

Andy Evans: Hello everyone and welcome to episode six of the Association Conversation Station, the official podcast of the Open University Students Association. Remember that this is the place to hear about the things that we do and the things that inspire us. The next few weeks will be big for us here as we welcome a new intake of Open University students and welcome back our existing ones. As a result, we put on Freshers twice a year, a two-week program of events, activities, and chats both face-to-face and online to help new and returning OU students to learn more about the OU, to find out more about the Association, and most importantly of all to connect with each other.

Our forthcoming Freshers Fortnight will take place from the 10th to the 23rd of October. This podcast will look at Freshers and how important it is to the life of our students. You'll hear from Nichola Connolly, one of our student leadership team, Pete Turner our Head of the Student Community, and Tracy Thompson, Chair of the Association's Space Society. Our host is the Association's Project Officer, Georgia Demopoulou.

Georgia Demopoulou: Hello everyone and welcome again to another episode of the Association Conversation Station. This episode's theme is everything to do with Freshers as we are approaching Freshers Fortnight and we're really looking forward to it, really excited. We've got a lot planned and we hope all the students enjoy it as much as we will. I have some really amazing guests with me today. I have Nichola Connolly, Tracy Thompson, and Pete Turner. Welcome, everyone. I'm just going to go around the table, the virtual table as it were, and have you all introduce yourselves, just say what your roles are and how you're linked to the Association. Nichola, do you want to go first?

Nichola Connolly: Hi, everyone. Yeah, Nichola Connolly, I am the faculty Association's rep for well-being, education, and language studies, also a student doing my final year in Primary Education Studies. I'm also involved in other ways with the Association so I'm an online event meetup host. I've done graduation ceremonies, and I also co-host the Northwest meetup and the Young at Heart's clubs I'm a club lead on the Young at Hearts.

Georgia: Wow. Well, that's plenty. That's incredible. What about you Tracy?

Tracy Thompson: Yeah, so I'm Tracy Thompson. I'm a student. I'm studying the M06 which we'll get very used to them soon as students you'll get to recognize those, which is a Master of Physics in the Astrophysics and Space Science. I have changed from the Planetary Science and Astronomy degree this year. How I'm affiliated as regards with OUSA etc, is I'm actually the Chair of the Space Society and have been for over a year now. The society is two years old, so I've been heavily involved in the last few years via the club and the society, so that's how I'm involved.

Georgia: Well, incredible. Thank you, Tracy. Last but not least, Pete?

Pete Turner: Hi, Georgia. Hi, everyone. I'm Pete Turner and I'm Head of Student Community, which is a rather grand title but I lead a little team of staff in the Students Association and we basically head up all the fun stuff. We do Freshers, University Challenge, student meetups, working with post-grad students and those kind of things. We sit in the background while our brilliant volunteers like Nichola and Tracy go ahead and do all the good stuff, the student-facing stuff.

We facilitate those events. One of the big events that we do every year that my team is responsible for is Freshers, which runs usually the last week of September first week of October, and also the last week of January first week of February each year. We run lots and lots of events. We do the marketing, we put stuff together, make sure the text are all right for our online sessions, and, I'm glad to say this year, we're going to do some face-to-face sessions too. That's what I do with my brilliant team.

Georgia: Brilliant. How exciting with the face-to-face as well. Yeah, keep your eyes peeled for that. It might be somewhere local to you as well. Nichola and Tracy, could you please like divulge a bit into what your personal experience is with Freshers? I'll start with you first, Tracy.

Tracy: I have to admit that I didn't really get involved with the Student Association my first few years of study, which is a detriment to me because I've since become involved as when we started the club two years ago. Honestly, the community that we've met, the people we've met, the sense of actually how connected you are as a student and studying is just phenomenal. I didn't really get involved until we started as a club a number of years ago.

How that actually happened was, we were at a space event, a UK conference for space for students interested in the space sector and the very lovely Dr. Hanna Sargent from the OU was giving a talk and there were cheers from different areas of the auditorium, but we realised there are other OU students here. We had no way of knowing so, we then started connecting via social media and we started the club and society and that's how I then became aware of exactly how much the society does with the Freshers and connecting all of the groups and clubs and societies just phenomenal. I, yeah, ashamedly, I didn't know about it till a few years ago when we got involved as a club and a society but now, I shout about it to everybody because it's utterly fascinating and if you can get in from day one, you're never going to regret it.

Georgia: Wow. Well, I totally agree and Freshers is really like a big pivotal point for especially new starting students because it's just such a springboard to so many different possibilities. What about you Nichola, what about your experience?

