

RESPONSE TO THE SSGS STUDENT CONSULTATION ON 'COMPLETING YOUR STUDIES AND MOVING ON'

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on support as you approach the end of your module and between modules which took place between Thursday 15 and Tuesday 27 April 2021 on the [Social Sciences and Global Studies \(SSGS\) Board of Studies Student Consultative Forum](#).

- Students registered: 71
- Posts by students: 360
- No of students posting at least once: 58. Of these 20 students posted only once.
- Estimated number of readers: 137
- Total ratings (likes and favourites): 29

Nine questions were asked about support towards the end of a module; delaying end of module assessments; resubmitting/resitting final assessments; understanding result outcomes and preparing for subsequent study. Engagement, observations and suggestions from those who took part were excellent, with a mix of praise for existing support, constructive criticisms of where we might do better and helpful suggestions going forward.

The focus of this year's consultation deliberately followed on from the 2019 consultation, which looked at 'Getting started' student support leading up and at the beginning of their module, and the 2020 consultation, which explored what helped students 'Keep going' during a module. This year we explored 'Completing and moving on', looking at the types of support that help students complete their modules and what they would welcome in terms of contact and content between modules.

Q1 Tuition

What types of tuition did you find most/least helpful to complete your module (cluster day schools, cluster tutorials, whole tutor group sessions, tutor one to ones, catch up sessions)?

Question one received a high number of posts. The positive comments reflected the value of the different tutor group and cluster group sessions, which were seen as opportunities to gain help from tutors and interact with other students. It was noted that tutors had an engaging teaching style in many tutorials/dayschools.

The negative comments related to not having the same tutor for each tutorial, and to tutors' variable skills in the use of Adobe for delivery of tutorials. There were comments related to tutorials just being 'a lecture' or 'a repeat of content', without the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of topics, and students saying they didn't have enough time to ask questions.

You said

OU response

Next steps, if appropriate

Tutorials need to offer a mix of teaching approaches – some tutorials are too lecture focussed with insufficient time for questions or discussion and poor presentational style

Tutorials should be exploring the module materials in an engaging way that bring students into the discussion. We have regular visits to tutorials by Associate Lecturer (tutor) managers to ensure best practice, and regular staff development should also emphasise the need for a blend of approaches in tutorials to engage students. Many modules are also producing their own slide decks and suggestions for tutorial activities

The Director of Teaching (DoT) and Director of Student Support (DoSS) will work with academic colleagues to ensure best practice in tutorial provision is a key element of staff development with ALs/tutors, and that the SSGS Associate Lecturer (AL) best practice guide (written in 2020/21 for use by ALs/tutors from Autumn 2021) is widely disseminated.

Some tutors seem more skilled with Adobe Connect than others

All tutors have been trained on Adobe Connect as part of the introduction for the tool, and ongoing staff development with it has been a part of both generic and disciplinary staff development within the school

The DoT and DoSS will work with AL managers and disciplines to ensure there is consistency of knowledge and practice in the use of Adobe Connect

Students welcomed 'tutor' or 'cluster' drop-in sessions

At level 1 drop-in sessions are regularly timetabled and offer an opportunity to liaise with tutors over understanding of the question/task and to explore the students notes together – it is really good to hear these are working well. At level 2 and 3 tutors have fewer teaching hours, but we can certainly explore drop-ins at these levels, hours permitting.

The DoT and DoSS will liaise with the Associate Dean (Teaching and Students) to explore tutorial hours available at level 2 and 3

Q2 Module materials

What types of module material/activity did you find most/least helpful to complete your module?

It was great to hear that most of the students who posted liked the FASS (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences) blended approach to study – the mix of book chapters, online/audio-visual content and the degree of interactivity in each study week. Students also noticed an improvement in the quality of modules over the time they had been studying with the OU. Hard copy books were valued.

