



**Students**  
ASSOCIATION



# THE HOOT

SiSE Magazine Issue 1 - May 2022

# Welcome to The Hoot!

The Hoot is an online magazine for OU students, powered by the OU Students Association. We publish a range of content relevant to OU students, provided by OU students themselves, and OU and Association staff members.

You are valued members of the Students Association, so we wanted to bring ourselves, and The Hoot, to you.

We hope that you find this selection of recent articles useful and insightful.

If you would like to get involved, we have included a pre-paid envelope for you to submit your own article of up to 500 words for consideration.

Your work might even be featured in the next SiSE issue, expected in six months time.

You might like to write about your journey as a SiSE student, or you might like to write about a hobby or passion of yours. We also publish short stories and poetry, book and film reviews, recipes and opinion pieces.

We're really looking forward to receiving your work and sharing it with our readers from The OU and beyond.

Very best wishes from The Hoot Team, The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Student Support Team, and the OU Students Association CEC (Central Executive Committee).

THE **H**OOT

## Hoot History

- The Hoot was founded in 2019 after OU student's hunger for content outgrew the Association's previous print and PDF magazine.
- Over 600 online articles have since been published.
- The name "The Hoot" came about because the OU's mascot used to be an owl.
- The Hoot's third birthday was celebrated on April 8th 2022



## Contents

2

Going for gold

3

A life turned around through OU study

4

OU study the second time around

5

Celebrating LGBT+ History Month

8

Cultivating resiliency

9

Celebrating neurodiversity

11

Self coaching: Personal strengths and motivation

15

Looking back on Association history

16

Marking 300 library study volunteer requests

17

Essay and exam tips

# Going for gold

## Celebrating 50 Years of the Open University Students Association.



The 2020 - 2022 Students Association President began their student journey with the Open University in 2017. They believed that life as an OU student meant a solitary relationship between them and their computer, with no need for anyone else.

On top of their OU studies, they had their own personal challenges and they quickly realised they needed more support. They reached out and discovered the OU Students Association.

Suddenly, they were part of something bigger. Their student journey was enriched through the Association and the network of friendship, support and practical help it provided.

Through the Association they discovered they had a voice and their voice counted.

Four years later and with a first-class honours degree to their name, they are now in their second year of a Masters degree and President of the OU Students Association.

They have kindly shared with us their thoughts and reflections on the Association's 50th anniversary, which we are celebrating throughout 2022.

50 years is a time for reflection and celebration. During 2022, the Association will mark its many achievements in helping all OU students realise their ambitions, regardless of their background and needs. Inspired by our students we will also be looking forwards, ensuring the Association is fit for purpose for the changing needs and demographics of the OU student

community.

One of their projects is an ambitious plan to raise £50k towards OUSET, the Association's student charity. Funds raised by students are used to benefit students in financial hardship and they have lots of exciting fundraising ideas to reach this target.

The global pandemic has challenged all of us and the President reflects that many are grieving for what they have missed.

"But we got through it!", they say, adding that the resilience of OU students blows their mind.

We are creating a book of inspiring student stories that we will be inviting you to contribute to as part of the Association's 50th celebrations. Could this be the article you submit to us?



# A life turned around through OU study

An OU in Scotland graduate shares how studying with the OU whilst in prison gave him an opportunity to turn his life around.

Around 15 years ago I found myself being sent to prison for a serious offence, for which I pled guilty. I received a long-term prison service and was left with a lot of time to reflect on what had happened, why I was there and where I could go from there.

I engaged with education in the prison Learning Centre and after undertaking some basic courses, I managed to enrol on an access course with The Open University. This led to me completing a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree in Social Sciences (Politics).

As time passed, I felt myself growing more confident, not only academically, but also when interacting with others.

Studying gave me a sense of freedom and liberation which my surroundings had deliberately denied me. It allowed me to fill my time

constructively and avoid the many pitfalls which surround you in prison.

