RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN THE OPEN PROGRAMME

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on learning communities in the Open Programme which took place between 18th and 31st October 2021 on the Boards of Studies Student Consultation Forum. The summary of student feedback is at https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=25083.

We asked students registered on the following Open qualifications (Open Degree/Diploma/Certificate or Open MA/MSC) whether they felt part of a learning community or whether as a multidisciplinary student they found their community in their specific modules or in other OU communities such as Student Hub Live or the Students Association. We also wanted to find out their knowledge and use of the Open qualification study sites and forums.

The invitation to participate in the consultation forum went to 10,966 students. 152 students registered to participate, and 41 students actively engaged by reading and posting responses.

The main points from the student feedback were that it was sometimes hard to find community as an Open student, although this is probably true for other students at the OU also. The qualification websites and forums are not generally known about and use of non-OU social media groups lessens the need for other forums.

This paper was presented to the Open Board of Studies on 15th December 2021, for review and discussion around how to address the feedback.

There are some quick wins here, including the better promotion of our qualification study sites and the regular updating of said sites to keep them relevant and engaging. However, some of the feedback around students not feeling part of a community are arguably down to the nature of the Open University being a distance-learning institution.

FULL RESPONSE

You Said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Q. Do you feel that you are currently a part of a learning community at the OU? Tell us which communities you feel you belong to.		
Use of WhatsApp and Facebook undermines the Tutor Group Forum (TGF). Students thought the Discord server was friendly, inclusive and interesting, not overpowering	Students will choose which social media type space to use. We can't force use of TGF over WhatsApp etc, however the OU forums need to be updated to encourage students to engage with them instead of Social Media (SM).	Seeking clarification from the relevant OU team on future plans to update the forums.
TGF needs more interaction from tutor, encouragement to students to interact.	Tutor training/best practice – **Update from Lead Staff Tutor for Open** – this is managed at module level which means the Open Programme has little control over how they are used. There are existing online tutoring modules that tutors can complete.	Open Qualification team to feed back to team that manages tutors.
TGF – usability needs updating, emojis and like buttons etc. Make more in line with FutureLearn forums which are better utilised and more user-friendly		Feedback comments to the relevant OU team to clarify plans to update forums.
More mandatory topics for students to post to TGF on – part of assessment.	Module teams are responsible for making the pedagogic decision on whether posting to the TGF is part of a module	Posting to TGF doesn't necessarily promote community but we are looking to create community in other ways, for those students that would like it.
Missing face-to-face interaction of tutorials as this creates community	Find out what OU position is on returning to face-to-face tutorials	Update from Lead Staff Tutor for Open: Face to face tutorials due to return in October '22.
Can feel treated differently by tutors as an Open student	We are looking to address this through the following actions: • Module teams and Student Support Teams need to be aware of the different needs of Open Qualification students and provide support for students accordingly e,g. using bridging materials to support with skills/knowledge development if needed. • Lead Staff Tutor for Open delivers sessions and tutor staff development events to increase awareness of the differing needs of Open students. • Upcoming Interdisciplinary teaching and learning conference planned, where this can be addressed • A page on TutorHome (tutor's information page) about supporting Open Programme students is to be created.	These actions are being progressed as part of the Open Periodic Quality Review Action Plan.

Do not feel part of a learning community because the OU is set up as distance learning	In any efforts we make to provide 'community' ensure we are mindful and clear that it's optional for those who wish to engage with it	Add paragraph to 'Your Community' section signposting students to where they can reach out to communities, whilst recognising that some students are happy without community.

You Said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate

Q. How often do you view the Open Qualification Study websites?

Main feedback was that students were not aware the sites existed so better promotion of the Open qualification websites	Yellow button on front of StudentHome – not clear that that takes you to qualification study site. Possible change of messaging that goes to Open Students	Meeting with colleagues to review initial messaging in communications to students. Liaise with other managers of qualification study sites to learn from best practice.
Once students were aware of the sites, they thought there should be more content and more engaging content on sites and forums	Team continuing to update and populate the Undergraduate and Postgraduate sites on an ongoing basis	Add Twitter feed to Getting Started page. Add column to Getting Started page with useful links. Ongoing plans to refresh study site pages throughout the year.