Some students indicated that tutor group sessions were good places to have discussions alongside the more formal whole cluster tutorial/dayschool environment

There were some concerns where links in module websites had expired and new links were not set up during the module presentation. Some students mentioned that the print on demand/alternative formats service was good and useful, but there were some issues with delivery and errors in what was delivered sometimes.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|---|---|
| That you liked the general blend within modules, but online resources were quite text heavy and you felt these were often better in books | It was good to hear that the FASS ‘blended’ approach to module design was proving popular. We constantly evaluate the balance between books and online, and there is work going on to ensure that Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) materials are interactive and pedagogically appropriate – that what works best online is online and that what works well in books is in books | DoT will liaise with Associate Dean (Teaching and Students) regarding the FASS teaching model and its ongoing development. |
| That students liked the smaller tutor group sessions for more informal discussions | The tutor-student relationship is core to the OU model and following introduction of the day school model across FASS, feedback from students means that we have reintroduced these on quite a number of modules, so many now have a blend between cluster events and tutor group sessions. We will continue to evaluate their use and take-up. | DOT will liaise with relevant faculty colleagues regarding the day school model and provision of tutor group sessions within this. |
| That internet links on module websites sometimes expired and were not replaced | We were disappointed to hear this; module websites are checked in the months before presentation start and any expired links should be noticed and repaired. Exceptionally they may be missed or have expired after checking and during the presentation. | The DoT will liaise with relevant colleagues to ensure that all links are fully checked before sign off of module websites. |
| That student notes for TMAs/EMAs sometimes had errors in and were overlong | It was disappointing to hear that some students had experienced this issue. Questions and student/tutor notes go through a writing and editing process prior to publication, and on most module teams this involves critical readers looking at author’s notes followed by editors from the university’s Learning and Design Services (LDS). From October 2021, all module teams will have an AL/tutor on it who will also critically read questions and notes for sense. | The DoT will liaise with module chairs concerning the recruitment of ALs/tutors and emphasise the requirements for a comprehensive reading and editing process prior to publication of student and tutor notes. |
| The print on demand service/paper copies of online content for students with disabilities was welcomed by those students who used it but there were some quality issues over content/delivery | The print on demand/alternative format service is valued by students, and in most cases works well. We are aware that there are some issues and where this has we will follow up to ensure that this service is uniformly provided. | The DoT will follow with relevant colleagues to ensure that the quality of what we provide for this service is as uniform as possible. |

Q3 Interaction with other students

Was interaction with other students, in formal collaborative work, on module/cluster forums, at tutorials or via non OU networks – WhatsApp for example, helpful?

This thread had a large number of posts. Firstly, whilst the benefits of collaborative working were appreciated, its use was felt to be mixed in the context of OU study.

The online only provision at present meant that online cluster dayschools were busy and the weight of numbers meant that the ability for tutor, student, and peer interaction was limited, leading to a lecture-type experience which contrasted with face to face face-to-face day schools which were often had different activities during the day.

Forums use also had a mixed response; this was in terms of form/appearance; inability to (re)locate particular threads and notes posed on there; and excessive tasks that often seemed to be meaningless or just 'add-ons'. OU forums and Adobe Connect seemed dated compared with alternative systems such as MS Teams and Zoom.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|--|---|--|
| That to be useful, collaborative working had to have a clear rationale and add value to the student experience | We were disappointed that some people's experience of collaborative work had not been positive, but we also noted the good examples mentioned. Working with others is a key skill, especially for employability but also in terms of academic development. | The Director of Teaching will feed this back to the faculty and emphasise to module teams in production the need to explain and fully integrate any collaborative skills work into modules, so they both add value and are relevant to assessment and the student journey. |
| Online cluster day schools don't support meaningful interaction in the way that face-to-face dayschools did – they lack the variety (cluster sessions, tutor sessions, Q&A sessions) that face-to-face sessions did. | The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that we have had to move all tuition online until the 2022B (February) presentations, where we hope to reintroduce face-to-face dayschools. We are seeing many modules offering a diversity of tuition provision online until then. | The Director of Teaching will talk to the Assoc Dean (Teaching and Students) to emphasise the student interest in continuation of face-to-face provision and the need for a diversity of online tuition. |
| That Adobe Connect was not as effective an online tool as either Microsoft Teams or Zoom | The pandemic has seen all tuition put online and a new version of Adobe has been launched. There have been some teething problems with this, but it has settled down and appears to be working well. Adobe has functionality as a teaching tool that neither Zoom or MS Teams has but we need to ensure that these are used to be effective as teaching tool. | The Director of Teaching will pass on comments concerning the use of Adobe over MS Teams and/or Zoom to the PVC (Students) office and work with the Director of Student Support and AL managers to ensure that the full functionality of Adobe Connect is used. |

