

RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON SENSE OF BELONGING/COMMUNITY, AND SUPPORT

SUMMARY

This is a response to the student consultation on **Sense of belong/community** and **Support** which took place between 25th June until 11th July 2021 on the [Languages and Applied Linguistics Board of Studies Student Consultative Forum](#).

We chose two topics: **Sense of belong/community** and **Support** because these topics are all aspects of the learning experience, student success and retention and we wanted to look more closely at what works well for our students and what can be improved across our qualifications. The aim of this forum was therefore to seek the opinions of LAL students on a number of issues related to their experience with sense of belonging and community, and how they feel about the support they get, and what support are most needed in order to improve the support that we offer to them.

Questions were organised under two discussion threads with the following prompts:

1. **Sense of belonging/community**

- (i) To what extent do you feel you have developed a sense of belonging to different learning communities at the Open University? For example, would you say you have a strong, medium, weak, or no sense of belonging to any one or all of the following, your tutor group, peer group, School, Faculty, or the Open University?
- (ii) Tell us a bit more about the community you feel closer to, or you'd like to feel closer to, what that connection means to you and to what extent your experience of belonging relates to your study experience.
- (iii) Would you say your sense of belonging has changed/is changing during your study? Can you pinpoint any specific points, events or incidents in your learning journey where you experienced a change in your sense of belonging to the OU learning community or communities you're a part of?
- (iv) What factors, in your view, support the development of your sense of belonging? What could we do differently to support your sense of belonging to learning communities at the Open University?

2. **Support**

- (i) What types of support are most needed when you are behind
- (ii) How familiar are you about where to find the support (e.g. who to contact for what)? If not, how can we improve it?
- (iii) When OU student support team (SST) contacts you individually, which method do you prefer most? (e.g. text message, email, phone call)?
- (iv) When your tutor contacts you individually, which method do you prefer most? (e.g. email, phone call, tutor forum)
- (v) Are you aware of the following University guidance? "Where you require reasonable adjustments to the usual method of contact, you are encouraged to make the University aware of this (disability team via SST). For example, state in the disability profile that you prefer not to take unscheduled phone calls so that your tutor and the SST will avoid this means whenever possible."
- (vi) Are you aware of the following University guidance? "The university recognises that there are times when it may be easier for a student to communicate with the University through the use of an advocate (e.g. if you think you may experience periods when contact with a third party directly is essential (as otherwise neither tutors not SST can discuss your study with anyone else, even if you would like that to happen)."

Two members of the School Management Team (Associate Head Learning & Teaching and Associate Head Curriculum & Quality) and one AL consultant considered the feedback provided. There were 50 LAL students registered to take part in the consultation (the consultation was opened to 3,620 eligible students). There were in total 83 posts by students, 27 students posted at least once, and there were 127 ratings (likes and favourites), and the estimated readers were 101 (minimum).

FULL RESPONSE

1. Thread 1 – Sense of belonging/community

Re (i) & (iii), the responses here were mostly split between participants who felt they had a weak sense of belonging and those that felt a medium sense of belonging. Other participants outside of these two main groups commented they felt they had a strong sense of belonging, or that they had no sense of belonging at all. Some participants also commented that having a sense of belonging was not an essential part of their particular learning experience with the OU.

Those who originally felt a strong sense of belonging noted that their experience had changed – negatively – because of the move to online instead of face-to-face tutorials and the lack of connection this brought about, as well as frustrations with technological issues and connectivity. It was also felt that the opportunities to raise general queries/issues and discuss/receive collective solutions had been lost by moving from face-to-face to online.

Re (ii), there were a lot of praises for tutors for their supportive and individual approach because it fostered good relationships and helped to promote the sense of belonging. They also reported the benefits of having attended Residential School and the support they received through other non-OU platforms such as Facebook and Microsoft Teams. One student expressed how the sense of belonging is there if you want it as everything is set up and available, and that there are limits to how much the OU can do in this regard as a distance learning institution:

'The sense of belonging was there all the time - [...]. It was the most beautiful time of my life. The reason I'm saying this is that the OU is a distance learning institution. It will never be possible to create the sense of belonging identical to a traditional university. And that's ok! The sense of being part of something bigger, a wider academical community is real - perhaps different than for other students, but not less beautiful and valuable, even without frequent face to face interactions. That is why we chose the OU - precisely because it is a distance learning university. To be able to study alongside other work or family commitments.'

