I know on my Access and my open modules, I only got the allocations overnight. So I haven't actually contacted any of my students yet.

And some people, if you might have registered late, it might be a little bit-- might happen a bit later. Don't worry about it. It's not that you've been forgotten about. I know everybody is all so keen to get started. And they want to get in touch with their tutor, and especially when they hear about Bláithín having drop ins and stuff. They're like, no, I want to get going. I want to get going. But don't worry. You're not missing out on anything.

So thank you, Ieman. Thank you, Bláithín And thank you, Njabulo, for your really helpful information.

I'll be coming back after the next video with Haley, Anthony, Philip, and Katie, where we'll be talking about the different nations within the University. So the next video you've got coming up next is how flexible thinking can help you to get ahead. And then, I'll be back with you shortly.

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