

Question Time with the Vice Chancellor

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to "the student hub live". Well, if you're watching in real time it's the 30th of September. It's 5:40 PM. I'm Karen Foley. And I'm joined by Peter Horrocks. We have our Vice Chancellor's question time. And you've been sending loads of questions.

We've written them all down. And we've put them in this bowl. And we're going to put them to Peter Horrocks. But if you haven't had a question there, and if we aren't answering something that you'd like to know, then you can let us know on the chats. So there are two ways to engage with this event. If you're new, I'm going to tell you about this.

There's a live and interactive button, where you can get an OUCU an OU computer username, which is really quick and easy to get. And then you can see the chat as it's happening, and engage with our interactive widgets. Or there's the Watch Only button where you'll just see the video stream. So they'll be a lot of chat going on that you can see and here about. So if you are in that button, and you want to choose the Live and Interactive, just got back to the website, and come and join us there.

Well, thank you for joining me today. This is the same time you've been on "student hub live," isn't it? And how things have changed.

PETER HORROCKS: Yeah, it's had a nice lick of paint, bit of carpet. And it's looking fantastic.

KAREN FOLEY: Indeed. And lots going on in our social media desk. So let's going to HJ and Helen and see what's been happening there.

HELEN: Well, in a stunning break from tradition, we're talking about food in the chat. We're basically talking about what we're having for dinner. So Devin's having omelettes. Sharon's having courgettes and cubed potatoes on top of pasta. And Adita's working on vegetarian beet root burgers. So I'm hungry now.

But also it's building a sense of community in the chat. People are talking to each other about their study, about everything really. And Elan had a lovely comment. She says, 'I feel as if I'm a proper student now', which is exactly what we're hoping for really.

HJ: So lovely seeing that-- and all these events, everyone likes to connect with each other. And we're using social media, such as Twitter, and people are following each other and sharing their stories about the day. It's been absolutely fantastic. But our favorite bit is everyone's sending in their lovely selfies for our selfie board. And we've had lots of selfies come in during the break.

And we've put them up. We checked our inbox while we were on our break. And Phil sent his this study area. And Lisa, who's studying DD102, she popped around as well. Devin sent in his study space.

We like study spaces, although I need to see a messy study space because I feel I'm on my own here. And we've also got lots of study buddies. So Matt sent in his study buddy, who doesn't look very engaged from the picture. He's got his cat there. He looks like he's about to fall asleep, which I don't blame him.

And Daisy's sent in a picture. And she's just listening. And she's with her son as well. So we've got lots of selfies, lots of people doing lots of different things. Yeah, so it's all looking good. Remember to send them in.

HELEN: Yeah, do send them in. Send them to studenthub@open.ac.uk. Or tweet them to us. And the hashtag to use is #studenthublive15.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful, well thank you very much. And do keep sending those in. We do like seeing our community develop. OK, so we've got lots of questions. Shall we start with one, Peter, and see how we get on? There's lots to get through.

OK, we keep hearing the term 'students first'. What does this mean? Where did the phrase come from? And what is the plan to put students first? Good question.

PETER HORROCKS: I think the university has always-- of course it's cared for its students. But it's about the extra responsibilities that there are because of the way the university is now funded. In England in particular, the fact that students take out significant loans means that responsibility that we need to show towards students is even greater than it's ever been.

And so it's really something which is sort of within the university. It's within the university's staff. I hope that students with the Open University have always felt their interests have been put first. But within the university, we need to accentuate that even further. And there's a whole range of things that we're examining to improve our services to students and to make sure that we live up to that statement.

KAREN FOLEY: It's interesting, we were talking to John Butcher earlier today, which you can watch on catch up if you missed. And we were talking about whether people identify with the term student with being in OU. And he said that a lot of people didn't. But our audience actually did say that they identified with the word student, which was quite nice. And I guess that's feeling important and prioritised, isn't it?

