Hi everyone thank you for joining us online. My name is Sam and I work at the Students Association and I'm here today with…

I'm Zana. I'm a second year PhD student based at the campus in Milton Keynes.

Thank you very much for joining us today Zana. So I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about your experience. So you're essentially a PGR, postgraduate research student here at the Open University and what is your research based on?

Yeah I'm undertaking a PhD research project which is a three year funded programme with the OU. My programme is actually quite special because I'm being co-funded by a local hospice to do my research and I'm looking at hospice care locally around the Milton Keynes area.

What hospices are available? Is it Willen Lake something like that?

Willen Hospice is the main adult hospice here.

I only know because I've seen charity shops quite recently. I'm quite new to the area as well. So where is your work taking you as well? Are you quite local then to Milton Keynes or have you been elsewhere or doing your research at other hospices as well?

No I live fairly locally in Buckinghamshire so I can travel in most days. My background isn't end of life care but it's in health, social care-related fields so it was easy to transfer into that form of study.

Excellent. And living quite close then hopefully to Milton Keynes you'll be coming to our conference taking place in a couple of days, as a delegate. It's your first time at conference is that correct?

No I came two years ago and I really, really enjoyed it because of course back then I didn't know I'd be doing a PhD. I was in the process of thinking about applying for these things. But I was an OU student because I had my masters that I got through the OU as a distance learner. So yeah it was great, a great conference, great experience and I thought I'd sign up again and do some volunteering this time to help people that come along to the conference.
Sam: Fantastic. So we’re going to be looking forward to seeing you at conference as well then. So essentially what influenced your decision to come to the Open University in particular and be a postgraduate research student here?

Zana: A couple of reasons. Firstly obviously it’s local which was important to me having children. I can’t really move around the country too much. But also because I’ve had past experience of the OU I think that model of studying and the materials I had before was fantastic. So that really encouraged me to apply. The fact that the OU is quite flexible and open and they seem to be very accommodating for people with a wide range of needs and specialisms. So that just appealed really and that’s why I wanted to come here, which is where I first started off my studies years and years ago.

Sam: And what was your first studies?

Zana: Back in 2001 I did the first undergraduate module in introduction to humanities. I think it was A103 then, it might be 105 now. And I just did it to see whether I could do university level study. I wasn’t sure I would be able to, I was a young mum, two children at home under five and I thought, I need to give this a go; other people have been to university and can do it so why not me. And then I got hooked, doing that module I got hooked.

Sam: And you also went to was it de Montfort University as well? So what were the differences in being an OU student versus being a student there?

Zana: Yeah because then my children started school and I thought I could do this full time, so I signed up for de Montfort which was fairly local so I could get there. The difference well I suppose I expected there to be a much larger workload being a full time student at a so-called ‘proper’ university, I use that in inverted commas. But I was really surprised there was only eight hours a week of lectures and I was like, wow is that all? I was doing that much on part time at the OU and yet this is all I have to do. Yeah I think I found the difference in the quality of materials as well and I don’t want to put de Montfort down it’s a great university but the calibre and quality of the stuff at the OU I think, I think we’re really privileged here in what we’re getting. I thought it was very, very good. I did like that interaction with the students obviously being on a campus with lots of students around and colleagues and the support with studies and getting to meet in the canteen and in the student bar afterwards was great. But when I was doing my masters I did use the forums a lot. I did go to the tutorials. So you still do get to meet other students when you are an OU student, it’s not as isolating as it may feel at first when you just get this box of goodies in the post and think, that’s it, it’s just me and a box of books for another year, you can get to interact with students.
And speaking of interaction with students in particular as well there are postgraduate research students on campus.

There are, there’s several hundred of us and people don’t realise. And it’s quite exciting because a lot of them actually come from overseas so you’re getting to see a lot of international students from all around the world coming here to study which is fantastic. So yeah we are around, we’re just mingled in with a lot of staff so you don’t always know who is a student and who’s staff.

Excellent and you’re quite active with the postgraduate research, or postgraduate student society as well, so what kind of activities have you been up to or what sort of thing are you thinking of doing in the future?

