

# Student Consultation Meetings

Summary feedback from the Student Consultation meetings held during March 2019

Final 21/06/2019



The Open  
University

## Background

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 March 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

All the meetings were facilitated or moderated by OU staff supported by Students Association staff and students.

For face-to-face meetings, students were arranged in tables and discussed two broad topics (see Contents of this report). Each table appointed a scribe to collate their views. In addition, individual feedback was collected at these meetings. Feedback was captured via consistent word document templates.

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.

By nature there is likely to be a skew towards more engaged and committed OU students because they have volunteered to given up personal time to participate. There is a skew towards valuing face to face events from those attending the face to face meetings.

## Key Findings

- Motivations to study with the OU range across an emotive to rational spectrum – flexibility seen as a key driver
- Prospect information needs were primarily related to finance, time commitment and support available
- Time commitment is viewed as the biggest surprise when study begins, as well as inconsistency of tutor support
- Prospects should be forewarned with more information about what study is like, on top of course content
- The benefits of milestone qualifications are seen to outweigh the negatives – principally because they play to the OU's core principles of flexibility and they demonstrate student progress
- Drop outs are felt to occur mostly due to changes in circumstances, which the OU would struggle to address – bridging the gap between modules and delivering closer tutor support at this stage would help
- The main area students feel the OU could help them achieve their study goals is through increased tutor interaction
- Word association with assessment is mainly expressed as: stress, anxiety, feedback and procrastination
- Assessment experiences could be improved by students receiving more information earlier, and more appropriate preparation (including tutor guidance, support, materials)
- The OU is seen as being on top of plagiarism – almost all understand its importance – some still need help in avoiding it
- The student consultation process appears to be welcomed – and should continue (or even expand)
- Most of the main findings equally apply to international students, however they were more likely to mention quality and credibility in their decision making process, need more flexibility in online tutorials to account for time zones and have a higher need for online student communities to aid student contact. In addition, milestone qualifications are potentially less viable

## Why students chose the OU

Motivations range between the more emotive and rational – with flexibility the main driver identified

EMOTIVE / PERSONAL

RATIONAL / VOCATIONAL



### SELF MOTIVATION

Desire to prove yourself  
Defy the odds  
Prove people wrong  
Challenge yourself  
Pursue a dream

### FLEXIBILITY

Fits in with working  
Fits in with home life  
Life/work balance  
Freedom to do in own time

### TRANSFERABILITY

Credit transfer available  
To finish a degree

### EMPLOYABILITY

Facilitate career change  
Better job / improve role  
Career progression

### CURIOSITY

Keep brain active  
Personal interest in subject

### STUDY METHOD

Independent / self-directed study  
Remote study  
Done at own pace  
More informal

### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Requirements suit  
Less pressured  
No prior qualifications needed

### ACCESSIBILITY

Open to all  
Open door and new opportunity  
Easy to apply

### CONTENT / QUALITY

Course availability and choices  
Subjects to dip in and out of  
Open degree opportunity  
Good reputation

## Student questions prior to study

Finance, time commitment and support were the main areas students were looking for information prior to committing to study

### PRIMARY LEVEL

#### FINANCIAL

Mostly the cost of the course

Plus: How to apply / get funding  
How to pay for it  
Loan availability

What other financial support available

#### TIME COMMITMENT

How much time does it take  
How to balance work and study  
Number of hours required a week  
How long course takes to complete

#### SUPPORT

What study support is available  
How support is delivered

### SECONDARY LEVEL

#### CREDIBILITY

If courses are accredited / recognised  
Qualification credibility  
Whether valued by employers  
How it would impact employability  
Effect on career development

#### HOW IT WORKS / IS DELIVERED

How tutorials work  
How distance learning is delivered  
Amount of interaction with tutors  
What flexibility there is between PT and FT

#### COURSE CONTENT

What subject to study  
How assessments / exams work  
What pathways and modules available  
Length of course