PETER HORROCKS: Yes, and that's interesting. Different students obviously have different experience and different expectations of the university. But we are university. And defining the people who are learning with us as students, I think, is the right way of thinking about it. Whether the individual learners see it in quite that way, I think that matters less. It's really about that service to students that I want to make sure the university is putting at the heart.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, excellent, thank you for that. Let's get another question out of our box. We've had a lot of discussion on social media today about study snacks and rewards. Yes, we have. What is your favourite reward when you're studying?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, I've only just started. But I'm a biscuit person, and probably digestives. That would be the thing that would keep me going.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, brilliant, so what sort of biscuits do you like? Our readers have really enjoyed hobnobs.

PETER HORROCKS: I would go for hobnobs, if there were hobnobs in the house. Trouble is, they often disappear quite quickly, of course. But any biscuit, but particularly McVities digestives, good old-fashioned McVities

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, thank you. OK, this is from Laura. What can students look forward to over the next few years?

PETER HORROCKS: Oh, gosh, that's interesting.

KAREN FOLEY: What are your plans?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, I think the way that students will learn will change. There are new techniques. There are new ways that we will be able to support students. There's ways in which we'll be able to help students more effectively.

We want to make our learning more personalised. That's both through the support that users can give, but also the way that the materials are delivered. So I think that as we develop our technology in the years to come-- and I'm not saying this is something that's immediately going to happen.

The ability for your learning to adapt to your needs, and to respond to you-- if you think about the way that a Netflix does, if you're someone who uses those online video services, or you think about the way that Amazon tells you about things that it thinks that you might be interested in, how can we bring those sorts of techniques to a learning environment so that, for instance, we know better whether you're understanding something or not? If you're going a little bit slowly with a particular part of a course, is there extra material that we can offer you?

Equally, if you're going fast and you're learning effectively, maybe you want to speed up. So that's about how the printed materials, the books, and digital can work together, and how digital can be more effective. So I would say that that's going to be an important thing from a student point of view.

I'm also interested in the way that we can bring the different skills of the university together. Obviously, some students just want to study a particular subject. But we know that people are interested in a range of skills-- not just the subject-specific ones, but social skills, skills in understanding data, the ability to be able to write effectively, the ability to be able to communicate. So one of the things I'm interested in is how do we take knowledge from different parts of the university and bring it together so it's meeting a broader range student requirements?

KAREN FOLEY: Now, we've got lots of people at home watching this. This is the perfect time to ask questions. Kevin asked one earlier.

And I wondered, what do you really want to know from students? You talk about listening to students, and finding out how they can engage with some of the materials we produce, how you can make those better, et cetera. Is there anything you'd like to ask people at home right

now to find out about what they like most about their studies, oh how they're engaging with things, or if they've got any bright ideas? And also, it might be worth telling them about some of the ways maybe we are listening to students at the Open University, some of the ways that we're including students within that sort of design process of some of the modules and materials that we're developing. Is there anything you want to know?

PETER HORROCKS: So I think in the most straightforward terms, what did students want from the university? And are we delivering it? So what do people start with? What's their motivations?

How, as they are studying with us, does that change? And are we giving them what they're looking for? Are we fundamentally serving their needs?

In terms of how we're doing that, and how we're trying to understand what students are looking for, apart from obviously the conversation that we're having here, we've put a lot of effort into surveys of students. So we ask questions. Some of that will be phoning people. Some of it will be online surveys, those sorts of things. And we do a lot of that.

We're increasingly able to know how students are doing without even asking them by using some of the technologies to understand how people are progressing, for instance. And then the Students Association is absolutely vital. The Students Association's contribution to shaping materials, and to shaping how we teach, and how we support our students, is vital.

And that's becoming more systematic. We're thinking about how we support the Students Association to be able to do that, because the number of questions we ask of students and their representatives is getting greater. And so we're working with the Students Association about how they can distill the evidence and information from students, and then feed that through to the university either at the senior levels, or more specifically in relation to particular courses so that those courses can be improved for the future.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful, well Kathlyn says that she feels very supported. When she wants to tell you that specifically.

PETER HORROCKS: Very nice to know.

KAREN FOLEY: Let us know how you're experiencing the Open University. I'd love to see some of your comments in the chats about how you're finding things, and what you enjoy most. And maybe if you've got any ideas about other things that we could improve, that would be good to hear too. Time for another question. This is a long one, very relevant though.

