# Student Consultation Meetings 2022

Overview of student feedback

# CONTENTS

**01** **Background**
What this overview includes and details of the student consultations

**02** **Staying on track**
Stumbling blocks, how students overcome them, and how the OU can help

**03** **Sustainability**
The importance of issues, and how the OU can support sustainability

**04** **The future of exams**
Reaction to the idea of online exams; their hopes, fears and expectations; and how the OU could support them

Student consultation is a central part of the ongoing relationship between the University and its student body. As a part of this, a series of online meetings were conducted in March 2022.

The following is a full overview of the emerging themes from this consultation, covering all areas included: **the future of exams, staying on track and sustainability**

The consultation included multiple student meetings, arranged as follows:

2nd March:       All students
10th March:      FASS/WELS students
12th March:      FBL/STEM students
15th March:      Scotland students
16th March:      All students
18th March:      International students
19th March:      WELS/FASS students
23rd March:      FBL/STEM students
26th March:      Ireland / Wales students

Over 220 students were involved in the consultation process

# Staying on track

## Stumbling blocks to staying on track

How teaching is delivered can have implications for students trying to stay on track:

- Lack of personal interaction with tutors can cause concerns – this can be both from tutorials and F2F

  Low level of tutor interaction

  More tutorials would be very good. I find that tutorials are very motivating and help to get back on track

  Not enough time with tutors … only got four hours per week

- Infrequency and poor attendance at tutorials and their non-recording also impact staying on track

  Not many tutorials are recorded any more, so if I am behind it would be difficult

  Issues with tutors … one who just didn't turn up for tutorials

- A general lack of interaction with tutors is mentioned by many – particularly face-to-face teaching

  Email communication with tutors is very formal and doesn't build relationships

  There are no pastoral support tutors

  Tutors are not proactive in contacting/supporting their students

- A sense of isolation is commonplace and does not help students stay motivated

  I know other students on my module have thought about packing it in because they feel so lonely and isolated

  I would like to see my tutor and other students … Being a distance learner can feel very isolating and this would help address this

- Response times from some tutors is also viewed as taking too long

  Tutors can take a while to respond

## Stumbling blocks to staying on track

- A lack of interaction with other students can also contribute to difficulties in staying on track …

  [not] sharing and getting reassurance with/from other students

  No peer support, don't even know if there are any same course students in my location

  Lack of engagement on forums

- There is a feeling there could be more both formal and informal ways of receiving support from fellow students

  Had no contact with students outside tutorials

  It would be helpful to talk to others more about our learning

- However, collaboration can be problematic for some

  Collaboration work doesn't work – some not doing any work at all

- Forums can also be intimidating places

  There is no way to talk freely with other students

- Balancing study with life and work can throw up challenges – although it is recognized there is little the OU can do to alleviate these circumstances - it needs to be aware of them

  Juggling work and family life

  I am a single parent and have a health issue … this has a big impact on my studies

  Life events can affect motivation and time

  Unexpected issues in life disrupting study plans

- Money pressures also exist for a few

  Cost of studying

# Stumbling blocks to staying on track

Some structural elements also contribute to difficulties in staying on track …

- Ineffective induction and lack of early planning can hinder progress

  There is little or no induction before starting a course

  It would be useful to have clear guidelines to show the criteria on which TMAs are based

  When you sign up for study you are advised of the hours commitment but it doesn't really mean much at the time

- Workloads can differ between modules and surprise students – when modules overlap this also brings pressures

  Massively different workloads between modules

  Time commitment. How do I know if 60 credits in Y2 will take the same time as 60 in Y1?

