

# RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN THE OPEN (R28 COMBINED STEM) PROGRAMME

## SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on learning communities in the Open (R28 Combined STEM) Programme which took place between 8th and 22nd November 2021 on the Boards of Studies Student Consultation Forum. The full consultation is available at <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=25158>.

The aim of the consultation forum was to ask Combined STEM (R28) students about their experience of community within the OU and how the R28 qualification team can better support them to develop a sense of community. We also asked to what extent the current sources of information and support on the Combined STEM\* website are effective.

The invitation to participate in the consultation forum went to 2,227 students. 49 students registered to participate, and 20 students actively engaged by reading and posting responses. There were 58 posts made by students. We are grateful for all the students who generously gave us their time and thoughts.

Some of the students who responded had not previously visited the suggested study routes pages of the Combined STEM website or Café forum. The Combined STEM website is linked from StudentHome (under the 'Study' tab). We have modified the text on the front page of the Combined STEM website so that it points to the suggested study routes pages. We will also be changing our welcome emails to new Combined STEM students to ensure the Combined STEM website, suggested study routes and Café forum are more clearly highlighted. Students who had visited the pages, or who did so because of this consultation, reported finding the information useful in planning their studies. We thank students for their ideas on additional improvements that we can implement.

It was clear from the conversations on the forum that not all students want to belong to any 'community' at the Open University and we acknowledge that it is an appropriate choice for some students. Students who did want a sense of community were seeking community at a module or discipline level rather than at the level of the Combined STEM qualification. We will therefore continue to run the Combined STEM Café forum as primarily a place for advice, for example on module choice. To enable Combined STEM students to find appropriate communities at the discipline level we have added links to STEM discipline forums onto the Connect pages of the Combined STEM website. We have also asked STEM colleagues to suggest any additional forums that might be appropriate to Combined STEM students and we will be adding links to any further forums suggested. Student comments suggested that face-to-face events or videos of module teams can promote a sense of community and we will be feeding that back to module teams via their Boards of Studies within each School.

This summary will be presented to the Open Board of Studies in May 2022, for review and discussion.

\* Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)

## FULL RESPONSE

You said	OU response	Next steps, if appropriate
<b>Q. To what extent do you feel you have developed a sense of belonging to different learning communities/groups at the Open University? AND</b>		
<b>Q. At what level do you feel it is most important to build a community (e.g., at qualification, subject or faculty level or with the Students Association or other OU groups)?</b>		
Students who wanted community were seeking it at the module or discipline level (e.g., “...I tend to assess community at the module level...”)	We have added links to other Study websites for easier access to discipline-based communities.	
Not all students wanted to belong to a community at the OU (e.g., “...I have no interest in pursuing a sense of community...”)	We respect this choice is appropriate for some students.	
Students appreciated efforts at building community around modules (e.g., “...the module chair recorded monthly videos... they did make me feel more part of a module community...”)	Modules sit within many different administering Boards of Studies (BoS) and we will pass on this feedback to them.	
Some students wanted opportunities for direct peer-to-peer interaction (e.g., “...It would be nice if our OU profiles would allow us to be more interactive with one another, send direct messages, like posts, perhaps add a contact list or allow to follow another person/student...”; “...easy to feel part of a community with other students if you engage with them on social media...”)	The R28 Team will pass this feedback on to IT to consider for future developments.	
Some students gained a sense of community via OU groups (e.g., “I have found OU groups to be very helpful (OU Space Society) as the members are from various levels and some have connections outside the OU too...”)	We encourage R28 students to explore OU groups including those run by the Open University Students Association. Please do let us know on the <a href="#">Combined STEM Café forum</a> if there are groups you would like linked to the Combined STEM website.	
<b>Q. Have you used the <a href="#">Combined STEM cafe</a> forum on the <a href="#">Combined STEM Study site</a>? If so, was it useful? If it was useful, how was it useful or if not, why not? What could be done to make the forum more useful?</b>		
Some students were unaware of the Combined STEM café forum (e.g., “I did not know that there was a Combined STEM degree route cafe forum.”)	We have reviewed standard email communications that get sent to R28 students, to better highlight the Combined STEM site and café forum including links and how to access them from StudentHome.	
Students acknowledged the value of the forum as a source of advice and guidance (e.g., “I don't think I	We encourage students to visit the Combined STEM site and café forum for advice and guidance related to the qualification, module choice etc.	