Nichola: From my experience it's slightly different situations. I did start from the beginning. When I started my studies, I had a really good look around. I was introduced to the Association's website early on in my studies. I got involved in everything and anything that I could. With Freshers, it's just phenomenal experiences it brings students together. You don't realise how many students are out there in the same position as yourself, a sense of community, a sense of belonging, it's fun, it's invigorating, it's inspiring it's just yeah, I shout about it to any student that I meet I say come along to Freshers you'll find out all about being an OU student and you'll have fun you'll meet other students, like-minded students and from other disciplines as well. It's just my experience has been absolutely fantastic of Freshers. I attend both of them, not just one. Both of them, I get involved in both.

Georgia: Getting all stuck in. I love it. A follow-up question to that, how can students get involved with Freshers and why is Freshers such a good opportunity to interact with all these different opportunities?

Tracy: From my point of view, we do study alone and it can feel quite isolating to sit wherever it is that you are sitting and doing your studying be it your kitchen table or you go off to a library or wherever it may be. Being involved in Freshers shows you exactly how large the community is, the student community. Exactly how many clubs and societies there are. If you can't find one that suits you, I will be really surprised. If there's not one there, then you can start one and it's utterly an amazing experience to be involved. You do make friends.

With COVID, unfortunately, a lot of the face-to-face classes had to be put on hold. I've met friends at mathematics face-to-face classes and we are still friends to this day. We have what we call a coffee club and we meet regularly. But through meeting people through Freshers and the society, we're now starting a new coffee club that we're starting with a group of local friends, local to the Midlands, and we're all doing S217 which is the physics,

so we're all starting a little group on our own as well. Again it's these things where you can connect with people and actually take it as far as you like. You can have conversations via forums or via the clubs or you can actually choose to meet face-to-face if you wish to. For me, yeah, it was definitely, go and see what's there and get involved because you won't regret it.

Georgia: Yeah.

Pete: On that, Tracy, and I'm going to bore everybody with this website. If students are unsure about where to go, the first port of call is oustudents.com and from there you'll find links to the timetable for Freshers as it evolves and all the events that run. This is now my 11th Freshers. I've seen it evolve and develop, and a lot of those things, a lot of the sessions that we have are pretty standard issues, they're always there.

But obviously, as our students change and our clubs and societies change, the sessions evolve, and sometimes we have different themes, themes about well-being or quality, and what have you so it's always slightly different. I want to stress also the Freshers we set up for both new students and returning students so that you'll find something for everyone there. Sorry to blabber on a bit but I think what we tried to do with the community to is, there's three things in Freshers. The first one is orientation so that's about what the Association does, how we're set up, who your student reps are, where you can find things and support that you might need.

One is around academic stuff so we'll have some sessions on how to approach your tutor and where to find the resources that you need and to make, for new students, the idea of study or returning to study not as scary as it should be, or as it can be. The last thing we do is things like socials. We'll have lots of sessions where you can pop in and contribute as much or as little as you like. They are mostly online. You don't have to say anything. There'll be a chat box if you want it if you prefer to a chat rather than... You don't have to have your camera on, you don't have to have the mic on.

You can meet other students, hear other students, hear those voices. We run quizzes and socials and competitions, and all the fun stuff that you'll get and there are going to be giveaways as well. That's this year, we're returning to Fresher's Freebies. Look out on oustudents.com and you'll find where you can put your name down for freebies. That's from our point of view, we like to do those orientation, and academic stuff and some social stuff too.

Georgia: I love that. That's a very good summary of all things Freshers that we want to hit every sort of angle. As Tracy was saying, it's really great because even if something's not really hitting the spot for you, it does give you all those ideas. It gets your mind thinking of, okay so these are what's on offer might not be something what I am... It makes you be more adventurous and really branch out and just take initiative on if something is really burning inside your heart that I really want this to have my voice heard, you just go ahead and do it and we can help you facilitate anything that you need really. It really is a wonderful kick starter with a lot of so many possibilities off the back of it essentially.

Going back to you, Tracy, we've mentioned clubs and societies already in this conversation and we know that it is such a huge part of Freshers and the Association as a whole. Could you just tell a bit more about how you got involved with your Space Society and how it's become what it is today?

Tracy: Yeah. I remember we started just after the February Freshers had gone. The meet was in March. Our first official we are a club happened in the September-October Freshers of that year. We, first of all, spoke at the introduction to clubs and societies talk. I think we

ended up with three minutes to talk about ourselves. I was like, no pressure, I've got three minutes to explain everything we do. But it was really good actually.

