Hello and welcome. We’re at OU Students’ HQ, Milton Keynes and today I’m with Cath.

Hi. I'm Cath Brown, I'm president of the Students' Association. And probably more importantly for this I've been an OU student for ten years now and I've done two and a half degrees so far. I'm an OU addict sorry.

OU addict, I love that. So I work in the student support team but I'm also a student and I started studying in May and I actually have a TMA due on the 6th December, so what we’d like to do is talk about how to approach your first TMA.

Oh a tense time isn’t it coming up to that ooo!

Yeah definitely.

So we’ve got a few tips I think haven’t we?

Yes. So you've come up with five haven’t you? And if you’d like to tell us a little bit more about those that would be lovely.

Certainly will. So the first one is start in good time. And it sounds obvious doesn’t it that you don't want to be rushing at the last minute and I know some people out there really do rush it at the last minute but that's a bit of a recipe for stress. Is that you?

Oh yeah. I'm getting better.

Good. It’s a bit of a recipe for stress isn’t it really? I mean I understand not wanting to work until you get close to the deadline but if you kind of kid yourself the deadline was like three days earlier then you’ve still got a bit of margin haven’t you? The reason I always say that is not just because it makes you feel stressed and you can't think straight but it's quite good to be able to come back to it a day or so after and just read through and see if you’ve done anything daft.

That's a good tip. Okay. And what's the next one?

The next one, it has to be the really, really important one, it's about talking to your tutor. There are so many students out there who act like they're still at school and their tutor is this really horrible scary teacher who’s coming to get them all the time. It ain't like that, we’re all adults, and they want you to succeed and okay they can't tell you what the answers are but at least if you
talk to them early and say, ‘Look I’m not quite understanding how to do it,’
they may be able to give you a bit of a hint. If you’re really running behind, life
has been against you, they might be able to arrange an extension, but just
get in touch with them early, get to know them, they really, really can be your
best friend at the OU.

Sammi  It’s funny you say that actually because I noticed sometimes that a tutor can
point you to the bits that are crucial for your TMA can’t they?

Cath  Absolutely.

Sammi  And also point you to the resources that the library have, so like how to
reference or how to think critically and how to write critically. So they’re all
useful pointers really that a tutor can help you coping in with those. And what
next?

Cath  Well I think one of the really important ones, in fact I’ve kind of got two
together, is about don’t expect to be perfect. We all want to do our best, we’re
all thinking, oh no I’ve tried so hard for this I want a top mark. But realistically
you’re not going to get 100% very often and realistically we’re all here to
learn aren’t we? We start out we don't know, we’re not an expert about it yet,
so don't expect yourself to be perfect – give it your best but don't beat
yourself up. And the other one is don't compare yourself to others. It doesn’t
matter if someone else there has got 90% so what! That's nice for them, be
glad for them. It’s like suppose you’ve got unfit me here and I decide to start
running – no this isn’t going to happen guys but just imagine okay – now I
shouldn’t get upset if I can’t run as fast as someone who’s been running and
in training for ages, if you like, and it’s the same thing here, you might have
someone else in there and they’ve spent ages and ages and ages on it and
they’ve got all the time in the world, they’ve been studying for years and
years, so what if you don’t get as much as them it doesn’t matter. Just think
about your aims.

Sammi  And focus on your own being, that’s the most important isn’t it?

Cath  Absolutely right yes. And that's the point you need to be realistic, give it your
best, never beat yourself up, don't compare.

Sammi  Brilliant. I love that. I’m going to use that.

Cath  Excellent. Go for it. The key thing about a TMA they’re actually there to learn
from. I know it feels a bit sometimes like someone’s judging us and again you
get very intense about it but the most important thing about any TMA is the
feedback we can get there from your tutor. Now I've seen a few people around and they get the mark and they're a little bit disappointed and they can't face looking at it but the thing to do then is to just give yourself a bit of a break, have coffee, have a nice bar of chocolate or piece of cake, or something stronger if it's that time of day and you feel so inclined.

Sammi We both like gin and tonic don't we?