**You said****OU response****Next steps, if appropriate**

*have ever posted anything of these forums but I know that I could if I had a specific question.”)*

**Q. Have you used the [suggested study routes pages](#) on the [Combined STEM study site](#)? If so, how useful were they? If not, why not (e.g., didn’t know about them)? What could be done to make them more useful? Is there anything that you would like to see added to the Combined STEM study site?**

*Some students were unaware of the existence of the R28 suggested study routes (e.g., “I have not used the suggested study route pages as I was not aware of them...”)*

We have reviewed standard email communications that get sent to R28 students, to better highlight the Combined STEM site (including the suggested study routes) and how to access them from StudentHome. We have modified the text on the front page of the Combined STEM website so that it points to the suggested study routes pages. We have also increased the visibility of the suggested study routes from within the ‘Choose your modules’ pages on StudentHome.

We will review and update the advice and guidance we provide to internal teams (e.g., advisers in various Student Support Teams), to promote greater awareness of the suggested study routes pages.

*Students who visited the suggested study route pages reported finding them to be helpful (e.g., “Having had a look at it [a suggested study route] now I have actually found it quite helpful as I’ve discovered a module I hadn’t really considered before.”)*

We are pleased that the information on suggested study routes is helpful to students. We will continue to review and improve the advice and guidance we provide here.

*Some students would like early access to resources or additional preparation materials for their modules (e.g., “...I only wish there was more content available for students wishing to make an early start in the summer...”; “On top of prerequisites and supplementary material offered by a given module, there should be better direction towards Open Learn courses or include more supplementary material...”)*

We have added links to discipline-specific Study websites where early start/additional resources can often be found. We are also adding links to further information/supporting resources for modules on the suggested study route pages on the Combined STEM website. (These are also accessible from the ‘Choose your modules’ pages on StudentHome.)

*Some students wanted advice on studying in two discipline areas (e.g., “What I would find useful is [...] a way of seeing how you could build pathways with two different disciplines...”)*

We have started to discuss this with individual Boards of Studies, with a view to providing additional advice and guidance on the Combined STEM site in due course.

To collect advice from Boards of Studies on the most suitable combinations of disciplines and modules.

**Q. Do you think of yourself more as a Combined STEM (R28) student or as a STEM Faculty student or both?**

There were mixed responses to this question, including ‘both’ and ‘neither’.

Thank you for responding to this. It helps us to better understand the diversity of students and their experiences when studying with us.

### You said

### OU response

### Next steps, if appropriate

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**Q. In addition to running this consultative forum, you may be aware that we have a forum on the Combined STEM study website, and student representatives on the Open Programme Board of Studies, as two ways of enabling student voice. Are there additional ways you would like to be able to feedback or provide suggestions about R28?**

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This question did not result in much discussion during the consultation.

We provided links to the Combined STEM site and café forum for continued discussion and feedback after the consultation ended.

### Other Comments

*"Having OU STEM conferences (or subject conferences), which we could attend in person, and which would feel engaging to students on all levels (levels 1-3) would be great opportunity to meet fellow students, make connections and start building a network."*

Thank you for this feedback. We will pass this on to STEM Boards of Studies for their consideration. In the meantime, we hope that you will enjoy the Open Programme's Student Hub Live events and be able to build networks through events hosted by the Open University Students Association and the OU's Careers and Employability Services.

*"...collaborative projects are the source of much anxiety. Alternative forms of assessment not involving collaboration should be prominently signalled as being available."*

Thank you for raising this point. Collaborative work is included in STEM modules as scientists, engineers etc rarely, if ever, work in isolation, and will often collaborate across different locations. Indeed, this may well be a skill that employers look for. However, we acknowledge that collaborative work is not appropriate for all students and that alternatives are needed.

**Date: March 2022**