Response to Law (Undergraduate) Board of Studies student consultation (February and March 2023) on face-to-face teaching, cluster forums and retention

Summary

This is a response to the consultation on the return to face-to-face teaching at Levels 1–3, the use of cluster forums at Level 1, and of issues affecting retention for law students. This took place between 27th February -13th March 2023. The summary of student feedback is below.

The purpose of the forum was to obtain feedback on the student experience of:

- Return to face-to-face teaching which was resumed in October 2022 following the impact of the C19 pandemic. Feedback will inform the development of future face-to-face learning events within the Faculty.
- The use of module Cluster Forums in comparison to Tutor Group Forums at Level 1. Feedback will inform future forum planning and support attempts to increase student engagement with Forums and used to shape provision at Levels 2 and 3.
- The different ways in which students remain motivated with their study. Feedback will help to identify any additional measures that could be taken to enhance engagement and retention.

Details of student participation were as follows:

- The forum was open to students studying the following modules: **W111B, W111J, W112B, W112J, W202J, W203J, W302, W330J, W360J**
  - *Students were contacted via email from the BoS Consultation Team, invited via Module Forum Posts, Module News Pages etc*
- 25 students registered to take part in the consultation forum.
- 177 student posts were made
- 20 students posted at least once and there were 45 student posts in total.
- Total ratings (most posts by user): 15
- Estimated readers (minimum): 91
- Total subscribers: 45 (even students who had not subscribed were still able to participate)
- Moderation was carried out by two Central Academics, three Lecturer and Student Experience Managers, and one AL Representative

Threads were set up covering:

- *Effectiveness of Cluster Forums in supporting with module activities*
- *The ways in which support provided in Cluster Forum differs to that of Tutor Group Forums*
- *The extent to which Cluster Forums provided an opportunity to collaborate more widely with peers*
- *The ways in which experiences of face-to-face events have supported study and provided an opportunity to collaborate with peers*
- *Reasons for non-attendance at face-to-face events*
- *The extent to which experience of face-to-face tutorials has differed from that of online tutorials*
- *Factors that motivate to continue with study*

Participants were also invited to start their own threads in the event they had feedback which did not fit into any of the existing threads. A summary of the points raised appears at the end of this report.

Highlights

In general, feedback was positive throughout in relation to F2F tutorial experience, with many students also providing positive feedback in relation to their experience of online tutorials. From the responses provided, it would appear that greater flexibility in location of F2F events would be appreciated by many students, and some interesting suggestions were made in relation to enhancing the online provision and increasing engagement.

The overwhelming feedback in relation to forum use, whether tutor group forum or cluster forum, is that these platforms are "out of date" and not user-friendly. Some interesting suggestions were made by students, including providing the option to anonymise posts or change user names to try and encourage greater participation.

Full response

If you have not attended F2F Tutorials…

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members or students, if you have not attended face to face events, please let us know why this is, and what we could do to encourage you to attend in the future.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Several students responded by stating that distance and lack of local options was the main reason for non-attendance, however emphasised that they would like to be able to do so and meet other students	Scaled back provision following pandemic Students dispersed over UK so key hubs used in 2022/2023 for running tutorials	Feedback will be passed on to relevant bodies within the University for review ahead of forthcoming presentations where face to face tutorials are available
A few students said that their non-attendance was due to practical restraints *e.g. lack of awareness of tutorial events, cost of travel, need for overnight accommodation, childcare difficulties* – this latter point was made several times in relation to traditional caregiving responsibilities falling to female students, resulting in gender-split in ability to attend F2F.	Always online provision to cater for those with multiple demands on time. Some modules have focused on providing invite/reminder of tutorials in feedback. Tutors are also asked to remind/invite students to tutorials.	This will be passed on to the Student Support Team (SST) for further action in relation to raising awareness of bursary funds which may be available There will also be greater publicity in 2023/24 in relation to provision for tutorials.
Double-booking prevented some attendees *e.g. W202 and W203 had Day Schools scheduled for the same day causing conflict.*	Online alternatives always available	Feedback will be provided to Module Teams and AL Services Teams at timetabling stage to endeavour to avoid clashes in 2023/24.
Considerable praise for online teaching being the preferred method. One student said that "online learning" was the "attraction" of the OU and that F2F was not of interest. Another student praised the quality of delivery through Adobe Connect.		The University would like to extend thanks for this positive feedback which will be passed on to relevant teams.

In what way have your experiences of F2F events supported you in your study and provided you with an opportunity to collaborate with your peers...

