

RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON COMPUTING AND COMMUNICATIONS POSTGRADUATE CURRICULUM

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on Postgraduate Curriculum which took place between 21 August 2020 and 6 September 2020 on the Computing and Communications Board of Studies Student Consultative Forum. The consultation forum is available at <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=23764>.

The consultation was open to all 505 eligible students. 36 students engaged with the consultation and 18 students posted at least once. Overall, there were 81 posts from students and 16 ratings (likes and favourites).

Although the number of students engaging with the process was low, we were pleased to see that 18 students engaged with the consultation and provided valuable feedback about a number of aspects relating to our postgraduate modules and qualification. In addition, some comments relating to modules from other schools were included, which we will be passing on.

Students at different stages of their postgraduate journey contributed and it was interesting to see the differences in study intention, from personal interest to support a change in career direction.

The feedback provided in the consultation has been considered by the relevant module chairs and wider programme members.

There were a number of key elements identified from the consultation, including the name of qualifications, different file formats for assessments, EMA feedback and the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. In response to these points raised:

- When introducing or updating our qualifications we carefully consider the naming and seek advice from colleagues and take into account employability needs and the marketplace.
- The current choice of file format, (doc or rtf), allows more flexibility for the markers to add inline comments, allowing for feedback to be included as close to where is applicable. Although tools are available for feedback on pdf documents, it still tends to be more limited. We will periodically review the submission options. There were a number of comments that doc and rtf formats were only possible through Microsoft products, please note alternative applications can produce doc and rtf formats, such as the OpenOffice suite.
- EMAs are equivalent to an exam, which does not include individual feedback. In addition, an element of feedback for TMAs (continuous assessment) is fed forward for the next assessable component. It is however worth noting that any resubmission result is accompanied by feedback that provides guidance on the areas that require improvement.
- The adjustment from studying at undergraduate level to postgraduate level is acknowledged by module teams and may be heightened due to the nature of distance learning. The programme recommends students study the [Succeeding in Postgraduate Study](#) badged online course on OpenLearn prior to postgraduate study. In addition, module teams are trialling briefings, pre-module start and for final assessment sessions. There are numerous other sources of guidance regarding postgraduate study such as the Study site and via the library. These resources are reviewed and added to when appropriate.

The module team has addressed your comments relating to the size of assessments on M816 by reducing the word count expectations on the TMAs. Modules continue to be reviewed on an annual basis, further changes to assessments will be reviewed and additional adjustments will be made if necessary.

The currency of the Advanced Networking curriculum is currently being addressed by replacing a number of 30 credit modules with a new 60 credit module (T829 *Advanced Networking (CCNP Enterprise)* launching in November 2021).

We have recently started the review process of our postgraduate offering and comments made during this consultation process will be taken into consideration and will be used to guide decision making.

FULL RESPONSE

Below we have included the questions from each forum threads, a summary or quotes from students and our response, including actions taken and next steps.

Module content

We would like to collect your views about the content of the Computing modules you are studying or have studied. Please remember to indicate the module you are referring to when answering the questions.

- Did the module meet your expectations for subject content and level?
- Do you feel there was sufficient time to complete all the activities?
- How do you feel the activities developed your knowledge and understanding?
- Did you use the resources provided by the module?
- How accessible were the resources?
- How useful were these resources?
- What do you think would have helped improve your knowledge and understanding?

Please feel free to add any other comments about module content.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
the choice of software on some modules and how it relates to software used in industry.	The software chosen for the modules is periodically reviewed. It is typically chosen to support the learning outcomes of the module. We thank you for your comments and will feed this into the next module refresh.	The module team will consider the feedback about the software choices when refreshing content whilst ensuring the needs of the module and learning outcomes continue to be met
M812 Digital Forensics 'the content was aimed too much at "computer geeks", studying within Computing, rather than others, like me, "visiting" from another course' and 'the software downloads and subsequent analysis take days' However 'the activities were good in that they were "hands-on" so I developed skills in analysis'	The digital forensics module is a technical module that assumes a good foundation in computing, the suggested entry requirements are that the expectations are you will hold a bachelor degree (or equivalent) in computing or a related discipline, or alternatively have at least three years relevant industry experience.	
Computing Tutors are looking for a different style in TMAs than tutors supporting modules from different qualifications.	This is to be expected as qualification and modules have different expectations and methods of assessing learning outcomes. However, in general postgraduate assessment does expect elements such as critical thinking and supporting evidence to be clearly demonstrated.	
Several respondents indicated that they were generally satisfied with the module content and supporting texts	We thank the respondents for their comments and the team will continue to review module content and materials in light of developments in the subject area.	

