[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome to Student Connections 2015. I'm Karen Foley and I'm joined by Ian Fribbance, Allison Green, and Troy Cooper. And this is the opening slot of the Student Connections Conference. So, hopefully, some of you will have been here before. And hopefully, there are some new faces as well.

So I'm just going to start by explaining how this all works and why we're all here. So this is the conference from the Faculty of Social Sciences. And the whole idea is that we, as an academic community of people at the Open University-- students, associate lecturers-- can all get together and talk about some of the things that matter to us in the social sciences.

Now, it's not only me in the studio, because the whole part of this dialogue is with you at home. So, I'm joined by HJ and Rachel on our Social Media Desk. HJ and Rachel, welcome.

RACHEL: Hello again.

KAREN FOLEY: I see you have had fibre optic broadband installed.

HJ: It's all fancy and lovely.

RACHEL: It is.

HJ: Well, our internet provider decided to upgrade us to one hour, which apparently isn't that much, which is why we're doing manual social networks these days. So we've got MyFace, and you can connect with us by emailing connections.open.ac.uk, using the hashtag #SEC15. We've got our wall, so all our updates will be popped onto our wall. And we've got a lovely area to pin our favourite things. A lot of good things come out with this, and we like to pin them to keep them and remember them.

If you want to tell us where you are and send in a selfie, we've already had some coming through. There's someone called Rachel and HJ have popped theirs up there.

KAREN FOLEY: [CHUCKLES].

HJ: And Gerard is there too, and someone's all the way up in Scotland at the moment. But if you

send any mail in, it'll come to our inbox here. Yeah, your selfies, and anything, comments, will come through to our inbox. And we've already got something, which is fantastic. Ah, I'll just have a look, yeah? That's what I like. Oh, this is the phone bill.

We'll save that one for later. If you want to send us anything more fun, though, we'd love to hear from you. So remember, email address, connections@open.ac.uk, the hashtag #SEC15, and you can like the Faculty of Social Sciences page on Facebook.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. And Rachel, tell us then, what will you and HJ be doing aside from collecting the mail and putting it all on the board during the event?

RACHEL: We'll also be chatting with you guys at home. You'll see us in the box. It's Rachel, Social Media Desk, and the same for HJ. And we'll be just feeding your comments through to the panel and making sure that you're included in the debate at home.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, thank you very much. So hopefully, people are filling in those widgets. And we'll come back to those to see how you're all feeling and what you're all doing right now. But we should officially open the conference. And I'm joined by acting dean now, Ian Fribbance. Ian, welcome. And would you like to open the conference for our audience?

IAN FRIBBANCE: Well, thanks very much for having me, Karen. And thanks to everybody for joining in. Yeah, so a formal, official welcome to the second Student Connections Conference from the Faculty of Social Sciences. It's all about really trying to build a sense of academic community and increase our engagement with students. And doing a live event and using social media is part of our plans for doing that. So officially, welcome, everybody. Let's hope it's a fun, engaging, and informative event.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, we'll talk a little bit more about social media, because as you say, this is a massive part of this event. and also something you're very much interested in at the moment. But Allison Green, would you like to introduce yourself as well and tell everybody about what you're doing?

ALLISON GREEN: Right. Hi. Thank you, Karen. I'm Allison Green, and I'm the associate dean for Curriculum Qualifications, which sounds a little grand, perhaps, but basically, it means that I have an overview of all the curriculum in the social sciences faculty. And we've done a lot of work over the past few years in thinking about how to structure that curriculum, how to best meet the needs of all of you, our students out there. And we've undergone some changes. We have

some new qualifications, which I can say something about a bit later on.

KAREN FOLEY: Perfect. Excellent. And Troy, welcome.

TROY COOPER: Thank you, Karen. I'm Troy Cooper, associate dean, Student Experience and Quality. And people usually say, well, what does that mean? And I am just figuring out as I work through the job. But largely, it means that I am interested in how we're forming relationships with students as a university, how we're meeting their expectations, getting feedback from students, and learning about who our students are and how we should respond to them. Because we are in a changing game now. Our students are changing, and we need to be able to change at the same time.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So exciting times. And, obviously, a lot's gone on since the last conference. Ian, you'd mentioned social media beforehand, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how that's important. Because we also have the Faculty Facebook page. And we've got the great Friday Thinker going on at the moment, as we speak. So can you tell us, why is social media an important way of engaging students, to link what you both are saying?

