RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON THE MENTAL HEALTH SCIENCE MASTERS PROGRAMME

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on the Mental Health Science Masters programme (F78 MSc in Mental Health Science, E91 PGDip in Mental Health Science and constituent modules S826 'Introduction to mental health science', SD816 'Core topics in mental health science' and SXH810 'MSc project module for the MSc in Mental Health Science') which took place between 16 and 30 April 2021 on the LHCS Student Consultative Forum. We thank Nathan Parsons (Co-ordinator, PVC-Students Office) for invaluable support with the consultation.

The consultation was open to 1,169 eligible students (including recent Alumni). There were an estimated 59 participants (readers) in total with 18 students registering in advance, and 36 posts to the forum (14 students posting at least once). Engagement was lower than typically expected. Reminders were sent to students via email and the opportunity to take part in the consultation was also advertised on module and qualification sites (posted as news items). A number of factors including a mixture of the timing (the consultation took place after Easter), changes around COVID restrictions nationally around this time, as well as individual circumstances and external commitments (personal and work-related), may have contributed towards lower engagement. Nevertheless, those who took part in the consultation provided a rich and diverse representation across the programme (from students starting the first module either continuing their studies with the OU or new to the OU, through to those completing the capstone module and those who had recently graduated) with responses showing both depth and reflection in addressing specific issues discussed as part of this process.

This was the first student consultation on the MSc since it was launched in 2017. The qualification is undergoing a mid-life review and our intention for hosting the consultation at this stage was three-fold:

–   to help us to improve our teaching, learning and assessment and overall student experience,
–   to inform the upcoming mid-life review (and updates/refresh of constituent modules), and
–   to offer students the opportunity to have a say in how their qualification is shaped moving forward.

With the above aims in mind, and in reviewing previous student responses to surveys (including the Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) Survey and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), comments posted to forums as well as end of module presentation and AL reports on constituent modules within theprogramme, we specifically sought to address the following discussion areas as part of the consultation:

–   Background, motivation to study and expectations
–   Preparedness to undertake study at this level and in this area
–   Structure, organisation and workload on the programme
–   Flexibility to fit around personal commitments: presentation patterns, timetable and study breaks
–   Tuition and assessment: innovations, highlights and specific suggestions for improvement
–   Skills development and tuition support
–   Capstone project module and dissertation

Each forum discussion thread (titles listed above) included a related set 'open 'and more 'targeted' questions with relevant context, where appropriate. Students were also advised that *any* feedback they may have on the relevant areas was welcome.

The Qualification Team have reviewed and responded to feedback received on each of the above areas. Actions to be taken are summarised below.

We would like to thank everyone who took part in the consultation. It has been a pleasure to read comments from current students and recent graduates, to learn more about you and your experiences on the Mental Health Science programme, and to consider your suggestions for improvement. Your input has been most valuable and will be used to inform our upcoming review, and help us to improve our teaching, learning and assessment and overall student experience on the programme.

Background, motivation to study and expectations

It was a pleasure to hear about your personal journeys – your background, prior studies and experience and how these have shaped your choice to pursue this masters programme. Your responses reflect the rich diversity of students on the masters, from those of you who are continuing your studies with the OU as well as those who are entirely new to OU study, whether you are studying out of personal interest and to challenge yourself, have recently embarked on your journey and are new to postgraduate study, to those who have completed the masters and are looking to move on to, or are currently undertaking a PhD, and others who are looking to move into related careers, or are using their learning to support their career development and inform their professional practice. We were especially pleased to hear the majority of you have found studying the programme to be flexible and enjoyable and that you would recommend it to others. Comments noting that you were 'impressed with the quality of the course content and how well the OU rates against other universities', that you have 'found studying with the Open University to be a more supportive environment' and indeed that you would be 'sad when the course finishes as the OU has been a part of your life' were especially rewarding. In terms of improvements in response to your feedback, we will consider how best to increase engagement in forum activities and what may be more effective in terms of module-wide tutorials as part of our upcoming review of the programme.