Basically, all of the clubs and societies have some time to talk about themselves and what they do just to give you a bit of an interest and a bit of an insight into what they do to see if you're interested. That was how we first got involved. But coming on from that what we do now is we actually tailor a particular talk for the Freshers and particular activities for Freshers, so we are really heavily involved in that we will have Fresher competitions which are open to new and returning students.

We give talks, we have guest talks and we will give a talk based on, we invite somebody who we feel could be pretty open. As a space society we are interested in everything space. It's not just satellites and planets. It's law, policy, history, everything you can think of that's related to space we are interested in. As a little sneak peek for our Freshers talk coming up it's actually going to be on the SKA which is the Square Kilometre Array Project and that's a worldwide collaboration project which is headed and has its head at Jodrell Bank. Again, it's showing people how the UK space industry is a huge industry and there's a lot going on there.

The last Freshers we had, we had an OU student, Samuel L. Jackson talking about his work with COAST and PIRATE. Again on many levels, it shows students who are joining and those who are returning what the OU can offer you as a student, how students studying have found their experiences, and what technology we have at the OU.

We find that it's really good to tailor our talks to that as Freshers and it hopefully shows people that, just gives them a little bit of a glimpse of insight in what we do, to come along then perhaps to our website, to find us on social media, just to have that bit more of an interest. But I would definitely recommend that everybody go to the introduction to societies and clubs. It's usually about an hour and then you can just get everybody telling you about what they do. If you see something that's of interest and definitely can pop along and check that club or society out further and join as many as you like.

Georgia: Yeah, it's honestly it's so great and I think picking up from what you said before that you didn't start immediately as a new student. But I think that's the beauty of Freshers that it's suitable for new students and returning students that it's not exclusionary in any way that, oh, no, this is purely for new students starting out. There is no end date for when you can join in so there is that massive beauty about it. I'm just going to go on to Nichola now about the Young at Hearts club and have the same question to you like how did you get involved with Young at Hearts? How did it all start?

Nichola: It started with it for me, I was a member, I was a member of the club and then I came on as a club lead after somebody else left so that's how I got involved. We've run quizzes we've been a little bit quiet at the moment me and Bev Smith both club leads on this and a bit quiet because we've both been extremely busy over the last few months. But that we'll be picking up now. We will be running more socials and we will certainly be doing something for Freshers, so, watch this space.

Pete: It's really fun that Nichola and Tracy always, they don't ever oversell themselves with what they do. They are the glue that keeps our students going. All of the sessions in Freshers will be run predominantly by student volunteers. We're always after new student volunteers, and there'll be a session for introducing you to what kind of volunteering roles are available.

They're a really good way of finding your tribe, finding people who are like-minded, into the same kind of things. Doesn't always have to be an academic thing. Sometimes it can be a

common interest thing and student volunteers are the lifeblood of what the Student Association does. We as staff, we're nothing without you guys and all of the projects and all of the sessions are always led by students and they're led by student needs. Thank you, Nichola and Tracy, and all of the student volunteers for the brilliant work you do.

Tracy: Oh, thanks, Peter.

Georgia: Amen. It is true though. It's very true and off the back of that, students can gain just so much from all these events, activities, clubs and societies. It's so rich with what they can provide. But I don't want to speak for students. I'm going to put it to you guys what you think students can gain from clubs and societies. Tracy, shall I go to you first?

Tracy: Of course, I can speak from personal experience. Being involved, first of all, within the Space Club with which they quickly became the society, I've just met so many people who I've known that are actually doing the same pathways as me and same modules, which is really helpful. But I've also met so many people that are further on in their degrees or just starting and you have this sense of you can support each other and help each other through. Somebody starting a module this year might be, "Oh god, I've just seen the course content and I'm really stressed." There will be somebody who's done that three years ago they're like, "No you're absolutely fine. Don't you worry," or there's somebody going through it with you. Like I say, we're starting a little group because we're all doing S217 now. You can make lifelong friends, although we don't study in a brick university, you can make lifelong friends.

Another thing that I've got from being part of the club and the society is connections to the bigger community so not just within the university but within the space industry. As a member now we can go to places and go, we're really looking to do an event with our society could you help us out? They are like, "Yeah, sure, we'll organize, yeah that's absolutely not a problem." You are getting access to the wider community, and if you are doing your degree looking for employment, I know some people are just doing their education for fun, I'm one of those. But when you say for fun and then you think, what am I doing, that sounds ridiculous, I'm doing a degree for fun. I need a life. But yeah, so there's a lot of students who are doing it just for fun. There are a lot of students who are doing it for a change of careers and to go and wanting to better their job prospects potentially or moving into a different area.

