STUDENT CONSULTATIVE MEETINGS
IN THE ENGLISH REGIONS

5 April – 14 June 2014
RESPONSE TO ISSUES RAISED
Dear OU students

First of all, thank you! Since we launched the Student Consultative Process back in February hundreds of you have engaged with the online forums and regional meetings. You have brought a huge range of experience and expertise to help us and you’ve shared your views on a diverse range of issues that face us as a University. Your ideas and feedback have been thought-provoking, challenging and invaluable in helping us to shape the University’s plans and priorities.

Since the conclusion of the 2014 Consultative Meetings in the English Regions and the Online International Students Consultative Meeting in June, we have been working across the University to respond to some of the issues raised. While immediate changes have usually not been possible or indeed thought desirable in every case, in this document we have outlined how we have responded or intend to respond to some of the issues raised. In other cases we have explained why we are not proposing anything different at the moment. We are not covering here issues raised in the University Students Consultative Forum or Student Support Team Consultative Forums. Feedback on these will be published directly to the relevant forum and students notified.

I hope you will find this document addresses some of the challenges raised so far in the Student Consultative Process and I look forward to your future engagement with the process.

All best wishes,

Keith Zimmerman
Director, Students
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1. ASSESSMENT

YOU SAID:

Exam venues can be too far away, and difficult and expensive to access by public transport, particularly for disabled students. There is a lack of awareness of the potential for attending exam venues other than those allocated.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The University has to manage its resources effectively. To increase the number of venues to ensure that no student had a long distance to travel would significantly increase costs that would be passed on to students. We do everything we can to ensure that all our established centres are easy to access by public transport. The cost is recognised, and regrettable. All established venues should be accessible for disabled students. If distance and accessibility is a particular issue, it may be possible for an examination to be arranged in a student’s home or at an alternative venue. Information about attending exam venues other than those allocated is contained in the Assessment Handbook and in the Examination Arrangements Booklet published and made available to students prior to each examination period.

YOU SAID:

You wanted feedback on exams.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The University is keen to provide more feedback on examinations than it does currently; however the issue is one of resource constraints. This issue has also been raised as part of the consultation on qualification-focused assessment held on the University Students Consultative Forum.

YOU SAID:

The process for claiming special circumstances where exams are disrupted is not sufficiently accessible.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The process and mechanisms are described in the Assessment Handbook and in the Examinations Arrangement Booklet.

YOU SAID:

Some TMAs and EMAs rely on skills not covered in the module.

THE OU RESPONDS:

This is a module specific issue and therefore students should raise these concerns with their Student Support Team who can pass on feedback to the relevant module team.
**YOU SAID:** Timings are poorly aligned for the working week e.g. TMAs should be due in for the end of a weekend, and exams held on Saturdays.

**THE OU RESPONDS:** The TMA cut-off-date does not dictate when students have to prepare their assignment. With over 90 per cent of TMAs being submitted electronically we feel it is important that students have access to support that is available during the working week should they encounter problems with their submission. The University has previously considered holding examinations on Saturday but the majority of students were not in favour. It is also important to note that Saturdays are religious days in some major faiths.

**YOU SAID:** There is inconsistent treatment for students with disabilities with regard to exams.

**THE OU RESPONDS:** Each case is considered on its merits in the light of the evidence provided of the individual’s need. That there are different arrangements does not mean the arrangements are inconsistent.

**YOU SAID:** Where there is a big discrepancy between the average TMA mark and the exam mark (say 25 per cent) there should be a right to detailed feedback and/or a second marking, even if a fee were charged.

**THE OU RESPONDS:** This would be costly to the University; even if a fee were to be charged the cost in collecting the fee would in itself be costly. It could also result in inequitable treatment of students – between those who could afford to pay and those who could not.

**YOU SAID:** Where students with disabilities are allowed a break during the exam, effort should be made to keep the room quiet when other students finish ahead of the disabled student.

**THE OU RESPONDS:** We will ensure this is emphasised in the instructions to invigilators.

**YOU SAID:** Students should not have to sit two, three hour exams on the same day.

**THE OU RESPONDS:** The system we use for timetabling examinations keeps the numbers in this position to an absolute minimum but we cannot give an undertaking that there will be no students in that position as it may be a case of unusual module combinations.
THE OU RESPONDS:

Referencing guidelines are often specific to the subject area and as such not controlled by the University. There are therefore good academic reasons why they are not standard across all modules. However, this issue was recently discussed on the University Students Consultative Forum as part of a consultation on qualification-focused assessment and concerns raised particularly in relation to the application of referencing guidelines will be followed up and responded to as part of that consultation.
2. CAREERS ADVISORY SERVICE

YOU SAID:
The OU should talk to OUSA about the skills gained from active membership of OUSA.

