Response to student consultative meetings: autumn 2017

Introduction
In autumn 2017 around 100 students attended face-to-face consultative meetings in Belfast, Croydon, Leeds and Milton Keynes, and 87 students discussed the same topics through an online forum. The two major topics were ‘Flexibility for Students’ and ‘Digital by Design’, both elements of the Students First Transformation. There was an additional exercise on student needs within the student journey at the face-to-face meetings. A summary of the feedback is available on the student consultation website.

The extensive feedback was passed on to the relevant areas of the University for consideration. Responses to the key messages are included here. Please note that this is an interim response, and as such, with plans still being made, we are not able to comprehensively answer every point. New models are still being developed and student feedback will continue to influence decision-making.

‘Digital by Design’
Headline messages
You raised a number of concerns, particularly related to online study, which are summarised below and in the Appendix. These concerns are being considered as we develop the new Teaching Framework during 2018, and as such this is only an interim response to the feedback from the meetings. The detail and potential impact of any changes proposed will be worked through carefully and proposed changes will be informed by the feedback. We will seek input from students again when we have more concrete proposals available. We hear what you are saying about the value you place on printed materials and this will be an important consideration in developing the new Framework. We have provided more information below about moving to more digital ways of learning in the future and clarified that this does not mean an end to printed materials.

You were also anxious about the University undertaking this work with appropriate due care and rigour. We appreciate your concerns, and for any changes that are proposed, we will explore options fully, evaluate research and evidence, carry out cost-benefit analysis, consider the implications of decisions, pilot and phase implementation, and keep you informed and involved.

Response to top three issues identified by students
1. Unsuitability of 100 per cent digital content for effective learning

You were very concerned about online/onscreen-only teaching and wanted to ensure that learning and teaching is blended (with a place for printed materials and face-to-face learning) and ‘inclusive by design’.

OU response:

We are not stopping the production of printed materials but we're looking at where it would be most appropriate to have printed materials to complement and enhance digital learning materials. We are also looking at the various ways in which students interact with the staff who support them, and with each other – and this includes tutorials. We want to ensure students
continue to have opportunities to interact, and that those interactions enhance their learning, but attendance at tutorials is patchy, so we want to find ways of doing them better, that will benefit more students.

We are in the process of designing a Teaching Framework which will explain in more detail what learning around a 'digital core' means, and will provide examples of how future study will be supported using a variety of media. Your feedback will be used to develop that Teaching Framework. Any changes to learning materials in the future will be pedagogically-driven to ensure the best, and most effective, learning experience for students. We will use the feedback you have given us and consult further with students where appropriate on the various aspects of this when we start working on designing and planning the changes involved.

2. Connectivity

Students wanted learning materials that are fully downloadable in a format that is easy to study ‘offline’. Students suggested that they could be provided with USB sticks or DVDs containing the material. This could overcome the issue of storage on student devices. Additionally, in the longer term, the University could lobby government(s) for improved broadband.

OU response:

There are many different ways in which the University will be able to support students with digital learning and teaching, and we will explore these in more detail when we start work on designing and planning. Thank you for the suggestions as to how this could be addressed – these will be considered as we develop more detailed plans in this area.

2. Accessibility and affordability

You wanted assurances that barriers to digital access would be addressed. There should be an awareness and consideration given to the amount of material some students currently needed to print. There should be no hidden costs such as links to websites that require a subscription payment. The digital requirements of disabled students need to be understood, with students involved in the testing of software. You suggested solutions such as the University seeking to influence government policy so that the funding gap between the disabled students allowance (DSA) and what students need for digital learning is bridged; or the University exploring the possibility of a contract with an IT supplier to enable student discounts or loans.

OU response:

The Open University mission is that we are open to people, places, methods and ideas, and we do not wish to make changes that make it more difficult for any particular groups of students to study with us. We will involve students in further discussions about changes that might be made, and will ensure that information about the impact of any changes is made available.