As I moved through the prison system I continued my education journey, gaining an OU master's degree. My OU undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications allowed me to make connections with colleagues at two well respected university institutions and enabled me to gain valuable intern experience, whilst on work placement from the prison. Many of these people, who I respect academically, have now become friends.

I have now left prison and am in full time employment. Although I'm not working in academia, I regularly attend various workshops and I am part of several which prioritise social justice. I'm also now pursuing PhD funding.

People in prison have no doubt made mistakes,

however, there must be some opportunity for rehabilitation.

For me The Open University gave me an understanding and insight into another world. It provided hope and goals to get me through a negative situation. I could do something productive and take control of my own destiny. It opened doors which would otherwise would not have opened. In fact, doors which I didn't realise were there.

I would recommend studying with The Open University to anyone, in any situation, as much for the personal development as the academic achievement. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.



# OU study the second time around

What I've learnt, what I wish I could have done differently, and why it's OK to ask for help.

I will always remember pressing the 'sign up for module' button for the first time on the OU website. Aged 20, I was a university drop-out, deciding that I wanted to study modern languages. My original university wouldn't allow me to study Spanish so I decided to give it all up for the chance to study the one passion I had at that age.

I had set myself a goal you see, to be fluent by the age of 30. My sister-in-law had given me a Spanish textbook for beginners and I devoured it, wanting to know more. I had no Spanish A-level, and had achieved a D grade at GCSE. In fact, I remember being told I shouldn't study languages by a teacher at school. I felt everything was against me studying it, but then the OU came into the picture.

Seven years later I achieved a BSc (Honours) Open.

It was good fun, stressful, my proudest achievement, tiring, everything. I was proud, happy to have been given the chance to study what I enjoyed and glad to have achieved what I had set out to achieve (...and yes, fluent by 30 was achieved!)

Two years later I was back. A student again. Not such a newbie this time, but I was back at the start nonetheless. This time physics was the choice! Why the jump from languages to physics one may ask – for me it was the chance to study a STEM subject I always had an interest in, but was always too nervous to study.

At first, I worried about failure, worried about not understanding the course material, worried about learning programming, but soon I started to see the world differently, wanted to question everything I had taken for granted growing up, it was as if I was seeing the

world through a new set of eyes.

My first degree really did set me up for my second. I had learnt how to time manage, how to effectively take notes, how to study whilst working, and of course how to tackle TMAs in a timely fashion. Skills that are really important to gain confidence in and I always am rattling them off to new students who ask for advice!

The most important tip that I did learn from my first time with the OU was to ask for help if you need it. It's OK to admit you're struggling and I'd be lying if I said I never struggled. I did, big time.

I'm nearing the end of my second degree now. I have enjoyed my entire time with the OU, but most of all I have loved seeing my confidence grow from my time as a student here. I have come to know who I am as a person and that's just fantastic.

# Celebrating LGBT History Month

We look back on Hoot content submitted by OU Pride and the Disabled Students Group in February 2022.

**Content warning:** contains mentions of sexual violence, death by suicide and murder.

## Marsha P. Johnson

When you ask someone to name a famous person from LGBTQ+ history many will come up with the name 'Marsha P Johnson' and rightly so in my opinion.



Marsha P Johnson was an American activist and self-identified drag queen. She was well known for being an advocate for the gay rights movement and a key party in the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

Life wasn't easy for Marsha. Born Malcolm Michaels Jr on 24 August 1945 in New Jersey, Marsha was part of a large, working class, family. Marsha was brought up in a very religious family, in fact they are quoted as saying: "I got married to Jesus Christ when I was sixteen years old, still in high school".

Johnson was interviewed in 1992 and describes

being the victim of rape which led to them describing the idea of being gay as a dream rather than a possibility. Johnsons mother described being gay as the lowest form of low and remained unaware of the LGBT community.

Marsha left home in 1963 for NYC with \$15 and a single bag of clothes. Marsha survived by waiting tables and hanging out with street hustlers. She finally felt able to 'come out'.