Q4 Catching up

If you have been struggling to catch up (with final TMAs or with preparation for your Exam/EMA) what forms of support helped you get back on track (one to ones with your tutor, 'catch up' sessions, module activities for example)?

Students mentioned the 'module wide catch-up sessions' – also mentioned in the feedback to Q1, as being really useful on level 1 modules. Some students also mentioned the Student Support Team (SST) and the Disability Support Team for guidance and advice

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|---|--|
| The 15 day turnaround for tutors meant variable return of correspondence tuition for students | The 15 day turnaround for tutors to mark TMAs was brought in as part of a wider set of temporary COVID-19 student regulations, which included an automatic extension of up to 21 days for students. The data overall suggests that most tutors did mark within the 10 working day standard turnaround. The 15 day turnaround is being phased out and will not extend beyond the 31 st December 2021. | Communications concerning the phasing out of the 15 day turnaround has been sent to students in July. |
| Some final TMAs are very near the EMA deadline, reducing the time students have for the latter. | This has been acknowledged as an issue in previous consultations and where this has been identified module calendars are being adjusted in consultation with module teams. | At the module production stage module teams will be advised to ensure that there is an appropriate gap between the final TMA and EMA This will be reviewed at the various approval stages. |

Q5 Deferring or postponing?

If you were unable to finish an earlier module, was it clear what options were available to you to discuss? (Deferral, (with or without assessment banking), discretionary postponement, for example)

Some students had not heard of or understood what was meant by discretionary postponement. Most students understood the options open to them, and some had taken them up. Students were reminded to always talk to their tutor before deferring as often a catch up plan or action plan to get students across the line could still be do-able and if not possible, to contact the Student Support Team.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|--|--|
| That students were unsure about the different options available if they were unable to finish their module. | We were disappointed to see that students were unclear around the options available when continuing a module was not possible. The Student Home 'Help Centre has a range of links dedicated to supporting students if they wish to change their study plans and we need to improve their visibility. | The DoT will liaise with the Assoc Dean (Teaching and Students) and Student Support Team (SST) concerning the visibility of the Student Home pages on 'changing your study plans'. |

Q6 Resit/resubmission

If you did not pass a module first time, or were able to delay your submission to a later assessment point, did you receive any help/support? How helpful was this and how could it be improved?

There were only a small number of responses to this question. Where students had undertaken a resit, the support from the SST and your tutor had been positive and well organised. One student noted that having failed, they didn't take up the offer of a resit, so proactive contact by the university to encourage students to see the resit as a second opportunity might be helpful going forward.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|---|---|
| Student sometimes perceived an offer of a resit as a fail | If students are offered a resit, it means they only just missed out on a pass result, and with support could resubmit and pass their module. We would encourage all students to take up the opportunity if it is offered. We will liaise with the SST to ensure the support available is visible to students. | The Director of Teaching to liaise with the Student Support Team concerning how students are made aware of resit support. |

Q7 Receiving your result

When you get your module result, what support, contact or information would you find helpful?