OK, OUSA receive a massive amount of money. However, a lot of this appears to be spent on administration. And many students in the region see very little of it. In the current climate of university cost cutting, is OUSA still good value for money?

PETER HORROCKS: Interesting question-- really, really good question. I wasn't aware of that perception. I mean, clearly, when you say administration, I suspect quite a lot of it is about the costs of bringing people together. So, of course, our students are from all over the UK. A lot of the decisions and the input needs to happen here at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes.

And so I think quite a lot of that cost goes into the students being able to travel. Students are not compensated. They're not paid directly. We meet their expenses. And there's a small staff that support the Students Association who are doing it on a voluntary basis.

As I said, a lot of it is about making sure the regional reps can come to Milton Keynes. I'd like to know more. Whoever the questioner was can feel free to email me directly. And if there's an issue about the balance between how much is spent at the centre and the support within communities and regions, I'm very happy to address that.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, so let us know if any of those questions are coming up on the chat, or if you're watching, and you'd sent this question in, and you'd like to know a bit more. It's funny. I was at an event the other day. And I was talking to a lot of peoples at brick universities, all about how they're having student engagement, and what their Student Association is doing.

And it struck me that we've got such a big challenge here because all of our students aren't necessarily connecting with us. And, yes, a lot of them want to be involved in events like this with the Open University Students Association, et cetera. And that it's just such a different entity from traditional students associations, where you've got people working directly in a faculty helping on modules, and doing this that and the other. So it is quite different in that sort of context in the HE sector, isn't it?

PETER HORROCKS: There are clearly practical challenges around that. And distance makes it harder to have some of those inputs. I think what we do have is the ability through the fantastic systems and the feedback systems that the OU has, the intensity of the relationship with the tutor, with the AL, and our ability to be able to study that, and to get the information.

So in a face to face university, there may be lots of people bumping into each other, and meeting in the bar, and those kinds of things. But, actually, it's quite hard to do that, and to distill the knowledge from that, on a systematic basis. So I think the OU has got the disadvantage of distance. But it's got the great advantage of its fantastic systems, and the way that we feedback, and we know how students are progressing.

And that enables us to be able to improve our offers to the students. That's what I think we should be doing. But if we're not doing it as well as I'm saying is happening, love to know from everyone about where they think it could be improved.

KAREN FOLEY: Do you think sometimes people think, oh, I'd love to say something to Peter. I'd love to put this forward. But they don't necessarily know how to do that. Do you get that sense the sometimes with the distance comes that sort of isolation that people maybe feel that they can't approach you or the OU?

PETER HORROCKS: I don't know. I mean, that's something which the students who are watching and listening can tell us. I hope I am accessible. I use Twitter, as you know. And I respond to that.

All individual students who have raised things with me, I've make sure even if I can't answer it directly myself, that that's looked into. And I think that's really important. If you're using social, you can't just be doing it in a one way form. But if there's more that we can do, if

people feel that the university is unapproachable, that's something that I would like to address.

I think the primary way where we want people to be able to get things sorted out is with their tutor, is with student services, with student support. And those are the people who are closest to the problems. And most of the issues that people have are, obviously, personal ones. They're quite particular.

And so I understand if not everyone's going to send an email, or a tweet to a professor, or head of department, or a vice chancellor. But it's very important that those people are open, and that they're available, and they're offering a friendly face to students.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, I know there's lots of question on the social media desk. So can I take some from you? And we'll then return to our lovely fish bowl.

HELEN: Yeah, there's a fantastic question from Joshua here. He says, can I ask a question about more career support for people who come from the military or NHS? How can the OU participate more with student learners from these backgrounds?

PETER HORROCKS: Those two communities-- the military and the NHs-- are already very important to the Open University. We have some of our best partnerships with those organisations. And I know you how much the military value what the OU provides, so this is in the military as an organisation and individual serving men and women get a huge amount out of it. I'm sure there are always things that we can do more effectively. I think with the military, because people are posted, they're own training, the flexibility that's required I would think is an important thing. And if we're not meeting the needs of the flexibility of those who are serving, I'd love to know more about that.