THE OU Responds:
The Careers Service are already talking with OUSA about this, which potentially relates to the implementation of a Higher Education Achievement Report for OU students, an OU project within Student Services from 2014–17.

YOU SAID:
The OU should form relationships with third sector organisations to provide opportunities for voluntary work for OU students, or at least advertise voluntary opportunities on the careers website.

THE OU Responds:
This has already been done in Scotland, where the OU helped establish Third Sector Internships Scotland [www.3rdsectorintern.org.uk]. This programme offers high quality, meaningful, paid internships on an open and competitive basis to all students studying at a Scottish university. Registered OU students resident in Scotland are able to apply for paid internships through this programme. TSIS is currently advertising c.50 paid, part-time internships in a range of third sector organisations across Scotland. Further opportunities will be available throughout 2014–15. We regularly advertise voluntary opportunities on JobZone on the OU Careers website including those from third sector organisations that we have specifically built links with e.g. CSV and WCVA (Wales Council for Voluntary Action). We have also run forums specifically on volunteering and work experience. In the current review of the Careers Service, we are exploring how we might increase opportunities for students to gain work experience.

YOU SAID:
The OU’s Careers Advisory Service should be available to prisoners.

THE OU Responds:
The OU Careers Services is already available to prisoners. They can contact the service by letter or ask the contact within the Education Department to send us an email, their tutor can refer and they can request an interview. All communication must be via the Education Department. In the current review of the Careers Service, we are exploring our offer to prisoners and how it might be enhanced.
3. CURRICULUM

THE OU RESPONDS:

In May 2014 work began on the Curriculum Fit for the Future Project which will be looking at many of these issues including module size, start dates and choice in the curriculum. These issues are interdependent and need to be looked at as part of a whole rather than addressed on an issue by issue basis.

The work will be evidence based and early evidence demonstrates the complexity of balancing the wide and sometimes conflicting needs and preferences of a diverse student body.

An OUSA representative is included in the project and a first round of consultation took place on the University Students Consultative Forum in September and October.

The project will need to consider the role of residential schools and practical skills development in curriculum planning. It will then be up to faculties to design their curriculum accordingly.

YOU SAID:

- The trend towards 60 point courses rather than 30 point courses is a barrier to study both in terms of cost and time commitment.
- A choice of start date is welcomed.
- There is insufficient choice of modules for students.
- Modules students have planned to study turn out to be no longer available.
- Students need early warning if a module or qualification is to be discontinued.
- ‘Way-marker’ certificates e.g. diplomas are appreciated.
- The phasing out of residential schools and opportunities for practical science were a concern.
Work on induction and student support during the first year of study is part of the new Initial Learner Experience Project that has recently started.

The decision to apply time limits to the transitional arrangements was taken in February 2012 by the University’s Qualification Committee and was in response to the transitional funding arrangements which will run out for students in England in 2016–17. Students were notified of the decision, giving them approximately five years in which to complete their qualification, our normal teach out period for a qualification is four years.

The decision has been reviewed and discussed in several University governance committees, as a result of which the time limit for the Open Degree was extended from 2017 as originally planned to 2019 to give students additional time to complete their studies.

An induction plan should be worked into course planners.

Transitional arrangements are forcing students to rush and some modules are not available.

YOU SAID:  THE OU RESPONDS:
YOU SAID: Tuition fees are too high.

THE OU RESPONDS: The OU reviews its fees on an annual basis, taking into account a number of factors, like market research and its internal performance, to ensure that it is aligned with the rest of the sector and provides good value for money.

Undergraduate (UG) fees: In 2012–13 the Government introduced changes to the way higher education (HE) in England was funded. Like all universities, the OU had to respond by raising its fees for students starting undergraduate studies after 1 September 2012. The fee of £5,000 per 120 credits (Full Time Equivalent, FTE), which was based on thorough research and analysis, was the lowest fee we could charge to be financially sustainable whilst still being able to give our students a high quality experience. Since then the OU has not increased its fees above the rate of inflation.

English and international students are currently charged the same UG fee, currently £5,264 per FTE.

Postgraduate (PG) fees: Based on the recent market research, OU’s UK PG fees continue to be in line with the sector. In terms of the international PG fees, the latest competitor price benchmarking carried out by the OU in Europe has shown that the OU is competitively priced against US and Australian HE institutions (HEIs) and at a similar level of pricing to other UK HEIs.

The OU will continue to review its fees on an annual basis and ensure that its fees are in line with the sector.

YOU SAID: OUSBA was under-resourced to deal with student queries.

THE OU RESPONDS: OUSBA holds monthly meetings with the Student Registration Service (SRS) to identify any future changes in demand. This information together with the previous year’s historical information is used to review short and long term resource requirements. Service levels are monitored on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. All members of staff are cross trained so that we can provide a flexible approach to our operational needs.

