

Student consultation is a central part of the ongoing relationship between the University and its student body. As a part of this, a series of consultation meetings were conducted in Spring 2019.

These consisted of:

- Nine meetings across a variety of UK and Ireland locations (Cardiff, Manchester, Glasgow, Bristol, Belfast, Milton Keynes, York, Dublin, London)
- Two Adobe Connect forums (one on each of the two topics)
- One asynchronous online forum for international students

In total, 262 students attended the face to face meetings; 50 participated across the two Adobe Connect sessions; and 66 students posted to the forum during the Online International Students Consultative Meeting.

Two major topics – ‘Communicating about study choices’ and ‘Assessment’ were discussed. A huge range of views on both topics were expressed, and a [summary](#) has been posted on the Student Consultation forums website. This summary has been considered by a wide range of staff members involved in improving the student experience in these two areas and is being used to inform further action.

Below is an update on what’s happening as a result of your feedback.

### Communicating about study choices

#### Engaging new students

##### **Feedback showed motivations to study with the OU range widely with flexibility seen as a key driver**

We are reassured that this consultation exercise aligned so well with the insight surveys and research we get on an ongoing basis. Flexibility is a crucial point of difference for The Open University and something that resonates with a lot of people. Furthermore, flexibility is core to the OU’s mission – we have no barriers to entry, a wide range of courses, people study for a wide range of reasons, study methods have flexibility built in. We are developing a few additional tools which are designed to help with this area. We are in the early stages of testing a new style of course finder on the website. Currently you search for course, but the new finder intends to enable people to search based on their motivation to study – for personal interest or to change career, as examples. It is in early stages of development and is quite a significant thing to build so we hope to implement it within the next 18 months.

##### **You told us that the information you needed when you signed up primarily related to finance, time commitment and support available**

We are working on several enhancements to the main OU website to tackle these three important information needs when someone is considering study:

- Finance – the website already contains information on fees for different courses, how different funding options work and how to apply. But it can be complex given different funding in different UK Nations and countries and in terms of different course requirements. Tests are underway on different ways to present funding in the online prospectus, using more visual and interactive techniques. We are evaluating how students find these different presentations and hope to roll out the ones which work best.
- We also have email campaigns which aim to support those who have already registered their details with the OU to give them the information they need to complete the process. There are emails which cover the different funding available and link people to ‘how to apply’. We are also commissioning new video content to support in this area as suggested by students.

- Time and support – there is a new '[What is distance learning](#)' area on the website, informed by student feedback, which covers more of the key information students need in this area – how long courses take, how study works, what to expect from tutors and study groups, how long you should set aside for study each week. It also includes a [Frequently Asked Questions page](#). We hope that these resources will help students gain a realistic understanding of what OU study is like before they start so they can prepare (see further information below).

**You advised that prospective students should be forewarned with more information about what study is like, on top of course content. Time commitment is viewed as the biggest surprise when study begins, as well as some inconsistency in tutor support**

We recognise that students tend to fit their study into already busy lives. Unlike those who go to University full-time usually at the age of 18, most of our students are older, have jobs, caring responsibilities and face a range of challenges that life can throw at us to juggle daily. Studying for any qualification does require time and we are continually working to inform potential students about how to fit study in. In addition to the 'what is distance learning' section above, we have introduced the following developments:

- Web chat is available across the part of the website where students choose what to study and the contact centre advisers are on hand to answer questions on anything students are not sure about as they investigate study options and how the OU works. This has been very popular
- There is a time planner tool on the website but also real-life student stories which provide study tips and help to bring study to life
- We have several real students who appear in short films and even shorter adverts on TV and social media/YouTube. These 'Open Diaries' feature students in their everyday lives and hopefully show that it is possible to fit study into a busy life
- When choosing a module, applicants are now warned about over-committing themselves and if someone selects to study 120 credits or more in one academic year, effectively full-time study, we attempt to call, just to have a conversation to highlight tools to help them and give advice. Advisers are also on hand in the contact centres and webchat.