Cath We do yes. So come back to it in a day or so when you've had a chance to get your disappointment out of your system and then go for it and just read it carefully and read every single little bit of feedback and don't take it personally that mark, that tutor is marking your work they're not marking you and they're not saying you're not an adequate person.

Sammi That's very true yeah.

Cath Yeah, so they're marking your work, look at every single little bit of feedback. Make a note of really important points so you can use them next time. And if you don't get it, you know what I'm going to say, ask your tutor again.

Sammi There you go.

Cath So remember they're on your side, they're there to help you and the feedback is there to help you learn and grow. Imagine if you're learning to drive and your driving instructor is telling you about how to improve your turn in the road, you're going to try and do it aren't you? That's how you're going to get excellent to pass your driving test, you're not going to say, 'No, no, no I'm better.' So make sure you take it on board even if it's a little bit hard to at times. That's really one of those things. But remember TMAs, the main function is to learn from not to be judged but to learn from.

Sammi Fantastic. So actually that feeds nicely into your next tip which is about how to recover when things don't go so well.

Cath That's right yes, I mean you always can recover. It is not the end of the world. There are so many OU students out there and I suspect every single OU student out there has had a disappointing TMA, they've maybe had a disappointing module. I know someone personally who's had a couple of occasions where she's failed a module and she's now doing her doctorate.

Sammi Fantastic.
Cath Yeah there's absolutely no reason to be downhearted if things go a little bit wrong, that's just one of those setbacks that's part of life. And you can do things about it.

Sammi Yeah. So actually there's also services available for when things don't go so well with students isn't there? Could you tell us a bit more about those?

Cath Of course. Well with the OU obviously we’ve got student support teams, so if you think that you’re concerned that things are going quite badly wrong and you want to talk to them as well as your tutor, they're there. We’ve also obviously got the services we have in the Association. So we’ve got our peer support service, and that's all anonymised, there's no reason to feel embarrassed or anything like that, but if you’d like to chat things through with someone who understands exactly how it is to be an OU student that's a really, really useful service. And we’ve relaunched this year haven’t we?

Sammi We have yes. And also it’s really important to say that service is run, well it's delivered by OU students and it’s completely confidential so you won't know who you're talking to and what you say is kept private. And then we also have Nightline.

Cath We do, we’re affiliated to Nightline and that runs at night, like it says, what is it? Is it 6 p.m.? 

Sammi It's 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. through term time, yeah.

Cath Yeah. So you can just phone that up basically, as an OU student you’re in a position to phone that up if you want to have a chat to someone and I think the night works really well because that's often when we do get a little bit stressed – you're sitting there, you're feeling absolutely desperate, you can't get your head around this.

Sammi I guess it’s the time if you’re feeling stressed and you can't sleep then actually that's a great number to call isn't it because then you can relay some of your worries and your anxieties and actually there's someone there to listen to you and help talk through your concerns.

Cath And that's all run by students isn’t it, not all OU students but it's run by students?

Sammi It is that's true yeah.

Cath So people who absolutely get what it’s like to be worried by it.
Sammi: Basically students are amazing, volunteers are amazing, we just need to keep using them services don't we?

Cath: We do and we've got a nice new one from the OU called Big White Wall as well haven't we?

Sammi: We do yeah.

Cath: Which is about mental health issues. And if you've got an OU email you can just sign up to that and it's all online so that's another way to get a bit of extra support. And we've had quite a lot of OU students signing up to that already and we're getting very, very good feedback about how useful it is. So if you're feeling you've got an issue with your mental wellness that might be a really good place to go.

Sammi: Sure. And you can actually access that information through our OU students.com website, so if you go to the student support section and on the dropdown there's a tab called Big White Wall and it's got all the information there about how you can access our service. So actually we'd like to offer you the chance to ask some questions as well. If you do have any, please leave them below in the comments section and we'll try and get back to you as quickly as possible and if we don't know the answer we will try and find the answer and get back to you.

Cath: We certainly will. Thanks for watching.

Sammi: Brilliant. Thank you.

Cath: Bye. Best of luck with that TMA I'm sure you'll do brilliantly.

Sammi: Good luck.