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members or students, if you have attended face to face events, please let us know how you have found face to face learning events in relation to their enabling you to work with your peers and enhance your study. For example, you may want to consider how the experience differs to online learning events

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Overwhelmingly positive feedback from most students about the opportunity in F2F sessions to "engage" with both tutors and peers. The "personal" and "interactive" and "participative" nature of F2F tutorials facilitated the "free flow" of discussion and "shared experience" not possible in online events, where students can be more passive		Thank you for this constructive and helpful feedback. We will ensure that Module Teams continue to look for new and innovative ways to encourage greater interactivity in online events, and aim to make provision for further training for our AL community.
Several students referred to their belief that university is a "social" experience as well as an "academic" experience which is the appeal of F2F events. Within this response, several interesting suggestions were made e.g. keeping Adobe open 30mins after tutorial with automatic shut off to allow students to socialise, holding specific Adobe "social sessions" at points in the module for students to get together virtually – this point was picked up by international students who commented that there are no F2F events but that a bi-module "social" event in their home	Student responded to thread and shared information about OULS – this was followed by Moderator providing link to OULS. The OU also has the Belonging Project which provides student-led coffee events, facilitating social events. This will be repeated in 2023-24. The OUSA also has a regular series of social events.	We will share this feedback with Module Teams regarding considering piloting of enabling tutorial rooms to remain open for 30mins after tutorials have concluded, and to consider the feasibility of facilitating some online social events on modules in conjunction with pre-arranged sessions already being provided by the Belonging Project.

country for students to attend would be well received.		

How have your experiences of F2F tutorials differed from that of online tutorials

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members or students, please let us know how your experience of face-to-face learning events (tutorials) has differed to online events

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Students responded to say that attendance is similarly "poor" in both F2F and online events.	Through analysing attendance data, attendance at online tutorials has demonstrated a higher uptake than at F2F events.	A pilot F2F conference for Level 1 and 2 law students is in the planning phases - due Spring 2024.
One student said that their experience was that F2F was more "engaging" however that Adobe was a "good platform" for online learning. A suggestion in relation to enhancing online provision was to hide the chat box during content delivery to ensure that attendees can remain "focused" by what is being delivered.	Whilst this is an interesting suggestion, at present, online tutorials are not lectures and therefore it is important that students are able to interact throughout and raise questions via chat should they need to do so throughout the event.	
One student suggested a change in tutorial style. Have clearly labelled pre-recorded "lectures" with tutorials being "workshops" for interactive activities. Another suggestion was to remove "recorded/not recorded", and instead have "cameras on/cameras off" events to require participants to use cameras.	These are very interesting ideas; "lecture-style" recorded tutorials are already being piloted on some modules and may be rolled out further. Cameras on / Cameras Off - this will be shared with module teams.	It is OU policy to provide both recorded and non-recorded tutorials and this needs to continue. There are practical difficulties in forcing camera use, including internet connection, however as a pilot we will share this suggestion with Module Teams to see whether there is an option to have tutorials where camera use is "encouraged" and

		advertised in the tutorial booking system.

In what way does the support in your Cluster Forum differ to that of your Tutor Group Forum…

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members, please let us know how consider the support differs between Cluster and Tutor Group Forum. For instance, has the source of support available in each differed? Has one source of support been more helpful to you, and if so, how?

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Overwhelming response from most participants is that forums are no longer a preferred method of communication, and that faster more instantaneous forms of communication (e.g. WhatsApp, Teams) are preferable. The nature of using any Forum was described as "tedious" with multiple clicks required to engage and respond.	Whilst we know that students prefer other social platforms, the OU has a strict policy surrounding the use of social media for module-related discussion to safeguard the student experience [Social Media Policy (open.ac.uk)](https://open.ac.uk) The Law Peer Mentoring scheme ran as a pilot in 2022-23 and is awaiting evaluation.	Outcomes from the Law Peer Mentoring Scheme in 2022-23 will be analysed and shared amongst Module Teams for future use. Feedback will be passed on to the Faculty and University; delivery platforms are decided at a university rather than module-level.
Some students expressed the view that forum engagement may be low because students may be afraid of "making a mistake" or looking "stupid". A suggestion was then made to anonymise posts, or enable students to change their user name.	While we appreciate that it can be nerve-wracking to make forum posts, it is vitally important to develop skills in communicating in an academic community. It is expected that, through the course of their study, students will develop transferable skills relevant to their future career and so participation in Forums provides an invaluable opportunity to do this.	