The introduction of the new online credit system and new consumer credit rules at the end of 2012 created a 200 per cent increase in customer activity, OUSBA employed up to seven additional temporary members of staff and a team of advisors from SRS to cope with the demand. Since September 2013 all service levels have been met with no additional resource. We constantly monitor the type and reasons of calls and emails coming in via disposition codes. This allows us to identify trends and issues early enabling us to address these and avoid unnecessary contact. There are periods of time when we are extremely busy due to unplanned absence but these are measured in days rather than for any extended periods of time.
Contact information has been significantly changed on StudentHome over the summer which make it much easier to know who to contact, with webforms and emails routed to the right place.

The operation of the StudentHome is being monitored and further adjustments and improvements to contact information will be made as necessary.

Student Support Teams have been experiencing a very much higher level of demand since May than expected, and many, though not all, have struggled to respond to requests as quickly as we want and expect. A variety of measures were implemented during the summer to address this, including overtime, sharing work across SSTs, especially those within the same faculty, and additional staff from elsewhere in the University.

The high demand experienced by SSTs confirms that they are the right vehicles for meeting students’ needs; so in addition to the measures already in place, and in the light of experience over the summer, we are reviewing the SST resourcing model. We are also planning how to flex resource through the year to deal with the variations in demand experienced at different times and in different subject areas to prevent the same situation arising next year.
THE OU RESPONDS:

Procedures and guidelines about information and advice standards are regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect curriculum, support and regulatory changes, and staff training and development is provided where necessary.

A review of practice across all locations and SSTs is currently underway with a view to documenting and defining standards appropriate to learner support staff. This review includes contacts with students with disabilities.

YOU SAID:

Inconsistent, inadequate or contradictory advice and support had been offered, particularly to students with disabilities.

THE OU RESPONDS:

Confusing acronyms and jargon are often used and the OU glossary of terms should be more prominent.

YOU SAID:

Confusing acronyms and jargon are often used and the OU glossary of terms should be more prominent.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The new Help Centre tab on StudentHome launched in August provides a search facility to help find the Glossary.

YOU SAID:

There were a number of other ways in which Student Support Teams could improve their service.

THE OU RESPONDS:

We welcome all your suggestions and will be reviewing how to take some of these suggestions forward.
Students in hardship who meet our study related costs funding schemes criteria can apply for support towards a computer (capped at £400). The hardship funds received from government are limited and set by the Government’s Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The cost of purchasing specialist equipment for disabled students would normally be covered by the Government funded Disabled Student Allowance scheme. For students who are not eligible for this scheme specialist equipment is often loaned by the University’s Disability Resources Team or in some circumstances wholly funded by the OU’s study related costs schemes or the Open University Students Educational Trust. Funding levels are set by the Governments Department’s for Business, Innovation and Skills.

There is currently pre-registration for postgraduate modules and ‘register your interest’ for undergraduate. There are no plans at this stage to be able to pre-register due to the timing of fees being agreed by the University and system restrictions. Consideration will be given to have this process when new systems are introduced.

Although 18-year-old school leavers are not the Open University’s core target market, we ensure that information is made available to schools centrally and via our regional centres. We also work closely with careers advisers through key education sector events. We do not actively target 18-year-old school leavers; however information is available to this group of people.
THE OU RESPONDS:

We are in the process of moving to ‘03’ numbers which will mean calls will be charged at local rate. We already have the online capability to take credit and debit card payments, OUSBA, gift vouchers and student loan payments. New payment methods will be considered when any new systems are put in place. There are qualifications that cannot be registered online. This is as a result of permission agreements or additional paperwork being required at the point of registration and original copies are required. There are restrictions on students overseas as their credit card limits are lower than in the UK.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The Open University currently supports around 18,000 students with a disclosed disability. Between 2012 and 2015 we have a target to increase new undergraduate students declaring a disability by 3.4 per cent per year. We are consistently exceeding this target. We regularly advertise in specialist press such as ‘Disability Rights UK’, whose audiences will include special schools and outreach workers.
YOU SAID: 
You were concerned about the increased shift from print to online teaching materials.

THE OU RESPONDS: 
A new learning and teaching vision and plan is being discussed by the University. The way in which this plan is implemented – including the use of different technologies – will be worked through very carefully in the coming weeks and months, including further stakeholder consultation. This is a ten-year-plan and so any changes to those existing learning and teaching models which are successful will be made very carefully and aim to make it more likely for students to succeed.

YOU SAID: 
There are problems with studying using online materials. Some of these are detailed below.