Q. Have you used the Open Qualification Café Forum?

Again, students were not aware of this forum but once aware, commented that it should be updated and more visible	We aren't able to change the location of the forum on the qualification study site but could signpost students to it to raise awareness of it.	Feedback comments to relevant OU team to discover whether work is happening to update forums. Potentially add a reoccurring news item to qualification study site to promote forum.
Naming it a 'Café' is like ticking a 'good idea' box – should be called exactly what it is!	Consider re-naming forum	This was a comment from one student – because the name is in line with other forums throughout the University, we don't feel this needs to be re-named.

You Said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate

Q. How could the Open Qualification team support you to feel better connected to a community?

You Said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
Help on module selection (for both students and guidance for tutors to give advice)	Work is underway to: - Improve the advice and guidance on the Open qualification study site around module choice, making the site leaner and easier to navigate - Creating clear signposting to other qualification study sites to help support students with module choice and preparation for study. - Remind Student Support Teams where to find this information so that they can also direct students towards it. This is already part of the SRSC training materials. - This will be covered in additional resources being provided to ALs (although this guidance should come from SSTs to the student).	This is being progressed through the Open Periodic Quality Review Action Plan.
Use of MS Teams, instead of Adobe	The standard student-facing comms software is Adobe Connect.	Advice requested from the relevant OU team as to whether there are plans to allow use of MS Teams with tutors/students.
More case studies	Campaign planned for gathering of more Open case studies	Stakeholder Engagement Manager taking this forward with OU Comms.
Better signposting to resources, particularly websites, maybe 6-8 weeks in	We are reviewing both the wording and the timing of the student communication interventions	Messaging to students is being reviewed and revised to include more signposting to resources.
Still uncertainty about how to explain the Open Degree	Resources on qualification site and in Badged Open Course – Multidisciplinary study: the value and benefits.	Plan to explore a 'highlight' of qualification site, possibly monthly, which will include resources around how to articulate the Open Degree.
Possibility of naming subjects within the classification	This is an ongoing issue for the Open Programme that has been raised before and we are in discussions with the University about how to resolve.	This is being explored through the Open Periodic Quality Review Action Plan.
Social event, led by tutors, for Tutor Group to get to know each other	Again, Tutor Groups are managed at module level which means Open Programme has little control over how they are used.	Although the drop-ins that were offered over lockdown were not specifically socials, they were relaxed sessions around TV, film, books etc and yet the take up was always low, despite lots of promotion.
Other socials for students to meet together	Students Association meet-ups already in place	More promotion of these on the qualification sites.
Better signposting to Students Association and clubs etc.	Explore opportunities to promote with Students Association	More promotion of these on the qualification sites.

Other Comments

"As with the others, I don't feel part of a community at all. I don't think is unique to Open course students - I'm on my final module now, and I've darted around different subjects, but I don't get a sense there's a hard core of students that have been together since the start that I am not part of. "

"[I feel part of a learning community] to a limited extent with fellow students on my current module, purely because we are studying the same material at roughly the same time. However, nothing beyond that. I really don't think this is an Open Programme issue, more about learning remotely."

"I actually feel that there are lots of options to gain a sense of community, such as through WhatsApp groups, the Facebook clubs, and some of the forum activities. I'm sure it would be easier if face-to-face tutorials were able to go ahead, but that's understandably not something the OU can control right now! Even though I don't have a particular closeness, I do feel that there are loads of options I could turn to should I want to."

"I am part of the social sciences and politics community and feel that there is a real active and dynamic community…"

"If building community is to help people feel less isolated, that they are part of something bigger and that there are others who are going through the same anxieties and triumphs, then I think it would be best at faculty level or through the Students Association. If the community is to provide practical help and support and maybe (pandemic notwithstanding) face-to-face contact, then it should be as far down the hierarchy as possible, preferably at Tutor Group or cluster level. Of course, these things are not mutually exclusive."

Date: January 2022