Other issues are set out below:
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<th>You said</th>
<th>OU response</th>
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| You were concerned about usability of digital content, for example:  
  - spending too much time looking at a screen / screen fatigue / health and safety concerns around expected increased screen use  
  - retaining information when reading online  
  - note taking, annotating and highlighting  
  - lack of physical reminder to study  
  - searching for content online  
  - the ease flicking through content to gauge your progress  
  - using two screens / books plus screen at once | The recent *Optimising Devices for disabled students for onscreen study* project identified that some students will always need to study from print, for example, students with screen-induced migraine, screen fatigue (screen fatigue can be caused by a range of conditions or issues such as visual stress, memory, concentration, epilepsy and radiation sensitivity). The project also found that many students, particularly those with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties, require mixed methods of study, such as needing to listen to an audio version of a text while making notes on a printed version. We understand that many other students also have a preference for studying from printed materials and this will be taken into account in the development of a new Teaching Framework.  
Provision of printed materials is currently inconsistent, and processes for provision are insufficiently robust. Creating materials digitally means that we can offer them to students in a more consistently wide variety of formats. Moving to a ‘digital by design’ model is an opportunity to improve our practice and ensure that we are providing an effective, consistent and timely service to all our students. It does not mean that books will no longer be provided, but does aim to provide more consistently high quality digital study experience. |
| You were concerned about technology issues, for example:  
  - broadband connectivity  
  - technology/device compatibility issues with VLE  
  - IT security and reliability  
  - the OU keeping content up to date and websites maintained  
  - support for a range of operating systems (such as Linux and Mac) and compatibility issues across platforms  
  - a resilient and robust IT infrastructure, and strong quality assurance to give students confidence in digital study  
  - hardware and software obsolescence | The Transformation that the University is undergoing will see a complete overhaul of our IT infrastructure which aims to significantly improve its reliability and robustness. Our IT infrastructure will also be simplified so we will have fewer bespoke add-ons which increase instability and are hard to maintain over time.  
We carry out a robust technical testing activity using a variety of desktop, laptop and tablet devices, and a range of browsers and accessibility software. This will continue to be an integral part of the development process, to ensure the accessibility of our materials to all students. |
A minority of you were concerned about skills for online study, for example:
- digital skills gap for some students
- preparedness for digital study – ‘learning how to learn’
- digital skills induction
- setting clear expectations of what digital study will be like

We recognise that there may be a skills gap for some students and are committed to supporting our students in developing those skills they need for study and also for a digital economy and workplace. We are looking at digital skills development to make sure students and staff are fully supported and have the skills they need to learn and work in a more digital university.

You were concerned about cost and value for money, for example:
- quality and affordability
- costs being passed onto students for printing, fast broadband, and maintaining hardware and software.
- digital can be perceived to be disposable and not tangible enough to be considered as value for money as other assets such as printed textbooks.
- not all students are able to afford the latest mobile device or have the level of access to a PC needed for online/onscreen only study.
- lack of differentiation between the OU and other online, and in some cases free, courses
- fee differentiation between printed and online materials – and the risk of creating a two-tier approach

We are confident that the academic foundations of the OU learning experience are of exceptional quality, and it is important that this continues. There is no intention to increase the cost to students – we will be looking at possible impacts of any changes to the way we teach. This might include, for example, providing devices to students or making digital materials available to learners for a number of years after a module ends. It is possible that in the OU of the future there may be several different ways to study and we want to explore these fully.

Quality standards will be articulated in relation to the digital learning experience as we start to design how teaching and learning will work in the future, and the University has robust quality assurance which will continue to apply.

We will look at the ideas you have proposed carefully and involve students in further discussions in due course.

You were concerned about what the digital learning experience would be like, for example:
- you felt a combination of print, online and face-to-face would provide the variety essential for a better study experience.
- a ‘print on demand’ option should be available for students who perceive that they need it.
- module websites need to be designed so that there are downloadable printable materials that meet student needs with a proper index and referencing to online activities.
- alternative formats should be made available to all students
- materials need to be properly indexed

We are in the process of designing a Teaching Framework which will explain better what ‘digital by design means’, and provide examples of how future study will be supported using a variety of media.

Any changes to learning materials in the future will be pedagogically-driven to ensure the best, and most effective learning experience for students.

The Teaching Framework will also include outlines of how you would be supported in your studies, how we intend to promote academic communities where you can interact with other students and the staff who support you, and more detailed proposals around tutorials.

We will ensure that changes we make are supported by evidence and informed by your feedback. We will consult further with students on the various aspects of this when we start working on designing and planning the changes involved.
• A University policy on the recording of tutorials is needed
• research and evidence is needed about how and when people learn best, using different media, and taking fully into account health and safety issues related to onscreen study
• efforts should be made to develop an ‘academic community’ as well as a ‘student community’, involving the students, the module team and Associate Lecturers.