THE OU RESPONDS: 
With all these issues we would welcome further and more detailed feedback in order to ensure we have understood the issue and help improve our systems and the student experience. Where there are module-specific issues, we would urge users to report this through their module forum, or to contact the OU Computing Helpdesk.

(Further details on the OU Computing Guide).

YOU SAID: 
It is difficult to study when a variety of learning materials need to be accessed using the same device.

THE OU RESPONDS: 
Unfortunately most mobile devices do not allow several apps to be open at the same time although more expensive devices with 5.5-inch screens or larger coupled with a recent version of iOS or Android have some form of multi-tasking. Most modern mobile web browsers allow tabs so different tabs content can be open at the same time.

In general this is a mobile device limitation which we cannot control and so we would recommend using a large-screen device such as a laptop or desktop when ‘actively’ studying – a mouse and full-sized keyboard is strongly suggested over touchscreen when it comes to contributing to forums, blogs or wikis, and definitely so when assessed work is due. Mobile devices are great, but they are best used for ‘passive’ activities such as reading ebooks or PDFs, website text, listening to audio, or watching video files.

Most module prospectuses will recommend studying the module using a desktop or laptop computer.

In view this feedback from you, we will go back and ensure that our advice and guidance about accessing online materials is easily accessible and made clearer.
YOU SAID:
Online teaching materials are difficult to access while travelling.

THE OU RESPONDS:
Accessing online teaching materials while travelling is a feature that we aim to deliver in every new learning systems development although one of the difficulties we have relates to the wide range of devices (screen types, smartphones, tablets, 3G mobile etc) and the rate at which they are updated.

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is optimised for mobile web and to be viewed on small-screen handheld smartphone devices upwards. With the exception of Java/Flash software (which should be minimal if they exist at all) and possibly one or two quiz (iCMA) question types, everything should be accessible on a small-screen mobile device.

However, where possible, we recommend that content is downloaded prior to travel using a WiFi connection. For online content, students can ‘View as single page’ and download the HTML, or use the ‘Downloads related to this document’ to download PDF or ebook formats, if available.

In regards to digital copies of physical teaching materials (e.g. module books), these are increasingly available through the OU Anywhere app, although obviously they need to be downloaded first and an ebook reader is required to open them.

In September 2014, a ‘Save post check’ feature was added to blog and forums (previously only available in the wiki tool). When a user tries to post a new message, the connection is tested and if there is no connection, users are advised to copy their post and paste it somewhere else until the connection resumes. This stops users from experiencing a ‘failed post’ error and losing their message.

The OU Learning and Teaching Centre has worked closely with other units to look into the issues raised with a view to giving a comprehensive and transparent response. The issues will continue to be monitored by the Learning Systems Director to ensure that the general issues related to study while travelling, and which are likely to continue while technologies continue to change rapidly, are not forgotten.

The Tripartite Group, which includes representatives of the Students Association and Associate Lecturers, will continue to be an important reference group for the Learning Systems Director and the University Students Consultative Forum will be consulted about any major developments.

We will go back and ensure that our advice and guidance about accessing online materials is easily accessible and made clearer.

In the next few months, we are expecting a new release of the software used to host our Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) which should enable a better user experience, enabling optimised themes for different screen sizes. Once that software upgrade is available, we plan to upgrade our sites accordingly.

Meanwhile, we have made some changes that mean that online learning systems and their development will be better informed by feedback from students and other analytical data. Further information can be provided about that in due course as the restructuring comes into effect. We will be looking at how best to keep students up to date about progress.

Some changes require developments to the underlying software (Moodle) which is not owned by the OU. We are waiting on Moodle Core decisions and their subsequent implementation into our VLE.
7. Teaching Materials

YOU SAID:
It is difficult to study when there is poor broadband or lack of access to the family computer(s).

THE OU RESPONDS:
Nearly all OU modules prospectuses state a requirement for access to a computer with internet access (broadband or WiFi), although an iPad or other tablet with 3G or faster mobile internet may be feasible for some modules.

Some modules are piloting Print on Demand, whereby students can request printed copies of the online materials to be posted to them. This is currently receiving a lot of development time and will see a lot of improvements over the next few VLE releases (December, March and June).

We provide advice about access to a computer.

Students may be eligible for a discounted desktop or laptop.

THE OU RESPONDS:
We are not aware of any universal issues regarding access to websites and unfortunately we cannot comment on individual technical difficulties without further information, such as what areas of which website. One way to resolve this is to either use the module website feedback form, or to contact the OU Computing Helpdesk (further details on the OU Computing Guide). We are deeply committed to improving the quality of the online student experience, but require more information in order to identify and solve the problem. We take all feedback about specific problems seriously.

THE OU RESPONDS:
There are technical difficulties with accessing areas of the OU website.