#### ENTRY / ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS

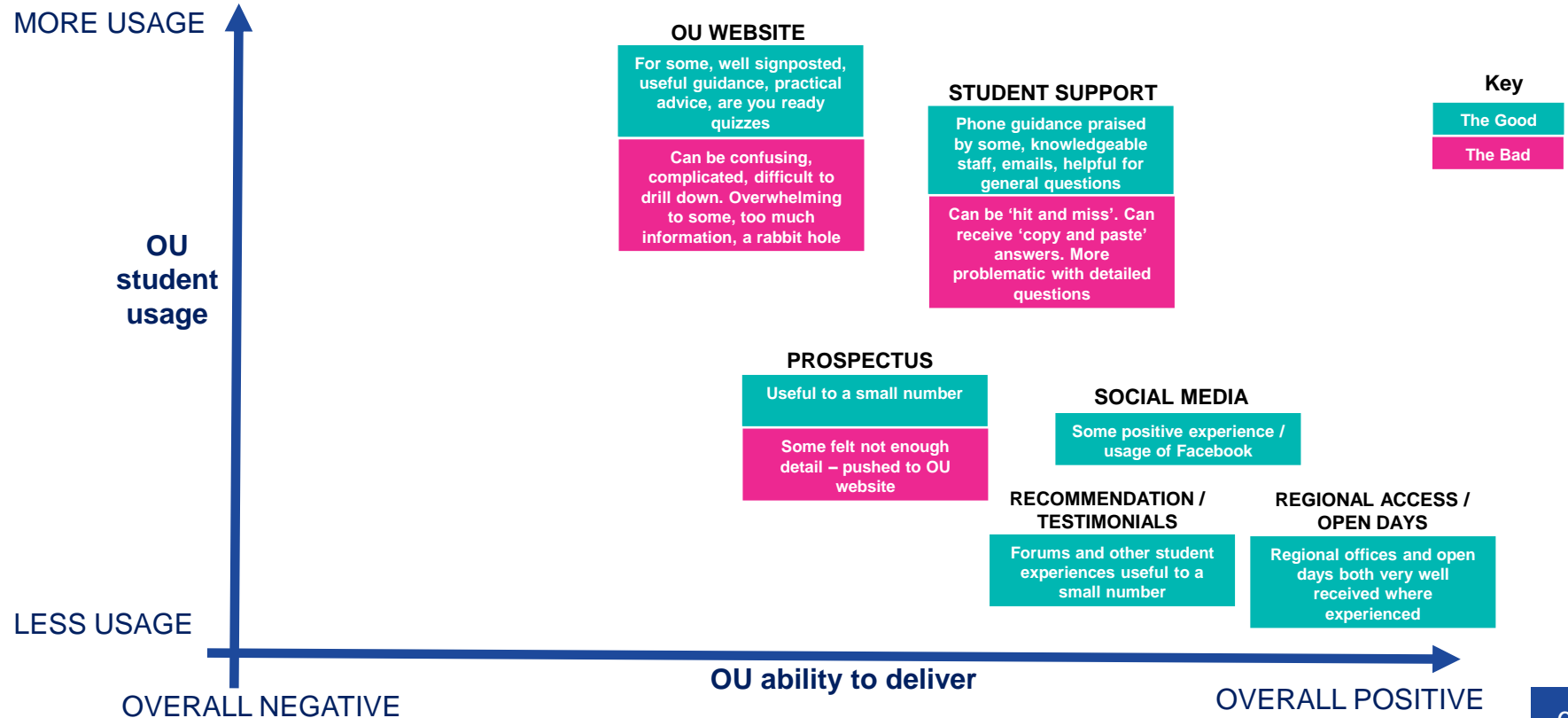
Level of difficulty  
Base entry level requirements  
Assessment of own capability

#### INTERACTION

Amount of student interaction available  
If can physically meet other students  
Extent of student societies / forums

## Student questions

Where students looked for information and the OU's ability to deliver – the more personal the interaction, the better it tends to be received