IAN FRIBBANCE: Sure. Well I've been very keen, as you know, to develop our social media presence, and indeed, was in a sense, behind the idea of Student Connections. I suppose there were several different reasons behind that innovation. Firstly, it was the sense of going to where students already are. So they can interact with students when they're actually on a module via module forums. But of course, Facebook will be part of their everyday lives. And if they're looking at it on their mobile, we want to be part of their lives.

Secondly, it's about giving a space for students in a broader sense, outside the immediate study of a molecule. So it's a feeling of belonging to a broader academic community with other students, with academics that they otherwise wouldn't be able to interact with. So that's really what's driving it. It's a sense of engagement, a broader connection with our academics, broader social science issues.

KAREN FOLEY: As you say, I mean, it's one of the things, actually, that the Library will be talking about in the next session, this whole idea of digital identities, and to what extent we can engage, and what some of those pitfalls are. How do you see, the idea of combining social spaces, I guess-- which a lot of people are in-- with an academic space, which is quite different? How are you negotiating that in the social sciences?

IAN FRIBBANCE: Well, I'm often asked whether we're going to use Facebook for direct teaching, for example. And I don't really see it as a place necessarily where you do direct teaching. I see it as, yes, we can have academic debates, academic discussions. Clearly, they're different according to the format. They're not going to be a long essay format, for example. They are going to be short interchanges. But they are good spaces for building that broader sense of community, that broader engagement.

We know students form the connections and relationships with each other. They can do that socially through online media just as they might have done in the past by going to the pub or a cafe after tutorial, or something like that. So I see it is helping to deliver those kinds of connections, those kinds of engagements.

Also, between students and the academics of the University. Obviously, students are working at distance at the OU, so they don't necessarily have a chance to meet the academics that write their materials, or their VLE materials, and so on. Now, if on the other hand, we're able to use social media channels to diminish that distance, then I think that's also a good thing.

KAREN FOLEY: Mm-hmm. Troy, I wonder If you'd like to comment on that point about student experience and the students being around other students and, I guess, bridging some of that distance. What sort of things are you working on at the moment to deal with some of those issues?

TROY COOPER: Well, I think, I mean, Ian's exactly right. Everybody in our university works at a distance-- the academics, the students, everybody else. So the name of the game is developing networks, and Ian's talked about some of the ways we're trying to network people together in different contexts. What I'm focusing on at the moment is trying to network students together in particular ways that are more personal.

So, for example, we're developing a student mentoring scheme, so that students at Level 1 get a student mentor-- like you would, actually, at other universities-- who's already been studying with the OU, and who will introduce them to the OU, and talk to them, and that kind of thing. So it's working across a number of ways of networking students together that we're looking at at the moment, so that notion of distance is just a virtual one.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. No, it's very important, isn't it? And Allison, I wonder if you could comment on that? Because obviously, you're dealing with curriculum, and that's a very different entity in terms of, I guess, the support. How do you design some of these things?

I mean the OU is well-known for its virtual learning environment and this whole idea about embedding learning into that space as well. Can you touch on some of the ways that we're working on that in the social, sciences, things like OU Live, and how we're trying to connect people? And maybe some people will have collaborative tasks to do in particular modules. So we're trying to, I guess, embed this coming together in the curriculum, as well as, obviously, a network that supports students.

ALLISON GREEN: We are. I can say a little bit about that, and I'm sure Ian might want to pick up on some of it as well. But, I mean, previously when we've been developing curriculum, we'd had almost a brick wall, if you like, between the design and development of the curriculum, and then how he actually delivered it. And I think one of the exciting innovations of the past few years has been the bringing together of the design of the curriculum and linking that in a lot more closely with the teaching and learning and the student's experience.

So we've done that particularly, I think, with our new top postgraduate programme, which we're launching in October 2016. So we're very excited about that. And it's a really good example of where we've brought together some ideas around curriculum and what we might actually teach students. And we thought very carefully about the student experience and how best to deliver a really good experience for them.

IAN FRIBBANCE: And we're also thinking very carefully about how we embed things like employability skills, for example, digital information, literacy skills, which are being designed now and embedded right through both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. And that includes things like collaborative learning, commenting on module forums, and so on, much more than it would have done in the past.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

TROY COOPER: I mean that issue of OU Live that you raised, Karen, is an interesting one. Because, of course, we're trying to introduce interactive teaching now, because the technology will let us. Although, obviously, it lets us down a lot as well. So students will know that if they've tried to access OU Live sessions, it can be a little bit hit and miss.

But the point is that the nature of the learning that they can now engage in is interactive. It's not just about reading a book, and reflecting on it by yourself through guided activities, and so on. It's all about working with what you're learning with other people. And that's why we're trying to roll out a very extensive programme of OU Live in the next set of presentations.