The NHS we have very effective partnerships with. I know that some of the issues there are to do with work pressure, and intensity, and hours, and those kinds of things-- so different from the military, but still very much about people's work circumstances. And so if there are things that we should be doing in terms of communicating with managers and bosses in both the services, and hospitals, and the NHS more generally, tell us about it. And I'll work with my colleagues who have those partnership relationships to help students be able to be more effective who are coming from those workplaces.

KAREN FOLEY: Fantastic, and also if you haven't already heard, there is a careers advisory service. And we have a session with them tomorrow. So that's a chance to ask any careers related questions, because they also offer a wealth of services. So maybe after speaking with them, if there are things that we aren't covering, we can get in touch and deal with some of those as well.

Right, I need to take one question from here and then go back to the social media desk. Dear VC, what inspired you to enter this role given your background in television?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, it's about the same sort of motivation, really. The BBC-- the organisation I worked for before I came to the Open University-- aspires to give great quality information to help people change their lives. And education does that, but in an even more concentrated and important way.

We used technology in broadcasting. Obviously, we use technology in the Open University. And how you express quality information and deliver it over the airwaves, or through books and other publications, there's obviously lots of similarities.

There are things that are very different. Academics work at a different pace from journalists. So there are things that I'm needing to get used to. But the fundamental idea of having great organisations, which happen to be British organisations-- the BBC, the BBC World Service where I worked previously-- and the Open University with fantastic ideals.

I mean, what could be more important than saying that education should be open to people, places, methods, and ideas, and being in a position to be able to support that? I don't think the interesting question is, why would I want to do that? It's, how lucky was I to be able to be in that position? Because I feel hugely privileged to be able to do that.

KAREN FOLEY: Are you enjoying it? Six months in now, and you have your inauguration tomorrow.

PETER HORROCKS: That's going to be a fantastic moment. Our wonderful and inspiring Chancellor Martha Lane Fox will give me the robes of office. It's an extraordinary almost sort of ancient ritual. Obviously, the university isn't old. I'm told that there's a mannequin on stage with the robes on them.

And I kind of process up, and then they give to me. And I make a little speech and so on, friends and family as well as some invited guests are there, as well as the students who will be getting their degrees from me in Milton Keynes Theatre tomorrow. So I'm hugely looking forward to it. I'm going to say a little bit about the future of the university, and what I'm hoping to be able to bring to it.

And then after I've conferred the degrees, I will be talking to the graduates. And, I hope, sending them on their way with a sense of inspiration about what the Open University is about. In fact, sending them on their way is probably the wrong way because one of the things I'm saying to people is you've been part of an Open University community as a student.

And it's not goodbye. It's, how can we work with you and support you in the future? And also asking students-- sorry, graduates-- how they can support current students.

So that sense of an Open University family that you joined when you are a first year student, as I'm becoming myself now, and that stays with you all through your life if you want it to, that's one of the things that I'm going to be talking to people about tomorrow.

KAREN FOLEY: That's wonderful. And, of course, at this event as well, people are coming together, sharing careers advice, and resources, and tips, and study ideas as well, all online. It is like a family out there as well. And I know a lot of people have been saying that today.

PETER HORROCKS: Are you mum?

KAREN FOLEY: I wish. I was just trying to get people to eat food--

PETER HORROCKS: Big sister, big sister.

KAREN FOLEY: Tidy their desk. And we've got more questions. I've got lots of here. But I just want to make sure that we're addressing everyone's questions in the live chat if they're coming through. I'm aware that you're also talking about loads of other things as well, and being a family in a community, which is wonderful to hear.

HJ: Yeah, there's lots of lovely threads going on. One question was, because there's loads of changes going on with the university, is about how the faculty mergers-- and we might need a little background on this for some people-- will benefit students from the perspective of interdisciplinary cooperation. So what the students see from that side?

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, that's an interesting question. So I guess about some of the changes, and what students might benefit from that.

