

Life-changing learning

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to "the student hub live." OK, so we've had a short break. Apparently, D has cleared up the mess from the mouse with the cat incident. So that's good to know. So we can progress with our next session.

And what we're going to talk about now is life changing learning. So a topic I'm hoping that we can really get involved with in the chat, because hopefully this'll be something that a lot of you have experienced, about how studying with the Open University is changing, or has changed, your life. So how do we have a panel for this?

Well, I have Sherry from the Disabled Students Group, welcome, Sherry. And Debbie Britton, who is from our marketing department, who has launched this campaign about life changing learning. So I was very interested in having you both from different perspectives talking, I guess, about why this is something, Debbie, that you feel resonates with students so much so that we're creating a marketing campaign-- so I guess on a broad level-- and Sherry, how this has actually impacted on you as an individual.

But before we do that, I'd like to know-- we've got this love part time campaign today. So I'd like to ask you both why you love part time?

SHERRY: It gives me a reason to get out of bed in the morning, to actually study and be part of a huge community.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent, thank you. What about you?

DEBBIE: With my marketing hat on, it make the OU so distinctive. I don't think there's anyone that can replicate what we do for part time.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, OK, so I'd love to hear your thoughts as well on why you love part time. Send those to us. We've had some post we're sorting that out printing some of it, had a bit of a delay with the new spam filter. So that is slowing things down a little bit. But we're working on getting those coming through. So do let us know why you love part time. And send us your selfies if you're engaging with "the student hub live."

OK, so let's sort of unpick this topic, then, about life changing learning. Sherry, I wonder if you can start us off then, because you're saying the OU is giving you a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and a reason to, I guess, continue with things, and also you're saying that the word disabled-- because you're the chair of the Disabled Students Group-- it wasn't a term that you thought would necessarily apply to you. So can you tell us about that journey, and how the OU sort of slotted into that?

SHERRY: It was a shock when I was diagnosed with the cerebellar ataxia, which is an incurable of degenerative condition. That was over 10 years ago. And the word disabled never featured in my life.

I was busy, and travelling, and working, and riding horses, and skiing. And suddenly I had that all taken away from me because of my physical disability. And I must admit, I grieved for a bit, and then joined the OU to keep the old brain cells going. And from the OU, joining in 2008, I've not only got a full time job again working with OUSA and the OU, but also my study discipline.

So my days are now totally full. And there are not enough hours in the day. And the way it affects me is giving my reason to live again. That is what the OU for me is all about.

KAREN FOLEY: So I guess it's not only the act of studying, and that pathway of doing the modules, and progressing in that way, but also being part of a community, and your role with the Disabled Students Group, and with the Open University Students Association, OUSA. Can you tell us a bit about the Disabled Students Group, and the work that you're doing in that sort of remit, and how important that is, I guess, to reach out to other students?

We've had a lot of students who have commented on disability-related issues in the chat. And, again, if you have any questions, I'm sure Sherry would be happy to answer those. But can you talk a little bit about that, and your motivations there for that Disabled Students Group?

SHERRY: The awareness I got when I joined the Disabled Students Group back in May, 2008 that there was so many of us out there, and not just physic-- I hate the word disabled. I hate the D word.

But it is the broader term for anybody that has to overcome any sort of obstacle to studying, be it physical, or mental, or cognitive, or whatever. And the Disabled Students Group is run by disabled students for disabled students. And I heard the latest figures from the OU last week. And this year, there are 22,263 students with disabilities. And those are just the students that have declared a disability.

And what we do through our Facebook group that has 800 members and through our membership which has over 500 members, and that gives people access to our private forums on the Virtual Learning Environment. We're there. We can't give professional advice. We're not qualified to do that.

But we can facilitate and point people in the right direction. Advise them, for instance, if you know that your disability might just delay a submission of a TMA we say, when you get your tutor's name and email address, write to them. And send them a little personal note.

And just say, hi, I'm me. I've got a hearing impairment. Or I've got a physical disability. Or we use screen reader software. Write to your tutors so they know, they're aware of it, because although our profiles are there for the tutors to read, tutors have got enough to do.

