

# RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON: SUPPORTING YOUR STUDY AIMS: ACCREDITATION, PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

## SUMMARY

This is a response to the [Environment, Earth and Ecosystem Sciences \(EEES\) Board of Studies Student Consultation](#) on ‘**Supporting your study aims: accreditation, personal development planning and learning outcomes**’ which took place between 14<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021. 79 students participated in the forum discussions, which comprised 406 posts in total. The aim was to use the information gathered to inform development of these aspects of our curriculum to support students’ studies at both qualification and module level, initially during the production of new curriculum for M05 Master of Environmental Science and R53 BSc Geology.

This forum ran much later than planned, due to a backlog of consultative forums across the University that saturated the capacity of the delivery team. Our forum was postponed from Feb/March. We were concerned that running a forum so late in the J presentation cycle (during peak EMA preparation time) would result in a poor response rate. However, this was not the case, with a healthy cohort of students on all threads. Credit also to the two AL moderators, **Jo Davis** and **Andrew Southworth**, for stoking the discussions.

*The following questions were asked:*

- 1) *What is/are the aim/s of your study with the Open University?  
This might be career, career change, curiosity, boredom, a wild impulse or just sheer chance – whatever it is, we want to hear!*
- 2) *How much do/would you value accreditation of your degree, and why?*
- 3) *How have you incorporated personal development planning (PDP) into your OU study?  
We’d like to hear your views on these – what worked and what didn’t – so we can improve our PDP provision.*
- 4) *How useful do you find learning outcomes in your OU studies:*
  - For completing assignment questions?
  - For reflecting on feedback from assignments you have completed.
  - For planning how to tackle future assignments?
  - At the module level?
  - At the qualification level?
- 5) *Do you prefer learning outcome grades (e.g. well demonstrated; just demonstrated etc) or conventional marks as attainment measures for your assessments? Please expand on the reasons for your choice.*

The purpose of the Board of Studies is to oversee the development of curriculum, to monitor the performance of modules and qualifications within the school and to sponsor appropriate actions and interventions.

*The headline messages received were:*

*More respondents (44/74) identified their overall study aims as career-related, while just less than half (29/74) were studying for personal interest/development; a couple started studying for interest but are now considering a career change.*

**Response:** This seems to confirm our impression of a shift in the study intentions of OU students generally, mirrored in the Earth and Environment area. More students are focused on career development, whether they are starting on a new career, shifting mid-stream, or up-skilling within their current career pathway. Having said that, there is complexity and variety in these responses, with many students’ aims being an amalgam of several motivations. And – as always! – there was a range of other aims in the cohort, including personal challenge, grasping opportunities previously denied them, wanting to ‘change the world’ or better inform their lifestyle choices. The diversity of your motivations is one of the joys of teaching at the OU.

We need to bear in mind the potential for the forum questions to skew the group of students who chose to respond: it may be that these particular questions attracted a greater proportion of career-oriented students than exists in our overall cohort.

Employability issues have a higher profile now in the School since the appointment of an Employability Lead (currently Prof. Angela Coe), who liaises with the Careers and Employability Service (CES) about ways to connect students with employers and build their professional skills. Employability has also been formalised as part of the module design process. In modules recently produced for Environment qualifications (S397, SDT306, S831) the emphasis has shifted away from purely academic content to include material, case studies, activities and assessment that develops professional skills. These same principles are also prominent in the creation of S319, the new Stage 3 module for R53 BSc Geology.

*The majority of students (42/63) value an accredited degree, perceiving that it would give them an edge in the job market, as well as conferring additional credibility on their studies.*

**Response:** Although this headline suggests a firm response, there was some ambivalence and even a couple of dissenters who feared that the requirements of accreditation schemes could limit the scope of some degrees. There was also some confusion around exactly what accreditation was, most of which was alleviated by discussion (with reference to the information given in the Welcome message). One post suggested that accreditation could reassure employers that sufficient practical experience was included in the degree, changing the perception that OU degrees lacked practical content.

We have recently re-accredited (or newly accredited) several of our Environment degrees with the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM): W47, Q52, M05, E79, F65 and R16, and are awaiting confirmation of renewed accreditation from the Institution of Environmental Science (IES) for W47, Q52, M05 and R16. We are investigating CIWEM accreditation for R53 Geology and eagerly awaiting the outcome of both the Quality Assessment Agency (QAA) review of the subject benchmark statements for Earth and Environmental Sciences and the Geological Society accreditation review. We hope that changes to these schemes' criteria may allow us to apply for accreditation for R53 Geology. The stringent requirements of the Geological Society accreditation scheme have precluded any OU geoscience degrees gaining accreditation up to now but a shift in attitudes across the external HE sector may make this possible in the near future.