Being part of a club or society will open that up for you and you will see the industry and you will see what opportunities are out there and you just have an opportunity to speak to people and get to know them and connect in better ways and find them via social medias or with the Society, we're very much like, oh, have you followed this person or do you know about this group? Or have you read this book? Or do you know about this company? It's all about sharing more information. I really wish I'd got more involved sooner, I have to say. Because I've made friends, there's been a great study support. You just get this real sense of community that just makes studying so much more fun.

Georgia: I love that. What about you, Nichola?

Nichola: Yeah, so a lot of the points that Tracy has mentioned, I would agree with. But, yeah, a lot of the friends that I have made, that I've met through clubs and societies are lifelong friends and I've met them online because of the pandemic. I'm just now starting to slowly meet them in person so which is great. There's a lot of people that I will, even once I finish my studies, I will keep in touch with through that. It's the connections that you make both internally and externally with other students. It is great to, like you say, different aspects from the student journey. We meet new students, through to students that have actually finished and graduated. Yeah, it's just phenomenal. It really is phenomenal the connections you make and, yeah, it's a really good way to get involved through the clubs and societies, opens

up so many doors for you.

Pete: I think there's one thing that... There are many, many things which being an OU student bring to you, and they're really gloriously things and they are great ways of studying and gives you flexibility and time and all the rest of it. But one of the difficult things that we know that many OU students face is a sense of isolation because you're studying predominantly on your own. Actually getting involved through the Student Association and through Freshers, you'll find ways to study with other people, either formally or informally. You'll begin to make links with people and you'll begin to be part of the community.

We know there's really good research out there that says when a student feels part of the community, whether that's in a brick university, or a distance learning, when you feel part of the community, you stick around for longer and you will succeed more. That's why we're here really. I don't want to get too motherhood and apple pie about it but it really is about, we want you to be around for as long as possible, want your journey to be as successful and as enjoyable as possible. Because if you don't enjoy it, you're going to pack it in, you're going to clear off and do something else.

Actually, that's what we're here for. The undercurrent of what we're all doing here is really making a student's life a brighter place to be. Particularly, we talked about this a lot and Nichola you have first-hand experience with this in terms of the well-being session that runs every Sunday, is that we're here to look after the mental well-being of our students and the physical well-being too of our students. Well-being is a real bedrock of what we're trying to achieve. By being involved in this stuff, however passively it really will make your student journey a lot more enjoyable and a lot more successful. That's my part of the political broadcast over.

Georgia: I love that, Pete. I really do, very well said. You probably have already, or essentially already answered this but I'm going to put it to you anyway. How important is Freshers in terms of the Association and in relation to connecting specifically with students? I think that's more in as a staff-student dynamic.

Pete: From my point of view, in terms of the staff, and I've been here five years so this is my 11th Freshers and its grown year on year but the stats that we get at the end of Freshers show that Freshers itself is the single largest point of engagement for student activity throughout the course of the year. The September Freshers, particularly, less so in January probably because it's a smaller intake. But it's Freshers as an activity is the single largest point of activity. We know that there's going to be an awful lot of people about. It's a good thing and a bad thing.

Sometimes it means you're in a room, a virtual room with 200 other people. It can be a bit daunting. But it's a really good thing in that it'll give you a really good overview of what the Students Association does. As the Student Union for Open University students, not everybody knows about us and we're here to spread the word and to make sure that you're all aware of the support that we offer, and the services and fun activities that we run too and all of our social media. Sorry, Georgia I've forgotten what the question was. How important is it to us? It's the bread and butter of what we do.

Yeah, and a lot of the stuff that, if you can't make the sessions, a lot of those sessions are recorded, so you can always catch up on our social media. It's such a great way for us to get our message out there and also for students to begin to realise that you're not alone. It's one of those things, we often promote our little shop and the Student Association sells all the OU-branded goodies. If you are on a train ever, with an OU notebook or an OU scarf or an OU hoody, people stop you. There's a lot of love out there for OU students.

When we do University Challenge each year, when our team gets on the tele, there's so much love on social media for OU students and I think that, Tracy touched on this earlier on, when you talk about employers or other organizations outside of the Open University, OU students are extraordinarily highly regarded. Because what you do as OU students is harder than going to a brick university. You have the discipline and you have the drive to keep going with perseverance to go through what you do. Distance learning isn't easy, and that's why I think why we're here and that's I think what Freshers does is gives you an access into some of the support that makes it a more pleasurable and interesting journey.

