

# RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON FLEXIBLE STUDY INTENSITY IN THE ARTS & HUMANITIES

## SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on experiences of and support for flexible study intensity, which took place between 11<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021. It involved discussion in the Arts and Humanities Board of Studies Student Consultation Forum, and a short questionnaire. The forum can be found at: <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=24463>

This consultation was open to all undergraduate students currently studying Arts and Humanities modules and qualifications. In total 92 people registered for the forum consultation, with 207 posts made by students.

The purpose of the consultation was to learn more about students' experiences of studying two modules in the same academic year and the techniques they use to help manage higher intensity study, and to gather feedback on how the school, faculty and the wider university can help them achieve their study goals more effectively.

The forum was moderated by Bev Smit (Arts and Humanities Board of Studies student representative), Richard Marsden (Director of Teaching, Arts & Humanities), David Thomson (Associate Lecturer), and Clare Spencer (Deputy Director of Teaching, Arts & Humanities). The moderators will provide a summary of discussions to the Arts & Humanities Board of Studies, and recommendations for future actions will be discussed and agreed at the Board of Studies meeting on 13 October 2021.

Below is a list of some of the major issues raised by students contributing to the consultation, and the steps being taken by the school to address them:

- **Study choices.** You value the chance to study at either higher or lower intensity, and to shift between intensities easily. The facility to stagger your study at level 1 is also very helpful, and you would like the option to do the same at levels 2 and 3. More help with the step up between levels would also be welcome.
  - At the moment there aren't enough students on individual modules at levels 2 and 3 to warrant presenting them in February as well as October. However, student numbers are rising, and we will keep this under consideration. We will continue to develop our bridging materials and deliver skills sessions to help students move from one level to the next.
- **Assessment.** Clashes between TMA dates on different modules falling in the same week is a major issue. Having both EMA submission dates on the same day or on the same week is even more challenging. Extensions, meanwhile, are a vital tool for students taking two modules at once, and the greater need that such students have for extensions should be properly recognised in OU policy and tutor practise.
  - Whilst there is currently no latitude to vary EMA dates, we are working hard to minimise TMA clashes between popular module combinations on new modules as they are produced and existing modules as they are reviewed. We will also continue to remind tutors that they can use the full latitude to the current extensions policy to support students taking multiple modules.
- **Tuition.** Popular module combinations should liaise more when timetabling tutorials to avoid clashes. More recordings of tutorials would also help on that front. In addition, access to a pathway tutor with oversight of both modules would be very helpful, particularly if he/she could then advise on how to deal with pinch points. This would also help to address the feeling of studying two part-time courses rather than one full-time one.
  - We are piloting the provision of additional support to higher intensity students from tutors who have knowledge of multiple modules across a qualification. In addition, we will work harder to coordinate timetables on popular module combinations at levels 2 and 3, as we already do at level 1.
- **Module materials.** The combined study planners we provide are useful, but they could be even more helpful if they were fuller and represented a better integration of the planners on the module websites themselves. You would also like to be able to access module materials earlier so that you start early to alleviate workload pressures down the line.
  - We have asked the university to look into a means of integrating study planners in a more seamless and sophisticated way. We are also piloting early access to module materials this year with a particular eye on its potential benefits for students studying at higher intensity.

- **Advice and guidance.** The OU's registration processes as well as conversations many of you had with student support seem intended to dissuade students from studying at higher intensity. In addition, the support materials available are scattered and overwhelming, rather too generic, and are not properly embedded into module websites. You would value them more if they were consolidated in one place, and better tailored to your particular qualification or study pathway.
  - o We will continue to rationalise our support resources for high intensity study so they are easier to find and navigate, and are piloting qualification-specific guidance for students taking multiple modules. We have also passed your feedback about undue negativity around the study of multiple modules back to the Student Support team and the various teams responsible for the module registration process.
  
- **Top tips.** Your most important advice on studying multiple modules successfully is to plan ahead. You also found that letting your tutor know that you are studying at a higher intensity usually garnered positive results. Ideally, however, tutors would be more proactive on that front rather than waiting for you to solicit them.
  - o There is lots of advice along these lines from other current and former students on the [Arts and Humanities subject site](#). We take the point about tutors being aware of your study intensity without waiting for you to contact them and are looking into the possibility of a study intensity 'flag' on tutors' student lists.

