

BHM 2021 Presentations

Experience vs Qualifications: reflections from an OU graduate and Sports Coach (27 Oct)

Ola and Allana Francis-Ashmeil:

SPEAKER 1: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for turning up this afternoon for the session and I'm going to be introducing our guest speaker. Now our guest speaker is an early alumni and her name is Allana Francis-Ashmeil and she graduated in 2016 on the BSE sports and coaching degree. I actually was one of her numerous tutors on the module EXCF 224 which is the coaching module, and I can say she was a lovely module student because Alana never asked for an extension. So, a lovely lovely student.

But the story here is Alana at the time was working in schools and also working with some coaching companies and studied and picked up numerous qualifications. For example, NFA coaching level 2. She has now graduated, and she's moved on working in the school and she's going to tell you a bit more about that in that sense when she introduces herself in more detail.

But one of the key things for me is how proud I am, when it says proud to be, I'm so proud to be here introducing Allana because we never as tutors sometimes kind of miss and not see where our students have gone, but because of the way Allana has been liaising with us at the OU, I've always been able to keep slightly in track in what she's doing. So, it's great that she's here with us today and she's giving something back to the OU. So, without me exploring anymore and going into more detail, I'll let Allana to carry on with the presentation today. So Allana over to you.

ALLANA FRANCIS: Thank you Ola and first of all, just good afternoon to everyone. Thank you for giving me an hour of your day to be part of this session. As Ola was saying, I'm proud to be a part of the OU's history. I'll explain more obviously through the session how I got to this point where I am at now. But I'm really excited to be doing this session and speaking with you guys.

What I will say is there is going to be a Q&A part at the end, but if there's anything that I say during the session and you feel like you need to ask the questions specifically to something I've just said, please, feel free to use the meeting chat and just to type something. Ola will be

looking at that. So, if there's a question that he thinks maybe I should answer this now instead of waiting to the end, he'll flag me and let me know and I'll answer any questions that you guys may have.

So, for today's session, there's literally just a couple of things I'm going to be talking about. So, an introduction of course, my journey before I got to the OU. So how I actually stumbled into leaving a Brick university as they call it and studying at the Open University. My time at the Open University, some of my issues should I say that study, work balance which I'm sure some of you may have experienced already and how I overcame that. My top tips. My graduation, which is obviously the part that everybody looks forward to. And then of course, finishing off with a Q&A.

So, just to get the session started, I'm going to ask you guys a question. You can type in the chat, feel free to be as honest as you want. But Ola if you go to the next slide for me, I just want you guys to think just by looking at these pictures that are going to come up, who or what kind of person would you say I was. So here are a few pictures. I just want you guys have a look and just write down some things you may already think of me just based on these pictures. Don't worry I won't take offense to anything anyone says. I just want to use this as kind of like an icebreaker.

So, if you feel free just to type or just give a minute or so you guys go ahead and type in the message. Great, so I can see sporty comes up a lot. Confident, supportive, energetic, engaged, optimistic, I like that one. Leader, successful, interesting, team player, happy.

Sociable, a winner, role model, resilient, OK perfect. Thank you, guys, so much. So, I'm not going to answer that question straight away. It's just interesting to see what you guys have typed. Hopefully by the end of this session, you'll know why I've asked you guys this question.

But thank you so much for writing those comments there. It's great to see you guys engaging.

OK so I'll start with my journey. So, I guess the most important thing to start with is school.

School was very, very difficult for me. I always knew I love sports. I always knew I was going to do something within the sports industry, but academically I really, really struggled. I struggled with reading, I struggled with math, I struggled with anything that required me to take information from texts, and no one really knew why from an early age unfortunately I was labelled as just being lazy. Or she doesn't want to read, she doesn't want to take part, she doesn't want to engage. The only thing I seemed to strive at was the extracurricular activities.

All the stuff that happened outside in the playground like I said sports, music, art, loved those.

So school was very difficult for me. I never actually had any aspiration at all to go to university. In my head I was just going to do primary school, secondary school, maybe college, and that was about it. Because unfortunately I was in an institution so to speak where I didn't really have many teachers who believed in me when it came to the academic side. In regard to taking part in sports and being successful in competitions and stuff, great, but in the classroom not so much. And that kind of label stuck with me for a really, really long time.

So, by the time I got to secondary school and my GCSEs came up in year 10, I was not interested at all. I had a very low self-esteem, and I didn't think my GCSE mattered because I didn't think I was going to do well anyways. It's not until I met my English teacher, a lady called Miss Robertson, she's retired now, but she became my English teacher in year 10 and I remember we were reading a story called *Of Mice and Men*. I'm sure many of you have heard of that novel before. And she used to do this thing where everyone in our class had to read a page out loud. I absolutely hated it, absolutely hated it.