THE OU RESPONDS:
We are currently working on a new version of the OU Anywhere app that seeks to address some issues already reported. However, where it is the case of the other software on a device, or the device itself causing the crash, there is unfortunately nothing we can do other than request further information, such as the module and material in question, in order to fix the issue if we can.

YOU SAID:
There are problems with OU Anywhere.

YOU SAID:
There are technical difficulties with accessing areas of the OU website.
YOU SAID:
Audio–visual materials are not being indexed properly or in the wrong order.

THE OU Responds:
This is a process issue and will be investigated. If further details could be provided, we could investigate the module materials in question.

All Audio–visual materials should be provided with captions and/or transcripts to comply with the high standards of accessibility the OU proudly provides (e.g. as per the OU standard module website policy). If further details could be provided, we could investigate the module materials in question.

If we can pin-point the affected media, we will fix the metadata accordingly. We will ensure that all staff are briefed and aware of the procedure.

YOU SAID:
There are software problems with online learning, e.g. Java, Elluminate, Blackboard.

THE OU Responds:
We recognise these problems and are taking the following action:

We are shortly to provide a new ‘OU Live Launcher’. This is a Java wrap-around that will prevent the majority of Java-related issues when using Elluminate or OU Live (powered by Blackboard). Essentially the software will use the wrap-around version of Java, ignoring the host systems version of Java (if present), ensuring compatibility. We are waiting on the launcher to be packaged to staff computers on campus before it is released to students, although it is important that the switch does not disrupt current modules, so time windows are currently being considered. This is a significant improvement to OU Live, and changes to documentation and guidance have already been prepared.

YOU SAID:
OU links are not easy to access when viewing via a Smart TV.

THE OU Responds:
We would need to know more about the OU links in question (e.g. whether StudentHome, general OU websites, the Library, the Virtual Learning Environment). While Smart TVs can be used to access OU content, we would strongly suggest using a normal desktop/laptop computer for OU study which is clearly stated at registration.

The Learning Systems Director will consider the extent to which it is feasible to include Smart TV technology in the set of alternative formats which we try to support. This may not be possible in the short term as Smart TV technologies are evolving very rapidly.
You said: There are online activities, where you can print out ‘live’ parts of the exercise when using Windows 8.1, but not when using Vista.

The OU responds: This could be a bespoke HTML5 activity, unsupported in Internet Explorer (IE) 9/10 (Windows Vista), but supported in IE11 (Windows 8.1). Unfortunately we would require further information before being able to respond to this issue in more detail. If it works on Vista with Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome, it is an IE 9/10 browser issue.

You said: Online learning systems should be tested by real students.

The OU responds: A variety of projects invite OU students (who are not also staff) to test various software and/or software developments every year.

The Learning Systems Team works closely with our Institute of Educational Technology (IET) who together conduct regular accessibility, expert and user testing on our learning systems during and after development. This testing ensures quality throughout the OU. Their findings feed into future module, qualification and learning systems design.

Within the Learning Systems Team, there have been several projects that have included the student voice by survey, telephone interview, or visits to research labs.

This autumn we will be launching the Online Student Experience Programme, which aims to embed an evidence base of quantitative and qualitative sources within our processes and production in order to direct all future developments and decisions and ensure the student is at the heart of our requirements.

You said: Suggested ‘further reading’ in modules should be available through the OU library.

The OU responds: There are budgetary reasons (related to publication access fees) why it is not always possible to provide access to all further reading suggested by module teams. We focus our attention and resources on making sure that essential texts are provided.

Not all content is available electronically and this therefore limits provision through online channels however we are striving to make as much content as possible available online.

We are talking to faculties about the proposal to broaden collections to include further reading and about how we might include students in decisions about what e-resources to purchase.

We will continue discussions with faculties and will seek ways to gather student views on this.
Being digital (a menu of skills development activities) is openly available so students can assess and improve their digital and information literacy skills prior to their module starting:

We are also developing student skills through use of the Digital and Information Literacy framework which is being embedded into new modules and by offering OU Live sessions on essential skills which are available as both live and recorded sessions.

We are working with OUSA to offer pre-course live introductory sessions as part of their Freshers’ Fair. We are reviewing the number and timing of the OU Live sessions.

We would be pleased to have more feedback from students about the skills training we offer and how we can better meet their needs.

Once students are fully registered they have access to the full range of online library resources via the library website. This includes journals, ebooks and various skills development opportunities.

Under the terms of publishers’ licences we are not legally allowed to offer earlier access except physically in the building. This is the position for all UK universities.

Access to other Higher Education Institution libraries is at the discretion of the individual library which makes available services according to its own local policy.

Access to module materials is provided via the faculties. From Jan 2015, access to module sites will be opened up 3.5 weeks prior to module start.