Applicability of the module to your qualification?

We would like to collect your views about the applicability of the module or modules you are studying (have studied) to your qualification. Please identify the module you are referring to.

- What is your qualification goal, please indicate specialty, if any?
- What are the key reasons for choosing the qualification you are following?
- How many modules have you studied towards your qualification?
- Do you feel that there is sufficient optionality within the qualification in terms of choice of modules?
- What would be your top 3 subject areas/topics for additional modules?

Please feel free to add any other comments about applicability of the modules you are studying (have studied) to your qualification.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
named qualifications such as MSc Cyber security were preferred to designations such as MSc Computing (Information security and forensics) because content is more obvious to employers.	The introduction of the MSc in Cyber Security was a result of consultation and reviewing current market trends. When the MSc in Computing (Information security and forensics) was introduced there was not the same demand for cyber security.	We will continue to review the names of our qualifications. We consider different external accreditations and decide which are most appropriate to apply for.
MSc Advanced networking – update knowledge and skills in fast changing environment. MSc Advanced networking – OK at the moment but things change. Update of current trends, an update of the material and some changes in approach to reflect changes in the industry would be more appropriate than new modules.	We are refreshing our Advanced Networking offering by replacing T824/6/7 with a new module T829 in Autumn 2021, which reflects changes in networking. We are using our experiences from T824/6/7 to feed into the development of T829	T829 launches in 2021K and will continue to review module contents .
One student commented studying 2 modules concurrently was not a good idea but depended on current level of knowledge and flexibility of lifestyle.	We are grateful to all respondents and feel the views of students at different stages of their study is important. We do note that studying 2 modules at the same time is not recommended if you are in full-time employment.	
MSc Cyber security range of options is fine. One student noted that when taking T847 it was difficult to make a decision on choice of final module – more variety would be useful.	Although more variety may be desirable, we feel that we already offer a good range of optionality where we can. It is important that the core modules for a qualification complement each other.	We will periodically review the optionality provided in the qualifications.
There were a small number of topics and possible programming languages suggested for additional modules.	Academically the postgraduate programme takes the view that the language specifics are not as important as the underlying principles. It is the computational design and thinking that should be core. The language is generally chosen to be a vehicle for the concepts being taught. It is expected that students starting postgraduate study have developed language skills in either an undergraduate degree or through work experience.	Discussions have begun within the School about the Postgraduate curriculum and the size and shape of our offering, including topic areas that should be included. Student feedback is important in guiding/supporting improvements

Overall experience of the module

We would like to collect your views about the overall experience of the module you are studying or have studied. Please remember to indicate the module you are referring to when answering the questions. Please post separately for each module.

How would you describe your overall experience of the module?

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
some text books are 'boring'.	The books chosen by the module teams tend to be focused on industry standards and are written by experts in the field.	The module teams will reflect on feedback provide by students and investigate if any changes that may be possible to address concerns.
There was a comment made about APM being difficult with regard to student membership.	The difficulties regarding APM have been resolved.	We will monitor and respond to any future difficulties
There were some comments about tutor support, but it was not clear if the issues were raised with the student support team.	We are always concerned to hear about difficulties regarding tutor support. We do however note that postgraduate tuition is typically different to undergraduate tuition. The tutor is there to provide support and guidance rather than for direct teaching.	When any difficulties are brought to our attention, we will endeavour to resolve them.
There were also comments about the lack of tutorials.	Most of the postgraduate modules have more individual assessments which benefit less from tutorials and more from individual tutor support and guidance	Briefings are being trialled which are two-part briefings (Part 1 is a brief outline of the programme and an introduction to PG study, Part 2 is module specific). EMA/Exam briefings are also being trialled. The future of these briefings will depend on the evaluation of these briefings which will evaluate the success rate and attendance levels of the briefings before rolling out further..
There were also a number of positive comments about most modules. With some providing enjoyable elements, such as the "personal" and "research" threads.	We thank students for all feedback and will continue to review modules and materials.	

BCS accreditation

We would like to collect some views about the importance of BCS accreditation.

Was BCS accreditation for the MSc an important factor in choosing your qualification?