## FULL RESPONSE

### 1. STUDY CHOICES

	<b>You said</b>	<b>OU response</b>	<b>Next steps, if appropriate</b>
1.1.	You value the opportunity to study at a higher intensity, in order to complete your qualification more quickly, to then move onto employment, career progression and / or postgraduate study.	We are really pleased to hear this. Increasing numbers of OU students are choosing to study at full-time intensity, and we are keen to support them to do so.	
1.2.	You value the facility to easily change study intensity part way through your studies. Some of you studied level 1 at higher intensity in order to reach more discipline-specific modules more quickly, which you then studied consecutively. Others took Level 1 at lower intensity to get used to university study, and then went to higher intensity at levels 2 and 3.	Again, this is great to hear. The OU understands how important it is for students to be able to vary the intensity of their study based on changing circumstances and personal choices. It is something we are committed to continue supporting.	
1.3.	You value the choice given at level 1 to study both modules starting in the autumn (consecutive), or to study one starting in the autumn and the other after Christmas (staggered). You would like to have comparable choice to study on a staggered basis at levels 2 and 3.	At the moment there aren't enough students on individual modules at levels 2 and 3 to warrant presenting them in February as well as October. However, student numbers are rising, and we will keep this under consideration.	
1.4.	You feel that the step up between levels is particularly challenging when studying two modules at once, because there is less time be spent putting in extra work to help adapt to the tougher requirements of the next level up.	We recognise the challenges described here. The second half of the Arts and Humanities level 1 curriculum has recently been revised in order to better prepare students for level 2, and we continue to develop bridging materials and toolkits to support students as they move from one level to the next. The Arts and Humanities Student Support Team also runs advice and skills workshops specifically for students studying at higher intensity every autumn. In addition, the Faculty is trialling level 2 induction sessions which will include a focus on higher intensity study.	We will continue to develop our subject-specific bridging materials and toolkits.  If the induction session pilot proves beneficial to students studying at higher intensity, we will roll it out more widely.

## 2. ASSESSMENT

	<b>You said</b>	<b>OU response</b>	<b>Next steps, if appropriate</b>
2.1.	It would be helpful if assessment deadlines (TMAs and EMAs) were staggered more, so that deadlines for two modules did not fall in the same week.	We appreciate the difficulties that deadline clashes pose for you. There is currently no facility to vary EMA dates. However, as new modules are produced we work hard to ensure that there are as few TMA clashes as possible with other modules that students studying multiple modules are likely to take them in combination with. We also try to address the issue of assessment clashes when existing modules undergo review, and we are trialling staggering the start dates of popular module combinations at level 1 to see if that helps.	We will continue to emphasise the importance of avoiding assessment clashes on popular module combinations when new modules are being made and existing ones are being reviewed.  We will also seek to stagger the start dates of popular module combinations elsewhere in the curriculum, where appropriate, if it proves helpful at level 1.
2.2.	A standard approach of giving student studying two modules at once greater latitude around extensions would help you to manage your studies better.	Existing policy is that extensions of under 21 days can be granted by tutors in response to student circumstances. A high intensity of study is already one of the factors that tutors take into account when considering requests for extensions.	We will continue to remind tutors that they can use the full latitude of the extensions policy to support students studying at high intensity.
2.3.	Sometimes the assignment feedback you receive from tutors on the two modules you are studying seems contradictory, which makes it more difficult to work out what how to improve your work.	Some degree of discrepancy between the advice that tutors give in feedback is inevitable, not least because they are marking different assignments on different modules. However, we will consider this issue as we update our guidance on study multiple modules	Address the issue of apparently conflicting assignment feedback directly in our guidance for students studying multiple modules.

## 3. TUITION

	<b>You said</b>	<b>OU response</b>	<b>Next steps, if appropriate</b>
3.1.	There are often tutorial clashes between the two modules you are taking, so greater coordination between modules in the scheduling of tutorials would be helpful.	The coordination of learning events at level 1 already happens, but we accept that greater coordination between the timetables of modules at levels 2 and 3 is needed.	We will ask the colleagues responsible for timetabling on level 2 and 3 modules to coordinate the tuition schedules of modules that students often study together, so as to minimise clashes.
3.2.	Having more tutorials recorded would help you to get perspectives from different tutors, given that you have twice the number of tutorials to attend compared to students studying just one module.	It's really heartening to hear how valuable you find the recordings of tutorials. Current university policy is to make just one recording of each learning event per cluster, as many students feel uncomfortable being recorded. However, we will pass your views back to the team responsible for that policy so that they can keep the matter under consideration.	