- There is insufficient time to complete TMAs for some

  Time … to complete the TMAs especially at Level 3 when the expectations are higher

  Not enough time allocated to write TMAs

  If students have to ask for an extension it is then very hard to catch up

- Slow TMA marking and feedback delivery can also hinder

  Getting TMAs back late past the expected service … causes problems … feedback is vital

- Printed materials not being available can be an issue

  Really, really miss the printed and bound book

  Not receiving textbooks and comb bound books on time

- And for some, exam issues can be problematic - either physically getting to them or sitting them for those with anxiety

- Some simply plough on or muddle through and make the best of it, feeling relatively unsupported

Working like a horse

I did it all alone … but it was very hard and I did not have real support from tutors

- There can be a feeling of having to make the best of it in the circumstances

Accept that I am effectively studying on my own with occasional input from my tutor with TMA feedback

- Time management becomes of vital importance – they handle this as best they can, using what tools they feel work best

Timebloc … is useful as you can split your time up during the day and it sends reminders

Use the study calendar to plan to book time off work around TMAs

Time management … strictly follow a timetable

- Many value the support from their tutor - and tutorials are a key cornerstone of staying on track

Open drop-in sessions alongside usual tutorials have helped

It's mentally stressful when you fall behind which impacts your ability to catch up

Tutorials are essential to completing the module

- All need some degree of tutor support but often there is little they can do to practically to get this

Contact from OU to check how I am doing … but don't get it in every module

Ask for help, depending on tutors

# How students overcome stumbling blocks

- Many turn to peer support or other informal networks for help – these are welcomed and generally beneficial

Support from others in the tutor group

A buddy system is a great idea

I talk to other students in my module through the forums … we can go through the nitty gritty

I've found a lot of support from WhatsApp groups, though I know some have been less well managed

I would like more opportunities to connect with students and staff, like Big Blether

- Students ask for extensions – but want to avoid this as it can cause more problems

Have needed to ask for extensions

Asking for extensions in plenty of time, and not seeing this as a failing

Trying to avoid asking for unnecessary extensions to prevent snowballing

- Many say they aim to get ahead or try to stay ahead to avoid falling behind …

Use the early module opening to get ahead

Trying to get ahead some weeks to allow for weeks that are busy when I get behind

- But for some, time pressures mean a need to focus on what they think are relevant areas of study only

I work backwards … look at the topic of the TMA, look at online study materials … I can optimize and focus my studies … while still managing to overview everything

Choose assignment in advance and focus on the relevant unit to keep on track

- More personal contact and support – be that F2F or 121 tutorials – would help students stay on track

> Tutors are stretched … there needs to be a problem to get a session with them

> Tutors .. Could there be breaks / catch up weeks built into the schedule?

> Face to face tutorials would be great learning experiences and team building

- More frequent contact and tutorials are felt to be beneficial - the more contact time the better

> Once per week catch up with tutor? Just to see how students are doing

> More contact time with tutors

> Tutors seem to have limited time available to support students

- Broader personal support is also sought by many students - even if it is simply pointing them in the right direction

> A special student phone line to talk about your problems, to talk with someone who can listen to you

> OU could do far more to publicise support in an empathetic way e.g. videos of students describing challenges and sharing how they have overcome them

> Student support and tutors should be aware about the issues students and disabled students might be facing

- There are 'structural' improvements that students point to that would help them – including a need to change how forums work – they often require better management. Students are split over whether there should be more or less focus on TMAs …

> Tutorials shouldn't be just about TMAs

> Have more consolidation tutorials as the module progresses rather than just special TMA forums

> Tutorials can't continue being pre-set with pre-written slides … and so unresponsive to needs of participants

## What could the OU do to help them stay on track?

- More preparation and relevant induction materials, time management tools, information on how TMAs are assessed would be valuable

> More material ahead of the module start, even if in draft format

> It would be better if the modules start by saying 'this is how you are going to be assessed, here is the first TMA and what you need to be doing'

> I didn't know the OU offered any support with time management … will be useful to highlight them

- More flexibility both in general terms (timings, exam methodologies) and flexible ways to stay in touch with both tutors and other students would help

> Allow disabled students to have the option of doing an EMA rather than sitting a final exam

> I think flexibility around TMA dates is certainly very helpful

> More effort should be put into encouraging and supporting a sense of community for a module, including the tutor

- There is a clear desire to improve the connectivity with other students – past and present

> There was a FASS mentoring system in place which was excellent although it was a very short period of time

> Connecting with students that have done the course is useful, occasionally they are on forum boards, but can be difficult to connect

> Better means of contact with other students especially with the same tutor in the same group

- More time for TMAs to be completed and more sensible timing of TMA deadlines would help some

> More time to write TMAs

> [Be] empathetic and sympathetic … there was a TMA due for 4th January … this was crazy as I have a young family …my tutor wasn't available for advice, and added to the stress