We noted that students wanted help understanding the results and how these results affect their qualification result. Students also had questions about having someone to talk to about their overall progress through the qualification. Some students mentioned a diversity of approaches to EMA/exam and whether these could be made more uniform in approach.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|---|--|---|
| Students would welcome the opportunity to talk through their module result and progress through their qualification with someone who knows the specific qualification well. | We recognise that while getting your module result is a positive experience, it may also lead to questions about a range of issues. Many tutors help with questions, and the Student Support Team are always available to help with queries. | The Director of Teaching will liaise with the Faculty Lead on the AL contract and the Student Support Team on the future direction of support for qualifications. |
| That there were significant differences in approach and format between feedback on different modules | Module teams work with the ACQ (Assessment, Credit and Qualifications) team to develop their EMA feedback forms, so hopefully in most cases, these relate and are designed to offer students feedback on the learning outcomes for their specific modules. | The Director of Teaching to liaise with SSGS module chairs concerning types and use of feedback mechanisms on EMAs/Exams. |

Q8 Between modules

During the period between modules, what sorts of activities would you find helpful/interesting?

There was enthusiasm amongst many of the students for academic activity between modules, to keep skills development going and to develop a greater sense of the content in their qualifications. Some students said how Future Learn and Open Learn modules were good.

| You said | OU response | Next steps, if appropriate |
|--|---|--|
| It would be good to have a list of suggested activities for each qualification that students could dip into if they wanted over the summer, including reading lists, OpenLearn resources, guest lectures, relevant skills activities | We already offer well developed subject sites, with forums staffed all summer by Associate Lecturers and central and regional academics who know the qualifications in their area and can offer advice on suitable activities. These sites include access to free informal learning; for example relevant OpenLearn content and any OU/BBC co-production (See The Open University - Learning on Screen). | The Director of Teaching will liaise with Qualification Leads and the Senior Manager Teaching over development of the subject sites and qualification activities in the summer. |
| That earlier access to module websites would help with familiarisation with the module and guide student activity over the summer | Related to the issue below, we would not want to reduce the time spent checking and editing module websites to ensure that the quality of content is as good as possible. It may be possible to launch websites slightly earlier – they are currently open, with a welcome forum, about three weeks before module start. | The Director of Teaching will identify a module(s) to explore earlier launch of their website. We are also continuing to develop the content of your subject sites, and will consider how these might be s. The subject sites are accessible to you year-round for the duration of your study with us. |
| Send module materials out when a student pays their fees. | There are practical difficulties attached to this. Students can register for October modules from April onwards, and in many cases, the production and editing of module materials is still taking place, particularly for new modules. We would not want to reduce the time spent editing materials prior to their launch/posting (see Q2) because of its possible impact on quality. | The School of Social Sciences and Global Studies Board of Studies acknowledges this issue but at present it may not be able to facilitate this request, for the reason outlined in the OU response to the left. |

Q9 Preparing for the start of your next module

How helpful have you found induction activity/resources prior to modules? What other kinds of activity/resource would have been useful?

It was good to hear that module inductions were liked for helping students settle into their respective new modules. The scale and form of induction varied and some were more comprehensive than others. Students liked the 'Read me first' quick start guides at level 1 and felt these supported induction well. The move from levels 1 to 2 and 2 to 3 was cited as an area where support would be welcomed.

You said

OU response

Next steps, if appropriate

Induction materials were generally good, but there were differences in the scope and breath of these – it would be good to have uniformity of scope and approach

It was good to hear that generally induction activity and materials are well received. There is some difference in approach from level to level and some differences might be because some modules are trialling a new approach – we are always looking to improve how we support students at the start of a module, and then mainstream what works.

The Director of Teaching will work with discipline leads and module chairs to ensure that best practice in induction support is shared across modules

That the 'Read me first' guides were helpful at level 1 and could be useful at level 2 and 3

It was great to hear that these were helpful and we are looking to implement these across all modules for October 2022.

The Director of Teaching to liaise with the FASS Deanery to ensure that the production of these is built into all module maintenance schedules for 2022J (October).

That support as students moved from one level to another was useful and important.

We noted this and we do provide both bridging materials and threads on the subject forums on the Social Sciences, Criminology and Environment subject sites to support students going from levels 1 to 2 and levels 2 to 3.

The Director of Teaching and Senior Manager Teaching will continue to work with faculty and technical-support colleagues to ensure that students have greater visibility of the bridging materials and support available.

Matt Staples, Director of Teaching School of Social Sciences and Global Studies

Date: 27th July 2021