OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (C E C)
13 - 15 November 2015

OU SA MODULE DELIVERY RESEARCH UPDATE

The C E C is asked to:-

i) note this report.

1. Background

1.1. This report summarises the progress made during the first stage of the Module Delivery Research from August to September 2015. It notes the key themes that have emerged from student responses, and suggests ways of exploring these themes in more detail in future stages of the project.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. The aim of the pilot study, as stated in the proposal presented to the C E C in July 2015, was to "systematically gather and analyse students' perceptions of how module delivery may affect their learning experience, together with the factors that influence students' engagement with different delivery methods".

2.2. The first stage of the research project had three arms. A survey containing closed and open questions was run for OUSA by the Institute of Educational Technology (I E T). Student comments were invited on the OUSA Student Research Forum, and our social media engagement on Facebook and Twitter promoted the research.

2.3. This report presents an update on the first stage of the module delivery research and identifies themes that can be explored further. Preliminary findings from the survey are also presented in order to gauge trends in students’ preferences for different delivery methods. The conclusion offers suggestions for future stages of the research since the emergent themes require further exploration.
3. Preliminary Findings from the Module Delivery Survey

3.1. The survey was open for five weeks from Monday 3 August to Monday 7 September. Eight hundred students were sampled, which was based on demographic variables such as age, gender, occupation, disability, subject area (or Central Academic Unit) and level of study. The survey received 74 responses, a response rate of 9.25%. The Survey Office in I E T have generated a report summarising the preliminary findings from the closed questions, which is attached in the appendices.

3.2. Respondents ranked delivery methods according to their preferences. Predominantly online/onscreen delivery was ranked in first place by 7%, in second place by 30%, and in third place by 63% of the 70 respondents who answered the question. Predominantly print delivery was ranked in first place by 49%, in second place by 21%, and in third place by 30% of the respondents. Interestingly, ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ was ranked in first place by 44%, in second place by 49%, and in third place by 7% of the respondents. When the first and second place rankings are added, ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ outweighs the other options at 93%, compared to 37% for predominantly online/onscreen and 70% for predominantly print.

3.3. Respondents also rated the effectiveness of their learning experience with different delivery methods. Predominantly print was rated highest for ‘extremely effective’ at 41%, ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ at 29%, and predominantly online/onscreen at 5%. A similar trend was seen for ‘very effective’. However, for ‘moderately effective’, ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ was rated at 33%, when compared to 16% for predominantly print and 19% for predominantly online/onscreen.

3.4. 69% of respondents indicated ‘high need’ for ‘print/hardcopy versions of module content’, while 30% indicated high need for ‘online/onscreen versions of module content’. However, this initial gap closes when the ratings are added for ‘high need’ and ‘moderate need’, with 73% for online/onscreen and 87% for print/hardcopy materials.

3.5. Respondents selected their preference for using digital devices for their study; 47% had ‘high preference’ for a desktop computer and 68% had ‘high preference’ for a laptop (in the case of tablets, eReaders and smartphones, ratings of ‘high preference’ were below 20%). ‘Low preference’ was notable for eReaders at 45%, tablets at 36%, and smartphones at 32%, when compared to 22% for desktop computers and 11% for laptops.

3.6. In terms of ‘daily access’ to digital devices, 42% of the respondents had access to a desktop computer, 64% had access to a laptop, 27% had access to a tablet, 12% had access to an eReader and 42% had access to a

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1 The total number of respondents who engaged with the questionnaire was 114 (a potential response rate of 14.25%). However, only 74 of these responses were complete, bringing the response rate down to 9.25%.
smartphone. In terms of ‘no access’, 30% had no access to a desktop computer, 8% had no access to a laptop, 42% had no access to a tablet, 70% had no access to an eReader and 30% had no access to a smartphone.

3.7. The qualitative responses to the open questions in the survey fall into a broad spectrum of needs and preferences. Below are some examples of responses from opposite ends of the spectrum:

“I do not use print at all and usually just end up throwing the paper books and materials that are delivered to me straight into a recycling bin. Therefore I consider printed books to be a waste of money and resources.”

“I find it much easier with print rather than online. It’s expensive to print all the documents at home and I don’t see why I should pay for the course and also have to pay for the printed material - which from the responses of some of my peers on the course wasn’t very good anyway.”

“Easier to locate material on screen than on paper. Easier to view several documents simultaneously on screen. Easier to keep track of all my work on screen.”

“Concentrated reading and efficient document navigation is very difficult with online/onscreen materials.”

These comments indicate considerable differences in study habits and preferences, which makes it difficult to ascertain student preferences for either online/onscreen or print delivery. We have included a ‘blend of online/onscreen’ and ‘print’ to all questions regarding preferences, and a number of responses received consider the benefits of a combination of print and online/onscreen delivery methods.