We continually work with publishers and intermediaries to further open up their collections (this is known as Open Access). It is likely that there will progress over time (maybe a decade) towards this end.
YOU SAID:

You wanted to see more face to face tutorials, or at least the current level maintained.
You wanted more online tutorials (either recorded or ‘live’) or the provision of tutorial notes/transcripts.
There should be greater clarity in advance about whether or not face to face tutorials were offered as part of a module.

THE OU RESPONDS:

Each module currently has to spell out the mode of tuition, in particular whether face to face tuition is part of the blend on a module or not, and the number of ‘contact hours’. We recognise that information is not currently as clear to students as it should be; nor are we as clear as we might be about the purposes of group tuition. It is hoped that the new Group Tuition Policy and the implementation work which would follow its acceptance will help to change this particular issue. However the University will never be able to deliver face to face group tuition where students are too geographically distributed to enable a face to face meeting to be attended by enough of them to make it a proper event. Such students are already offered online alternatives in most cases.

There is anecdotal evidence of decreasing attendance at face to face events which may be leading to them being moved to more central locations with the hope of increasing attendance or moving several tutorials into one day school. Both of these may lead to an impression of less face to face tuition.

The new Group Tuition Policy will offer greater clarity about group tutorials and how they are delivered, as well as greater consistency in students’ ability to engage with the purposes of group tuition. It will not deliver face to face tuition on all modules but it may enable a more flexible approach to delivering at least some face to face tutorials in more isolated locations than at present. Ultimately it depends on students engaging with group tuition – something we are very keen to encourage as a core part of the OU’s package of support to students.

Greater clarity in advance about whether or not face to face tutorials are offered as part of a module should come as part of the new policy BUT will always be dependent on sufficient students within a geographical area as well. The new policy will ensure that there is always an online alternative for those who cannot attend face to face events, for whatever reason (often not to do with geography but to do with work patterns, religious observance, ability to travel etc).

The Group Tuition Policy will be implemented over a period of at least a year, probably two years, so major change will not be visible within the next 12 months. However it is hoped that the increased emphasis on group tuition will lead to some increased thought about how it is delivered and how the University encourages students to engage with it even during the implementation phase.
The University should facilitate self-study groups between students.

This already happens in many cases, including students using OU Live for self-study meetings. We hope that changes to the technology will make this easier in future. The Open University Students Association social forums and module forums within the Virtual Learning Environment can also help facilitate self-study groups.

Regional offices should put on more seminars/conferences/open days/social events for students.

We expect more day schools and qualification-based events may develop as group tuition policy develops.

There should be open drop-in sessions for some modules.

This may become possible online but they are too resource-intensive for face to face.

You wanted study skills workshops including for example, ICT, assignment writing and exam skills.

These have not proved effective in reaching those who would really benefit from them.

Students should be able to opt out of face to face tutorials for a lower course fee.

The University believes that group tuition can be of benefit to all students; there are no current plans for opt-outs.

You wanted Skype tutorials.

The University’s preferred synchronous technology is OU Live which offers some educational facilities not included in Skype.
YOU SAID:

- Tutorial venues can be too far away.
- Tutorial venues can be difficult to access by public transport.
- It can be prohibitively expensive to travel to tutorials, including cost of parking.
- The distance to and accessibility of tutorial venues is a particular issue for disabled students.
- Tutorials are not always scheduled at a convenient time.
- Students are not given enough notice of tutorials.
- Tutorials can be scheduled at the wrong time in relation to assignments.
- There is a lack of awareness of the potential for attending tutorials other than those for a student’s own tutor group.
- Tutorials offered are inconsistent both within and between modules.

THE OU RESPONDS:

The University recognises that there are many issues that are associated with the delivery of face to face tutorials that are of concern to students and that the quality of the experience students have can be very variable. We are also aware of the variability of student engagement with the face to face tuition opportunities on offer as measured by attendance at tutorials. Tutorial venues are normally chosen to match the distribution of students on a particular module. There are minimum standards in place for tutorial venues and these are audited regularly. We appreciate that this may involve more or less travel distances for students for low and high population modules respectively.

It is very difficult to respond generically to the issues raised that may refer to the tutorial timetable for a specific module in a specific location, or issues linked to the use of a particular tutorial venue in a region or nation. However, the new Group Tuition Policy will offer greater clarity about group tutorials and how they are delivered, as well as greater consistency in students’ ability to engage with the purposes of group tuition. Ultimately it depends on students engaging with group tuition – something we are very keen to encourage as a core part of the OU’s package of support to students.

The implementation plans seek to address many of the issues above or at least will create mechanisms by which the detailed concerns that students raise can be systematically recorded and addressed. The policy aims to give much more notice of tutorials so that they can be put in diaries, to be clearer about their purpose in relation to assessment, and to improve consistency within a module and within a qualification.