Initially she used the name "Black Marsha" as her drag queen name but then changed it to "Marsha P Johnson" with the P standing for

'pay it no mind' which was a phrase used when people commented negatively on their appearance or choices.

Johnson identified as gay, a transvestite and a drag queen, although according to others their gender would be accurately described as gender non-conforming. Marsha was one of the first drag queens to frequent the Stonewall Inn once they were allowed in. Infact Marsha has been named as one of the "three individuals known to have been in the vanguard" against the police during the uprising. Johnson denied being one of the catalysts of the

riots but was reportedly there.

On the first anniversary of the uprising Johnson marched in the first ever Gay Pride rally on June 28th 1970.

Later in 1970 Marsha and their close friend Sylvia Rivera started STAR – Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries and became loud voices in the gay liberation campaign.

Marsha remained an active and loud voice for the rest of their life.

In 1992 Marshas body was discovered in the Hudson river. Whilst the police ruled this death a suicide, their friends insisted this was not possible and in fact pointed out wounds on their body that could not be self-inflicted. This occurred at a time when there was anti-LGBT violence and Marsha theirselves was speaking out against 'dirty cops' and organised crime rings believed to be responsible for violence against members of the LGBT community.

Eventually, in 2012, the

NYPD reopened the case into Marsha's death and cause was changed from suicide to undetermined.

But why is Marsha P Johnson so important to LGBT history – well its simple really. Marsha stood up and shouted when all around was violence against the LGBT community. They dedicated their life to helping others, despite their own mental health issues.

We should not forget the sacrifices of others to allow us to be able ourselves.

## **Audre Lorde**

Born on 18 February 1934 in New York to immigrant parents from the West Indies, Audre Lorde was famous for being a poet, feminist, and civil rights activist. She used her writing to shine light on her experience of the world as a black lesbian woman, and later, as a person suffering from cancer.

She was declared legally blind as a toddler due to the degree of her near-

sightedness but despite this taught herself to read at the age of 4 and began to memorise poetry, a passion that stuck with her for the rest of her life.

Lorde's activism and writings speak of the importance of liberation from oppression due to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and ability. Becoming a prominent member of the women's and LGBTQ rights movements, Lorde dedicated her life and work to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, classism, and homophobia. As a professor of English, she received many honours and awards throughout her career and her writing has been published internationally, including *The Black Unicorn* (1978) and *A Burst of Light* (1988).

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1977, Lorde found that the ordeals of cancer treatment and mastectomy were isolating for women but more so for Black lesbian women.

In an effort to combat the silence and foster



## Alexander The Great and Bagoas

Homosexuality was common in some areas of Roman society.

Alexander The Great was no exception, As awareness increased and time passed, it became obvious that Alexander may have presented as bisexual, had the variety of sexuality identities and labels seen today been in common use in 300 BC.

connection with other lesbians and women of colour facing the same struggles, she offered a raw portrait of her own pain, suffering, reflection, and hope in *The Cancer Journals* (1980) which won awards and became a classic work of illness narrative. Refusing to be victimised by her disease, she considered herself, and others like her, to be warriors.

Lorde died of breast cancer in November 1992 at the age of 58, leaving a legacy through her work. Her ideas about collective identities still resonate with and inspire many different peoples and communities all over the world.

Allegedly Alexander kissed a Persian eunuch named Bagoas, the secret lover first of Darius III, publicly at a festival. Following the Battle of Issus when Alexander conquered Persia and Darius was assassinated by a member of his own family, Bagoas became the lover of Alexander.

Historical literature has always been interesting to analyse. On one hand, Bagoas is hardly written about in the surviving sources, but on the other hand, it is widely known that he and Alexander had intimate relations. With a modern eye and understanding of LGBTQIA+ culture and

society, we can see many ways this may be taken.

Firstly, we already know men at war have sexual desires, we also know that in 300BC people held strong beliefs in gods, religion, and spirituality. Therefore, it's a valid question to ask when the modern-day take on Christianity and the belief that being gay 'is a sin' began?

Is this why Bagoas isn't mentioned often? Because he or Alexander was ashamed? Or is it because back then... it was not a big deal?