Preparedness to undertake study at this level and in this area

It was reassuring to hear that on the whole you felt suitably prepared to undertake study at this level, that you have made use of the recommended free learning resources available on OpenLearn 'to provide additional context to the level of knowledge required and setting the expectations for study at Masters level' and that this together with your prior studies gave you the confidence to move on to postgraduate study in this area. The MSc admissions team and study advisers do make sure to advise students and enquirers of these resources and where necessary any preparatory study that would help support students to make the transition to this interdisciplinary masters programme, as part of the routine entry checking procedures. We will also be reviewing the guidance provided to prospective students in the online prospectus to ensure that relevant free learning preparatory resources, including the badged open course 'Succeeding in Postgraduate Study' are appropriately signposted on the qualification F78, E91 and module S826 pages. In response to your suggestions for improvement, we will also be reviewing resources associated with the poster presentation activity and the requirements for submission of TMA01 in S826, to determine whether they can be further simplified, and review guidance provided to prospective students in the online prospectus to ensure that relevant computing requirements are explicitly highlighted.

Structure, organisation and workload on the programme

We were pleased to hear that you considered the structure and organisation of the first two modules in particular worked well, that you were able to manage the workload which was perhaps higher than at undergraduate level but 'as expected' at masters level, were able to identify core and background resources, to assess these and prioritise the time you have available for study, making use of the Study Guide, planner and calendar. Comments that the structure of the Stage 1 and Stage 2 modules were 'excellent' and that you felt that 'clearly a lot of work had gone into creating the qualification' were especially pleasing to hear. It is genuinely rewarding to receive appreciation for the sheer amount of work, thought and dedication that goes on 'behind the scenes' when developing a programme such as this, so thank you for this acknowledgement. Your comments on how the project module could be further improved have been noted and will be considered and actioned where feasible, as part of our upcoming review of the programme (please refer to the section entitled 'Summary of actions to be taken in response to feedback received').

Flexibility to fit around personal commitments: presentation patterns, timetable and study breaks

It was great to hear your positive views on the flexibility of the programme, how this has supported you to pursue your studies while managing the demands of your work, family and personal commitments; that on the whole the timetable works well and that some of you are making good use of the study breaks. We would also like to thank those of you who indicated your preferences concerning module presentation patterns. Views on precise timings (preference for a February or October start, whether to have a break between the first two modules or remain with the current schedule and an extended break over the summer ahead of starting the project module) have perhaps understandably, been mixed, based on personal preference. Reviewing feedback from students since the programme was first launched in 2017, indicates that being able to complete the Postgraduate Diploma (S826 and SD816) within 18 months has been a key driver for some students. Some have indicated their preference for taking an extended summer break (which allows planning for family holidays etc.) before embarking on the final stage of the masters, while others have not indicated a specific preference. Given these mixed views, we do not propose to change the schedule of the programme or module presentation patterns at this time. We will revisit this again in the-not-too distant future as part of our regular review of the programme, and would like to thank everyone who has fed back their views and preferences on this issue to date.

Tuition and assessment: innovations, highlights and specific suggestions for improvement