And every time it would come to me, I'd be the slowest person to get through my page. And we used to do a couple of mock exams and stuff with her and that's when she actually noticed it in me that I was dyslexic. Being dyslexic herself, she saw the signs in me, so she called my mom in and I remember thinking I was getting in trouble for something. Because up until that point, every time my mom came into school it was always because Allana hasn't done this or Allana hasn't done that, or she hasn't handed in her homework, or it hasn't been to a good standard.

So, I was thinking, here we go again, another meeting about to get in trouble. It actually was the breakthrough I needed. Thanks to Miss Robertson, I was able to get tested, and I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was 15. And I passed both my English GCSEs in year 11 and I never would have done that if I never got the help and support from her as a teacher. And that was the start of me realizing that sometimes when it just takes somebody just believing in you just a little bit, it can actually push you to achieve more than you think you're capable of doing at the time.

So, my GCSEs weren't great. I got, if I remember the top of my head, I think I got four A to Cs. I got three Ds and two Es. So, on paper, my GCSEs were terrible. They were just enough to get into college, there wasn't even enough to get into my school sixth form. My school sixth form required five A to Cs, I only got four, so I had to leave my secondary school which had a sixth form college and find a college elsewhere.

So, although I kind of overcame that hurdle, OK now I've got dyslexia, it became a bit of a burden at first. Because once I got to college, it was more of a I have dyslexia and a part of

me maybe possibly use it as an excuse to just not be engaged in studying at all. So, although I went to college to study sports, again I was in a very big college, I was going to an adult college which I don't think suited me at the time.

So, within my college setting, I was 16 at the time, there was people in my college or in my class should I say they were 25, maybe some people around 18, 19. So everyone was coming in at different points in their life. So, I didn't take college seriously the first-time round, and of course I came out after two years with absolutely nothing. The only thing I came out with was that I retook my math GCSE and passed.

So again, back at square one. I ended up finding a sixth form college a bit further out from where I lived. So, I lived in Southwest London, and it took me about 40, 45 minutes to get to my college each day. But it was the best decision I ever made. It was more structured like school, so we had like parents evening and stuff like that. So, they were very engaged in my education and made sure that was relayed at home. I had a one-to-one teacher as well for my dyslexia, and I ended up coming up with three Bs.

So again, that was right back I was like, great, I'm back. I know I'm doing; I want to study sports; I was motivated now. I'm going to go for university and just like everyone else who was doing, I started applying for all these big sports universities, sending in my UCAS application. I want to go to this one, I want to go to that one, I went for open days, I went for interviews, and I ended up going to Canterbury Christ Church University. After my first year, I felt, and I say this now with pride. At the time I never used to say I never admitted that I went to a brick university. I always just skip that part out, but I say it now with pride because if I didn't fail that first year of university, I never would have ended up at the OU.

So, I was studying a sports degree and I remember going to my lectures sometimes and for example one of the modules on my degree was sports psychology. Now I didn't realize at the time until I started at brick University that just because you're studying sports, certain modules crossover with other degrees. So, when I would go for my psychology lecture in the morning, it would be myself and those on my degree, but also people from other degrees who were studying psychology as well. So, by the time you look, you're looking at 6, 7, 800 students in one lecture theatre with your lecturer up front standing there with the slides behind him or her and clicking away and you're just supposed to keep up and take notes.

Now, for me I can't study like that. Yes, that might be also part of my dyslexia, but I also think that there's different ways that people can study, and I really struggled with taking in the notes. And also, I found it very daunting to put my hand up and say, excuse me I don't understand that, or you would you care to explain.

Because if you imagine there's 800 people in your lecture theatre, you're that one person who puts your hand up or asks the question, sometimes you just don't want to do it, so I didn't. I strayed away from answering any questions whatsoever and I struggled. I really, really struggled. The one thing that kept me going through that year at university is obviously, I was playing football for the university team, and I absolutely loved it. So that kept me going and I made some great friends but academically again I was struggling.

So, when the exams came up, of course I failed, I failed my first year of uni. I passed two modules, which one was my sports coaching and the other one was sports massage. The rest I absolutely failed and didn't have enough to carry me through to my second year. So, I came home, and I was just like, I'm not doing this anymore. It's not for me, university is not for me, I'm just going to go out into the work field I'm going to find a job hopefully maybe in sports and go from there.