Please feel free to add any other comments about BCS accreditation.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
There were several divergent comments about the value of BCS accreditation for the qualification.	The variety of comments about the relevance of the BCS have been noted and will be considered by the wider team. The BCS has a membership of 65,000 out of a worldwide industry of many millions. The profession needs a professional body, as do professionals.	The wider team will consider the comments when developing new qualifications and reviewing current qualifications.

Assessment

We would like to collect your views about Assessment of the Computing modules you are studying or have studied. Please remember to indicate the module you are referring to when answering the questions.

- *Do you feel the assessments were aligned to the module materials and learning outcomes?*
- *How closely do you feel the weighting of an assignment reflected the workload?*

- From your expectation of postgraduate assessment, do you feel that the assessments have been set at an appropriate level? If yes, what did you think was most useful? If not, how could the assessment be improved?

Please feel free to add any other comments about assessment.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Some students were disappointed with the weighting of assessment and their final result in M811 <i>Information Security</i> .	Typically, the EMAs test different learning outcomes to the TMAs. For instance, the learning outcomes for M811 are balanced between organisation-based ones, assessed in TMAs, and professional and research skills, assessed in the EMA. This latter set contribute to your ability as a professional for research, self-directed study and communication, as well as for capstone project training. To gain a grade other than pass, you must perform at that level throughout the module.	
A comment was made about the TMA word counts, including a comment about M816, which had the word count set very high.	The M816 module team have reviewed the word counts in the TMA and reduced the TMA word counts.	
A comment was made about the low word count in one assessment for T828 Network Security being trivial.	The module team commented that the assessment is looking for specificity of information rather than volume. This allows students to demonstrate their ability to concisely convey information around some focused thinking.	
There were a number of comments about EMA feedback not being the same level of feedback as received for TMAs. This included a comment about the marking processes.	The feedback on TMAs typically includes feedforward comments, which relate to the subsequent assessments. The EMA is equivalent to an examination, which do not typically have individual feedback. The EMAs on postgraduate modules are double marked and any submissions with large differences between markers are reviewed by the module team.	
A couple of comments were made in relation to the EMA following on from the TMAs	In general, the assessment for a module needs to cover all of the module learning outcomes. In several modules the EMA addresses different learning outcomes to the TMAs and so may appear not to follow from the final TMA.	
For the module with an exam (M812), my experience was that I spent a lot of time learning for the exam, which went well, but I sadly already forgot a lot of that material, which I didn't feel happening with TMAs and EMAs. In	An assessment strategy that includes a healthy and a mixed diet of assessment types is preferable to a more linear approach. Each module considers their assessment strategy carefully.	When modules are reviewed and updated all elements are considered and changes are made where it is considered appropriate.

my opinion EMAs are a win/win, because it's not as stressful and I personally learned more from them than the exam		
There was a comment that the step between undergraduate and postgraduate seems significant. The work needed for the assessments in postgraduate study seems harder than at other universities	<p>We feel that the step between undergraduate and postgraduate is similar to other universities. The differences we see are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In a traditional university you may have the same lecturer, perhaps, which gives some continuity. - In a traditional university you may also have easier access to peers - We acknowledge that as The Open University offers distance learning study there may be less opportunity for informal discussion about assessments. <p>The modules are reviewed by external examiners who consider the materials and assessments to be set at an appropriate level for the sector.</p>	We will continue to work with external examiners to maintain the appropriate levels of assessment across our modules and qualifications and to support students.
There was a comment about T802 Research project assessment from a student with experience at dissertation/PhD level who found the structure of 4 TMAs unhelpful.	The majority of students who study T802 are new to postgraduate study, so do not have the experience of completing a PhD. The TMAs are there to help guide students through the research process and act as milestone checks on progress.	
We have received a few comments concerning modules outside the School of Computing and Communications.	We will pass on the comments to the relevant module team and school/Faculty.	
There were a couple of comments about the consistency in word limits for assignments across the range of postgraduate modules.	<p>The word limits are set to reflect the exact nature of the questions being asked.</p> <p>This is likely to vary by topic and type of question used to assess different learning outcomes. Some modules set very limited word counts to encourage focused critical thinking and reflection, which are important postgraduate skills.</p>	
There was some discussion regarding being able to submit assignments as pdf which appears to be acceptable on Science modules. A comment was made that consistency across STEM would be an advantage. It was noted that it is difficult to give the same level of feedback on a pdf. Some students also wished to use FLOSS alternatives and odf. It was noted that students can submit rtf files.	<p>The school follows the university guidance¹, which notes most applications can export appropriate formats.</p> <p>It was noted that annotating pdf files is not as flexible with respect to annotating as .docx or .rtf</p> <p>In any event students can use FLOSS/FOSS products for the TMAs to submit in .docx or .rtf format there is no need to engage with Microsoft.</p>	The University is currently exploring the use of an alternative Exams and Assignments system.