Yeah because anybody who’s a postgraduate student automatically is a member of the postgraduate student society or PGSS and the main thing we have is a Facebook page which is where we interact a lot and you can post messages and chat to people. Because I’m a postgraduate student based on campus doing it full time I’m more focused on doing things locally around Milton Keynes. So we’ve got a barbecue coming up. We had one last year. We’ve done a quiz night. I introduced some international students to bingo.

Wow!

That was quite fun to explain the rules and the terminologies you use in bingo, you know, two little ducks, what does that mean? And I also did a trip over to Bletchley Park which is not very far; it’s about three miles or four miles from here, fantastic history site. And I showed them round and got to see what was going on there during World War II. So we’ve got a few things going on but I don’t run it. It’s not my thing, what I want is for any postgraduate student who wants to do an event or organise an activity or do something they can do it. I’m happy to help them and obviously OUSA as well is there to help us organise and set things up. It’s really just to try and create a community and a feeling of togetherness and to socialise really.

Excellent. And what do you enjoy about being an OU PGR student and what are the challenges as well? What are the top main things that you love and what are the top challenges because I expect there can probably be a whole mixture of those things as well actually?

Yeah I mean being a postgraduate research student I think the main thing is the fact that you get to do something you love for three years. So you’re really focusing down on one particular topic. So as you go through your studies you start off quite broad, like I started with humanities and now I’ve narrowed this
right down to doing a single question about hospice care that I'm really focusing on for three years. So I feel quite indulgent I'll be honest.

Sam    Indulging in your studies.

Zana   And it is a real indulgence that you have to take advantage of because you’re never going to get this opportunity again. I'm very fortunate because I'm being sponsored to do it, so I'm getting funding to do this as well. So I think those are the real privileges of it, of being able to be here in this wonderful academic environment, surrounded by professionals. I've got my own desk and a library of resource and that's just wonderful. The challenges of it are you’re spending three years focused on one tiny subject.

Sam    Right okay.

Zana   So it can become quite daunting. It’s very scary because it’s something you've never done before. You are much more on your own than you would be at undergraduate level or even at the taught masters level. You've really got to think for yourself and try and do this. You've got to end up with 100,000 word thesis of your work and it’s got to be something new that no one’s ever done before. So that's quite a challenge to do. And you’ve always got that in your mind as well. So people liken it to a rollercoaster because you have ups and downs. It really is like that. Some days you are so happy and euphoric that you’re doing this and other days you’re like, why am I doing this? Can I do this? Am I capable of doing this? And I think those are questions that every student has, whether you’re just starting out on an access course or you’re doing a PhD like me, you have those doubts and fears of am I able, can I do this? And the answer obviously is yes you can.

Sam    Absolutely. And essentially I was going to ask if you have any advice for students as well. So adopting something like yes you can attitude?

Zana   Yeah but also it’s taking advantage of everything that's offered to you. When I first started out all those years ago on A103 I joined in on the forums. I went to every tutorial that was offered. I read all the material. I took advantage, you know when you get the timescale of what to do each week, I tried to follow that just to keep on top of things. So it's just using everything that's offered to support you along the way. And of course knowing that there are people there to help if things do go a bit pear-shaped, something happens at home, talk to your tutor, that's what they’re there for. There is flexibility in the OU to help people out in those kind of situations.
Sam: Well so this is my last question then so how could students understand a little bit more about what you do and your research, or how students can be involved in the postgraduate student society?

Zana: Well from the research side you can look up on the OU website and if you go into any department you can find out about research that’s happening there and there should be a list there of students and you can click on each student and we’ve got our own little page...

Sam: Have you?

Zana: ...which tells you a bit about our research and what we’re doing.

Sam: I’m going to stalk you later then as well.

Zana: Yeah absolutely. The other way is to look at the poster competition which is happening on Friday. A lot of students are encouraged to do it. I haven’t taken part this year but I did last year and I won it!

Sam: Well done.

Zana: So you can see the posters of people’s research. So there’s lots of ways you can find out about the research that students do here. The PGSS is looking at the Facebook group really. If there are people listening who are postgraduate students then I’d encourage you to come along and join in, get involved in the conversation.

Sam: Thank you very much Zana.

Zana: Okay thank you.