- For some, there are clear technical improvements that would help them
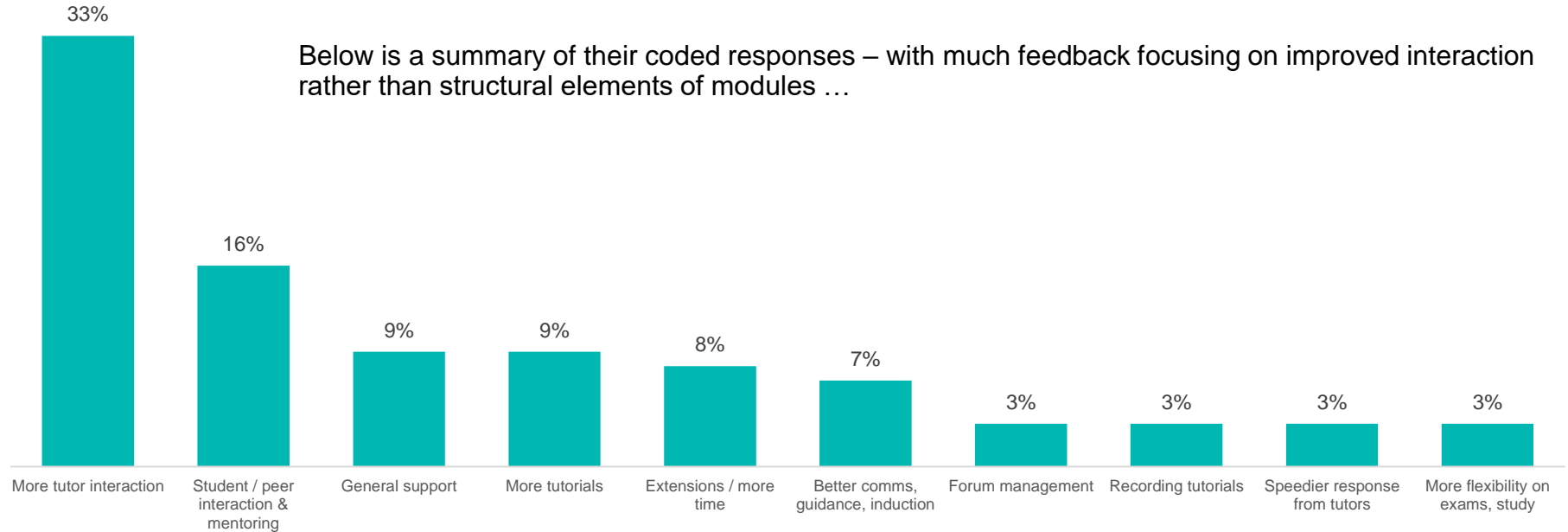
> IT issues (service interruptions etc) are an OU issue, and they could do better

> The present forums have a lot of friction due to outdated design and lack of modern social features

> Use Teams instead of Adobe! Interaction would be easier

**Students were separately asked what is the one thing the OU could do to help them overcome the challenges of completing modules**

Below is a summary of their coded responses – with much feedback focusing on improved interaction rather than structural elements of modules …

| More tutor interaction | Student / peer interaction & mentoring | General support | More tutorials | Extensions / more time | Better comms, guidance, induction | Forum management | Recording tutorials | Speedier response from tutors | More flexibility on exams, study |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 33% | 16% | 9% | 9% | 8% | 7% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |

And a word cloud of those responses highlights the importance of tutors and their support …
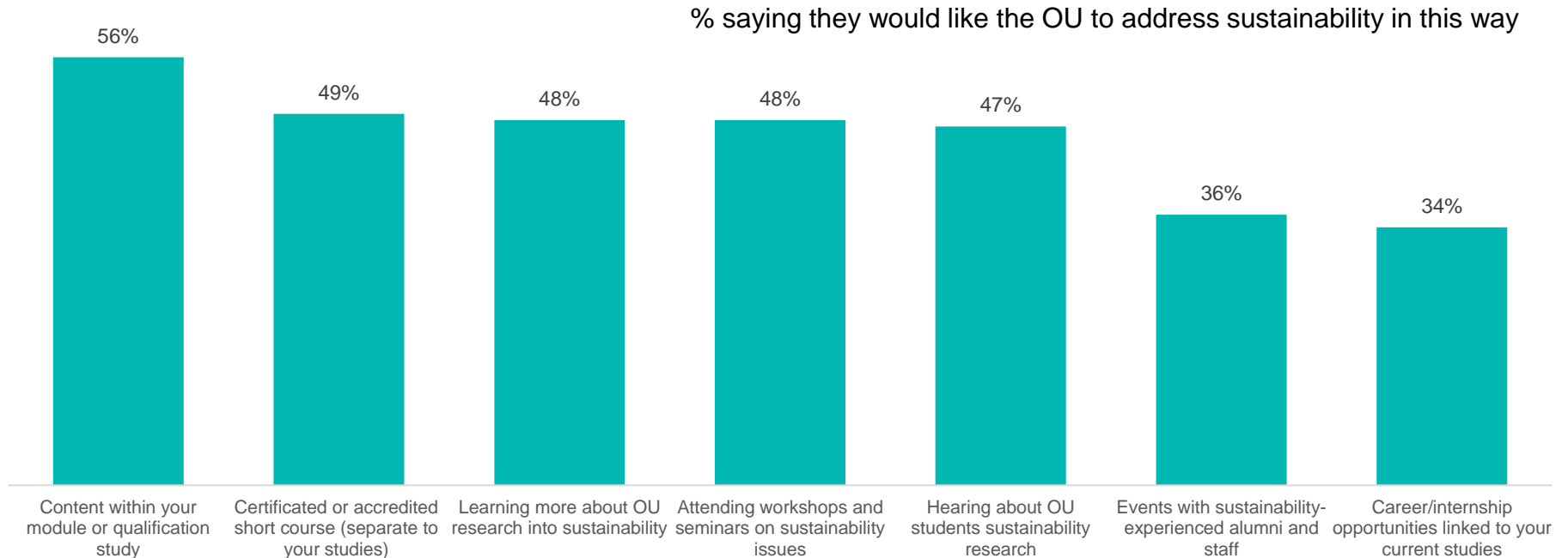
## Staying on track: Summary

- A perceived lack of interaction with both tutors and other students can make staying on track more difficult and is the primary cause for concern

- Other issues that contribute include the difficulty in achieving a study/work/life balance, insufficient induction/preparation and a simple lack of time to complete TMAs

- Students often overcome these issues by muddling through. There is a slight sense of learning as they study how to stay on track: be that improving their time management, better module preparation, or just asking for TMA extensions

- Support also helps students stay on track where they can get it – this is highly valued but not as available as they would like – be that from tutors or even peer groups (preferably from the former)

- The main way students say the OU can help them stay on track is through more frequent and personal tutor interaction