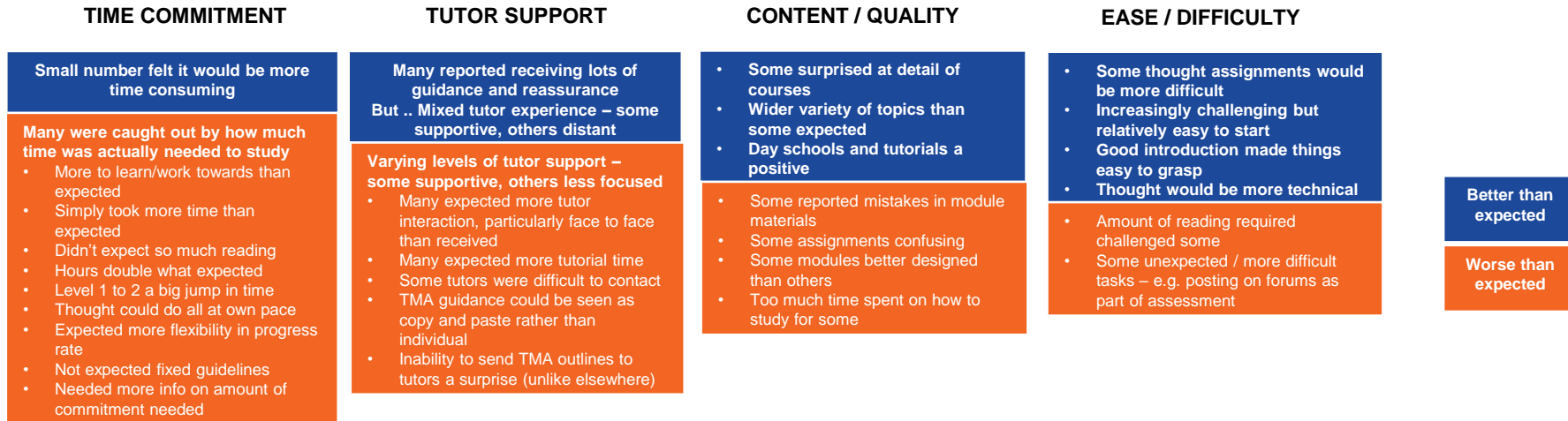


## Early student experience against expectations

Students broke down their early experiences into four main areas ... some with more surprises than others

WORSE THAN EXPECTED

BETTER THAN EXPECTED



### THE OU CHALLENGE ...

Ensure time commitments are more clearly spelt out – can be problematic when trying to 'persuade' prospects to study

Deliver a consistent tutor experience – the more personal contact, the better

More consistency in material delivery

Ensure students can both engage with material but also stretch themselves

## How the OU can improve information and support for potential students

### Students feel the OU can do more to forewarn prospective students about what the experience is like

#### Primarily to:

- **Provide**
  - **diagnostics** so students can assess study suitability for them – a realistic overview of ability to do the course
  - **tasters** of what study materials are like – to allow for early preparation and reduce surprises
  - information on **course content / detail** (via website) so clearer what to expect
  - materials that accurately **demonstrate** the student experience
  - guidance on how **assessment** works
- **Improve**
  - **website navigation** – essential to help deliver information and communication needs
  - student **support in advance** to study – enabling identification of level of support required
- **Demonstrate**
  - how **study relates to employability** – providing a clear link between study and workplace benefits
  - the amount and style of **tutor interaction** prior to signing up

#### Students also took the opportunity to suggest general improvements on information provision and ways of working for all ... including ...

- **More face-to-face contact** within course delivery
- **More flexibility on coursework submissions / deadlines** – but also calls for more consistency too
- **Introducing the early start option** – to get module access earlier
- To **communicate changes** to modules more clearly



## Milestone qualifications

The benefits of promoting milestone qualifications outweigh the negatives

The drawbacks appear to be fewer ... but clear communication with both students and employers will be key

### BENEFITS

- They play to the need for **study flexibility** – accepted strengths of distance learning and the OU
- They help to demonstrate student progress, provide **formal recognition** of achievement
- They help build **confidence** and aid **motivation** – longer-term goals of study feel more achievable
- They provide a tangible sense of **achievement** – including the chance to walk away with something if your circumstances change
- They give the potential to **pause** study and **return** later – allows for circumstances to change
- They provide a clear demonstration to employers of commitment and **employability** – adding quickly to a CV and showing employers their investment is worthwhile