¹ <https://help.open.ac.uk/submitted-your-file-in-the-correct-format>

Workload of the module

We would like to collect your views about the workload of Computing modules you are studying or have studied. Please remember to indicate the module you are referring to when answering the questions. Note that there is a separate discussion for you to comment on Assessment, so it would be helpful if you could give comments on study workload in this thread.

- How did you find the overall workload for the module?
- How many hours a week did you expect to be studying?
- How many hours did you actually spend studying each week?
- How strong a background did you have in the topic at the start of the module?
- At what stage in your qualification did you study the module (first, last, in the middle)?
- Would it have helped to study this module at a particular stage in your qualification?

Please feel free to add any other comments about module workload.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
A couple of participants made comments about the amount of reading on various modules.	MSc study will typically require a significant amount of reading, either in the form of module materials, recommended reading or self-directed study around the subject. Depending on the familiarity with the subject area and the subject some of this will be more or less easily digested.	
A couple of comments were made about the useability of some software.	Software is chosen to support particular learning points and to support the subject matter. Software guides and additional guidance is supplied where appropriate.	
There was a wide range of expectations regarding the amount of study time required for a module, which spanned from 7 to 20 hours per week.	The average workload expected for a typical 6-month postgraduate module is between 12 and 15 hours per week for a 30-credit module. The exact time depends on how much prior knowledge is brought into the module. This includes studying the materials, external reading and self-directed study. This information should be available on the prospectus website (F66 MSc in Computing Open University) and on the study site.	
There were several comments regarding external factors and how to fit study in, especially in the exceptional conditions around Covid. This resulted in additional work hours in numerous ways. Some students noted that the workload was relatively easy to schedule with their other commitments.	External factors can have a significant impact on the time available for study. I am always impressed by all Open University students who study alongside other work and family commitments. It is clear that this year, for some of our students, the available time and the difficulty of fitting in study has been exacerbated because of the pandemic.	
Some questions were raised about the entry requirements for M813	The M813 (Software Development) description page ² under the entry requirements tab states: "You should also have experience of object-	

² M813 Software Development - <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/modules/m813>

	oriented software development from previous study or professional work and an understanding of what UML is. A basic working knowledge of Java is expected and some Java coding tasks will be part of the assessment.”	
Other general comments: Found the OU library difficult to navigate through. The search capability I found to be quite lacking..		We will feed the comments back to the different areas of the university

Structure of module

We would like to collect your views about the structure of the Computing modules you are studying or have studied. Please remember to indicate the module you are referring to when answering the questions.

- How did you find the overall structure of the module?
- Did the structure of the module help you to understand the module content?
- Do you think the split of Blocks and use of activities, quizzes etc. aided your study?

Please feel free to add any other comments about module structure.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Although M812 was considered well-structured there was a comment about the structure and continuity of M812. In addition, there was a comment about variety of TMAs.	The module is currently undergoing a significant rewrite which incorporates major structural changes, such as changing the legal block and distributing some the content in-situ to where it is relevant in practice.	The module team will review the impact of the changes and make further adjustments as appropriate.
M812 is a unique course for me which I enjoyed and found the "interview" assessment satisfying to go through - different from a typical assignment or exam.	We would like to thank you for the comments about a different style of assessment. We try to use a variety of assessment methods that relate to the range of learning outcomes being assessed.	
Some students commented on modules outside those managed by the school of computing and communications, such as T848.	As these are not managed within the school we cannot comment directly. However, we will pass these comments on to the relevant teams for them to consider.	

Apprenticeship students

We would like to collect some views from Apprenticeship students studying Computing modules.

- Do you feel starting the programme with a single module helped your study?
- How are you finding the need to balance two modules during the second 6 months?
- How do you feel the workload is balanced between the modules?

Please feel free to add any other comments about the Apprenticeship programme in relation to Computing modules.

No student posts.

We would like to apologise for the delay in publishing this response, this was due to staff availability due to several factors. These include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes that needed to be introduced. In addition, the introduction of remote working and remote meeting has impacted efficiency. The school is also engaged

in producing several new modules which has meant staff being stretched more than normal because of the unusual working environment over the pandemic period.

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