There are many ways we can perceive this. Surely, if it was seen as a sin or something to be ashamed of, Alexander's contemporaries would have screamed this from the rooftops.

If Alexander the Great – an arrogant, headstrong leader – can flaunt a young eunuch of the same sex publicly on his arm and exhibit clear homosexual behaviour with no shame over 2000 years ago, why, with an ever-changing and slowly accepting society, can't we today?

# Cultivating resiliency, a mentor's advice

Being resilient is about strength to survive difficult circumstances.

## How do you work towards a more resilient you?

Breathing plays a vital role in improving how we approach a matter and how stressful we find it. Breathing correctly can help oxygen to move around the body - this is not only good for blood flow and necessary movement of nutrients, but supports a healthy brain, especially memory function. It is extremely helpful to ensure sufficient rest between times of high mental exertion.

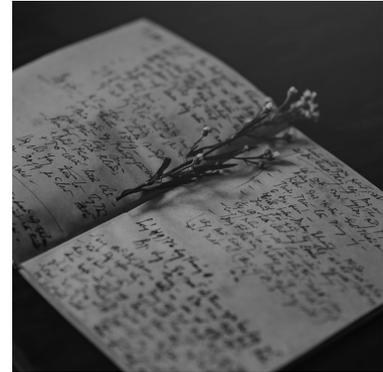
## Reflection and evaluation for resilience:

Reflection is helpful to examine previous habits and how they did or did not serve you. Reflection helps you recognise and embrace ways to create new habits that can serve you now as you change and develop as a person. What is important to you, what do you believe you are capable of and how much time are you willing to invest in yourself?

## Ask yourself penetrating questions:

- What does resiliency look like for you? What are the essential components?
- What are your needs and concerns?
- What adjustments can you make vs what is required?
- What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are your knowledge gaps?
- What is your ultimate state you wish to accomplish?

Create a journal to record your thoughts and actions. Your journey may highlight skills and talent capabilities that were not clearly evident before.



Use your findings to establish values or principles that you wish to base your journey or life on. (You might like to combine this with the exercises on pages 11-13.)

## Resiliency recap

- Acknowledge your difficulties and strengths. This provides a balanced positive view.
- Apply reflective action – use personal journals to support you. This will keep you motivated.
- Strategise and create a plan to provide purpose. This will provide a basis for consistency and focus.

# What is neurodiversity & why do we celebrate it?

You may have heard the terms 'Neurodiverse' and 'Neurotypical' used before, but do you know what they mean - or which you are?

Many people think Neurodiversity refers only to people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or that it includes people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but there are actually lots of conditions that fit under this umbrella.

## So what does Neurodiversity really mean?

The term was first used in 1998 by sociologist Judy Singer, when writing her sociology honours thesis. She was corresponding with the American journalist Harvey Blume, who went on to use it in an article in *The Atlantic* that same year, which discussed the rise of autism advocacy on the internet and the possible superiority of Neurodiverse brains. The term caught on quickly, resonating especially with the disability advocacy movement and those who were looking for a positive model for autism awareness. Internet forums, online

organisations and awareness campaigns began to spread greater understanding, and Neurodiversity became the banner under which people with all kinds of neurological processing disorders saw they could advocate for recognition of both their disabilities and their abilities.

Neurodiversity recognises that other people have brains that function differently to our own, or to what is accepted as the expected, or 'Neurotypical' way. This includes people with ASD and ADHD, and also Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia and Dysnomia.

Then there are Sensory Processing Disorders, including Auditory Processing Disorder (APD), Visual Processing Disorder (VPD) and Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). There is Hyperacusis, Misophonia, Hyperlexia and Meares-Irlen Syndrome. Synaesthesia, OCD and Tourette's Syndrome (including other Tic Disorders) are also often included within Neurodiversity, and many of these conditions often co-exist with each other, or exist alongside conditions such as Fibromyalgia, ME/CFS, Migraine, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Complex PTSD,



hypermobility and diseases affecting the immune system.