• Co-published books have a strong academic purpose and are an important reputational showcase for research and scholarship at the OU.

There are no plans to stop co-publishing books where there is demand.

What happens next

Your feedback is being combined with other input from across the University to inform and refine the Teaching Framework, which sets out the high level implementation aims in this area and will be considered by the University in spring 2018. If it is approved to go forward, we will start planning implementation in more detail and will involve students in that next stage.

‘Flexibility for students’

Headline messages

You asked for more detail and clarity on a number of aspects of this topic. More detail about how increased flexibility of study might work will emerge as we develop the Teaching Framework during 2018. As such, this is an interim report and we will continue to use your feedback to develop our proposals. We are still in the process of reviewing evidence and considering possible business models so that we can give firmer information about how this might work. We know that students want more flexibility to fit their study around their lives and we want to remove some of the limitations arising from our current presentation patterns. We appreciate that you also had a lot of questions and some concerns about the potential impact of increasing the number of start dates. The detail and potential impact of changes will be worked through carefully and your feedback will be used to inform these changes. We will seek input from students again when we have more concrete proposals available.

You were concerned to ensure that the University was undertaking this work with appropriate due care and rigour. For any changes that are proposed, we will explore options fully, carry out cost-benefit analysis, consider the implications of decisions, pilot and phase implementation, and keep you informed and involved.