I know they probably do read them. But they can't remember it. And particularly if you're deaf, say, and you want a special way of being seated in the tutorials so you can lip read both your tutor and your fellow students, and you need to be sat in a certain place to get the conversation, you know what's going on. I met a student only last Saturday that didn't know about the DSG. And she's been studying for two years.

And she's deaf. As she didn't know that she could get all this help and assistive software through disabled student learners. And I think the link is there. There's some links on the website to do that. So it's finding and helping people like her. That's our main thing.

KAREN FOLEY: The audience are absolutely loving what you're saying, Terry. And so I'd like to take a little bit of time to go to the social major desk. HJ and Helen?

HELEN: Yeah, we've been having some fantastic stories from people, people saying that studying has enabled them to get a new career, and to change their life around, basically. But also some people commenting that because of their physical disability, they would have found it difficult to attend a brick university. And also mental disabilities have been mentioned as well.

So Kevin said the with mental disability, a lot of people couldn't see it, and therefore might have considered me a fraud, which I thought was quite a powerful comment.

KAREN FOLEY: Last night, Peter Horrocks was talking a lot about the work that the Open University are doing with various things like the military, and ways in which those different types of disabilities that may not be so obvious apply. But, Debbie, I wonder if we could pick up on some of those themes, because this is obviously-- I mean, you've heard a lot of these stories. And it was something that you thought was important enough to bring as a marketing campaign to recruit students. Can you tell us a bit about that process?

DEBBIE: Do you know what? It's stories like Sherry's, and like many other students, that just make my job so pleasurable. I mean, it really is, I think, the best job that any marketer could ever have because it's full of life stories. It's full of real, inspiring life stories.

And what we wanted to do was really bring that to life. We wanted to really share to the whole world how this isn't just about very dry study. It's actually about what you do with your life. And whether it is about retraining, or about changing career, or about doing something because you've got a very full life but you want that added kind of extra, or whether it's something that just gives you a real purpose in life, I think what we want to do is really draw out good examples from every spectrum of life of how that actually impacts-- not just the individuals as well.

It's the families. And it's the friends that are associated with that individual. It has an impact on them as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Going from that, because we've been saying there are some disabilities that are mental or different to what one might categorise as a disability. And, obviously, seeing the Open University marketing feeds on Facebook and things, there's some really inspiring life stories. But I'm conscious that those might not be the main.

Some people might say, well, I know a lot of students are struggling with depression, or anxiety, agoraphobia. They may not want to go out to a tutorial. And a lot of things that they might think, oh, some people have real big problems. And I'm just depressed. Or I'm just feeling alone and isolated.

And, actually, those can be real barriers that can be as much of a struggle for somebody as they can be for somebody with maybe a physical disability. Could you tell us a bit about, I guess both of you really?

DEBBIE: When we first started looking at how we were going to design the campaign, I was really interested in how it's very easy to land on the barriers. It's very easy to say why wouldn't you do it, rather than why would you? And I think my view on this is actually what we've got to keep doing is reminding people for all the good reasons why you would just go ahead with this kind of-- it is actually a real incentive to do something that inspires you, that is just so-- I don't know. It isn't just about getting the qualification, is it? It's so much more on that.

So I guess I'm suggesting, let's go above and beyond the barriers. I know sometimes that's very hard. But it doesn't help if we remind people of the barriers.

Let's make no mistake. It's tough. And it's very, very hard work. But if we can help people to see all of the reasons why, then actually it gives a more balanced view.

SHERRY: I think one thing I read a lot is the phrase, I didn't think I was disabled enough. Or didn't think I qualified. And the hidden disabilities, special learning disabilities, as you say people that have agoraphobia, or have mental health issues, people that have panic attacks even thinking about ringing their tutor and talking to a man or a woman on the phone. Somebody who's deaf can't use the time.

And when I say, I glibly say oh have you applied for your DSA-- Disabled Student allowance I get back, oh, I didn't think I was eligible. On that link I've put, which is from student home, to go to the help centre on the OU website. There is an eligibility checklist there that will tell you whether or not you are eligible for DSA.