And it was my mom that told me about the Open University. Not too sure how she knew about the OU, I'd never heard of it before, but she said to me, why don't you go and have a look and see if they offer any courses or some thinking in the field that you were interested in. And I was just like, I'm not too sure how this works. What do you mean you actually don't physically go? I never got the concept of not actually going in, how does it work? And I remember going onto the website and requesting a prospectus which came to my home, and reading through all the stuff that the Open University provides and I thought to myself, well why not?

And I've tried everything else, I've tried the norm, and I used that very loosely, the normal way of studying or getting a degree. So, I said to myself might as well give it a shot. So, I did, and I signed up to the OU, and obviously now I can say it's one of the best decisions I ever made. But at the time, I was very hesitant, and I had a lot of reservations about how this would work and whether it would be for me or whether this was going to be something that, again, another thing that I have tried, and it didn't come out to anything.

Through the education system I'd always like I said, been labelled as lazy, I didn't do well in my GCSEs, I went to college once and failed. I went to college again and it went well. But then I went to university and felt like everything seemed to be stop start, stop start, and I thought to myself, well why is this going to be any different. If anything, it's possibly going to be worse because I'm now being trusted to be responsible enough to study independently.

Whereas when you're going to college or when you're going to brick universities, you're studying in groups or people that you're interacting with. And I'm quite a social butterfly myself, I like to be around people. And I thought to myself, well, how is this going to work. But another side of me just thought to myself, well, what have I got to lose? I've tried everything else, and it's not worked, so let's give it a shot. So, the degree I signed up for was, all I was

saying was the sports coaching and fitness degree. And I thought to myself, OK I had a look online, I read through the perspectives of what I'd be covering, I thought to myself, this really interested me so, yeah, I signed up.

So once I signed up and registered and got everything sorted with my student finance, it was all mainly about understanding the initial concept. So, I signed up to register for the upcoming October. So that was 2013, don't quote me, but it was the summer of that year, and the October was when my degree started. So, between then on October, I was coaching, I've always been a sports coach.

I started off as a volunteer when I was 16, I went back to my old secondary school and was working with my old PE teacher who was one of those teachers who I got on really well with. And that just gave me experience and just learning the basics of the sports industry, what is it like to coach, what is it like to pack away equipment, set up equipment, get players motivated, x, y and z.

So, by the time I started at studying at the Open University, I was coaching part time with an external sports company who would send their coaches to different schools that they had contracts with. So, during that summer, I was working as a coach doing summer camps. And I would spend my free time just getting myself ready and understanding the initial concept of how it would work. Then everything went through my registration and then I started to receive my study materials.

Now when my study materials came, that is when I got very nervous. I remember a big brown box came and it had all my books in it that I needed for that year for all the modules that I was taking, and I just saw loads of words and I thought to myself, what have you signed yourself up for. This is exactly why I didn't want to do; I think I explained at the start, I struggled very, very hard we've taken information from text, especially when it's just a book of text. And all these books came at once and one was for this module and another one was for this module, and I think to myself, I don't think this is the right idea.

So again, I started to talk myself out of it. Maybe it's not too late to pull out, maybe this isn't for you, you don't have to do this, what's the point, you fell so many times before, just give up. Lucky enough, for me I come from a very supportive home and my mom is a firm believer that you don't know until you try. So, it was very encouraging having her behind me, and she just said to me look, just give it a go and see take one module at a time, see how you go and go from there.

I think another thing that actually gave me a little bit more security was the fact that the OU allows you to study at your pace, and that was something that I never had before. So, one of

the things that I understood when I was registering and getting all the information from the OU was that it doesn't have to be at the speed of everyone else, you can take breaks if you need to, you can come back to a module if you need to, it doesn't have to be full on or straight away.

So, with having the support at home and knowing that I had that essential safety net with the OU, I was like, OK, let's go for this. So, one of the things that I had to get myself familiar with were just grasping the online lectures. So, I'm not too sure of anyone here who's listening or watching has been to a brick university before, but it's very different in the concept of waking up, packing your bag and going to a lecture hall, sitting down, listening to your lecturer or taking notes, maybe passing other students in the library x, y, and z. This is very much; everything is on your computer screen.

And that took me a while to understand that concept, that concept of signing in for my lectures and making sure that I have peace and quiet around me at a particular time to take in information. But once I got into the swing of things, it was literally amazing how much more interactive I could be with, not just my lecturer, but my fellow students on my online lectures.

I remember- I can't remember what module it was, but one of my lectures was like 7 o'clock every Tuesday evening. And I remember coming home from work, getting myself sorted, having dinner going on to my lecture. And the first thing that my lecturer would always do, which is asks everyone how their day was, something that I'd never had before. In a brick university, everything's very fast paced, you have to get through this amount of work by this period of time. And unfortunately, you miss that sometimes that interaction with your lecturer whether you feel like they actually know you.