- Students would also value help via greater peer interaction, improved technology platforms or delivery, broad personal support and flexibility from the OU in how modules are delivered and assessed
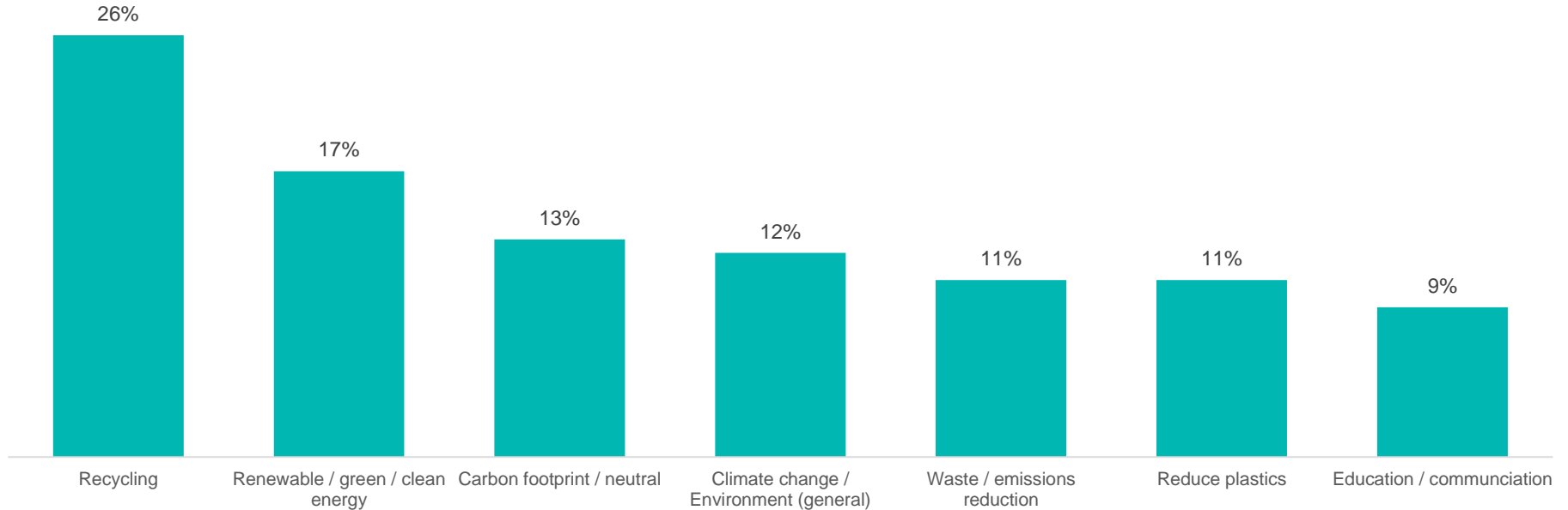
# Sustainability

**Sustainability**

**Students were asked a <u>prompted</u> list of how they would like the OU to include sustainability in its teaching and learning …**

% saying they would like the OU to address sustainability in this way

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Content within your module or qualification study | 56% |
| Certificated or accredited short course (separate to your studies) | 49% |
| Learning more about OU research into sustainability | 48% |
| Attending workshops and seminars on sustainability issues | 48% |
| Hearing about OU students sustainability research | 47% |
| Events with sustainability-experienced alumni and staff | 36% |
| Career/internship opportunities linked to your current studies | 34% |

Source: Q: How would you like the University to include sustainability in its teaching and learning?
Base: All students answering in Vevox (121)

16

**Students were then asked (unprompted) what is the most important sustainability issue for them …**

Below is a summary of their coded responses – based on all those who completed the exercise

**Word cloud based on answers to what students believe to be the most important sustainability issue for The OU**



Source: Q: What is the most important sustainability issue to you?
Base: All students answering in Vevox (110)

18

# The Future of exams

# The difference between online and face-to-face exams

- With online exams, students would have the opportunity to operate in a familiar study space that is generally convenient

> Online exams are less onerous, you have more time and in a familiar environment, so less daunting

> Had a bad experience with face to face before, triggered severe anxiety

- Stress would be reduced by virtue of the environment they are being tested in – exam anxiety can already be relatively high

> Hate going into an exam room … get edgy and nervous and start panicking … sitting with other students … it adds pressure

> I prefer an online exam … I have psychological disabilities … and sitting final exams has been a horrible experience

> Online really good for students with health issues

- Online exams take away the stress, cost and difficulty of travel to and from location for some

> Travel … would add stress and more difficult to attend especially for people with mobility, income, mental health

> Remote exams are on the whole better as no cost and stress of travelling

> Much prefer online exams … takes away the stress, time and cost of travelling

> Online exams are preferable if you need to get to the exam centres from rural areas (for example Scottish islands)

- Some feel by implication on online exam would involve more time to complete it, and/or involve an open book style of testing – these are generally less stressful and not a test of speed of handwriting or typing

> Handwriting with face to face exams is a problem whereas online you would not face this problem

> Online provides greater flexibility … a 24 hour timeframe provides more time for considered thought

- An online exam is closer to a better test of a student's ability to grasp principles and to understand and to apply skills, rather than a pure memory test

> More focused on skills than memory

> It's possibly the only way to give anything close to true equity of accessibility … for those with any kind of additional needs

- An online test naturally suits the International student community – it also talks to sustainability

> Online exams would help with sustainability

> Online exams give more time to allow for time zones

- There is some degree of technology anxiety for students – unprompted before being asked what their concerns might be - what happens if their Internet crashes or there is not enough bandwidth at a crucial time?

