University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on Enhancing Initial Learner Experience
14–27 October 2014: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the Forum.

Note: There were 180 posts. 30 forum members made at least 1 post and 2 students made 10 or more posts.
**Discussion 1: Settling in**

What do you think are the most important things that help students to feel settled in their first year with the University?

Themes arising were contact with tutors; the opportunity to meet other students; and knowledge of how the OU works and where to turn for help when needed. More should be available before the module opened and the fact that students study at different rates should be more upfront so people didn’t feel stressed that they were ahead or behind.

Other things that help students feel settled:

- Before the module opens promote library training/careers advice/OUSA/how to use the website including StudentHome/study support (e.g. short podcasts). Possibly hold an open day.
- Professional, friendly and accessible tutor contact. Let the student know when the tutor will contact them and that they can contact the tutor.
- Face to face tutorials (although students should not be disadvantaged if they can’t attend)
- Being able to plan future study
- An appreciation of different backgrounds – some people have lots of previous knowledge and experience others have none, including using the technologies. All should feel included and made to feel that study was not a competition.
- Being encouraged to ask ‘stupid’ questions (or indeed advanced ones)
- Avoid jargon and explain clearly acronyms and assessment – make the glossary more accessible.
- A friendly supportive atmosphere and the promotion that for some the OU is ‘a way of life’
- Moderators striking the right balance on forums in particular between people asking for help with TMAs and being able to ask about general concepts.
- Promotion of forums and tutorials as a way to combat isolation e.g. using case studies
- Make [DGAP001 Developing Good Academic Practices](#) compulsory or at least more accessible.
- More joined up support for visually impaired students.
- Make better use of tutor group forums and module forums and promote the OUSA Welcome Forum.
- Provide a website ‘sitemap’
- ‘Dummy’ TMAs with zipping and attachments were good practice and settled nerves before a ‘real’ TMA.

It was noted that learning journals were not always helpful, particularly if they were part of assessment.
Discussion 2: Expectations
Which things were the most useful to you, when you started, in helping you to understand what you could expect from the OU and what the University would expect from you?

Responses:
• Reading everything properly, at the beginning of study, and having a willingness to explore different parts of the website.
• Tutor support, including the dummy TMA.
• Using the study calendar and adding tutorials to it.
• Using the forums to post questions, particularly OUSA forums and for some but not all, Facebook.
• Attending tutorials, either online or f2f.
• Knowing current or previous students gave a sense of what to expect.
• The good essay writing for Social Sciences and Good Study guide.
• Having a current student show how StudentHome and a module website worked.
• Finding out when assignments would be returned.
• Support for disabled students.
• The ‘do I have enough time for study’ web-page.
• The prospectus.
• The U101 induction box.
• Short taster courses to give an experience of how OU study works.
Discussion 3: Induction

The consultation forum on ‘Learning Now for the Future’ highlighted the importance of a well-structured induction for new students. What are the elements that should be included in this induction?

Suggestions:

• Enable new students to be put in touch with existing students in a peer support/mentor-type programme
• A step by step guide to StudentHome (possibly handbook, podcast or demonstration at an open day), the module website and the forums available (including OUSA) and how they work that would not only show students what was where but also teach them the skills to find things and use forums for themselves.
• A introductory face to face dayschool or open day for new students with a physical takeaway booklet.
• New students should have some printed communication if only to highlight key information and where to find more.
• A student handbook or similar explaining how the OU works, including help to navigate the main parts of the website (possibly online but if so well signposted). This would address the issue raised repeatedly that there is lots of information available but it’s not always very easy to find, particularly if you don’t know it’s there. It was also noted that improvements to the OU’s search facility would help.
• Promote the Good Study guide and similar.
• An introduction to the Library and its resources, and to OUSA and how its activities contribute to ‘student life’.
• A support area for students considering dropping out, or to help generally in decision-making.
• Clarity on assessment – OCAS/OES/Weighting/degree classification etc. Provide a degree class calculator.
• Promote the glossary of acronyms and abbreviations.
• Clarity on what to expect from your tutor, how to follow the study calendar and strategies for when you don’t understand something or where to turn if it’s not going well.
• A timetable of online activities accessible after they have taken place.
• Skills training e.g. referencing, essay writing, time management.
• Video or podcasts (with transcripts etc) from the module team and maybe tutors /past students.
• A personal phonecall from your tutor (opinion was divided on this with some not wanting to be rung).
• The option of live web chat with your Student Support Team.
• The OUSA freshers’ event had a good mix of content and had been well-received.
Discussion 4: Induction details
When, and for how long, do you think induction should take place?