*The majority view was that Personal Development Plans should not be mandatory parts of modules, but could be a useful optional activity – perhaps running throughout a qualification with a completion certificate.*

**Response:** I was slightly taken aback by the strength of feeling on this topic, which indicates we need to review and change our current practice. The suggestion of running a PDP scheme longitudinally alongside a student's entire qualification chimed with discussions we have had in the STEM faculty recently; were it not for the COVID situation, plans for such a scheme might be more advanced by now. We were also interested to learn of similar schemes at, for instance, Lancaster University. There were comments that our approach to PDP was inconsistent because it acted at the level of individual modules; the flexibility of OU study exacerbated this patchiness because of the way students can 'mix and match' modules from different Schools and subject areas.

Some students commented that PDP could be helpful, for instance for students with mental health issues; several praised the approach of modelling PDP with examples of good vs poor skills portfolio content. However, many students remarked that PDP was largely irrelevant for older or retired students not focused on career progression. These students reacted very negatively to the inclusion of PDP questions or activities in TMAs: this was viewed as displacing more important module content.

*All students were aware of learning outcomes related to assessment; however, module- and especially qualification-level learning outcomes had a much lower profile. Most found them useful when clearly and specifically related to assessment questions, but there were several comments that many learning outcomes were too vague or generic to be useful. A majority (26/45) preferred conventional marks to learning outcome grades, because they wanted to know exactly where/how they had lost marks.*

**Response:** It is encouraging to hear that students are aware of learning outcomes and use them in their everyday study. It takes time to adapt to using learning outcome grades as opposed to conventional marks; it may be true that some questions are better served by conventional marks while others are more suited to learning outcome-based grades.

In EEES, we have held two meetings in 2021 discussing marking issues, including both tutors and our BoS student rep in the discussions. These have resulted in sharing good practice to ensure consistency of marking across cohorts of tutors, which we had identified as an area of concern – associated partly with the predominance of EMAs over exams in our School but also with the importance of independent project work in our modules. The style of our assessment has slowly changed over the years so that it is based much less on factual recall and mainly on demonstration of conceptual understanding and skills. We have identified a need to improve the clarity of our assessment questions, as well as better mentoring of new TMA authors in how to write clear, effective questions.

We have recently (2020-21) reviewed and revised qualification-level learning outcomes for Q52 alongside developing new ones for M05, with the aim of making them more concise and clearer. R53 learning outcomes have been written along similar lines. We are required to articulate and update learning outcomes for our modules and qualifications by both the University and the QAA, but it is helpful to hear that students are primarily concerned with more specific learning outcomes connected to their everyday study.

## FULL RESPONSE

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
More than half of you said that your overall study aims were career-related.	Our EEES Employability Lead is working with the Careers and Employability Service to connect students with employers and resources. Employability is now embedded in the design process for new modules.	Mapping employability skills across our Environment curriculum, as has been done for our Earth Science modules, to identify any skills gaps.
Accreditation for degrees was valuable, enhancing both employability and credibility.	In November 2020 we gained CIWEM accreditation for 6 of our Environment qualifications; we have also applied for IES accreditation for 4 of these same degrees.	Scrutinise the revised QAA benchmark statements for Earth and Environmental Science, along with the revised Geological Society accreditation scheme, to assess whether to apply for accreditation for R53 (BSc Geology).
Personal Development Planning (PDP) is best delivered as optional content outside assessment and maybe outside modules.	This is a useful steer on our current practice, which we accept is somewhat inconsistent because it is delivered at module level.	We will raise this issue again with the STEM faculty, aiming to revive discussions initially held in 2019 on the potential for a longitudinal qualification scheme similar to the 'Lancaster Award' at Lancaster University.
Learning outcomes are most useful when they are related clearly to specific assessment questions or tasks.	We held 2 discussion meetings on marking practices in EEES in 2021, including tutor and student views. We have rewritten the degree learning outcomes for Q52 Environmental Science so that they are more concise. We have also written degree learning outcomes in the same style for M05 Master of Environmental Science and R53 Geology.	We will share good practice identified in these meetings across our modules, including improved mentoring of new TMA authors, to ensure that assessment questions are clearly and transparently related to learning outcomes.

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