### DRAWBACKS

- Employer understanding and recognition is vital – will employers understand the milestone or value of the course?
- Milestones could encourage lower aims for some students – a “that will do” attitude
- They can re-enforce the thought that part-time study takes longer

**Milestone qualifications will need to be promoted more widely to show the benefits**

**Clear communications are required with both employers and students**

## Why students might drop out

### Four main reasons were identified why students drop out between modules

#### CHANGES IN LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

A broad spectrum of 'personal' issues ranging from poor health to pregnancy to redundancy to moving house. This is where simply "life gets in the way of study" – a shift in the flexibility balance that drew many to the OU

#### TIME MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Not being able to find the time to study (sometimes due to a change in circumstances). For many, the time commitment ended up being far greater than expected

#### THE COURSE ITSELF

A wide range of issues, including difficulty, workload, poor performance in assessment or exams leading to a drop in confidence

#### LACK OF SUPPORT

Primarily from tutors – students reported mixed experiences including times where the level of support was not as expected. Lack of face to face support in general was an issue for some.

- There were also a small number of other minor factors, identified by a few – including: the cost, a realisation that distance learning isn't for them, a sense of isolation or simply a drop in personal motivation

**Some of these factors can be influenced by the OU, some not ... But managing initial expectations could help alleviate impacts**

## Keeping students on track

Many areas were identified where the OU can help retain students from module to module

### PREPARATION & TIMING

- Provide **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
- Facilitate 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
- Provide **extra activities / opportunities between modules** – primarily day schools or boot camps in the summer – particularly important when moving between levels
- Address course content and student time management issues – examples including **more flexible start dates, more flexibility around assignment deadlines**

### ENGAGEMENT

- Improve **tutor-student relationships** and provide more support. To include support tutorials between modules, and better / more frequent interaction with students on an ongoing basis as well as between modules
- Be **proactive** in terms of support elsewhere – either Student Support contact between modules, or more access to Student Forums between modules (they have to initiate this themselves)
- Improved **information provision** and communication in general (as an ongoing requirement) - a clearer demonstration (online) of pathways and what happens when

Actual experiences of the OU keeping students on track were mixed – particularly in relation to tutor support (in not addressing some of the above issues)

## How the OU can help students achieve their study goals

**Largely through more interaction with tutors and other students - looking for more consistent support and for the OU to leverage its strengths**

- More **face to face communication** and delivery from tutors – more F2F tutorials with greater frequency
- Better **access to print materials** – for some this is too focused on online delivery exclusively
- Improve the **website experience**, particularly navigation – information overload for some
- More **student to student access** and events, such as day schools, summer schools. Looking for the OU to facilitate more connectivity within the student body
- Leverage the appealing concept of **flexibility** to improve how study works – e.g. being able to share work prior to a TMA, accessing module materials earlier, providing past papers with response examples
- **Broaden student support** – more tailored and pastoral where appropriate
- Provide more **tutor consistency** – variations in experience are clear. Some students believe tutors should be observed, assessed, even evaluated
- Maintain the **positives that make the OU stand out** – access to all, tailoring material for students with disability



## How the OU can improve assessment communications

Students suggested more communication improvements during the course rather than prior

### PRIOR TO ENROLMENT

- Provide a clear explanation of **how assessment works** – what assignments are, how grading systems work and marks are awarded, TMA examples
- **Open days** to explain timings and assessment requirements – how TMAs and exams differ
- Specific open days for different modules
- Tips from tutors and students on effort and time required
- Ensure timings and deadlines are **understood in advance** – e.g. example calendar with deadlines

### WHILST ON THE COURSE

- Continued explanation of **how assessment works** and ensuring timings are understood
- On course assistance – **how to** structure an assessment, **how to** reference, with examples
- Deliver pre-assessment preparation information – samples of answers and marking explained
- Deliver 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

Again, students are looking for support and preparation tools ...