“But I spend most of my working hours in front of a computer screen, it is a relief to read and write on real paper - both mentally and physically, e.g. for my eyes. These comments relate specifically to humanities, since computer graphics can be invaluable for explaining, for example, how cells separate or how molecular structures function.”

“Predominantly print would limit the possibilities of for example making the resources more compact - downloading text books onto portable devices like iPads. On-line only would limit possibility of having physical resources for example highlighting texts etc.”

Comments such as these can explain why the combination of the first and second place rankings put ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ at 93% in terms of preference for delivery methods.

4. OUSA Student Research Forum

4.1. The OUSA Student Research forum was opened from Wednesday 2 September to Sunday 20 September. The forum was moderated by Peter Cowan, Ruth Parry, Kathryn Alderman and Cath Brown. A total of five questions inviting students’ comments were posted, all of which received over
44 responses, with the first question about preferences for delivery methods receiving 216 responses.

4.2. The responses on the research forum leaned more strongly towards print books in comparison to the survey, but respondents also commented on the benefits of ‘a balance of print and online onscreen’ delivery.

“I like all methods, I like receiving the books as a "hard copy", online for the activities, I learn better with the video. So I guess I am really saying is a blend of online/onscreen and books.”

The participation on the OUSA Student research forum was very active and was notable for the depth and detail of the comments, and the constructive suggestions offered:

“Print: ability to quickly scan through multiple pages, add post-it bookmarks with notes as to why a particular page is bookmarked, not only highlight or comment on text but draw diagrams in the margins, and keep for reference for years in the future.

Onscreen: short videos that demonstrate processes or actions that would be difficult to describe in print, such as volcanic eruptions or how common tasks are performed in the lab. Interactive activities such as testing myself on identifying the direction of slip of various faults, or the virtual microscope from S276; things that genuinely require thought, rather than just following instructions. Note that these things can be provided by DVD just as well as they can online.

Online: interaction with other students and course tutors. Providing questions, photographs or diagrams for practice, which also encourages students to share their different tips and methods of doing things. Encouraging curiosity. Having somewhere to voice frustrations and difficulties and be reassured that other people feel the same way. (Most course forums do not do these things, which I think is why many students take to Facebook). Online interactive tutorials that make use of the medium by allowing students to draw on diagrams to complete them, etc - not lectures that simply go over the course material again!”

These comments not only offer insights into the aspects of accessibility and effectiveness of learning that the first stage of the research project set out to explore, but open up a variety of themes such as designing module content that takes into account study practices such as annotating module material. The preferences for particular delivery methods draw more widely on the personal circumstances of students, such as spending long hours in front of computers at work. The dialogue around online/onscreen delivery needs to take into account these circumstances, while module design (including the delivery methods chosen) needs to consider personal study habits such as highlighting and making notes in the margins. Many students associate annotation with print/hardcopy material, and online delivery needs to lend itself more readily to these study habits. The number of responses and comments in favour of ‘a balance of print and online/onscreen’ indicate an appreciation of different delivery methods (for example, students who are open to the idea of using online delivery for certain aspects of their study). But
this needs to be complemented with offering students choice in terms of delivery methods, so that their learning experience can be as effective as possible.

5. Social Media Engagement

5.1. Our social media engagement was handled by OUSA’s Engagement and Support team and was used as a platform for promoting the research project (for example, by directing members to the OUSA Student Research forum). The responses gathered through Facebook and Twitter highlight concerns similar to the survey and research forum responses; interestingly, a number of responses mention items such as pens and highlighters, emphasizing study habits such as annotating print material.

6. Common Themes Identified from Responses

6.1. The first stage of the research project has identified common themes that map onto the ‘factors that influence students’ learning experience’; an objective set out in the CEC July 2015 proposal. The following are five broad categories under which students’ preferences for one or the other delivery method, and the concerns they have raised, can be slotted.

6.2. This was an important objective for us because the responses give quantitative indications of student preferences, but also strong reasons to support the themes listed below.

7. Study Habits

7.1. The free-text responses suggest that there are specific aspects of revision, annotation and retention that tend to be associated primarily with print/hardcopy materials. It is worth noting that having several eBooks open and highlighting text are equally possible in online delivery; these are new skills for many students and time-constraints can leave them feeling overwhelmed. However, a number of respondents gave a quick evaluation of their I T skills, such as working in software development, in order to debunk the common assumption that lack of I T skills influences a preference for print material.

7.2. In terms of how effectively students feel they can study with different delivery methods, an issue pointed out in many comments was that people were spending a large part of their working day in front of a screen, and that studying online would cause screen fatigue.