Because we need to get students used to using it and used to using it ourselves, but developing an approach to learning with students that's far more about them and what they're doing and less about what we're giving to them and delivering to them.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So teaching is more of a dynamic process where we're listening to students. And for those students who maybe haven't heard about OU Live, can you explain a bit about what that is?

TROY COOPER: Well, OU Live is essentially an interactive audiovisual conferencing system that's delivered over the web. And it should be relatively easy to use and can be. But we are learning to build into our curriculum at the very beginning, teaching students as well as tutors, actually, how to use OU Live, and how to get the best out of it.

But when it does work, it works really well, because it has ways of allowing students to interact to the [INAUDIBLE] just like being in the same room. You can have breakout rooms where students go and talk to each other. They can lock the room and be secure. We hope they don't diss the tutors while they're in there, or something.

And there are all kinds of tools that are available. So it's about being able to reach out to students because we know how difficult it is to get to face-to-face contact for people with modern, busy lives, and living all over the four nations. Being able to reach out to them more, and enabling them to interact with each other, and also being able to work with them in their learning and in a dynamic way.

IAN FRIBBANCE: We've moved to a situation, haven't we, in the faculty where we're working towards students being able to access both face-to-face and OU Live tuition and across all their modules in a blend, so that students can access either, or indeed both, according to what suits them.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Allison, I wonder if you could maybe tell students who may think oh, OU Live, I'm not quite sure about that. Because ultimately, it's sort of a bit like this, but with less sofas, I suppose. What would you say to students who may think, oh I don't know whether I should go to these tutorials or not? I mean, how important is this idea of actually connecting with your tutor in terms of supporting learning?

ALLISON GREEN: I think it's absolutely vital because the way in which we've designed our curriculum is sort of predicated upon this idea that students will engage, and that they will have opportunities to engage in ways that suit them and at times that suit them. So I'd say, it's critical. It's really

important that they do take all those opportunities. Because we've designed this for them.

TROY COOPER: Yeah. Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Well, that's fantastic. I'm going to talk about the new modules in a minute. But I want to go and see how everyone is at home. What's happening on the Social Media Desk? I noticed a flurry of activity there. There's lots going on. HJ and Rachel.

RACHEL: We have loads of chat going on in the box. It's fantastic to see everyone chatting away. People are saying, sorry for asking too many questions. Please, ask away. We want to hear your voice. And we've got a mix of new students. We've got Laura, Kerry, Hameet, Denise, and Jonathan, who are among our new students, and Carla who's studying her fifth module. We have some questions on the wall.

HJ: [CHUCKLES]

RACHEL: You'll probably not be able to see that behind my big head. OK, so we've got questions about where did you find the #SEC15 hashtag and the connections@open.ac.uk email? So the hashtag is social media, so that's on Facebook, Twitter. You can just type the hashtag in and it'll pop up. And if you use your own email account to email your selfies and your pictures to us, that's where you'd send it to the connections@open.ac.uk.

And we have a question for you guys. Everyone wants to know if there's a catch up service available because there's so much content. And everyone's really excited, and they want to make sure they could fit it all in. But they've got to fit it around their current schedules, so a catch up?

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Well, we've organised a fantastic catch up service. Like all TV productions, I think 24 hours is acceptable. So we're going to try our very, very best to get this all cut and sectioned into nice chunks that will be available 24 hours later. So you'll be able to catch up and watch some of that content. Because we've got great sessions on Saturday about things I know that are going to be very popular, like the postgraduate modules. We'll talk about psychology modules later. Troy will be talking about managing expectations.

So there are things that, hopefully, you might even want to watch again at some point in the future. But they'll be available for you to watch 24 hours after the event. And there will be a Catch Up button on the screen. So the same way you got into the conference, you will then just watch the catch up. And then you can select the items that you would like to enjoy in the

future.

Other than that, Rachel and HJ, where is everybody and how are they feeling?

HJ: Well, We've got a lot of people who are excited, nervous. A lot of new people, so it's understandable that you're nervous. But once you get into it, it'll flow by lovely. You'll do fantastically. We've got people from all over starting to populate our board very nicely. We've got Roseanne from Kent, Carla from the West Midlands, a few people from Wales, and a lot of people from Essex. So it seems that's the place to be at the moment, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: And I see the global map, as well, has some.

HJ: Yeah. We've got some European students around. Last time, we had some people from Australia and Sweden, so I'm sure they'll pop by soon. They're our international fans.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, indeed. They'll probably still be in bed.