Georgia: Yeah, massive respect to our students, for sure. Yeah, as Pete said, I feel like our awareness and knowledge of what the Student Association does and can offer to students is ever growing and it's important for students to know what we do. Because we are here for them at the end of the day. The amount of students we've had come up to us or after creating a club or something like, "We didn't know anything that any of these things were an option or was currently operating." That's our biggest target. Overall we have our strategy and everything but the bottom line is we want to have as many students if not every single student who joins us to know what we do, what we are, who we are, how you can contact us because our door is always open, long story short.

Go on to the final question and it's a very nice closing question, which I quite like. If you are a new student or imagine you're a new student, what would be the one piece of advice you would give to someone who's starting out? I'm going to go around the table again. Nichola, you're up first.

Nichola: For me, it would be, yeah, get involved, come along to Freshers, see what we're about, see what the Association can offer, meet other students. Then hopefully, it won't be as daunting going into your studies and you will feel as though you are part of a community and not be as isolated. Yeah, that's definitely a good piece of advice. Come along, get involved.

Georgia: Brilliant. Thank you. Tracy?

Tracy: I'm just going to reiterate that. I wish I had known about the Student Association those few years back before getting involved. Definitely, get involved. Spend some time when you've got your study site up, spend some time checking out the clubs and society forums. Go check out the website if they've got one go check out their social media's, Twitters, Discords whatever they may have. Definitely be willing to put yourself out there. When you get into your modules, there will be what they call like a forum cafe or something where you as students can introduce yourself and say, "Hi, I'm new to the OU," or, "Hi, this is my fifth module," or whatever it may be and you can you use that to talk to students who are studying in your same module, but then it's also broken down into your little tutor areas as well.

Definitely put a little, "Hi," out on those forums. Just introduce yourself. If you really wished to, put yourself out there and say, "Well, I'm in this local area." I'm not saying you have to tell people where you live, by no means, but say you're in a local area, does anybody, obviously given COVID it's how you feel about it, but would somebody like to meet for a coffee. Or you can definitely put yourself out there and you can make so many friends and you can really enrich your studying experience. There was nothing bad that I experience wise I've ever had being involved with the Student Association at all. There's nothing negative, it's all positive. There's loads of support for you. Everybody's in the same boat, and everybody's just loving learning. Once you're part of the OU, you'll never leave because you'll never stop learning.

Pete: Can I add to that? I think that's a...

Georgia: Yeah.

Pete: ...a really lovely way to look at it, Tracy. I'd say, doesn't matter where you are, no matter what you're studying, no matter what level of study you're at, and it doesn't matter what you're into, there are other students like you out there. Meeting other folk like you is good. I would say, sign up. Whatever it is, sign up to our newsletter, first and foremost, sign up to the OU students newsletter you can find that on oustudents.com. But sign up to the newsletter, sign up, join clubs, join societies.

Most of them are free. You will meet loads and loads of people. You can always unsubscribe later on. Sign up now and see what's going on out there that interests you. I'd say find things around your study because you're going to be busy enough studying as it is. Having a chance to look at someone else's cat or to share your knitting project, it's great stuff that makes your study more enjoyable. Sign up, sign up, sign up.

Tracy: Definitely. I think as well, we've not really touched on the amount of students worldwide. But we have talks with the Space Society we have students signing in from all over the world, Canada, South America. Literally everywhere, we've had talks from Americans, we've had Australians do talks for us. We literally have people from all over the world and it is just fascinating just to see how large a community the Open University is and just get that sense of, yeah, wow, it's amazing to be part of. It just hopefully would make you feel proud to be an OU student.

Georgia: Honestly, I'm loving these little nuggets of advice. They're invaluable and so true and I hope people listening in really do take Freshers and grab it with two hands. There you have it guys. That's all things Freshers and I hope this was insightful and interesting. I'm hoping you're all looking forward to Freshers Fortnight and obviously pending with January Freshers as well. Make sure you're attending both and getting involved, and thanks all for listening. Thanks for my guests today and, yeah, that's everything from us. See you later.

Andy: Our thanks go to Tracy, Pete, and Nichola for giving up their time for this podcast, and also to Georgia for hosting. By the way, don't forget about our fund-raising plans to celebrate our 50th anniversary. We're raising money for the Open University Students Educational Trust, otherwise known as OUSET. OUSET is a grant which provides wonderful support for OU students in financial hardship to begin or continue their studies. We'd like to raise £50,000 for OUSET by May 2023. If you'd like to get involved, please visit oustudents.com/fundraising. This has been the Association Conversation Station. It was hosted by Georgia Demopoulou, and produced by myself Andy Evans. Thanks for listening and see you next time.

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