The policy indicates that where modules have identified the need for face to face tuition there should be a choice of venues and times that those tuition events are offered. This will be achieved by clustering tutor groups in an area and providing all students in that cluster a choice of tutorials that will be clearly visible to them on StudentHome and bookable well in advance. Online tuition events will also be offered as an alternative.

The new policy will not enforce aspects of tutorial venue management but it will allow us to interrogate data about different venues to enhance our understanding of what students do and do not expect in terms of facilities and distance from home for different types of event. There are likely to be stronger guidelines developed as a result of this work.

We will be able to record attendance at tutorials and use that information to fine-tune the dates and locations that are most popular for students. We will build in feedback mechanisms into our systems so that issues raised by students such as car parking, public transport or accessibility can be addressed. Finally tutor development teams will be asked to develop a more detailed strategy for the delivery of tutorial events for a particular module that will address issues such as the timing of tutorials in relation to assignments.
THE OU RESPONDS:
The new Group Tuition Policy will encourage the delivery of day schools instead of tutorials particularly where travel distances are greater. It will also ensure that there is always an online alternative.

YOU SAID:
Tutorials can be too short to make the travelling worthwhile.

THE OU RESPONDS:
8. Tuition

YOU SAID:
Tutorials should be recorded for those unable to attend.

THE OU RESPONDS:
The new policy explicitly excludes recording of tutorials for the moment. It does not disallow it as an activity – there are current protocols which govern recording and of course it is essential in some circumstances, particularly for a student with a disability for whom recording is part of the agreed reasonable adjustment. However there is growing evidence that recording

a) does not deliver the same purposes as attending an interactive event (engagement in the processes to build knowledge and skills), although it can be useful in delivering other purposes (e.g. revision, hearing a different set of perspectives on the material) and

b) there appear to be side-effects to recording which the University needs to consider, including

• less effort to attend the actual event
• less contribution to the event because of being recorded, less contribution to the event because what is ephemeral (and can be experimental and exploratory) in a live event becomes fixed and repeated in a recording
• the sense that the recording can give of there being ‘more stuff’ to engage with on the module so increasing the sense of overload on the module.

For this reason it has been decided that the University needs to undertake more research and scholarship before creating a policy on recording tutorials.

YOU SAID:
Minimum standards for tutors should be enforced in terms of response times, engagement with students, preparation for tutorials and consistency of marking and feedback.

Minimum expectations of tutors’ response and marking time should be clearer.

THE OU RESPONDS:
Many issues of this nature are picked up using the Student Feedback questionnaire (SEaM) which all students now receive each year and can use to express any concerns they have. They are fed back anonymously to each tutor via their line manager and may be considered as part of the tutor’s regular appraisal. More serious concerns should be expressed using the complaints systems.

Students may find it helpful to check the Tutor Support Statement where minimum standards are set out:
YOU SAID: Tutors should be more effectively trained in the use of technology for synchronous tutorials.

THE OU RESPONDS: Additional training and development is now on the way. It is always going to be a challenge to move from a technology we all grew up with (classrooms, black/white boards, face to face interactions) to a brand new technology where access to good models of practice are not automatic. We are aware that we need to do more to support this transition.

YOU SAID: Feedback on assignments could be improved by showing where marks were gained.

THE OU RESPONDS: This should already happen – it is good practice.

YOU SAID: Assignment results should all be issued on the same day for the same module.

THE OU RESPONDS: There are pros and cons to this – in particular the down-sides include that it would leave students without timely feedback, which would have to be delayed until well after the cut-off date to allow for late submissions and extensions which can run to three weeks after cut-off date (plus ten working days to mark). Another option would be to stop allowing any extensions beyond the date when results were released. Even then, at present many students receive their feedback within a week of submission and this would be lost.

YOU SAID: After TMAs have been marked, make exemplary assignments from other students available to support learning.

THE OU RESPONDS: This is a good idea which we have currently failed to find a way to deliver with any ease. It is important to ensure that there are several ‘good’ assignments to look at – there is rarely just ‘one right way’ to answer a question.

YOU SAID: There should be more telephone contact between tutors and students.

THE OU RESPONDS: Students are encouraged to call their tutor for support and advice.
Tutors are very different in their styles and there is no one right way to be a tutor. Getting used to a different style can be beneficial but may take time. It will never be easy to change tutors. However we do enable it when it is clear that the relationship has not been properly established or has broken down. In future it will be much easier to attend a range of different tutors’ group tutorials without changing tutor and this may help people to feel that they do not need to worry so much about getting moved.