Some participants had less favourable experiences and reported not feeling so connected to their tutor and/or the OU because of bad experience with their tutors. OU Forums were discussed as being useful but under-utilised; with non-engagement by other students viewed as discouraging and/or disappointing.

Re (iv),

There were several factors that help develop a sense of belonging, along with potential improvements ranging from ensuring residential schools take place again, to requesting that face-to-face tutorials are reinstated, and potentially having peer group support. Below are the main themes emerging from this discussion:

- Difficulties associated with language learning online and the lack of opportunities for speaking language practise leading to students feeling
 - greater feelings of isolation
 - a desire for face-to-face tutorials
- Adobe Connect issues:
 - Poor sound quality
 - Lack of clear pedagogy in using breakout rooms

'I think it would be great if the OU could implement one-on-one compulsory speaking sessions with tutors throughout the year (similar to that of an EMA without the pressure)'

'I have felt studying Spanish this year has been a very lonely experience. Although my tutor was very helpful, it was very difficult to communicate in the chat rooms and you could not see the other students or the student you were talking to.'

'My tutors were lovely and were an invaluable source of support, but it is different from having another student to work alongside'

'I have felt that studying languages has been tricky and often very lonely. Finding people to practice the spoken language has proven extremely difficult and I would say that this would be my only gripe with OU.'

'I also find that working in the breakout rooms is really terrible for learning languages. It is fine to work with another student to practise, but if you are making mistakes they just get repeated and amplified, without the tutor support.'

'I also found that the tutors were more responsive and proactive in helping and supporting people in face to face sessions. I don't mean to say that during online tutorials, they don't care as much. However, the sound quality of the Adobe software isn't always great, so it is very difficult to hear accents and pronunciations properly, whereas in a live setting this is easier.'

In summary, we can see a clear correlation between the impact of student experiences and the strength of feeling with regards to whether their sense of belonging has been maintained, or negatively altered during their learning journey.

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
<p>You did not feel connected and felt that having a sense of belonging was not an essential part of your learning experience with the OU</p>	<p>One of the big challenges of learning at distance is the sense of isolation. To overcome that, all our accredited learning modules have synchronous tutorials and students can attend as many tutorials as they wish, which is not only beneficial to your learning but also keep you in touch with your tutors and fellow students. Asynchronous discussion forums (e.g. module-wide student forum and Tutor group forum) are on every module website for all registered students on a particular module to communicate with each other, and with their tutors and module teams. There is also the General forum for Languages and Applied Linguistics students on the Study Home site for students to communicate across the school.</p> <p>In our school, there are module student buddies who provide practical advice and moral support to students on a particular module; and community & peer support buddies and event champions who help with organising self-help groups and community building events across school.</p> <p>LAL central academics and staff tutors regularly take part in the Faculty-wide Student Hub Live online and interactive events, which are designed to support OU students in their studies and facilitate academic community</p>	<p>We will work more closely with LAL Community buddies and champions to organise and promote more community-building events.</p> <p>We are going to recruit Peer Support Volunteers amongst students who will help promote and run these events and self-help groups.</p> <p>We will continue to provide and promote interactive events on Student Hub Live and take on board your feedback on what topics and activities you'd like to see featured.</p>
<p>You ask for one-to-one compulsory speaking sessions with the tutor</p>	<p>As OU caters for students from diverse backgrounds and needs, all the tutorials offered are optional so that students have the flexibility to fit in with their needs and timetable.</p> <p>You can ask your tutor for individual support if there is real need such as falling behind due to unexpected circumstances such as illness.</p> <p>In line with some other modules, on L116, L192 and L194 we have removed any preparation for TMAs from tutorials and replaced this with a recorded screencast. This will return time to the tutorials for speaking practice and specific focus on developing fluency and confidence.</p> <p>In a number of modules we have conversation cafés, where the focus is on relaxed conversation and, in some cases, games. (L192, L193, L113, L116, L226, L223, L313, L314, for example).</p> <p>Students are encouraged to set up self-help groups in modules. Some modules provide materials.</p> <p>There are cross-level conversation groups run on Study Home.</p>	<p>We will be recruiting <i>Peer Support Volunteers</i> who are either native or competent speakers of the target language, or students who have completed the module to help coordinate and facilitate speaking sessions.</p> <p>We'll be putting on extra catch-tutorials for slower-paced students (already offered in some modules).</p> <p>This year, we are introducing our Peer Support Volunteers Badging Scheme. The hope is that this will give us a pool of students willing to facilitate conversation groups (amongst other activities).</p>
<p>You ask for face to face tutorials</p>	<p>The provision of tuition in online mode only is temporary and has been necessitated by the pandemic and the related government and university policy.</p> <p>We have no plans to abandon face to face tuition completely (although, it may take a different form in the future). current lack due to Covid.</p>	<p>Before the pandemic there were additional face to face sessions in addition to tutorials, such as weekend conversation Pop-up groups and we'll be looking to reinstate them when possible, subject to health and safety regulations.</p>