7.3. Convenience and portability were defined differently in student responses. While some students found it easier to download material and read them offline, others found books more convenient to carry, annotate and revise from. Views on flow of study also diverged, with some students finding online activities a disruption from reading, while others seeing them as a welcome break.
8. Hidden Costs

8.1. Printing course content at home and paying for the Print on Demand service are the two main examples students give of the hidden costs of their study. Not only do students print out most of their material, they also lose time while arranging them in folders. The latter is also true of the P o D service, as they send out loose sheets.

8.2. Students did not agree with statements such as online delivery being more environmentally friendly, as they were printing out study materials at home. Remarks around the lack of printed materials reflect a general perception of the university trying to find cost-cutting/cost-saving alternatives. While this is a misperception, since developing online materials involves considerable investment of funds and resources, it is worrying for the OU’s image that students are making this association, which shows a developing trust deficit.

9. Technical Issues

9.1. There are aspects of online delivery that require considerable improvements. For example, transcripts of audio/video files are not proofread, and the software programme used for the transcription can introduce many errors. Similarly, online links need to be checked regularly to ensure that they are working.

9.2. The online experience for many students, such as effective use of module and tutor group forums, varies widely between subject areas and modules. In some cases, students have pointed out that they could not access recordings of tutorials and/or handouts, either because they were not offered on the module or because the tutor did not share them.

10. Feedback from students

10.1. Students have noticed a shift to online-only modules, but have not been intimated of these changes centrally. The module teams’ response on online delivery remains vague, whereas students wish to know if changes are being considered based on their feedback. Some faculties (Science, for example) have put up forum posts from the Programme Director, and such transparency is needed across the board.

10.2. That modules could be changed to online-only delivery after a student has registered on a qualification pathway is perceived as unfair, and students would like to be made aware of these changes well in advance for planning their study.

11. Motivations for OU Study

11.1. Students shared many reasons for preferring print/hardcopy material, some of which go beyond the practicalities of access and study habits. Opening new books at the start of a module, keeping books as mementos and
referring to them during subsequent modules were some of the more intangible aspects of a preference for print.

11.2. It is important to note that students are appreciative of the value of certain online activities (such as interactive quizzes) and recognise that online activities could be well-suited to certain subjects. However, not having the choice of print leads to two attitudes. On the one hand, some students are resigned to a potential shift to online-only delivery and continue with their modules, especially if it is essential for their degree and if their study has been sponsored by their employer. On the other hand, some students have indicated their decision to leave the OU.

12. **Conclusion: Suggestions for Future Stages of the Research**

Future stages of the research project, this report suggests, can combine methodologies to explore different aspects of module delivery.

12.1. Exploring the evidence for a move to online delivery

Online delivery in the specific context of distance education is worth exploring in more detail, to gain a better understanding of whether the OU’s move to online-only delivery is based in evidence. Current research around the topic is not unanimous regarding the pedagogical benefits of online-only study. Indeed, students mention common assumptions made in favour of online delivery, such as younger students being particularly enthused about it or digital devices being universally accessible.

Students’ comments help challenge these assumptions and make the case for offering the choice of print/hardcopy materials to those who prefer them. Currently the emphasis is on the need for print material rather than preference, so that ownership or access to digital devices can be used to justify a shift to online-only delivery. However, screen fatigue is a factor that complicates the association of access to digital devices or IT skills with an enthusiasm for online delivery.

12.2. Survey and focus groups

Pooja will be in dialogue with I E T to explore the possibility of another survey targeting a bigger sample of students. This would also offer an opportunity to revisit the survey questionnaire and reword/add/remove questions.

I E T can also help us with samples for focus groups for in-depth interviews. We could also consider the possibility of approaching students on the research forum and inviting them for case studies (for example, students who have studied with the OU for several years and can draw on their experience of studying modules in different subject areas and with different delivery methods).

The raw data from these surveys and focus group samples will help map the overlap of demographic groups with access to digital devices and preference for studying online, thus offering an opportunity to make the distinction
between need and preference, so that the access to digital devices cannot be the sole variables to justify a move to online-only delivery.

12.3. The OU’s brand/mission

The perception of the OU’s mission is as important to its brand as the actual organisational motivation behind the changes introduced to course delivery. For example, if students continue to associate the lack of printed books with cost-cutting, then it damages to the OU’s reputation.

The Module Delivery Research can also draw on ongoing projects within the OU (such as in Learning Design) and explore the evidence base for the online delivery of module content. Questions can be asked about the student feedback on delivery methods gathered to date, and the OU’s response to students’ concerns regarding online-only delivery.

13. Update on research for the student community

Our members need to kept briefed with an overview of where we are with the research project and the broad findings. These updates can be shared via the student magazine and the OUSA website.

Appendix
I E T report on the ‘Findings from the online student survey’.

Pooja Sinha
Research and Information Officer