So once I grasped how my online lectures worked, I actually really looked forward to signing in. And sometimes you sign in and you've had a really long day and you're tired and you're just trying to get your work done, you maybe don't really want to interact for using your microphone. And what I loved is that you had the option of maybe just typing or literally just sitting and listening. I never had that before where you felt comfortable enough to truly just be yourself, truly just be that studier that you wanted to be.

So once I passed those online lectures, everything just really flowed. I was able to organize myself whereby I could structure where my lectures were, understand what I'd be looking in that particular session. And like I said, one thing I use really well was that the conversations in those online lectures were amazing. People would sometimes ask questions that maybe I was already thinking and just by them typing it or putting their hand up and using their microphone, you were able to just have a really good interactive session even by not being in the same room with somebody.

So, I remember my lecturer in one session saying that everyone should really go online and use the forums, but prior to studying at OU, I wasn't really a forum person or go online and type or read or anything like that. But the success from the online lectures encouraged me to go into these forums.

And like I said, you never know when-- you sometimes when you're in a situation where you feel like I don't understand this or this is not working, you kind of have that feeling that it's just you, simply just you. You're the only one going through that, you're the only one who's stuck, and you start to feel like a little bit disheartened should I say, in the sense you think, well, it's just me but these forums were absolutely fantastic.

I'd go on to forums and just type into the search box something that I was struggling with and they would come up, these chats would come up, these groups would come up or people on the same courses as me or people even on different courses but was having the same problems or they're struggling with the same situation, TMA's or deadlines, the stresses, the work life balance and one thing I would say to you guys listening today is use those forums, be confident in knowing that no one's going to judge you. Everyone is a student; everybody has a story and everybody is at a point based on that story and their journey that they've been through.

So, use those forums, be confident in maybe sharing just a little bit. You don't have to divulge and share and think if you're not confident enough to, but I always believe that a problem shared is a problem halved. And I never understood the value of these forums until I started to use them. So, I say reason why I touched upon forums is, during my study at Open University, I sadly had a bereavement in my family. And I had to leave the country because the bereavement was abroad and I had to go with my mom and my sister and attend the funeral, she sadly lost her brother.

And by having that open line of communication from the very start with my lecturers, I was able to touch base with them and just share what I was going through. And the first thing that I would point out is that the most important thing in the conversation between me and my lecturers was the situation. They didn't even talk about my study until further on down the line, they just wanted to know whether I was OK, how was I doing, how was my family doing.

And I never had that before, through primary school, secondary school college, where I can refer back to that thing where I said I was kind of labelled as lazy or not interested and not really took the time out to ask me if I was OK or how I was feeling, I was now as an adult receiving this in my study world. And it just made me feel that, oh my gosh I can literally just put pause on my study for a while, go and deal with this family bereavement and come back

and know that I can pick back up where I left it and knowing that I've had the support of my institution behind me. It's little things like that that makes you want to continue with your studies.

And I think as OU students, we sometimes don't even realize how blessed we are to have those things around us because like I said, maybe some of you have experienced a brick university before, maybe some of you haven't, but it's very rare that you get that. Even in the work industry sometimes, it's very rare that you get that. So, when you find that, especially in something so important as you studying for a qualification that's going to benefit your future, it makes a massive difference.

So, communication with your lecturers is key, like please take my advice in saying be open. If anything, that you may be going through, anything that you may be struggling with, please don't feel that you are alone in that situation, whatever it may be, you it's something very minute so why am I going to bother somebody with it, but that's what your lectures are there for essentially. That's what the forums are there for, so use them.

Ola was a fantastic lecturer for me and very supportive even to the point where after I graduated, we've still very much been in contact and that's great to have. I wouldn't even be able to present to you guys today if it wasn't for me still having that line of communication with Ola. And we've never met in person, so look how amazing that is, everything's been through a screen, but I feel like Ola knows me more than some of my teachers that I had in school who saw me every day. So, use your forums, use your communication with your lecturers because it's going to make a difference to your studying.

TMA's, I'm sure everybody knows those three letters very well. My first TMA I was still in that headspace of being very blase about deadlines. And I believe that TMA's have taught me something so much about being organized and not-- I procrastinate over everything, it's still something I'm still trying to do. If I have a deadline for Friday, I have a very bad habit of saying to myself on a Wednesday I've still got one more day.

But my TMA's taught me I couldn't do that. I learned that the hard way should I say, the first couple of times where honestly speaking, I probably could have got a high percentage on my TMA's than I did. But once I fell in love with the OU and fell in love with studying, I committed myself to putting more into my study, putting more into my work. And like I said, based on what I was saying with the whole forums and communication thing, you give and receive like you give and take. And I found with the support you get for the OU, you want to do well, you want to do better because you know that there's people behind you in your corner who want to see you succeed.