[LAUGHTER]

Gee, I don't know anything about the time difference right now. It's probably all changed. But yes, excellent. Oh, well, that's fantastic, excellent.

So I wanted to talk a little bit-- Allison, and I'm going to ask you to talk about some of these wonderful new books. Because you can see here, I mean, books are such a core part of the social sciences. And once we have our fabulous Virtual Learning Environment, and we have all these online activities, we do know that our students love books. And they love highlighting them. And we'll be talking a little bit about how to do some of that later.

But we have been in a massive process of module production in the faculty. And I'd like you to talk about some of these new books. Because when I asked Rachel and HJ to put them down, they spent about two hours thumbing through all of them, deciding on their next modules. And they're already graduated. So they can't do any more. [LAUGHS] But can you tell us about some of these new ones that you're specifically proud of?

ALLISON GREEN: I think I'll start with DD103, which is the top to Investigating the Social World, 1 and 2. So this is a brand new module which was launched for the first time this year. And it's part of a lot of the social sciences qualifications. So almost all students who are studying one of our social sciences qualifications would at some point be studying that particular module there.

I think we're particularly proud of the way that we've put together a number of different discipline areas and tried to knit them together around particular themes, so that students with interests in say, economics, or in sociology, for example, or criminology, there's something in it for everyone. But it's not done in a compartmentalised way. It's organised around particular themes.

So hopefully, students will get that sense of the social sciences. And they can see the social sciences through different lenses. I mean, that's the term that we use within the module. So you see it through the lens of sociology, for example, through the lens of criminology, or a little bit of psychology, and a bit of economics. So a little bit about that.

I can see you have the psychology textbooks down there as well. We went through a massive reorganisation of our psychology programme. And that stack of books sort of belies the amount of work and effort that went into that. But we're very excited about that new programme. It's designed to be as flexible as it can be and to give students choices.

Because previously, you simply didn't have choices. You studied our psychology programme, and we noticed that other universities had diversified the kinds of qualifications they'd offered. And we've tried to do that too. So we've listened to our students, and we've taken on board the particular interests that they have. And this is the result.

KAREN FOLEY: I've been looking at some of these new modules. And the thing I most like about them is the books are obviously fantastic, and we love them. But the way that so much media has been integrated into the Virtual Learning Environment is really fantastic. It's things like, when you watch-- in particular, psychology-- you watch someone in Bristol talking about something, or someone in their 70s doing something, you're watching all this live footage.

Whilst you can have a lecture in a normal brick university doing something, when you actually see some of that archive footage, you get such a sense of perspective and scale and context that I think is somehow missing when you just have the straightforward ways of talking to people. And I think that this combination of both reading about things, doing exercises, reflecting, as well as seeing a lot of this content that has taken so much time to develop, makes it such an interactive and rich experience.

IAN FRIBBANCE: Well, that's one of the things I think we've really focused on in the last few years is precisely the kind of blended learning approach that we were talking about earlier. So we've wanted

very much to retain the tradition of the classic textbook, if you like, that we know students love. All our undergraduate modules continue to have textbooks on them. And for our kind of subjects, we absolutely recognise that's important.

But on the other hand, equally, we want to also take advantage of some of the possibilities of technology enhanced learning, precisely for the kinds of reasons you're talking about. So that you get that very rich texture of material, archive footage, audiovisual, activities, which are increasingly crucial, so that students can check their own understanding and progress. So I think now we're in a place where we have a really rich mix of both the written word and online.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. I'm going to go to the Social Media Desk in just a minute. But before I do that, we're talking about supporting students. And I know Troy, you wanted to mention a couple of options that are available to support students. We've got Student Support, but also things like the Students Association, Nightline, and things like that that were important. And just hearing some of the content from new students who may be feeling slightly anxious, can you just tell students about those sorts of University, OU networks, that are there to support students in their studies as well as the mentoring that you've mentioned before?

TROY COOPER: Yes. I mean, the Open University Students Association has a lot of services available to support students, new or well into their studies, but especially when they reach crunch points. Because everybody-- everybody-- doing anything on any course of study, will reach a crunch point where something else happens, something important, and they don't know if they can carry on studying. And they want to talk to somebody about that set of issues.

So the Open University Students Association has a student mentoring project. So you can ring in and talk to another student about your issues. And they've also got a link to Nightline.