And this is-- am I disabled. That's a horrible word, disabled, again. People who have mental health issues don't consider it as disability. But what we keep saying is if you are overcoming any sort of obstacle to study successfully, then you have a right to apply and try to get your DSA, and try and get the assistive software and hardware that is there to help you. I listen to everything.

My eyesight is appalling. My hearing is going as well. And my speech is bad. My typing now is five words a minute. But I've got assistive software there to help me keep up those deadlines with TMA. But, again, let your tutor know. if you've got a problem, let him or her know because they can't help you unless they've got the information in front of them.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, Sherry, the people at home are saying the DSA has an amazing support for students, and that that's much appreciated. So I'd like to go back to the social media desk, and find out some of the things that you're talking about there.

HJ: Yeah, a lot of the stuff is just people sharing their stories, again, about how the OU has helped them, how it's meant that they can study part time. One of things that people are saying is they're just describing all the great support they get from the OU. So some people have helped with computers and finance.

Other people have had to help being able to attend tutorials. And the tutor is always lovely and very accommodating to people who need the extra support. And it's really great to hear how the OU has impacted, and how all this extra support means so much to people.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely, well, that's great. And we love those stories going on in the chat and things. And I'm aware that this is all part of a community out there. So we'll leave you talking about some of those things. Do keep up to speed with that.

But I wanted to return to this idea as well about the norm, and about marketing, I guess. I mean, marketing is one of the things that we study academically with the business school. So a lot of people are very interested in marketing. And this the whole idea about how we conceptualise things, how we attract people, how we're selling things, ultimately.

And there's this sort of dichotomy here between saying, well, the OU is a fabulous community. And, yet, we want more students. And we want to be able to include them and feel part of that. We want to reach out and tell people what it's like.

And, yet, we know that often people are at a distance. And it can be quite an odd thing to explain. So could you talk a little bit about how you're working with those marketing ideas, how you're selling this, and basically selling, I guess, the idea of student stories. And you talk about barriers and overcoming those as well. How does that resonate with people? And they think, oh yeah, I want to go and do something with the OU?

DEBBIE: Yeah, I won't bore you with the science of marketing. But I think the reason why it's so straightforward with the OU is because, actually, any good marketing starts with what customers want. That's the very first thing you look to, to design a product, to work out what it is that they want.

And I think because we've got such a massive network-- whether it's with the communities or whether it's with the students themselves-- that gives us so much ready material to say, well, what is it that they're looking for? We do do formal research as well. So we get groups together where we ask them specific questions. We really stretch them in what is it that they're looking for?

And we look at people who aren't currently students. So they're just learners. Or they haven't necessarily considered learning.

And what we do is really probe into those barriers. What would it take to really make you consider the Open University? And I guess for us, the job is hard because there are so many choices out there-- everything from do nothing, I'll carry on watching the TV every evening through to my life is just too busy because life just happens, through to actually I do want to study. I've made that decision.

But a university is for me, in terms of red brick university, or a distance learner that I can just do a very quick one evening course. That would do me. And what we have to do is really show how distinctive the Open University is.

And I do think it really is. It's unique. There's nothing that it can be compared to. My job is to try and articulate that with non-students-- people who we want to attract, and try to make that clear. And one of the hardest things that we've talked about is, how do you bring that study

experience to life? How do you really package and sell that? So that's what keeps me awake at night.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely, because like you say, it means so much. And we can sit there and go, it's the reason I get out of bed. And you hear that. But it's, again, communicating this to people.

We've been talking a lot about MOOCs, and about how a lot of people can sample OU content. And you made the distinction between students and learners, often saying that learners are maybe people in the more informal environment, I guess. And, yet, we talk about part time learning, and how often this is a journey.

And sometimes there are formal networks. And sometimes there are informal ones. I wonder if you can both say a bit about that, about this idea of feeling part of a community, feeling categorised as a student. It's been something we've talked about, about how people say, I'm a student even though they've got a job. They've got house work, all these other things that often accompany OU study.