Your feedback will continue to inform developments in this area so that anyone signing up for OU study can be as clear as possible about what to expect.

Students have also raised some inconsistencies in terms of support they get from their tutors. Obviously, every student is different and will have different needs and we try and flex our support to serve students. That said, one of our priorities for student success is called 'Enhancing tuition experience'. We are looking at a range of areas including how to ensure there is more consistency in approving requests for TMA extensions and developing a policy for online recordings of tutorials.

## [Milestone qualifications](#)

**The benefits of promoting milestone qualifications – including diplomas and certificates – outweigh the negatives. Clear communication with both students and employers will be key**

The University is now actively promoting milestone qualifications and they are better positioned on our website. Our advisers will be receiving updated training in relation to these qualifications that will include how to support students in their qualification choice. For example, some students may be clear that they want to sign up for a full degree, others may not be so sure, and so the advice is now, sign up for a milestone qualification such as a Certificate of Higher Education and then there is always the option of upgrading to a higher qualification as students progress and want to continue.

## [Keeping students on track](#)

**Several examples were given of how better preparation and timing could help students stay on track as they move from module to module. These included:**

- **Providing relevant course material earlier including early release of reading material and TMAs. Not knowing what is coming next can make students more likely to drop out;**
- **Facilitating an earlier 'start' to modules making bridging materials available in advance, such as examples of assignments. For some, the summer is dead time and could be put to good use;**
- **Providing extra activities/opportunities between modules primarily day schools or boot camps in the summer particularly important when moving between levels;**
- **Providing more flexible start dates and more flexibility around assignment deadlines.**

Student success is at the centre of our strategic priorities as a University and we are investigating different ways in which we can support students to continue their student journey and achieve their study goals. Your feedback and input are central to this work.

One example of work in this area is the analysis of some pilot work in our Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics faculty that offered early start material on two modules. We have been reviewing the evaluation of this work and asking challenging questions relating to the impact on student success. For example, has this work improved student outcomes or would those students have succeeded anyway? How can we target those students who would benefit the most?

We are also looking to improve our communications to continuing students and as a first step will be reviewing our University level pro-active student communications and using your feedback to make improvements in this area. We are also aware of the value placed by OU students on the flexibility offered by OU study. We will continue, informed by your feedback, to look at improving how the flexibility we offer can best meet your needs.

**You told us that ongoing engagement was key to ensuring you continued your study journey, for example:**

- **Improve tutor student relationships and provide more support. This might include support tutorials between modules;**
- **Provide opportunities for better/more frequent interaction with students on an ongoing basis as well as between modules;**
- **Be proactive in terms of support elsewhere such as Student Support Team contact between modules, or more access to student forums between modules;**
- **Improve information provision and communication, including a clearer demonstration (online) of pathways and what happens when.**

As mentioned above we are looking at ways to improve our communications with continuing students. This is a big piece of work and we have just kicked it off by agreeing to review all University-level pro-active student communications. How we communicate with students in between modules is included as part of this work.

## Assessment

**You said that your assessment experiences could be improved by students receiving more information earlier and more appropriate preparation (including tutor guidance, support, materials)**

An orientation Badged Open Course (BOC) 'Being an OU student' has been launched which is available to anyone who is a new student, or thinking of becoming a new student, with the OU. The course is available free of charge on OpenLearn and once enrolled on an OU module enables a student to complete a series of activities to enable them to be better prepared when starting their study. The course includes an [introduction to assessment](#) and is regularly reviewed and revised to update the support provided and in response to student feedback.

The [Help Centre](#) on StudentHome also contains support materials in relation to assessment which are available throughout a student's time with the OU. Some module materials are now made available before the module start date; and there are taster materials available on OpenLearn for the majority of modules.