Some modules offer occasional 1:1 opportunities with tutors - this is difficult to accommodate due to the time required, but we are increasing opportunities for development of conversation skills in general (confidence, fluency, etc.).

Some modules have café conversation events; in L194, L192 and L116 we are giving tutors more time and a specific instruction to spend time in tutorials doing this focusing on confidence and fluency rather than accuracy).

This is the case across the University as stated at the [Help Centre page](#):

For modules starting before August 2022, all tutorials will be delivered online-only. In exceptional circumstances some events such as residential or day schools may take place in-person from January 2022.

<p>Many of you reported technical issues with Adobe Connect – e.g. poor sound quality which affected your tutorial experiences; and significant disruption during Oral exam (EMA)</p>	<p>OU works closely with Adobe Connect to improve its quality and stability. Adobe Connect has now had an upgrade and it is now much more stable.</p> <p>You are advised i) to upgrade your version of Adobe Connect before logging in to your tutorial (follow the prompt upon entering an) and ii) not to use the Browser version, but to download the app onto your computer or mobile device.</p> <p>Re Exam disruption, your marker is aware of these challenges and can address them as needed. You can also fill in Special Circumstance form when technology impacted negatively on your performance for it to be considered at the Module Result Panel.</p>	<p>The School also provides many drop-in practice sessions on using Adobe Connect before each presentation. For 21J presentation, they run till 28th October 21. Go here to find details.</p>
<p>You were unhappy about the use of breakout rooms without tutor input</p>	<p>OU regularly offers tutors professional development workshops on pedagogy and other topics to do with teaching, including the pedagogy of using Adobe Connect for language teaching.</p>	<p>We will feedback to tutors and in the meantime encourage tutors to share their good practices of breakout room usage with each other</p>
<p>You asked to use other platforms such as Microsoft Teams for tutorials</p>	<p>For online tutorials and student meet-ups, OU uses Adobe Connect as it suits our needs and is fully supported by OU Help Centre.</p>	<p>On many module websites, under the Resources page, there is an Online Student Room which allows students to enter without tutor presence to practise speaking etc.</p>
<p>You felt that forums were under-utilised, and reluctance to participate due to shyness, or being put-off by other students</p>	<p>Research has shown that although many students do not actively take part in forum discussion, they do read the posts and benefit from the discussion. Many OU students have work commitment so often they have little time to engage in forum activities. Free resources have been created to encourage students to take part in forums, the benefits and how to build up the confidence. For example, Building confidence in using online forums is a free course on OpenLearn.</p>	<p>On School's Study Home site, there are LAL Student Common Room and LAL Student Events Room which give students' host rights. You can use these rooms to meet your fellow students across the school.</p> <p>Direct students during the induction to take part in the forum discussion; and provide training to module student buddies on communication skills so as to encourage active participant. Further exploration to galvanize this resource as a teaching and learning tool and method of communication.</p>
<p>unsupportive tutors made you feel unconnected to the OU</p>	<p>The past 18 months have been challenges for both students and tutors. The majority of our tutor are dedicated and go beyond their duties to support students. We have mechanisms in place to monitor tutors' performance and to support their professional development, but there is always room for improvement. We also get feedback from students about their tutors (e.g. end of module survey and student consultative forum). Based on the feedback, trainings and mentoring are provided to improve their performance.</p>	<p>Continue to work closely with module team chairs and staff tutors to provide support for tutors. New repository site is under way for tutors to share good teaching resources. We will also organise workshops for tutors to share good practices.</p>

2. Thread 2 – Support

Re (i) and (ii), we are delighted to hear the very positive experiences about the availability of support reported by participants who identified their tutor as the first port of call for personal issues as well as specific module-related help, and for referring on/signposting to other parts of the University. The Student Support Team was praised with reference to needing to reduce intensity of study or deferral following health/family issues, and in general terms, and Disability Support Teams were mentioned positively in particular. StudentHome was cited as being a useful 'one stop shop' and other students also mentioned OU student forums, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, as important for moral support and encouragement. Below are a few quotes:

- *'I have such a good rapport with my French tutor for the past 2 years (I'm hoping that I have him again for my final year in October). He has put a lot in place that I didn't need to contact the Disability Support Team'*
- *'I have enjoyed excellent support and guidance from the Student Support Team, especially [insert name], as well as my tutor'.*

There were some students who did not have a positive experience in relation to support with tutor (which was already mentioned in Thread 1 above). There were comments about the challenges of certain disabilities (hearing impairment for example) especially with regards to communication and the challenges related to this generally, and to language learning in particular. There was request for a designated tutor for ongoing support and pastoral care for the whole learning journey.

Re (iii) and (iv), most of you prefer email communication when contacted by tutors and SST, which has confirmed our assumption and we will pass on this feedback to tutors and SST.

Re (v) & (vi), only a few students responded that they had seen them somewhere so it was not clear if they were aware of them. These two questions were put out there to raise awareness. In our cross-school induction live session on Different routes of support to students, these were highlighted. The slides and recording link to the session are here.

Some of you also raised the following concerns or made suggestions and we will take them into consideration and work on feasible solutions:

- Mixed abilities of language skills/competency levels in tutorial groups are seen as a barrier to learning progression and demoralising for beginners
- can tutors intervene when it comes to students who are clearly enrolled in a module which is too rudimentary for their level?
- can more advanced students be placed together in the same group?
- Are there options of practice sessions with a small number of students and a tutor which have a specific theme like "work" or "holidays" or "hobbies", etc.?

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
You mentioned challenges of disability with regards to communication and challenges in relation to language learning	We recognise the challenges and there are supports and adjustments available by study elements. Check this page for available adjustments and get in touch with Disability Support Team for advice.	We will work more closely with Disability Support Team (DST) and improve the communication between DST, Module Team and tutors. We will explore if Disability Support Team information can be provided on the Student Profile page (email, telephone number).
You request for designated tutor support for pastoral care for the whole learning journey	On the "identity, needs and circumstances" page at StudentHome, there is a chat button which says "chat now" – the Disability Support Team are available on webchat. There is also a box on the right hand side which links to further information via the Help Centre and contact details for the DST. The Personal Learning Advisor (PLA) Project is underway. It is a new support service in line with the Access, Participation and Success (APS Strategy) whose mission is to eradicate different levels of access, participation and success. It is designed to boost student's confidence, resilience, motivation and their ability to succeed. This one-to-one mentoring service has been offered to some students and is now being offered to more students.	The School is supporting and advocating for the roll-out of the Personal Learning Advisor scheme, so that as many students as possible can benefit from it.
You feel that Facebook, WhatsApp groups are important for moral support	You are free to form these groups but bear in mind that the module team does not moderate those spaces. You are strongly advised to communicate with other students	Get this message to students via tutors and Module Student Buddies so that they are aware of the risks of using social media

on the module via the module Student forum or contact your tutor, especially if your query is about the module content, assessment or other study related issues in order to ensure that you get the right advice and information.

You are not happy about mixed ability/language competence in tutorial group

We appreciate the challenges in a mixed ability group. As OU has an Open Entry policy, it is against that very spirit to then put restrictions in place. However, we offer a range of materials to suit different learners, and also we encourage students to form self-help groups and seek help in various forums so that you can benefit from students who are at a higher level of language competency.

For 21J we have slower-paced tutorials timetabled for all Unit Practice tutorials in L192, L194 and L116.

In Beginner and L1 modules we have Grammar Workshops, which are, by definition, aimed at students who are at the level of the module.

We are running sessions on 'Dealing with language learning anxiety' which will, in part, aim to help students develop resilience as language learners and to see higher levels as a learning resource.

We'll be putting on extra catch-tutorials for slower-paced students (already offered in some modules).

The new beginners' modules will be working with pathways to account for different needs among learners.

Mixed abilities needs will be included as a theme of Associate Lecturer Staff Development.

You suggest tutors intervene when someone enrolled in a module which is too rudimentary for their level

We have put diagnostics in place to better ascertain learner's language level, and we have introduced automated warnings in the Module Planner and advise students to consult a Student Advisor to get a better sense of what their module choices entail

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