> Worries about online connectivity

> Issues around tech - will my system handle it, is my connection going to be OK … if there is a power blip will this affect my outcome

> Just because I can write a TMA on my PC does not infer my equipment may be powerful enough to run monitoring software for exams, this is a huge issue for some students

- For some, there would be a higher degree of achievement in being examined in a face-to-face environment – it is viewed as a more rigorous test

> The in person was harder there was a real sense of achievement with the result

> Online appears not as rigorous

- Some are also conscious of the need to ensure the reputation of an OU qualification is maintained … employability on the back of their qualification is important

  > it would be a good idea to have an invigilator when doing online exam

  > I want my qualification to be credible, I do not want it to be diluted by poor reputation

- There are some concerns over how an online exam would be moderated – do they need to turn their cameras around? Would moderation reduce Internet speeds?

  > I would prefer this although how would it be moderated?

- On balance, students tend to favour an online exam versus face-to-face, with the above caveats – having flexibility of assessment could reduce stress

  > Having both options is useful

  > Would consider modules that offer EMAs to avoid some exams

- However, this raises the issue of whether more continuous assessment would be appropriate rather than full reliance of examinations … many would like to see a higher proportion of overall marks based on TMAs (even though some of these can also be stressful)

  > I would like to see disabled students with serious health conditions offered an EMA option

  > EMAs or TMAs are fairer

22

## Hopes, fears and expectations of online exams

- Most hopes tend to be focused on delivering the perceived positives of online exams, whilst addressing the negatives (where viewed) – concerns focus on alleviating these

> So much easier to do things from home in your own comfortable setting

> Worried that … giving extra time is the only reasonable adjustment that could be considered for someone with a disability

- The perceived increase in flexibility is a positive that students hope will work in their favour – be that the environment they are tested in, the time an exam may be allocated, or when they can take it

> I think the OU could review the weight allocated to exams

> Want option to decide on F2F or online exams

- Technical issues are the main area raised in terms of considerations – usually around reliability in the home

> What software do I need, can I run it, is my Internet sufficient, what if something breaks?

> What would happen if there was a power cut during the exam?

> Many students don't have good access to equipment … how could we ensure that it was a fair environment for everyone

> The technology breaking down – what would happen if you couldn't get back in

- There are also concerns regarding how cheating night be 'managed' … either checks on their own behaviour or others gaining an unfair advantage

> How are remote exams invigilated? How would integrity be maintained online?

> Hopes would be to have a fair system where everyone had the same time limit and the same material to draw from

## Hopes, fears and expectations of online exams

- Home distractions are a concern for a small minority – mostly children and others in the household using equipment or the Internet

> Not everyone has a private room, work space or even a laptop

> Exam being at home might be difficult if you haven't got a quiet place

> Challenges of maintaining a quiet space in the household

- Expectations from the OU begin to focus on effective preparation for an online exam: Guidance on how to approach them; what to do if your technology fails; what support will be available if there are any issues

> It would be reassuring to have clear and detailed guidance about how the exam is planned to proceed, what to do in the event of issues, and an urgent contact

> Can I get tech support if my tech goes wrong

> My fear would be not to get the extra support I need (e.g. breaks during exam, extra time)

- There are a few fears over course devaluation – in the eyes of employers in particular if it becomes well-known that OU qualifications are online only

> If other universities are still using in person exams to validate results does it devalue the course or degree to drop them

> Would online exams be viewed by employers as valid

> an employer might view someone who has taken the exam in person is more credible than someone who has taken it online

> If we want our degrees to be valuable, we need exams

- TMAs tend to still be a preferred option for student evaluation for many – **exploring the use of online exams may lead to a greater call for this from students** – if there is no need for a F2F exam, why not use assessments instead?