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| 3.3. | It would be useful to have access to a pathway tutor with knowledge or oversight of both modules. This would be particularly helpful in terms of general study planning, prioritisation and dealing with clashes / pinch points. It would also help to address the sense of studying two part-time courses rather than one full-time one | We are trialling this kind of additional support for students taking multiple modules on one of our qualifications. This will involve a couple of additional learning events that relate to both modules they are studying, as well as a forum moderated by tutors with knowledge of all the modules in the qualification. | If that pilot proves valuable to students taking multiple modules, we will roll it out more widely. |
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#### 4. MODULE MATERIALS

<b>You said</b>	<b>OU response</b>	<b>Next steps, if appropriate</b>
4.1. Combined study planners are beneficial, but ideally they would be fuller and more properly integrated, rather than just a Word document with dates from both study planners.	We agree that this would be of great benefit to students studying multiple modules. The request has been passed to the university's Flexible Study Intensity working group, who are exploring the extent of the technical work needed to make this happen.	In the meantime, the 'Printable version' link at the bottom of your module study planner will allow you to print your planners so that you can compare them side by side.  We will also continue to provide combined assessment planners on the Arts and Humanities subject website.
4.2. You would like module websites to open earlier, so that you can get going on your studies before module start and thus relieve some of the workload pressure at pinch points later on.	We are trialling early access to module materials on two of our modules, and are looking at instances in which this already happens elsewhere in the Faculty.	If those pilots prove beneficial to students studying at higher intensity, we will roll them out more widely.

#### 5. ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

<b>You said</b>	<b>OU response</b>	<b>Next steps, if appropriate</b>
5.1. The messaging from the registration process, OU websites more broadly, and also the SST itself implies that the OU does not want students to studying 120 credits in a single academic year. This needs to change so that you feel supported rather than undermined in your study choices.	We recognise that there are still inconsistencies in how we advise students about higher intensity study. This feedback has been passed back to the Student Support Team and to the various teams responsible for the messages you receive about higher intensity study as you move through the module registration process.	
5.2. Some of you were unaware of the resources available to help you navigate studying two modules at once, whilst others felt that there was too much in too many different places. You would value a consolidated 'one-stop' approach to these resources and more efforts to make you aware of them – ideally they would be embedded into module websites. Many of you felt bombarded with information at module start which made it hard to	We take the point about feeling bombarded by information at module start, and the need to be made aware of the various kinds of help available in a more gradual manner. We are also already working on consolidating the resources available to support students studying at higher intensity.	We will continue to rationalise the resources that are provided to help you, so that they are easy to find and navigate.  We will also revise our communications plan so that you are reminded of them when you aren't being overloaded with other messages.

remember and follow up on those leads and resources later on.

5.3. Many of you told us that the resources to help you when studying multiple modules were too generic, and you would appreciate resources that were more tailored to your qualification and module combinations.	We are piloting some more specific guidance for students taking multiple modules in one of our subject areas,, which focuses on the positives and challenges of particular module combinations and offers advice on different routes through the qualification.	If that pilot proves beneficial to students studying at higher intensity, we will roll this additional guidance out more widely.
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## 6. TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL STUDY

### You said

### OU response

### Next steps, if appropriate

6.1. The piece of advice that the largest number of you shared was to plan ahead, particularly in terms of putting a study schedule together at the beginning of the academic year. However, you also stressed that it was important to be willing / able to adapt that schedule in response to changing circumstances	This tallies with the advice from other students that we already have available on the Arts and Humanities subject site. It is really helpful to hear so many of you reiterate it.	
6.2. Many of you also advised other students taking two modules to 'embrace everything', including attending as many tutorials as possible. That said, others of you felt that you had missed out by studying multiple modules because you only had time to engage with the core materials and not any of the optional extras.	These points speak to the different circumstances in which students taking multiple modules are studying. Some will have time to engage with all of the materials and tutorials, others will need to be more instrumental in their approach. We recognise that many of our high intensity students are time-poor. Your tutor will be able to advise on strategies for keeping up with your studies, and there is also advice on that on the Arts and Humanities subject site.	
6.3. One piece of advice that came up over and over again was to contact your tutor and alert them to the fact that you are studying at higher intensity. Some of you felt that your tutor should know this already, and therefore be in a position to make proactive adjustments rather than waiting to be told and then reacting.	This is good advice, since it enables your tutor to give you guidance that is more tailored to your situation. We have also requested a flag on the student lists that tutors receive to indicate what intensity each student is studying at. That request has been passed to the university's Flexible Study Intensity working group, who are exploring the extent of the technical work needed to make this happen.	

**Date:** 20 September 2021