Neurodiversity considers these conditions different, not damaged, ways of processing information – but does that stop them being disabilities? Not in a world set up for Neurotypical people, no! But these are not diseases or conditions to be cured, they are disorders that others should accept, and make accommodations for.

If you're Neurotypical, your awareness of and allyship for Neurodiversity can help make a better world for everyone.

### **How can we celebrate and accommodate for Neurodiversity?**

Think about what will make a better environment for the people you see getting left out, so they can take part in activities and without feeling excluded or anxious. If they don't want to participate, that's fine too, of course, but it's never a reason not to keep inviting someone to join in.

You may find a different way to look at the world and appreciate how you process sensory input yourself if you begin to appreciate the world from the perspective of your neurodiverse peers.

Or perhaps, you've just realised that there's a name for how you think, and you're not alone after all?

None of us can know how unique our consciousness is, until we try to understand someone else's.

How we think, and how our brains interpret the world around us, is part of who we are. It's easy to assume everyone else sees the same shade of blue, thinks in a constant narrative flow, or can visualise objects in their imagination as detailed 3D solids that they can take apart or bring to life.

Instead, we live in a world of people with face blindness, no visual memory, or a constant musical soundtrack to their lives.

There are new ways of processing our



environment being found all the time, and there is no reason to let any of them be a handicap. Autistic people are finding success in a society that accepts them for who they are, and nurtures the talents they have, rather than trying to repress their 'non-typical' behaviours.

Dyslexia is now spotted early in children's schooling, and can often come with skills in spatial awareness. Tourette's and OCD are seen beyond their stereotypes, as unique insights into how the brain functions, and people with hyperacusis and Meares-Irlen can be helped to deal with their external environment.

Today, Neurodiversity really is something worth celebrating!

# Understanding yourself through self coaching

Guide yourself through these exercises by The Open University's Personal Learning Advice Service.

Coaching usually takes place between a coach and the coachee (you), however you may not have access to a coach and this is where self-coaching can really help. Through self-coaching you'll learn things about yourself you may not have consciously been aware of before.

Self-coaching can be a great way to get

past obstacles, identify your goals or create a plan to get 'unstuck'.

Identifying your personal strengths is often seen as a key step in self-coaching as it's useful to focus on what you can do easily, naturally, skilfully, and energetically – rather than focussing on the things you can or could improve.



## Identifying your strengths and potential

Within positive psychology, personal strengths are defined as our built-in capacities for particular ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Linley, 2008).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) explored what an individual's personal strengths might look like and came up with 24 core strengths that are associated with the six virtues of positive psychology theory:

### **Wisdom/Knowledge:**

Creativity, curiosity, love of learning, judgement and open-mindedness, perspective

### **Courage:**

Honesty/authenticity, bravery, persistence, zest

### **Humanity:**

Kindness, love, social intelligence

### **Justice:**

Fairness, leadership, teamwork

### **Temperance:**

Forgiveness, modesty/humility, prudence, self-regulation

### **Transcendence:**

Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, religiousness/spirituality

These 24 core strengths are often referred to as character strengths and

- are evident across human history and world cultures;
- each exist in all of us to varying degrees.

Through self-reflection, identifying your character strengths can help you:

- boost your confidence;
- develop your potential;
- improve your performance and help you achieve your goals;
- increase your happiness and general wellbeing with positive vocabulary and self-talk.

Using the 6 virtues/24 core strengths reflect on the following statements and make a list of your responses.

- My positive qualities are...
- Things I like about myself/things others like about me...
- I'm great because...

Just write down your immediate thoughts, feelings, reactions and ideas. Remember, there's

no right, wrong, good or bad responses – this is about you.

From your list of responses from activity one, take a deeper look to see if you can identify any patterns.

Are there any character strengths that:

- are very familiar to you?
- are repeated?
- are similar and you could group them together?
- are a surprise to you?

Ask yourself:

- What might be my top three character strengths?
- How can I use ALL my character strengths to succeed in my OU studies?
- Where in other areas of my life can I use my character strengths?
- What character strengths could I develop further? How could I develop these? Who or what could help me?