There are similar concerns about tutor notes as there are about recording tutorials – notes do not serve the same purpose, they can give a false sense of security about not attending a tutorial and they can be seen as ‘more stuff’ to engage with on a module, adding to a sense of overload. However they are an issue which the University will return to when we have better research on such topics.
**YOU SAID:**
End of module surveys do not invite all students to contribute, come too late to affect the experience of that cohort and are too restrictive in the questions asked.

**THE OU RESPONDS:**

The student experience on a module survey (SEAM) is sent to all students on all modules. This has been in place since 2012J presentations.

The survey is sent out prior to the end of the module (two/three weeks depending on the length of the module). The aim is to ensure that we are inviting experience on the whole module. Students are given the opportunity to submit open feedback in addition to answering the closed questions. The results do feed into enhancement for students on future presentations or new modules so students will benefit from the feedback provided by students on previous presentations. Every module team examines the aggregated survey ratings and the written feedback you provide on our module experience and responds to the student feedback received from this survey as part of our review processes for modules and qualifications. Tutors review the aggregated survey ratings and written comments for their tutor group from the ‘Feedback on your tutor’ section of the survey.

Taking action in response to some student feedback will necessarily take time, or the feedback will be on a component of a module that the existing cohort of students has completed. In these cases, we use one cohort’s feedback to enhance the experience of future cohorts with the aim that all students gain as a result of the process. However, students are right in flagging that some feedback could usefully be acted on while students are still studying the module. With that in mind, the University is piloting different ways of collecting and acting on feedback from students during the presentation of a selection of modules starting in February and October 2015.

**YOU SAID:**
Students should be able to review modules after each delivery with a few students from each module working with module leaders.

**THE OU RESPONDS:**

We are not able to report immediate action on this suggestion however the University and OUSA are working together to find more ways to ensure student engagement in qualification and module design, evaluation and improvement. We will ensure this suggestion is included in our discussions.
Mathematics courses should not be examined through multiple choice papers. Students' working should also be assessed.

YOU SAID:

THE OU RESPONDS:

Modules delivered by the Mathematics and Statistics programme are assessed by a variety of methods, including the use of multiple choice questions on some modules. The methods used are designed to assess Learning Outcomes of the module, and to contribute to the assessment of Learning Outcomes of the qualification in which a module is studied. As the level of module increases, the use of multiple choice questions in examinations becomes less likely.

The Mathematics and Statistics Programme Committee (which includes student and Associate Lecturer representation) undertakes regular reviews of its assessment strategies, and as part of this process, the assessment strategies are scrutinised by External Examiners. There are no current plans to remove multiple choice questions entirely from our assessment strategies. However, we do intend for the M249 examination (which used multiple choice questions in 2014) to return to its traditional form in 2015, whilst we comprehensively review its use of multiple choice questions.

The Mathematics and Statistics Programme Committee will continue to review assessment strategies, and will act upon External Examiner reports which are received after every presentation of every module.

The Mathematics and Statistics Programme Committee will continue to use multiple choice questions where appropriate in the immediate future. There are some advantages to this style of question – for example, allowing shorter questions to be answered quickly, so that more time is available to work on longer questions, which may require detailed working. Every module in the Mathematics and Statistics programme has a component of assessment involving full, worked answers: this is evident in our Tutor Marked Assignments, but many examination questions also award marks for working and/or good mathematical communication.
**YOU SAID:**

It is difficult for social work students to find placements if they are not currently in employment.

**THE OU RESPONDS:**

Practice experience is a regulatory requirement for students wishing to study social work. All students who are registered for the social work qualification have a sponsor who has signed a collaboration agreement – committing the sponsor to provide placements for the student. As a result, all students registered for the social work degree will have placements assured.

This issue is confined to those level one students who have, as yet, been unable to secure a sponsor – they can only complete the first level social work module without a sponsor, they cannot continue their social work studies until such time as they have a sponsor. There is a practice based element to first year study – students are required to complete ten days in practice. The Programme is aware that this can be difficult for those students who do not already have access to social care experience before enrolling on the module. We have therefore:

- Emphasised the need to set this up and the length of time this may take in all literature advertising the module.
- We have made it a message for the Student Support Team (SST) to send out in its contact with students.
- In the 2014 presentation we have reduced the number of days required from 20 to 10.
- We have emphasised in our literature that this is at ‘volunteer’ level and could take place in a wide range of settings where children or adults are in receipt of some form of support.

In addition this message is reinforced by SST contacts, module guidance and introductory workshops.

We need to review the impact of the above measures before considering further action/changes.

The only alternative to address this difficulty would be to split the academic and practice element for these students. This would make it possible to pass the module without the practice experience and assessment of readiness for practice. Those who wish to proceed onto the social work programme would then need to be offered the opportunity to complete this element separately. The Department has been advised that this is not practical within University regulations and budgets.

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**DOCUMENT LINKS**

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