- The general view was that whenever it took place the relevant material should continue to be available and students should be able to access information when they needed it.
- Most felt the time between registration and starting the module could be better used, and that while induction events might fall naturally into the week or so before the module started, access to online induction materials should be from as early as possible.
- The OUSA freshers’ event seemed to be a good model although there was some feeling that any ‘induction period’ would need to be more staggered to accommodate students’ outside commitments and induction forums would need to last possibly a month into a module to allow for settling in issues.
- It was suggested that induction activities should be scheduled in as part of students’ timetables although there was concern that these should not be compulsory or assessed.
- The Arts and Humanities SST ‘Getting off to a good start’ email containing links to the induction website and various study and skills resources was useful. It was suggested that a similar welcome email with this information should be sent to new students immediately after registration. A ‘welcome back’ email with the same links could accompany subsequent registrations.
- A printed letter/handbook should be sent as soon as you have registered, and, if there is a big gap, a reminder just before the module starts.
Discussion 5: Induction package

There are many possible aspects to induction such as:
• Introduction to the University generally
• Introduction to your qualification and faculty
• Introduction to your tutor group
• Introduction to the students association

Would it work better, for you, to do all of these together as one 'induction package' or do you prefer to let different areas of the University provide their own introductions?

No strong view emerged in answer to this question specifically but contributions indicated that while each area of the University might provide its own introduction, something pulling all this together in a clearly signposted and accessible way would be welcome, although this might be staggered to avoid information overload.

Points:
• The OUSA Freshers’ Fair was excellent and should be developed in collaboration with the University. Certainly any general induction should link to it.
• Each module and tutor group could offer focused mini-inductions.
• Current students could usefully be involved in all elements of an induction, this could be OUSA but may also include other volunteer students, and include presence at face-to-face tutorials and dayschools.
• It was suggested that a printed letter could introduce an online induction package that would involve various exercises to help a student navigate the OU websites.
Discussion 6: Online confidence
How confident are you that you could navigate your way around on online induction package on your own?

While most students commenting felt confident themselves, they were aware of other students who found their initial experiences of the OU website more difficult, including younger students and those very familiar with other packages. It was therefore felt that any package would need to be well-signposted, have a clear introduction as to how it could be best used and encourage students to ‘click and explore’.

Other suggestions
- It was suggested that students should be asked on registration whether they felt confident online and those that didn’t should be sent a paper guide to the OU website(s).
- A sitemap would be useful.
- Any package should not require students to be completely ‘on their own’ but include forums/OU Live sessions for them to talk to others. These could also serve as ‘practice’ activities before being faced with the real things.
- It may be necessary to offer alternative options for disabled students or the less confident, including perhaps the option of face to face induction.
- Something similar to the new Help Centre might be fine.
- Materials should be printable.
- The package should be designed to be as simple as possible (i.e. no links buried within links that are hard to find again later), and so that parts can be skipped if you feel they aren’t necessary for you.
Discussion 7: Anything else?

Suggestions
• It was useful for students to be able to talk face to face to more experienced students e.g. at dayschools.
• It would be good if self-study groups could be facilitated face to face by asking students if they were interested in either taking part or organising a group and were willing to share their email address.
• Social events to which all new (and possibly continuing) students are invited might be good.
• Course choice events were a good way of meeting and discussing with other students and staff.
• The OU should be better promoted in large workplaces.

Next steps
• Your input will inform the development of trial measures to enhance the initial learner experience on some 15B presentation modules. We will come back to the Forum in early 2015 to report on these developments.