Buckingham and Clifton (2005) maintain that a person's talents are enduring and unique, and

that their greatest room for growth is in the areas of their greatest strength. As a result, developing your existing strengths as a student will not only bring you satisfaction but can also be used as a resource to support you in overcoming any areas of weakness. In fact, there's nothing wrong with viewing yourself as an ongoing work-in-progress!

Finally, identifying your strengths isn't a one-off exercise. Your ideas about your strengths will almost certainly change over time, and it's useful to revisit your strengths on a regular basis to review your development and any changes.



## Mastering your motivation

Motivation can be described as the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviours. In everyday terms, motivation is what causes you to act and helps drive you to success.

There are two types of motivation:

### **Intrinsic motivation:**

What drives you from within. The individual values and preferences that make tasks more meaningful to YOU. It occurs when you're compelled to do something out of pleasure, importance or desire. It could involve solving a complicated problem, a desire to learn, passion for a subject or achieving a goal. Usually these are things that you're in control of.



### **Extrinsic motivation:**

Incentives provided externally by OTHERS. It often involves rewards such as trophies, money, social recognition, or praise; sometimes it can even involve fear to make you do something. Often these are things that others provide and see, and they're often things you aren't in control of.

Identifying your key motivators will help you figure out what really matters to you and why. It's key to achieving your goals and your personal satisfaction.



Here's a quick activity you can complete to help identify your key motivators:

1. Find 10-15 minutes to sit calmly and reflect on all the reasons why you started your OU studies. Write these reasons down. Don't try and analyse your thoughts and reasons at this stage.
2. Next identify if these reasons are intrinsic (internal to you) or extrinsic (external to you). It might help to move the reasons into separate columns or to mark them with two different colours.
3. Look at your intrinsic reasons, these are likely to be things you have control of and are things you can take steps to develop. They are often very closely linked to your overall goal and help build your personal 'why'.

It's useful to acknowledge that there may be times throughout your studies when you lack motivation or feel stuck – this can happen to all of us, we're human!

You might:

- feel you're unable to make progress on your most important goals;
- feel unclear of where or how to start taking action;
- feel overwhelmed, not knowing what to do next and often not doing anything;
- keep jumping from one task to another, without actually achieving anything;
- constantly doubt yourself and worry more than you need to;
- talk negatively to yourself for not getting things done.

The good news is that lacking motivation and feeling stuck is never permanent. Take some time to review the following motivation top tips and reflect on your responses.

## Top tips for staying motivated

### 1 Remember your 'why'

Self-knowledge is important, it will unlock the 'why' behind your motivation. Ask yourself:

- What am I'm studying and why did I choose it?
- What's my big vision?
- What's important to me about my studies?

Use your responses to get clear on your overall vision and future plans.

### 2 Know yourself

- How do I learn best?
- What distracts me/gets in my way?
- How do I like to study?
- How can I create a positive study environment?
- What time of day/when do I study best?
- What other positive study habits work for me?

Use your responses to

create your personalised study plan.

### 3 Identify your goals and take action

Having goals in mind is essential to keeping motivated. Ask yourself:

- What are my study goals? How are my goals SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound?
- What steps will I take to achieve these goals? In which order?
- How will I stay on track with my studies?

Use your responses to create your personalised learning action plan.

### 4 Reframe your attitude

There's nothing more powerful for self-motivation than having the right attitude. Often you can't choose or control your

circumstances, but you can choose your attitude towards your circumstances. What can and can't you control?

Use your responses as a reminder of the things you can control in relation to your studies, try and let go of the things you can't.

### 5 Reflect and track your progress

Taking pride in even small achievements can boost your self-confidence and motivate you. Pinpoint what worked so you can repeat it in the future.

- How will I know I've been successful?
- What will my success look like or feel like?
- How can I repeat and continue my success?
- How will I celebrate my successes?

Use your responses to track your progress during your studies.