PETER HORROCKS: We had up until recently, seven faculties. And those are being merged together so there are four rather than seven. I think for most students, that's not going to make an immediate difference. It's certainly not something for anyone to be alarmed about.

From a practical point of view, in terms of running the university, having a smaller number of larger faculties means that it's easier to work with a smaller group of people to be able to talk about how we improve things for students. And part of that-- from the question-- is about how the different disciplines work together, and how the best of all of the different subject skills that the Open University have got can be brought to bear.

So when earlier I talked about one of the things that I would like to see more of is courses being able to draw from a variety of skills. So if you're doing a science course, but you also want to be able to improve your writing, the skills that exist within the arts department for instance are quite useful. So getting more interfusing between the different subject areas-- I know the Open programme obviously does this extremely well already-- but building that into more of our courses, giving people more options in relation to that-- so that's one example of the kind of improvement that I hope that there will be able to be in the future.

KAREN FOLEY: No, of course. And like you said, we've been talking to a lot of students about various things when they've studied with one faculty, and then they will perhaps study with another, things are run quite differently. And I can imagine that in pooling some of those resources, people would hopefully get ideas, and inspiration, and develop things further.

PETER HORROCKS: Yeah, so there's interesting balance to be struck when you're thinking about how the university is run by saying, we'll make things simple, and keep things consistent and standard across the university. But, of course, there are big differences. Studying a STEM subject, a science subject, or something like that, is very different from largely reading an essay-based subject such as arts and some social sciences.

So we have to be careful about getting the right balance between consistency and simplicity for students, but also making sure that things work to the specific needs of different subject areas. And having the heads of the faculties in the top team that manages the university, which is one of the things that changed when those faculties were merged together, enables me to help take those decisions with the professors, with the deans of the faculties, who most understand what their students need, and where the university can take, I hope, quicker, better decisions to benefit students in the future.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, so students might not see anything immediate right now. But hopefully the ideas and the management at the top end will be given to filter down so that we can get better. Let's take one more question from the social media desk.

HELEN: Yes, certainly, so lots of people have been sharing their educational journeys in the chat. There's quite a few new students that are returning to study after a long gap. And we were wondering what your own educational journey has been like, Peter?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, I've had a long gap since I was last studying. So I've just started on a statistics module myself.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

PETER HORROCKS: Initially, I was trying to keep it quiet that I was studying. But somehow it's got--

KAREN FOLEY: Who's your tutor? They must be terrified.

PETER HORROCKS: It would be unfair. But I've had some conversations with my tutor. And I'm just an ordinary student. I'm just going to be exactly the same as everyone else, go along to tutorials and involve myself.

So I haven't studied since I did an honours degree back in 1981. And I'm terrified, frankly, probably like many people when they're starting out-- either studying the first time or resuming their studies, understanding what the course requires, and working my way through some of the briefing material and so on, and just also being excited by the challenge of it. So I'm looking forward to it, as well as a little bit nervous too.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, OK, lovely, well let's take one more question from here. Oh, this is from a recurrent listener who has heard you singing before. And they, you sang on "student hub live" in the past. Are you prepared to sing again?

PETER HORROCKS: Well, one of the things I know that you've been looking at is copyrights. And I'm slightly worried about breaching that. And also, I don't want to intrude on people's happy viewing any more than I did last time around. So if I come back, I hope I'm invited again, maybe I'll prepare another number. So next time around.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent, well thank you very, very much for coming along. We've been having lots of interesting discussion, students supporting each other, and talk about how many cherry bakewell's we've got left. So lots of fantastic stuff going on. Well, I made a little video earlier because we're hoping that students will send in more than just a selfie with a little video.

If you don't know how to do that, you can look at the Videos tab on the website. And also Janet Sumner's come in and talked us through how easy the whole process is. And that will be available on the catch up very, very soon.

But we'd love it if you sent us just a brief video about your OU journey, about something you found interesting, or maybe your response to one of the discussions that we've been having today. And we're going to go to my brief video, and show you some other video clips.

And then we have ontology, epistemology, ninjaology? - it's the wheel of ologies quiz coming right up after this break. So you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]