Appointment and allocation of tutors to students cannot be undertaken until details of numbers of students who have enrolled on a module are known and this will not be until after the final enrolment date, which is often just a few weeks before the module start date. Tutors will often undertake an online or face to face tutorial at the start of the module to help prepare their students for the module, including assessment. The OU will continue to look at ways of ensuring that students are as well prepared for

assessment as possible, and we are working on improvements to make marking criteria clearer, which will be available as the OU moves to new assessment systems in 2020.

**Your feedback demonstrated that you have been well supported by the OU in understanding the importance of avoiding plagiarism – but there are still some possible improvements to help in avoiding it**

Helping students to avoid plagiarism is a high priority of the OU. Teams across the OU work together to build plagiarism preventive measures into module design. All assignments go through a software system that has been designed to detect possible plagiarism. If it is identified that the possible plagiarism is due to a lack of understanding about academic literacy and the need to reference work or ideas that are not one's own, a student's tutor will be notified and they will contact the student to arrange extra help to improve academic practice.

A site to help with [Developing Good Academic Practices](#) is available. The objective of the site is to help avoid inadvertent plagiarism and to develop good academic writing skills. A quiz is included to test understanding. OpenLearn also has a [free online course](#) which helps by providing guidance on developing academic integrity and avoiding poor academic practice. We are also developing a Badged Open Course (BOC), that students will be able to undertake to learn about and demonstrate their understanding about good academic practice. We hope that this will be available in the new year.

Prior to enrolment, you said you would like a clear explanation of how assessment works – what assignments are, how grading systems work and marks are awarded, and TMA examples. Open days would be useful to explain assessment requirements and how EMAs and exams differ.

The Badged Open Course (BOC) 'Being an OU student', [available publicly](#), contains a section giving an overview on how assessment works. It also provides a link to the Assessment Handbook which gives detailed information on all the rules and policies on assessment. To build on this, the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) is working closely with the Open University Students Association to improve communication with students around assessment. One of the areas that has been identified as a focus is reassurance and support for students to help develop good study skills and develop these skills as progress is made through a module. It is recognised that carefully constructed guidance about assessment and assessment criteria, using language that is accessible to students often unfamiliar with higher education, is critical.

**Whilst on the course, you asked for continued explanation of how assessment works and helpful, clear information and guidance. This might include:**

- **How to structure an assessment, how to reference, with examples.**
- **Improved pre-assessment preparation information – samples of answers and marking explained.**
- **Relevant ongoing tutor feedback – what to improve on prior to submission, 'dummy' assessments, early TMA outline reviews.**
- **Other (broader) communications considerations include more consistency and transparency on extensions and assessment criteria, and consistency between guidance notes and tutor feedback.**

We are working across the OU, including across the faculties, on several issues to improve the information available to students, based on your feedback to make it clearer, more understandable and consistent.

These areas include allowing students to engage in a deeper dialogue on marking criteria and learn more about tutors' expectations in conjunction with exemplars and peer review.

On assessment feedback, work is taking place looking at the quality and timing. It is important that the feedback should focus on the learning rather than on marks and is understandable to students.

Work on improving information about requesting TMA extensions is nearing completion, informed by student feedback, and there will be communicated soon.

**You told us you find constructive feedback on your assignments very helpful and would like this to be of more consistent high quality**

An internal audit of TMA monitoring has identified gaps in the process and work is being carried out to address these issues, which can lead to inconsistency. Improved training is being rolled out creating a single University training module and handbook, as well as making it mandatory for monitors to undertake training before conducting any monitoring. Updated University-wide monitoring principles are in preparation, in consultation with tutors.

The relatively new Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) is prioritising working with units across the University to help improve the outcomes for students and in response to student feedback this includes support for tutors to ensure a consistent approach to feedback across the University. It is proposed to develop a toolkit for tutors that will be rolled out across all faculties to provide a guidance/training tool.

There is a wealth of information and guidance available, however, it has been recognised that it is often confusing, procedural, difficult to find and not expressed from a student viewpoint which causes a sense of anxiety around assessment. A framework has been developed with the aim of keeping prospective and current students more informed about assessment and its purpose as a component of their study experience.