# Looking back on... international study tours for disabled students

16 May 2022 marked the Association's 50th birthday, so we're looking back on one of our proudest moments from the 1970s.

In 1975, a party of ten disabled students and a team of helpers set off on a study tour of Rome. The age range of the group was spread from 25 to 70, and student disabilities ranged from multiple sclerosis, to polio, to congenital disabilities, with all of them using wheelchairs most of the time. The team of helpers were drawn mainly from the student body, but we were also fortunate enough to have additional support from people outside of the University.

Travel arrangements were made by EROS Travel, and the group stayed at Casa S. Birgitta, Piazza Farnese, which is a hospice and hostel in the centre of Rome, run by a Swedish order of nuns. The group could not have been more comfortable, more cared for or made more welcome. In Rome the group was met by James Mourtou, a Youth Exchange Officer from



the British Council, and representatives from other organisations they had been in touch with; through these contacts, they were loaned a special coach.

The Association later acquired its own bus, which was donated by an anonymous donor in standard London Transport condition. The students at the Middlesex Polytechnic then converted the bus to make it suitable for use by disabled students. The bus enabled more students with disabilities

to take part in regular international tours just like the one to Italy, sometimes going as far afield as Russia and Turkey!

Pictures: Above - the bus in Rome. Below - an article in the original OU students magazine, Sesame.



# Celebrating 300 Library Study Volunteer Requests

The student volunteer scheme that provides students in secure environments with access to essential library resources has recently reached its 300th enquiry!

The Open University has been providing world-class education to students in prison for over 40 years. As of March 2019, there were approximately 1,800 students on more than 130 courses in 150 prisons.

Some students in secure environments (SiSE) have access to the OU's Virtual Campus (intranet site) and printed materials, depending on the facilities available at their prison or health facility; however, independent study materials found through the Library are not available via these routes. Students were therefore reliant on their personal tutors or educational officers to obtain independent study material for them with varying results.

In late 2018 the OU Students Association

began a pilot student volunteer scheme whereby the OU student in a secure environment would send an anonymised request detailing what information resources they were looking for and a volunteer student would then carry out the research on their behalf.

The student volunteers would all be experienced students studying at the OU who would receive training from the SiSE Team, the Association and the Library before they answered research enquiries. Ongoing library support would also be provided for the volunteers. All those involved managed to get the service up and running in just 3 months, being piloted back in January 2019 with students in prison studying at Level 3 and above. There was rapid take-up of the service,

with 27 requests being received within the first 4 weeks!

Due to the huge success of the pilot, it was decided to provide the service as part of the Library's business as usual and extend it to include SiSE studying at Level 2. The service has now been in place for nearly 4 years and, in total, has received 300 requests!

Once a larger cohort of students have used the service, the Library plans to carry out further analysis to determine the true impact of the service. All teams involved are also involved in ongoing discussions around how they can help SiSE to develop their digital skills, which are essential to function effectively within the work and personal environment, without having open access to the internet.

# Exam Tips

## Use past exam papers

Past exam papers can give you an idea of what the exam will look like and what to expect. It's also a great opportunity to try out the style of questions you'll be expected to answer.

## Make good notes

Clear and helpful notes are really important when it comes to exams, as you'll need to be able to know and recall key information quickly. The key part is making sure your notes are clear and hold all the key information you'll need.

## Time management

Managing your time effectively is important both when you're preparing for the exam and when you're taking the exam. You could plan on what days you'll revise which topics to ensure you can cover everything you need in time for the exam. In the exam itself, you could roughly plan your time for each section or question.

## Test your knowledge

In assessments like exams where you might

not be able to have your notes in front of you, it's really important to know your stuff inside out. One way to do this is to write key definitions, equations or facts on revision cards (you can just use pieces of paper). You could try writing these in the form of question and answer, and then test yourself. This can help you to remember what you need to know.

## Read the questions carefully

When we're under time pressure in an exam it can be tempting to power through as many questions as you can quickly. But remember understanding the question and doing what is asked of you is key, so make sure you understand it before attempting to answer. Underlining key words in the question might help.