Suggestions included larger group sizes to increase engagement, seeding discussions to "get the ball rolling" and "push notifications" enabling quicker access	Some modules already publish "Weekly Top Tips" for each Tutor to post within their TGFs, with a view to seeding discussions and facilitate/encourage debate and participation. On some modules, there are "Combined TGFs" (where a tutor has more than one group on a module). The principle behind "Cluster Forums" was to facilitate larger group size discussion opportunities.	Thank you for this suggestion which will be passed on to the Faculty with a view to looking to run an engagement scholarship project for 2023-24.

To what extent has the Cluster Forum provided you with an opportunity to collaborate more widely with your peers?

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members or students, please let us know whether you have found Cluster Forums helpful in enabling you to make contact and work collaboratively with other students. Has this been a positive experience, and if so, how does this differ to the opportunities provided in Tutor Group Forums?

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Students responded to say that their experience of their TGF was that they have a more "personable" experience in comparison to Cluster forums however using TGF was "off putting" due to low student engagement		Please see response to previous question. Further suggestions will be passed on to Module Teams with a view to considering feasibility of a pilot for cluster forms in 2023-24 with named moderators aiming to facilitate increased personalisation and engagement.

How effective have you found your Cluster Forum in supporting you with your module activities?

General questions posed for students to consider

Without mentioning specific staff members, if your module utilises Cluster Forums, please let us know how you have found the support you received through Cluster Forums. For instance, thinking about completing your module activities, have you found Cluster Forums helpful and if so, how this might compare to other support?

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Similar to other responses relating to Forums, students suggested that Cluster Forums were "not effective due to students not using them", that using Cluster Forums "took time" and that the system was "out of date" In comparison to e.g. Twitter style platforms		
One student commented that some Forums have weekly "Top Tips" which are helpful, however this is not universal across all modules.		Provide feedback for all Module Teams regarding benefits of Weekly Top Tips, with a view to seeing if this can be rolled out for all modules.

What motivates you to continue with your studies?

General questions posed for students to consider

Thinking about the different tuition support available on your module, for example:
- *one to one calls with your tutor*
- *cluster forum*
- *tutor group forum*
- *face to face events*
- *online tutorials*

Without making reference to specific staff members or students, please share with us what has been the most valuable in motivating you with your study

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Many students responded to say that tutorials (both online and F2F), detailed tutor feedback, responsive tutors, and meeting other	Students can feedback via variety of method – TGF, Consultations, Contact MT through SST, and email: ou-law@open.ac.uk	

students as being key motivators. One student suggested being able to provide "post-module assessments" of tutors.		
One student referred to their career aspiration being their main motivating factor. Another student referred to financial factors e.g. cost of degree, with a further student saying their "family" is their key motivating factor.	The OU has a careers service Careers support is available on [Law Study Home]().	
A student responded to say that in their view "motivation comes from within" so that the OU "shouldn't worry about shouldering the responsibility to motivate students"	[Stay motivated with study | Help Centre | The Open University]()	

STUDENT/MODERATOR THREADS

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
DEVELOPING SKILLS (INITIATED BY CA MODERATOR) Special tutorial sessions on skills would be helpful based on individual student need Oral skills development would be helpful in Law. Suggestion to make the tutorials "recorded" and the Tutorials "skills sessions" with pre-circulated problem questions to enable students to work through IRAC etc in a live session	Some modules have trialled this in the past, however attendance at Skills-only tutorials has been lower. This is why skills and knowledge are incorporated in main tutorials.	

LIBRARY SERVICES (INITIATED BY STUDENT) Library resources are excellent "fantastic resource" *e.g. webinars* Suggestion to increase tutorials/workshops on using Westlaw/Lexis etc	A variety of library sessions are already offered on some modules e.g. W111, W211, W212 and W360	Thank you for this suggestion. Module Teams will be asked to consider whether there is scope to increase these sessions in 2023/24.
TUTOR BIOS – (INITIATED BY STUDENT) Students would like to learn about their tutors backgrounds – Google and LinkedIn give some info but students would like to know more Students would like to "request" specific tutors depending on their areas of expertise/experience Students would like to be able to "cut red tape" and make requests for change of tutor based on experience and engagement in tutorials	The Open University model for allocating students to tutors doesn't allow for this level of choice regarding which tutor a student is placed with for a module or academic year.	
(RECORDED) HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR LEGAL ESSAY FEEDBACK - (INITIATED BY STUDENT) Positive feedback on 26/2/23 for tutorial which helped with referencing which would have been useful at the start of the module	Material and guidance is always available in the Law Undergraduate Guide, and Law Toolkit on the Law subject site, with referencing tutorials offered by certain modules e.g. W111	

__Hannah Griffiths__, Law School, Student Experience Manager, May 2023