So, my first couple of TMA's I was very much blasé about it or I'll submit it last minute or finish it last minute or that one where I'm cramming it in at 2, 3 o'clock in the morning trying to get done and submit it before I go to work in the morning. And I realized I was short-changing myself. I had become a student of this great institution, which I don't think is highlighted enough by the way, the amazing institution, the OUS.

And I was short-changing myself based on where I had come from. That self-fulfilling prophecy like they say where somebody had continuously told me in the past. I remember one of my teachers saying to me, you're never going to get your GCSEs and all of that stuff. But I had to remember where I was now. So, for any of you who have struggled within the past of studies or education, please don't let that define where you are now. The fact that you are a OU student means you have faith and belief in yourself that you've signed up, registered, or have started your studies with the Open University.

That is the start, you're not defined by where your journey has brought you to. If anything, where your journey has taken you has helped you become the person that you are, but please do not be defined by any of those as people call them mistakes. I don't really see them as mistakes or downfalls, I just see them as life lessons. So, I would say with your TMA's, you apply yourself the way you would want-- how can I put this?

Everyone looks forward to graduation, we all do. That's the end goal, we want to wear our cap and gown. But think of that moment, when you put it on, how do you want to feel when you put it on? Do you want to feel like, OK, yes I've graduated, but if only I may be done a bit more, you don't want to have that feeling. You want to put it on knowing that you put your heart and soul into your studies, and this is the reward you've got for your hard work.

So, with your TMA's, apply yourself. Make sure that you put 100% in. And whenever you are struggling, please use the forums, use the communication with your lecturers. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to share something that may have worked for you because it might work for some of your fellow students. That's the beauty of the Open University, is everybody's in the same boat and everybody is here to help each other.

So, I just want to touch upon the whole study work balance. And I was doing a little bit of research this week and I came across this article on The Independent. And it said that only half of all UK graduates are working in a field that relates to their degree after leaving University. And it says in addition, 96% has said they switch careers by the time they reach the age of 24.

I'm 31 and I've had the pleasure, should I say, of working in my industry ever since I left school, I've always worked in sports. My youngest sister, she's 27 and she went to university,

she went to a brick university, and she did a degree in fashion and business marketing. She doesn't work in that industry. Now that's not me saying that the OU is better than her university, but what I found was she studied full time. She did three years, she studied full time, she graduated. And what she was struggling with when she started to look for work was this work experience.

A lot of employers were like, great you've done your degree, you've got your first-class degree or your two one degree, whatever it may be, but you don't really have a lot of experience. So, we'd love to have you, but maybe we'll start you down here or sorry we can't offer you a job right now because this person who had come in is more experienced than you. And it poses the question of, how do we get the balance between that study and work balance? How do we get that balance?

Now when you go to a brick university, I remember my first year at Canterbury, I couldn't find a part time job. That was probably the first year I wasn't working at all. Because the way my timetable was set up, I think I had lectures on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The only day I didn't have a lecture was Wednesday, and that's when you played your team sports, and I would come home on the weekends. So, there was no way I could work, there wasn't enough hours or days for me to be able to have even a part time job.

So that year I didn't work. So, when I look back, I think if I'd stayed and done the three years, would I have had the opportunity to have had that work life balance which should put me into the position that I'm in now, which I will speak more about shortly. But I think have a look at our article and just have a look at what it says. I'm just going to click on the next slide, which just continues on from this where it says that there's a debate about-- it's another great article for you guys to have a look. But there's a debate about that whole qualification versus experience.

And for me, personally, I think as OU students or as past OU students, we were in the best position possible to have that balance between studying our qualification and gaining experience and what we're studying. I also feel that the experience in the work industry will enhance your studies. I was studying in a sports degree at the time of the Open University and working part time as a coach, and I was able especially when I was doing more of my practical module, I was able to relate and put into practice what I was studying, which actually meant the quality of the work I was producing for my TMA's was better. Because I had a better understanding of what I was reading, what I was learning, what I was taking in.

Brick university students don't have that luxury unfortunately. It's very rare that they have the chance or the opportunity to be working and studying, it's usually one or the other. So as an OU student, you are in the best position to really go out there and put what you are studying

to work, so to speak. Get a taste for the industry that you're studying to work in, get a taste for what you like, what you don't like, what you're interested in, what you'd like to explore a bit more, and be honest with your employers. The school that I am at now was actually the school I was at when I was an external coach.