One thing I've read both from disabled students and from ordinary students too, some employers have said, oh, it's an Open University degree. That doesn't have the same value as a brick university. And as an ex-personnel manager, I would say, well, if I saw that on somebody's CV, I would say they are absolutely masters of time management, because if you're doing a full time job, if you got a family, and you're doing modules as well, then you are damn good at managing your time, which is a real skill for any employer. So thank you, OU, yes, it's a big star on the CV, isn't it?

DEBBIE: And I guess for me, the world's changing, isn't it? And there are all sorts of different ways of learning, and different types of learners. And I think what we have to do well is just guide people through to the right decisions for them. So I think there is definitely a role for all of those things. And, actually, what the Open University offers encourages all of that. But it's then about having the advice, and the hand holding to help them come to the right decision for them.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, let's take a quick check to the social media desk.

HJ: There's so much going on, so much great stuff. And Matthew said, he wanted me to pass on a comment. He says, a big thank you to you, Sherry. He says, lovely woman, and very interesting and helpful talk. So that's lovely.

SHERRY: Thank you, blush.

HJ: We do appreciate you coming down and talking to us.

HELEN: And somebody else also commented that they encountered you, Sherry, in on a live Facebook chat. And it was great to put a face to a name. And, in fact, lots of people are coming in today to just watch. And actually, they're finding that they're getting a lot of help from their fellow students.

So quicker than HJ and I can reply, or the people who are helping backstage, their fellow students are giving them lots of advice, and linking them to mental-- there's a Facebook

group for students with mental health problems, for example. So it's really fantastic seeing all the students interacting in this way.

And we do have a final question, if you've got time for it. It was, how do students know where to get help and advice outside of office hours? Because, of course, a lot of our students don't work when we're in the office.

SHERRY: That is a difficult one. We know that the official help and advice is nine till five-- not strictly true, but it is office hours, which is where, hopefully, people like us in the DSE can help. We can't tell you categorically what's right, what's wrong.

But you can be damn sure that if you come on to the Facebook group, or join the membership, there is somebody in the membership that would have been through exactly the same problem where you say, oh, that happened to me. Have a word with these people, or ring this person.

My lot in the Facebook group are brilliant. They're there 24/7. They're superb. They really are good.

And I think to go back to this community thing, the feeling of isolation which a lot of people with disabilities have-- be it mental, physical-- the isolation is broken down with that communication, sharing your problems with people who are exactly the same as you. Now, I've got people in the group who have some serious mental health problems. And they open up and chat in there. And they just go in there and have a rant.

And they start their message with rant warning. And I'm sitting there reading it. And they go on. And just by doing that, they're releasing that stress and tension. And maybe they've been afraid to go out the door or whatever.

They can just chat to people of a like mind. And you get all the hugs. We have group hugs in there. And it all works.

Yeah, we all say good morning to one another, and what you're thankful for today, which happens at the end of the day. And it just works. It's lovely.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, there's so many support networks. And the OU students always amaze me how things are set up to support and help each other. Thank you for all your links. If you can email anything that you'd like included, we'll put it on the Resources page of the website.

I'm aware that there are lots of links and lots of support going on. So do email us-- studenthub@open.ac.uk. And we'll get those included on the website.

But I'd just like to thank you, Sherry and Debbie for coming along. Debby in particular, I know it's really nice for people to see that there's more to the OU than just professors, and universities, and books, and things, and that we actually have an institution that is very considered in how we're trying to talk to our students as well as design learning for them. And Sherry, I know everyone's really appreciated you coming along and being so honest.

SHERRY: Lovely to be here.

KAREN FOLEY: We've got links about the Disabled Students Group on the website. We're feeling the love. So we're going to go now to a Joe Pasquale video, which is all about love part time. And also, I'm going to show you my selfie video because I'd like you to send a selfie video, ideally, about why you love part time, or what studying with the OU has enabled you to do that's really changing your life-- so something about showing your love for your study. We'll be back in five minutes. See you then.