

## Response to Student Consultative Meetings 2020

A series of Student Consultative Meetings were conducted in March and April 2020. Unfortunately, many of the face-to-face meetings were cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, all students due to attend a face-to-face meeting were instead invited to participate in online forums and activities covering the same topics – Tuition and Student Communications. Around 150 students participated in total and The Open University and Open University Students Association are very grateful to all students who got involved. A summary of the feedback for [Tuition](#) and [Student Communications](#) is available on the Student Consultation VLE website.

Your views will be used to inform ongoing work to improve the student experience. Please find below an update on what has happened so far as a result of your feedback, however there is still a lot of work to be done in order to really act on your feedback, and this will take time. We hope to update you again in the future about how your views have made positive changes to the student experience.

### Tuition

Students were asked to comment on and consider questions on the following topics:

- Expectations of OU study, of tutor support and how well-informed students feel before study
- Which aspects of tutor support work well and where it could be improved
- Which tutorial elements are most useful, what is needed from tutorials and why students may or may not attend

The response summary has been reviewed by relevant senior managers across the OU. The feedback is being used to inform next steps in improving the student experience within the area of tuition.

#### Improving tuition at the OU

Working with students and tutors to improve the experience of tuition for students is a key area of activity within the University. We aim to make continuous improvements to how tuition works for students based on your feedback. We are currently identifying which new areas of work should be prioritised and the views you expressed at the Student Consultative Meetings will primarily inform that prioritisation. And of course, students will continue to be involved in work in this area through the OU Students Association and future consultations.

#### Update on recent work

Recent examples of improvements to the tuition experience following student consultation include the development of a new online tutorial recording policy and improvements to referencing advice. In recent years there has been significant consultation with students about recording tutorials, and we have heard about the need for consistency in approaches to recording and flexibility in access. From October 2020 a new policy for the recording of online tutorials will be implemented. This will ensure a recording of each tutorial type is made available to students to maximise flexibility and support for students who are juggling multiple priorities.

We also heard from you about issues with referencing. Improvements in referencing advice to students has recognised the benefit of a standardised source of referencing guidance, for use by all students on all modules, which aims to improve consistency in the advice offered.

#### Tuition summary

As a result of responses from the consultation the following areas will be explored as a priority for future work:

- **Student expectations before study:** We aim to improve information available to help prospective students make informed choices about part-time online study.
- **Student expectations as they start their studies:** We aim to help students improve their understanding of the role of an OU tutor, what support can be provided for their studies and how to access help when their tutor may be unavailable.
- **Tutorial accessibility:** We aim to explore how the OU can make online tutorials more accessible, particularly for our disabled students. For example, to explore the use of captions, transcripts, timings of tutorials and identify ways to provide more information about what may be covered within the tutorial.
- **Tutorial development:** The valuable insight from the many responses received as part of the consultation about which tutorial elements students find most useful will be collated and shared with colleagues across the University to inform day-to-day decisions about teaching and learning.

## More information

**Student expectations before study.** Responses suggest that many students did not know what to expect in relation to tuition and tutor support at The Open University, and that information to help form expectations was not easy to find. We will be looking at how readily available information to students about what The Open University tuition experience may look and feel like is. The breadth and depth of responses received from the consultation provide great insight into helping the University develop resources to support students to make an informed choice about study with more information about how their study experience will be supported if they choose to study at the OU.

**Student expectations as they start their studies:** Many students responded that it would be useful to have better information about the support that could be expected from tutors or Student Support Teams (SSTs). Many OU tutors work with the OU but also have part or full-time jobs at other universities or colleges or elsewhere which brings great benefits to students but may mean tutors may not be instantly available, although all our tutors do try to respond as quickly as possible. We are working across the University, including with student representatives and using your feedback, to understand what information should be made available to students to help them understand the role of an OU tutor and Student Support Team, how they can help them in their studies and help students better understand how to access information, advice and guidance when their tutor may be unavailable.

**Accessibility of tutorials:** Student responses mentioned a need for a greater variety of days and times for online tutorials, to improve flexibility, as well as the provision of more information about tutorials in advance. These responses echo those raised within a student mental health consultation. We will be exploring how tutorials may be made more accessible to students, for example through timings, more or different information, transcripts and recordings.

**Tutorial development:** Many of the responses provide insight into which parts of tutorials and tuition students find most useful or engaging as well as reasons as to why students may or may not attend tutorials. This insight is immensely valuable and is being collated and shared with colleagues from across the University to help inform decisions around teaching and learning such as module development and tutorial planning.

We look forward to updating you further about how work in this area is progressing based on your feedback.

## Student Communications

This consultation asked for feedback on:

- Tone and style of communications
- Timing of communications
- Mode of communications
- Length of communications

Your feedback has been considered by relevant parts of the OU as part of our institutional priority to improve Student Success and is being used to inform work in this area going forward, in particular new guidance for staff who are writing and reviewing email communications, as well as changes to specific communications.

### Tone and Style of Communications

| You said  | OU response   |
|---|---|
| A more informal, friendly and to the point style communication is preferred                                     | This is helpful feedback which we will build into our guidance for staff who are writing and reviewing email communications.  |
| It's easier to recognise a Call to Action (request to do something) in a more informal, friendly communication. | The idea of ensuring that the call for action, in any communication, is easy to recognise is important and we will ensure this point is included in the new guidance.   |
| Shorter communications which include links to additional information is preferred by many.                      | This is helpful feedback as we consider how to communicate complex matters which can result in long emails. The feedback is telling us to keep the message to the essentials and enable those people who want to read the information in more depth to do that through a link to a webpage with more information. |

### Timings of communications

| You said   | OU response  |
|--|--|
| You provided a preference for timings of communications for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Before module start</li><li>– On module</li></ul> | We understand that communications can be more effective and useful at certain times during your time with the OU. A review of existing timings of communications will take place. These existing timings will be compared to the responses |

- After/before next module
- Those to be communicated as and when required.

and recommendations made through the consultation and we will look at changing timings if appropriate.