Your responses highlighted an array of innovations and aspects of the programme that you found helpful, including the use of forums for helping fellow students; the usefulness of online tutorials, podcasts and recordings; advice from previous MSc students on the project module (providing study tips and avoiding pitfalls); how previous TMAs on the taught modules help build confidence towards the extensive piece of writing expected for the dissertation and how you have found access to previous students' example project plans helpful in clarifying expectations and making this a less daunting task; how self-reflection (and personal development planning) are incorporated within the programme and feedback from tutors helps facilitate this process; how the online presentation of module materials and resources helps in terms of providing access and flexibility for your studies and the ability to print off materials including tutorial slides allows you to work offline. We were pleased that you noted the online peer review as an innovation – this activity was pioneered at masters level on this programme and we were pleased to hear that you have found the process on S826 as well as sharing commentaries on set articles within your tutor group (TGF activities on 'evaluating research articles') helpful. As you have noted, receiving fellow students' and your tutor's perspectives on your own work, the opportunity to review other's work, to provide constructive comments, share commentaries of set articles and to test your personal assessment alongside others', to reflect on your own learning and areas that you may have missed in the process and to support the development of your writing style were precisely what we had in mind when planning these initial activities for Block 1 (and in doing so, supporting students to develop and begin to apply core postgraduate skills) so we are delighted that you have found these useful. Comments that providing feedback on others' work has also 'pushed you to think critically about a subject which might not be familiar to you' and 'to test your understanding' were particularly poignant, as these were also among the key objectives we set out to achieve when designing the peer review activity. In terms of suggestions for improvement, your comments about the possibility for scheduling further activities/discussion to support the capstone project module have been noted and we will also be considering how best to make more effective use of module-wide tutorials on the programme as part of the upcoming review.

Skills development and tuition support

We were really pleased to hear that you felt the size of your tutor group allows you to work constructively in engaging with other students for the core activities (including the discussions around set articles and the peer review process for the poster on S826), that you have 'found the skills building activities stimulating', 'are feeling motivated due to the stimulating content of the block resources' and that Block 1 provided you with a good foundation to prepare you for Block 2 on S826. It is certainly rewarding to hear this, and to know that your tutor is providing you with exactly the right support 'needed to make your study stimulating, challenging and enjoyable' and that you 'would not change a thing.' In terms of your suggestions for improvement, we will be considering how best to make more effective use of module-wide tutorials on the programme, as already noted.

Capstone project module and dissertation

Feedback from those of you who had completed the project module showed that you enjoyed this crucial element, and the opportunity it offered to apply the skills and learning developed on the taught modules to research a topic of your own choice and to write a critical narrative literature review that was within the scope and remit of the masters programme. However, we also noted a number of specific suggestions for improvement to the project module, which we will consider and action where feasible as part of the upcoming review. This includes exploring resources that would help students to develop skills on writing a piece suitable for publication, and in being able to learn how to write a systematic review, as well as resources (podcasts, tutorials or similar) that would help students focus more on their project development and contingency planning.

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN IN RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK RECEIVED

The following actions will be implemented as part of our upcoming review of the masters programme.

− We will consider how best to increase engagement in forum activities and make more effective use of module-wide tutorials on the programme.
− We will be reviewing resources associated with the poster presentation activity and the requirements for submission of TMA01 in S826, to determine whether they can be further simplified where feasible.
− As part of our regular review, we have already considered introducing FAQ (frequently asked questions) documents on each of the first two stages (S826 and SD816), collating queries (and responses) that students have raised on the programme to date. It is hoped that these 'reference' documents will also help provide additional clarity for students and will further support them, particularly during the early stage of their studies and with TMA01 on S826. As noted above, we will also be reviewing resources associated with the poster presentation activity and the requirements for submission of TMA01 on S826 to determine whether they can be further simplified where feasible.
− We will review guidance provided to prospective students in the online prospectus to ensure that the computing requirements are explicitly highlighted.
− We will review the guidance provided to prospective students in the online prospectus to ensure that relevant free learning preparatory resources including the badged open course 'Succeeding in Postgraduate Study' are signposted (on F78, E91 and S826 pages).
− Your comments around the possibility for scheduling further activities/discussion to support the capstone project module (project development process) have been taken on board and will be considered as part of the review.
− It is unlikely that we can extend the project module beyond the ten months, but it may be possible to structure the initial weeks to make more use of relevant resources (podcasts, tutorials or similar) to support students in thinking further about planning their project development and contingencies, and we will consider this as part of the review.
− We acknowledge comments concerning the potential usefulness of resources that would help students to develop skills on writing a piece that is suitable for publication, and in being able to learn how to write a systematic review. We will explore these as part of the review of the masters programme.

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