So just a quick brief story, I was working for a sports company who would employ coaches such as myself and put us in different schools around South London. The school that I'm at now full time, that was one of the schools I was at. And they approached me and said, we've got a full-time position coming up and we'd love you to just be with us as a school and leave this company, which I did. I left the external company I was with when I just worked for this school.

But one of the things I was very honest and open with in my interview with them was that I was a student, I was studying. I explained to them I was an OU student and what that looked like, what my schedule was like when I was studying x, y, and z. I mean it was a school, so I did get the school holidays off, but I also just said to them, look, in regard to the work week, this is what my week looks like. If we can maybe work around how many clubs, I do a week and stuff so I can get home in time for my study and stuff like that. Even to the point where during some of my hours at work teachers are given what's called PPA time, which is time to go off and plan your week, they would literally timetable time for me to go off and study.

So, by being open and transparent with my employer, that line of communication meant they understood where I was at when they offered me the role. And I understood that, yes, I had a job, and I was committed to my job, but my job also understood my studies. Now I'm not saying that every employee is going to be like that, I'm very blessed that the school was very supportive but be transparent. Be very honest and open that you are a student.

Please don't let people overlook that because you study from home that your studies are less important than somebody at a brick university, not at all. Be honest and open with your employers but I would say, try and source some experience of work experience in what you're studying. Whether it's part time, full time, fit it around your OU schedule, fit around your study schedule. But once you get your degree, the fact that you're going to have your degree in one hand and your experience in another is going to put you in such good standing when you are either going out there on your own, starting something on your own, or going into employers and saying, I'm looking for a job.

The OU gives you that flexibility to do that. And that's where that debate comes in. What's more important? The qualification or the experience. I personally think they both carry weight, but if you're in a position where you can have both, you're going to be able to apply for more jobs or experience more in life. Instead of wondering, oh my gosh, I've spent so much time on

my studies, and I haven't really experienced anything in the industry at all. Or you've got all this experience and you want to apply for this job but they're saying, we only take from graduates up. And you think to yourself, now I've got to go all the way back into study.

So as OU students, you are so lucky to be in a position where you can have best of both worlds so to speak. And I would use that, use that to your advantage. And talk to your lecturers about any people that they know in the industry who are looking for employers. I will share my information about my sports company which I'll tell you guys more about in a minute and what I'm looking for. If anyone's looking for work experience or stuff like that, that's how you use that. Use your forums, communicate with people, but go out there and get that experience to back up your qualification because you're in the best position to do that.

So just going to touch on some of my top tips. So, one of my main top tips is identify what type of learner you are. It's really important for you to know that. I'm a visual learner, I'm somebody who likes to watch something or interact with something, physically do it to understand how it works and how it takes. And that's going to be important for your studies because by understanding what type of learner you are, you can make the decisions on how long are you going to need to complete your degree or what kind of modules are you interested in taking.

You might be doing an open degree and not necessarily something that's structured around sports. How are you going to choose your modules? You're going to choose them based on the type of learner you are. Please don't be influenced by everyone else on what they're doing. My journey and your journey are completely different, and that's going to determine what your interests are, where your interest lies. So first top tip is just identify what type of learner you are and be proud of that type of learner.

I wear my dyslexia badge now with pride, whereas before I didn't, I was embarrassed by it. I thought it meant I was stupid or slow, I hate those words by the way anyways. But that's what I thought it meant, whereas now I wear that with pride. I'm dyslexic, it just means that I take information differently, I learn differently. So, identify what type of learner you are, be proud of that type of learner you are, and use that to help you with your studies.

I would say my next tip would be make a decision about your study time based around your worst-case scenario. Now I say worst case because as humans we like to base everything on the best possible situation, the best-case scenario. But life doesn't happen like that. We say to ourselves, well, I work two days a week, so I've got three days and a Saturday, so maybe four where I can study. But life doesn't happen like that unfortunately. You might get to the weekend and you're absolutely tired, do you have a day to recharge, do you have a self-care day where you don't do anything but just maybe binge watch something on TV or go out and

have a walk or exercise, whatever it is you do that recharges your batteries, you have to count that as a day.

So, whether you're studying full time or part time, make sure it's based around your life and something that is going to allow you to have balance. Don't overdo it. Don't overexert yourself, don't burn yourself out at both ends because at the end of day by doing that, one, you're not going to get the best out of your studies, and two, you're not going to enjoy it. And if we're not enjoying what we're doing, we're not going to put our all into it. I think I was saying to you guys at the start, with my TMA's I had that very blase attitude of I'm just going through the motions, and it reflected in the results I was getting.