> Have exams as less a percentage of overall mark ... More fair and less stressful

> Remote exams or EMAs bring out the best in students … not asking them to go to an unfamiliar environment and anxieties associated with exams and performance

> Option of external exam centre with a range of times you can attend … able to take breaks .. Not all sat in rows like at school, in rooms or cubicles so as not to distract

Students would be looking for help from the OU to address the expressed negatives about online exams:

- Mock or dummy exams are overwhelmingly the main area students identify as where the OU can help – these would be mocks of an online experience, including how their technology holds up

> A dry run … to prepare and know what to expect

> functionality to submit a dummy exam paper to overcome technical fears

> Opportunities for a mock exam so as to experience what it is like

> Dummy exam submission, similar to the dummy TMA submission, to allow students to get familiar with the tech side

- Preparation should include the use of previous exam questions and how they might be adapted / re-calibrated for an online environment

> video presentations to show how to prepare

> More of a "best practice guide" for preparing for online exams

> I'd like to hear feedback from those who have done it, particularly my subject

- Reviving 121 tutorials (even if over Zoom) are felt to be necessary for some to help online exam preparation

> Tutorials and exam preparation such as past papers

> Tutors would need to spend more time with students beforehand … explaining the format of the exam

> More guidance as to what to expect to allow you to structure your revision accordingly

> Provide training on the use of the platform before the exam

- Details of how moderating would work are required – both as guidance for them and to alleviate the concern others might take advantage. They would also appreciate understanding any potential impact this may have on their connectivity

> How would the integrity be maintained online?

> Monitoring of students whilst doing online exam … both for support and to ensure no cheating

25

## What the OU could do to help students prepare for online exams

- There should be clear guidance on what to do if your technology fails during an online exam - Support systems will be required during them – they expect help if something goes wrong technically

> Technology concerns being addressed beforehand

> Be clear about what will happen when something goes wrong … work out in advance how students can communicate with the exam centre if they have difficulty with technology

> Like to know in advance what to do if technology fails on the day

- Support for the less digitally able would be a pre-requisite for fairness

> Lots of support about how to access it, timeframes etc

> People who can't type as fast may be disadvantaged … how can we support them (the old one finger hunt and peck brigade)

> Those who live in rural areas are less digitally enabled, how is OU going to support them

- Clarity over expectations (technology, cheating, moderation, assessment, support) of the online exam will be crucial – especially for those doing this for the first time

> Be clear with students on the expectations of the examiner in online exams

> It would be useful to know what is expected during remote exams at the beginning of the module … it would reduce anxieties

- Removing time limits on exams, and indeed making them as 'open-book' as possible is seen as a positive: students do seem to want their assessment to be based on their skills rather than a memory test

> Why not offer the choice of either a face-to-face or an online exam

> Remove time limit on exams so take stress out if it … meant to test learning not what you can remember in panic mode

- For many, EMA/TMAs are the preferred route to appropriate assessment – and this appropriateness varies by subject

> Would it be possible to give students greater choice about how they are assessed?

> EMA option instead of exams (regardless of online/F2F)

**THE MAIN CONCERNS**

**MAIN WAYS THE OU SHOULD ADDRESS THESE**

Different exam preparation

→ Mock / dummy online exams

Tutorial preparation (121 preferred)

Technology anxiety

→ Guidance on what to do if something technical goes wrong

Support on hand "live" during an exam in case of technical issues

Maintaining integrity

→ Moderation process information in advance

Understanding of impact of invigilation on technology / connectivity

**All discussion of online exams raises the issue of assessment and what is the most appropriate way of doing this**

## The future of exams: Summary

- The introduction of online exams is seen as broadly a positive step for most. It recognises some of the anxieties and stresses of face-to-face examination: travel, environment, and how it is not always seen as a fair test of their abilities or what they have learned

- There are a few concerns for a minority – these largely centre on technological issues where they worry their domestic environment will not be able to cope with what is required

- Other negatives include how the integrity of exams would be maintained online – not just how it might be moderated or cheated but also how an OU qualification could be perceived by employers

- Students will be looking for the OU to help address the perceived negatives of online exams if they are introduced more widely: Principally, delivering confidence that they will not be penalised for inadequate technology; providing active 'live' support in the event of anything going wrong; maintaining the integrity of the exam itself and providing relevant exam preparation including appropriate mock situations that address these issues

- Conversations over exam methodology lead many students to point to ongoing assessment being an even fairer test of their understanding, skills and knowledge of what they have studied. Care would need to be taken in the wider introduction of online exams – it may broaden the debate to discussions over how a more heavily TMA-based assessment system might be even more equitable