## Mode of communications

| <b>You said</b>   | <b>OU response</b>   |
|---|--|
| <p>There was a preference for the following message types (for example, tutorial reminders) to be sent via SMS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Primarily alerts and notifications</li> <li>– Short calls to action</li> <li>– Reminders and prompts (such as tutorial reminders, TMA due dates and assignment ready reminders)</li> <li>– Time sensitive (urgent) requests</li> </ul> | <p>SMS messages are limited at the moment to TMA reminders and occasional urgent messages. The preferences expressed will be taken into account and used as we develop our SMS service.</p>  |
| <p>There was a preference for the following message types (for example, exam and assessment details) to be sent via email:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anything important you need to refer to</li> <li>– Allows easy retrieval of information</li> <li>– Feedback and results</li> <li>– Majority of tutor communication</li> </ul>   | <p>As we do more work on developing the routes to use to communicate with students, we will use this feedback to review email communication.</p>   |
| <p>There was a preference for the following message types (for example careers information) to be sent via online bulletin board (for example, StudentHome)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Generic information on wider OU events/organisations</li> </ul>  | <p>It is helpful to know that the StudentHome bulletin board still has a role in our approach to communicating with students and the sorts of things that we should use for it. We will start to use this feedback immediately to help guide the choices made around using the bulletin board.</p> |

## Length of communications

| <b>You said</b>  | <b>OU response</b>  |
|--|---|
| <p>That the length of the communication was dependent on its subject. Some communications should be longer, some could be shorter.</p> | <p>Thank you and we will seek ways to review length and style of communications so we can refine our understanding of what works for you – this might for example include options to provide feedback on the communications you receive on a regular basis.</p> |

## General feedback

| <b>You said</b>  | <b>OU response</b>   |
|--|--|
| <p>The more informal communications are felt to be more likely to be opened and acted upon – they provide greater engagement and understanding of student needs.</p>   | <p>We will build this into our guidance for writing emails and encourage those communicating with students to bear this feedback in mind. We want to ensure that communications encourage students to open and act on them, so it is important that we know this.</p>  |
| <p>Students recognise that between them they have very different needs – and the OU should communicate accordingly – perhaps with an 'opt in' or selection of communication modes and timings they choose.</p> <p>Students are concerned though about not subscribing to emails, as they might miss something essential.</p> | <p>We share this concern – that by providing more opt in/out options we might miss telling you about important matters. We will undertake further analysis and seek feedback from students on how we might enable opt in/out options without creating the risk that something important might be missed.</p> |

Forums are also not uniformly believed to build on appropriate communications principles – they can be difficult to access, engage with, learn from – and should provide the option for anonymity.

We have shared this feedback with the team responsible for the digital tools used in teaching and learning. They can include this feedback in considering new developments and options.

In the meantime this resource might help - <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=12694&section=2.1>

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|--|---|
| To introduce a Service Level Agreement for responses from the OU and tutors  | Our statements of service can be found below and we will consider how awareness of these could be raised:<br><br>Tutor Support Statement: <a href="https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/tutor-support-statement/files/129/tutor-support-statement.pdf">https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/tutor-support-statement/files/129/tutor-support-statement.pdf</a><br>Information, Advice and Guidance statement of service: <a href="https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/information-advice-and-guidance/files/30/iag-statement.pdf">https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/information-advice-and-guidance/files/30/iag-statement.pdf</a> |
| Having a phone-call as a reminder to complete the National Student Survey has been known to prompt response  | This is interesting to receive feedback on, as we consider the best range of mechanisms to contact students. This feedback suggests that it is sensible and appropriate to sometimes follow up emails with a call.  |
| Communications are viewed to be Milton Keynes and Anglo-centric (view from Glasgow face-to-face meeting) – no Scottish contact is available outside of office hours. | This is noted and will be shared with other teams. We are also looking to do further research about tone of voice for different groups of students so we will incorporate looking for feedback on a nation basis.   |
| Change of location for face-to-face tutorials should happen earlier than it does   | It is unfortunately when a problem occurs that a late change is needed and we do all we can to avoid that, but we will take this comment into account about needing notification of changes as soon as is possible.   |
| Introduce 'welcome back' emails after Christmas / Easter / Half term breaks to bring students back to a studying mindset   | This has been noted as an idea to share, in particular when looking at the communications calendar.   |
| Students expressed a desire to hear more about and from the Students Association   | This is good news. You can find out about the Student Association here: <a href="https://www.oustudents.com/">https://www.oustudents.com/</a><br><br>The OU will work with the Association to make sure we are referencing them and to improve how you hear from them.  |
| Student support in the evenings should be maintained (where it exists) – removing this would be a backward step  | Thank you and this is noted. At the time of writing the Student Support Teams have changed opening times because of the COVID pandemic, but we are working on improving the current temporary arrangements.   |

## The Comparison Game

As part of the Student Consultation Meeting we asked you to think about the OU as an animal, what animal it would be and why. Among those chosen the narrow leaders were Chameleon, Owl and Tiger. The main words used to explain these choices included adaptable, different and flexible. This exercise was not designed to influence any particular part of the student experience; however, it is helpful to increase our understanding of your perception of the OU, and the findings have been shared with relevant staff across the OU.

Thank you for participating in this game, and indeed all other parts of the Student Consultation. Your engagement really does make a difference to how changes are made and contributes greatly to improving the student experience.