Once I got that balance right and I said to myself, I'm committing this day, this day, and this day to my studies, this day to football and whatever, it was better. I was getting better results, I felt better about myself, I was more positive about my studies. So please make a decision based on that worst case scenario. What's the worst possible time that you have, and base it around that.

Be transparent with your tutors. I think I touched upon it earlier, but be transparent. Introduce yourself, explain maybe a little bit about yourself and your background and where you're coming from and why are you studying and allow them to know a little bit more about you. So, they understand that if you do stumble or come across any problems, they understand a little about you. Like I said, I had an amazing tutor-pupil relationship. Ola was one of my tutors which you can tell by even just being able to present this now and when I got to that situation with my family, when I lost my uncle, I felt comfortable that my tutors understood where I was coming from, and they supported me. So be transparent with your tutors, just introduce yourself. Let them know a little bit about yourself.

Embrace your struggles. That's really important because I think it's very easy for people to celebrate success and to give you a round of applause when you do something well, but people don't always see all the struggles that you went through to get to that point. When I graduated, you post something on social media and everyone puts their likes and their comments but it's not everybody that knew that I struggled with dyslexia, or I was disheartened, or depressed, or didn't even want to go to university or threw in the towel.

When I got to that point where I graduated, I had to really look back and say, look, I head to embrace those struggles. I had to say to myself, it happened, how do we bounce back from it? When you're struggling, the only way is up. You can't get any worse than the situation that you're in. So, embrace it. Embrace the moment that you're in because when you reflect, those are going to be the moments where you say to yourself, I overcame that. And it's going to help you in your life once you leave OU, once you go into the work industry, whatever

ventures you might take yourself on, you're going to notice that if you ever come into a struggle again or a problem, you're going to be able to overcome because you've been there before. So, embrace them.

Like I was saying to you guys, use the forums, they're amazing. And celebrate every success, even the little ones. And I know that sounds weird, but sometimes a success may be just turning up to your online lecture. Now I know that sounds so silly because you think, well, that's what you're supposed to do but life happens. And the whole reason that we're studying through the Open University because the brick university doesn't work for us, our lives doesn't coincide with how their structure is.

So, you showing up to your online lecture might be a big thing for you that week. You might have had the worst week ever and not everybody knows; your tutor might not even know. Those people in your lecture don't know because they don't know you like that; you guys are just study peers, or they don't understand what goes on behind closed doors. So, you attending that online lecture today might be a big success because of the wretched week you had or the really bad day you had.

So, embrace your struggles but celebrate every little success. Be proud of yourself because you overcame that or be proud of yourself because you got a better score in this TMA than you did in the last one. Those are what's going to keep you going and going to motivate you to carry on and pursue your studies further.

So, this was my graduation. My cap and gown day as you can see, I'm beaming with pride, it was a great day. What was weird was because everything was on a screen until graduation.

My graduation was at Barbican centre in London, and it was crazy, you just see all OU students and people and the chancellor and everything and you're thinking, wow like this person behind the screen now has a face and he has a voice and they're actually a person like me. And it was a great day. It was an amazing day, my family was there, I even had one of my cousins she flew over from the states and she came over and celebrated because they understood the journey that I had been on and how hard it was for me to just get to this point.

My memory that stayed with me from this day was I actually was sitting next to somebody who studied a business degree, never met him in my life and we had the best conversation.

And literally it sticks with me because for me that defines the Open University. He asked me what my journey was like, how did I get onto the degree, how did I find it? We laughed and joked about the TMA's and deadlines, and it was so nice because up until that point I never

knew who he was. I would have walked past him a million times in the street not even knowing that we both studied at the same university.

And just by being there on the same day for graduation we ended up talking and just sharing our experiences and that's what the OU is about. Different people from different walks of life, all coming together for the same goal, which is to get to this point of graduation and celebrate in how hard you studied to get there.

And when I walked across the stage and received my degree, it was so surreal moment for me. I couldn't believe that I got to that point. It was like flashbacks of me being like I was just going to be a sports coach. And I know that sounds very-- what's the word I'm looking for, there's more to life than titles and stuff but that wasn't for me. Like I said, my younger sister she breezed through education. She got 10 GCSEs A to C, she got amazing A-levels then she went to university.

She got a great degree, and I was kind of just picked a pottering behind her, and as the older sister I felt like very dejected. Low self-esteem about it and walking across that stage and seeing my family stand up and clap for me and fellow students clapping for me as well it was like I did that. And you have this feeling of pride that I can't really put in towards. You guys will all experience it because I have no doubt that you guys will all get to this point. But just have the belief that this will be you, just believe in yourself, believe in your struggles.