Now, what I would like to see and what I will be working on in the next year is broadening that to make student counselling more available. Not deep counselling, because if we're talking mental health counselling, obviously, that's in the care of the professionals, but the kind of educational support counselling that students need in order to be able just to carry on when they reach those kinds of crunch points. Yes. But there are, at the moment, a certain level of resources available. We need to make them much more available, as you would find in other institutions.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. So we'll have links to the Open University Students Association. There's a Resources section on the website, actually, which I should mention, that will have all of these

links. So we'll put the Open University Students Association on there. In fact, they have a Freshers Fair, I know, that's coming up next week. So you might like to get involved with that, plenty of live chat and things going on. You can find out how to get your discount cards, and all sorts of things from them.

And I also wanted to go back to the Social Media Desk and see what everyone at home is saying. And I hear there's quite a lot of chat going on.

RACHEL: Yes, there's a lot of chat about new modules that they're starting. And here, we're sitting over here. And we see all these new books on the top. It's too far away.

[LAUGHTER]

But a lot of comments are coming through from students about disability. And a lot of students that have studied several modules have said just how supportive the OU is for students with disabilities, which is fantastic. We are a community. We're a network, so the students help each other, and they do know that there's access for those things as well. But we've also got some things coming from you. We've got some--

HJ: Yeah. We seem to be expanding our reach. We've got, well, Steve's in Suffolk, just down here. But then we also go into the Southeast of France where-- who's in the Southeast-- Christine is in the Southeast of France. Barbara is in Cyprus, which must be very nice and warm this time of year. But I've noticed it's starting to get chilly here. I feel like a weatherman now--

[LAUGHTER]

- --actually, talking about the weather. Oh, and Nuria is from Holland at the moment, but originally, she was from Spain, I think. But yeah, so we're getting a nice reach on our board. But our Australian friends should be waking up soon and logging on, of course. Or they'll watch it in catch up. So we'll see.

RACHEL: And also, we're waiting for the postman because we have some mail coming through. So please, keep sending more selfies through. Something happened to our board.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, that's fantastic, brilliant. Well, it's so lovely to see such a range of people. Thank you for telling us where you are, and thank you for feeding in the chat. And I'm really looking forward to getting the post when it comes in a minute.

I'm just going to wrap up by telling you a little bit about what to expect and, really, what happens next. So we've mentioned a lot of really important things that we're going to be doing further sessions on. So we're going to be talking about online-- deciding who to trust online, and whether or not Wikipedia is a good academic source. And we're going to have the Library, who are backstage now, getting ready for that session. So I'm really looking forward to that. They tell me they have props, so I think that'll be exciting.

Troy is then coming on to talk about setting realistic expectations. And it's one of those things that we often find with students. We all want to get an A. We want to do our best. But how helpful is that as a construct? So we're going to be spending a little bit of time thinking about that. And I'm hoping that that gives you a chance at home also to think about your forthcoming studies and to think about some of these ideas.

So aside from all of the academic content, we've got so many skills in the faculty, as well. So the counselling and psychology side, we're hoping to bring in and apply some of that. We're then going to have a little break and show some videos. And then we have Richard Heffernan talking about another new module which I'm very interested in, D211.

Then Allison and Rose are going to be talking about the new psychology pathway. As we mentioned, massive regeneration of the module materials on this. So that'll be very interesting. We can find out what sorts of projects you do, what the pathway looks like, and what some of these new modules are looking like.

We then have a very interesting social psychology debate, which is actually following something that we were talking about on our Friday Thinker a few weeks ago. We have the idea of "Does doing something racialist make you racist?" So that will be very interesting with, hopefully, a lot of discussion.

We're then going to look at a bit of history and learning together at the OU with Dan and John. And then we have a session about the career service, one of the least well-tapped resources. They have so many ways of helping students out there with careers advice, and CV building, and all sorts of things. So we're going to find out exactly how they can help you.

So that's going to be our afternoon programme. During each little intermission break, we're going to be showing a short video. The chat will be open, so do let us know any questions you've got. There is no such thing as too many questions.

In fact, we have two Q&A sessions tomorrow that I'm hoping to store lots of questions for. We have a Question for new starters, so please let us know any questions you've got if you're new. And we also have a Question for our Student Support Team, so anything to do with the social sciences, psychology, studying those. Do let us have those questions for tomorrow.

But I shall now go to our short video break, after thanking our guests, Ian, Allison, and Troy. Thank you for coming along here. It's a wonderful way of getting people. I don't know many universities who would have the deanery come along and actually do something live.

You say you're nervous at home. We're also nervous here too. So we really do appreciate your support. And thank you for filling our students in. I'm sure they really appreciate it. So we're now going to go to some videos from the Library before having our Library session.

[MUSIC PLAYING]