## Rest & Refuel

Try and get a good night's sleep and eat well before your exam – your body needs the fuel!

## Try mindfulness

Mindfulness may help not

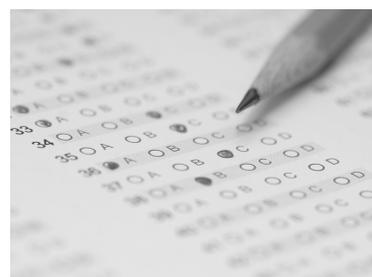
only while you are preparing for your exam, but in the exam itself. If you find yourself getting anxious and stressed while studying or while answering exam questions, try to focus on what you can control and take some deep breaths.

## Go to your tutor with any questions

Remember your tutor or education advisor is there to help, so when you speak to them, remember to ask questions about the exam or bring up any concerns you may have.

## Revisit your feedback

Look at your past feedback from other assessments when preparing for your exam, and you can do the same with the feedback from your upcoming exam. If possible, ask your tutor or education advisor if you can discuss the feedback in more detail if anything is unclear to you.



# Essay Tips

## **Plan, plan, plan!**

This can be as brief or as detailed as you like. You could just include the main points and sections of your essay. Or you could do a more detailed plan which includes references you plan to use, and even roughly how many words you'd like to include in each section, which can help you keep to the word count and avoid going off topic. The important part is having a plan to guide you and keep you on track.

## **Stick to the question**

Make sure you really understand the question and keep it in mind throughout your assessment. You could even write a very brief answer (a sentence or two) to the question to start with, which you could keep on your desk or device as a reminder of the direction you want to take. Stick to the question and avoid going off topic.

## **Read the guidance**

Read the guidance notes and instructions included with your assessment and clarify things with your tutor if you can. Once you have drafted your

assessment, come back to these instructions and check you have included what you need to.

## **Remember your tutor is there for you**

Make sure to keep in contact with your tutor if possible, and if you have any concerns or queries, just ask.

## **Reference as you go!**

There's nothing worse than coming to the end of your draft, and realising you have to do all your references. So make sure you reference as you go – keeping track of your sources – to make your job much easier at the end of the essay.

## **Take breaks**

Regular breaks are really important to help clear your thoughts. If you're

feeling really stuck, take a break and come back to your essay later. A fresh perspective does the world of good!

## **Start small**

Set realistic goals for yourself. You could focus on one paragraph, section, or number of words at a time. This may help the task feel more manageable.

## **Sit down and write**

Sometimes it's best to just get something down on the paper and come back to it later to tidy it up.

## **Back up your work!**

If you're working electronically, make sure to keep saving your work and keep backup copies.





### **About The OU Students Association**

All Open University students are automatically members of the OU Students Association.

The OU Students Association was born in 1972, just a short few years after the Open University was established by Royal Charter.

### **Our Mission**

We're on a mission to make a positive difference for all OU students. This is a mission we believe in and that we use to make all of our decisions.

We work together. We genuinely care about each other, offering compassion and safety. Our best ideas, projects and events are born from truly listening to one another. We work collaboratively with integrity, openness, kindness and compassion.

We celebrate our differences. We understand that we will never all agree. Some conversations are hard, but they need to be had. So long as we share our individual perspectives respectfully and with acknowledgement for other's hardships, journeys and barriers, there is always something we can learn from one another.

### **Our vision**

To support, encourage and empower OU students by:

- Offering students the support services that they need.
- Creating opportunities for students to engage in a vibrant and inclusive student community.
- Being a strong, effective and accountable representative body.
- Working in partnership with the OU to enhance all aspects of the student experience.

### **Our values**

Integrity - Equality and inclusivity - Openness - Collaboration - Kindness and compassion

### **Have your say.**

Look out for the OU Students Association "Secure Environments Survey" in June 2022. We are committed to providing you the best support we can during your OU journey and the survey is your opportunity to share how your Students Association can help to support your studies.