## How assessment experience matches up to expectations and where to improve

**Suggested improvements were largely focused on the areas students identified as lacking in information prior to study**

### EXPERIENCE VS. EXPECTATIONS

- A mixture of more and less positive as well as ‘as expected’
- Assessment could exceed expectations where **detailed feedback** was received, showing progression
- Feedback appears to be **inconsistent** – some expected more interaction before and after with their tutor or received less feedback than they were expecting
- There was little signposting of how **work gets harder as you go up the levels**
- Some had issues with how assessment works and lack of information on this – day schools helped here where they were experienced
- The restriction of not being able to share work or a plan in advance of a TMA was a surprise to some

### SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

- Make **preparation information available earlier** – dummy or practice TMAs and earlier release
- More **guidance and feedback from tutors** – the inconsistency of feedback again identified
- More information at the very beginning or before the course – how assessment fits in with the module, how marking works
- Amendment or greater flexibility in timing of assessments – tutorials often spoken of as too close to assignments
- More **flexibility with deadlines**, including when two module TMAs fall on the same date

**Some students believe the type of assessment does influence module choice (where this is an option) – in general TMAs were felt to be preferable to exams as you are better able to express your academic ability (and they are less stressful)**

## How the OU can help students prepare for exams and EMAs

Again, students feel the OU can help them with focus on preparation and appropriate tutor support

### PREPARATION

**More materials, more guidance, provided earlier**

- Exposure to past papers to prepare for what it looks like
- Examples of pass, fail, distinction TMAs and exams to see how gradings work
- Mock exams which are submitted and assessed in advance
- Ability to submit a plan in advance of an EMA for feedback
- Videos demonstrating what an exam looks like

### TUTOR GUIDANCE

**With emphasis on preparation**

- More in advance exam preparation sessions – one month in advance
- Revision guides and tips from tutors
- Drop-in revision sessions with tutors
- Have option for ‘private’ extra tuition (paid for)
- Integrate revision into module teaching
- Day schools before each exam – a chance to discuss with other students and tutor

### TIMING & ‘HOW IT WORKS’

**Improved ways of working**

- Earlier notice of which parts of the module are included in exam
- Release the EMA earlier
- More exam support for disability – including closer venues with better directions
- Give option of TMA or exam or even open book exams
- Ensure exams are not just a memory test



## Plagiarism – awareness and what the OU can do to help

### Students believe the OU is on top of plagiarism, but some still need support to avoid it

#### AWARENESS

- For most students, the OU makes them very aware of plagiarism and its implications – *“the OU is all over it”* – only a small minority felt this emphasis was negative
- For most the implications of plagiarism were very clear *“we couldn’t fail to be aware of the implications”*
- Students primarily look for information on the OU website, and what they refer to as the OU Library
- However, they might need more help in how to avoid it – OU support should focus on continued guidance and providing relevant tools and materials ...

#### POSSIBLE HELP

- More guidance on referencing – setting out how and where module materials need to be referenced
- More guidance via tools and education – making more aware of librarian service, real-time referencing help
- Producing materials to further enable them to spot plagiarism – how to analyse but not copy, a podcast on how to write in your own words, examples of good and poor practice
- For some, simply enable or promote current processes such as the assignment declaration
- Some would like access to external sources or software to help – Turnitin, copycatch and Tutorial were mentioned
- Be less secretive about OU plagiarism software and policies

## International student perspective

### International student responses in general mirrored those of UK students, with only a few variations:

- International students were slightly more likely to refer to **quality or reputation** as a deciding factor in studying at the OU – their initial enquiries naturally also involve a need to understand if and how they need to travel for exams
- More **flexibility** in terms of the timings **of online tutorials** would be appreciated by International students – some report difficulty in ‘attending’ these due to time differences. More consistency of recording tutorials would also be of benefit
- The **comparability of milestone qualifications** between the UK and some countries is a complex issue – some students question how recognised these might be locally. The length of study for a degree also varies by country adding to the difficulty in ‘translating’ some qualifications
- International students appeared to have slightly more inclination towards **more flexible (additional) start dates**
- There is slightly more of a demand for the OU engaging / helping to **establish online student communities** – International students even opened a separate specific thread in their forum to discuss this. These should be on a regional rather than global basis
- Exams are not a viable option for some International students, but all welcome any early preparation materials and interaction from tutors for this and EMAs

**THANK YOU**



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