But like I said, celebrate the little successes and really use everything that the OU has to offer, and you guys will definitely get to this point, and I will be one of those people who will be liking everything on social media when I see the celebrations of graduation and seeing people enjoying the special day.

So, I graduated in 2016 and the OU you just gave me a sense of self-belief that I'd never had before. And I was like, I've always wanted to have my own sports company, something that I've always thought about but never thought I could really execute. And when I graduated, I was like, I'm going to try this, and I went and travelled for a bit. So, I went and I coached in the States for a few months and then I coached in Canada a few years later just to get a sense of what they were doing over there.

And the school I was at the time as a sports coach, they offered me a full-time role and I became senior coach which was deputy head of sports. And just by the traveling and then getting promoted in work, I started to then pick up all the skills and experience in working with like-minded people to start my own thing. And I started my own company which was called Project Ace Sports.

So, the word Ace is actually my football name. In football no one really has the time to say Allana, it's too many syllables, so my name got abbreviated very quickly and Ace just stuck, and it's been my name in football for as long as I've been playing. I've been playing since I was 17, and so I decided to create my own company called Project Ace Sports which is the picture of me and my team in the gray jumpers and the idea of my sports company is to give back to my community through sports. I think sports is such a valuable tool for things like self-esteem, and confidence, and learning how to communicate with people and work as part of a team.

And unfortunately, there's been so many cuts across the UK where there's not a lot of sports happening for kids unless they're playing in school and schools are very stretched in what they can do. There's not a lot going on that kids can get into. So, I started my sports company in 2017 and I won't say it was a walk in the park because I'd be a liar. I started with three kids, a bag of footballs at my local park. My football club now has 55 players, I have a team of coaches, we now offer basketball and taekwondo and holiday clubs.

So, I would have never had the perseverance to continue to push through with my company if it wasn't for the Open University, and that's not a lie at all that is 100% the truth. If, I never studied at the Open University, Project Ace Sports would never exist. I would have just been continuing going for the motions. I wouldn't have learned enough about myself to think that I had the capability of doing something like that.

I've continued to play football, so that picture of me in the orange shirt. I now play for a team called Walton Casual Ladies who are based down in Hampton Court. But my football experience I've played for QPR, I played for Crystal Palace, I played for AFC Wimbledon and what's amazing about football, football is like my escape from life. I love the sport, I love playing, but what's amazing about it is that you meet like-minded people, but you also meet people from different industries. I have friends who are nurses, doctors, electricians, all of that stuff and you all share your stories about your journey and where you've been.

And every time I mentioned the Open University people are, oh what's that? What was that? I've seen an advert on TV and then it's my opportunity to share with them the amazing journey that is the Open University. So, where I am now in my life is future project. So, I'm just trying to continue to grow my company. I'm still at the school that gave me a chance when I was a part time coach. They recently made me diversity lead, so I'm working very closely with them on stuff in regard to making the school a better community. It's a private school, so there's some things that they need to work on and I'm still coaching in sports.

So, did I ever think at 31 I would be here? Not a chance, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. And I just hope that me sharing with you guys today is just inspiring you to believe in

yourself and believe that it's never too late to start something or do something or take something on we all have the capability to do something that is within us.

So, I asked you guys a question at the start of the session, which was who Coach Ace is and first of all, thank you for the lovely comments that you guys typed in. But the answer to the question is I'm just a loner. I am like every single one of you here today in this session. Some of you were typing leader, happy, role model. Yes, we could say that, but I'm also somebody who struggled with my hidden disability. I'm also somebody who's been through depression, I'm also somebody who suffered low self-esteem and that's what I want you guys to remember is that it's very easy for people to look at stuff on social media or look at people around us who are doing well and think, oh my God, they're amazing and I will never be like that. And that's not true, they've been through their stuff too, everybody has.

So, embrace everything that you go through, the highs, the lows, the ups and downs, embrace them. Because you guys sit and stay listen to me talk for the last hour or so about my journey and I'm hoping that it's inspired you, but your journey will inspire those around you. So be proud of where you are right now. Be proud of how hard you've worked to get to where you are now, but don't stop there. You have so much more that you can give, just believe in yourself.

And it's very important to use the OU as your support system, that's what they're there for.

That's why you guys signed up, I don't believe anyone registered for the OU just because they feel that well, I might as well kill some time and study. That doesn't make any sense, you registered for your degree, you registered for your studies because there's something else you want to do. There's another goal you want to achieve. So, who is Coach Ace? I am a learner who was an OU student, a proud OU student. And because of the OU, I'm able to be where I am right now and ready to kick start on to maybe some more projects in the future.

So, thank you so much for listening to me.