Full response

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<th>You said</th>
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<td>You were concerned that offering more presentations per year might add</td>
<td>We will carefully consider the impact of changes to ensure that the student experience is not adversely impacted, bearing in mind your feedback. Our aim is to improve the student learning</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>complexity and reduce the learning experience for some students</td>
<td>experience so that retention, progression and satisfaction levels are improved, so we don’t want to make any changes that would not help us meet these aims. As we develop implementation plans, we will consider the potential impact of changes and make decisions accordingly.</td>
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<td>You had lots of questions about how more presentations would work, set out in Appendix 1. You were particularly concerned about the potential impact of a smaller cohort on community building and tuition delivery; and what the arrangements might be for moving between presentations.</td>
<td>There is a lot of detail around this topic that is still to be determined. This is because the University needs to be sure first that our general direction of travel is the right one, and will enable us to improve student retention, progression and satisfaction. We will be setting out these aims in a Teaching Framework which, when it is approved to go forward, will shape a number of individual projects for detailed implementation. All of these points – and more – will be considered during implementation planning and we will seek more input from students on particular topics in due course.</td>
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<td>You wanted to be consulted further on these topics and wanted up-to-date information to be provided as we progress with this work</td>
<td>Absolutely! We recognise that seeking student input on any proposals for change is critical to making things work well. Regular updates on the work involved in Students First Transformation will be shared via the Student Voice website. As we progress, we will seek further input from students on specific topics and will use student feedback to ensure we are planning implementation in the right way, with due consideration of any impact on students.</td>
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<td>You wanted to know if the cost of making changes to presentations would be passed on to students</td>
<td>No, this is not our intention. The University is undertaking detailed cost benefit analysis of all the work planned under the Students First Transformation, so that change projects can be budgeted for without impacting on student fees. Many of the projects involved have been designed to reduce the University’s costs, so that money can be ploughed back into services that ensure the best possible student experience.</td>
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<td>You are concerned about making the right decisions about study pace and intensity for you, and wanted reassurance you would be fully supported</td>
<td>When new flexible models of study are introduced, we will make sure that you have access to appropriate support and guidance to help you make the right decisions about planning your learning – not just when you start, but throughout your studies. Support and guidance services for flexible study will be scoped and put in place in due course as required.</td>
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<td>You wanted to know what changes are planned for tutorials, particularly face-to-face tutorials</td>
<td>We are currently researching the effectiveness of tutorials and plan to look at changes as part of the Teaching Framework. We know that face-to-face tutorials are expensive for the University to run and attendance can be patchy. We want to ensure students have the best value experience and that tutorial arrangements are consistently good across all subjects. When we have reviewed the evidence we will put together some proposals around tutorial provision in the future, and will involve students in further consultation.</td>
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<td>You were concerned about the emphasis on collaborative activities and</td>
<td>We recognise that there are different views around collaborative working and need to explore further how it could work well for Open University students. It is recognised that</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>your results being dependent on other students</td>
<td>collaborative working, particularly in online environments, is a skill that is increasingly important for working in the digital age, and we want to provide the right opportunities for students to be able to work in this way. We will be exploring this topic further as part of the development of the Teaching Framework.</td>
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<td>You suggested we surveyed students on the proposal</td>
<td>We issued a survey to a representative sample of students in December and will be sharing the results of this on the Student Voice website. We will be seeking student views on a range of topics over the coming months – but we need to be careful not to bombard you! The University has an agreed limit on the number of times per year that students can be approached to take part in surveys – so we may need to seek input in other ways, at the appropriate point in time – this may be via a survey or may take different forms, for example a forum, workshop or online room.</td>
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<td>You said the University should undertake cost benefit analysis on the proposal</td>
<td>Yes, we are undertaking this work at the moment</td>
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<td>You wanted to see examples of how the proposals would work in a qualification</td>
<td>As we progress with developing the Teaching Framework, we are planning to work with colleagues in the faculties to think about how new study arrangements would look for different types of student. We would like to involve students in these. We will seek input from students in due course and share the outputs when ready.</td>
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<td>A piloting and phased approach to implementation should be taken</td>
<td>Yes – we agree. Change can be difficult in such a large organisation and we want to be sure we are making the right changes, in the right way! Not only will we be taking a piloting and phased approach to implementation, but we will also be drawing on a wide range of research and evidence to support decision-making. Pilots and implementation phases will be considered in due course, when any proposals have been agreed through appropriate University decision-making channels.</td>
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<td>Students already on their way to a qualification would need to be able to continue without disruption</td>
<td>We agree – we do not want to disrupt any students already on a qualification pathway and will take care when planning implementation to ensure disruption is kept to a minimum.</td>
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<td>Care should be taken to ensure that presentations are viable with lower student numbers</td>
<td>When we come to implementation planning we will be considering how increasing the number of start /end dates could work in a cost-effective way – which means student number planning will be at the heart of any decisions made on this topic.</td>
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<td>Impact on fees, loans, disability support and</td>
<td>Yes – we absolutely agree that any changes proposed must fit with all of these factors to ensure students are not adversely affected.</td>
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| benefits needs to be fully explored | Additional points:  
The University should consider different forms of assessment to fit with increased flexibility of study  
Better induction and bridging materials should be considered, as well as taster materials and an online student handbook  
Early access to module and qualification websites and interactive study timetables would help with preparedness for study  
We should explore splitting modules into smaller chunks with more exit points for credit, and allow more flexibility in the order of studying modules  
Online tutorials could be run differently | These are all really important points that we will consider in detail as part of developing the Teaching Framework.  
We are looking at assessment in some detail; and also looking at making access to module and qualification websites available as soon as fees are in place. |

### What happens next

This feedback is being combined with feedback from across the University to inform and refine the Teaching Framework, which sets out the high level implementation aims in this area and will be considered by the University in spring 2018. If a decision is made to move forward with an increased number of start dates, we will start planning implementation in more detail and will involve students in that next stage.
**Student Needs within the Student Journey**

At the face-to-face student consultative meetings, students were informed that we were going to redesign how students experience the OU, from their first point of enquiry to completion of their study goals.

The first stage of this work had been for the OU to identify what students need at each phase of their journey, and a summary of these needs was brought to the student consultative meetings. Using coloured dots, students were asked to either agree or disagree with the needs that had been identified; the results were then collated and analysed.

Across the Student Journey, 75% of the feedback given was in agreement with the needs we had surfaced, with 9.2% disagreeing that they were relevant to them (this was usually around areas such as ‘I need information about alumni employability’, which might reflect the proportion of our students that are learning to meet goals other than employability):

![Student Needs Validation Diagram]

These results were then shared with the team redesigning the student experience, as well as with wider groups of staff who have input into, or governance over, this work. The feedback students gave us through this consultation activity provided positive evidence to support the work the team had done, and allowed us to build a student-led picture of the student journey, which will be the foundation of the next stage of work. You can view the consolidated student journey through our Prezi. Please bear with it, the document is very large so can take a while to load.

**Next Steps**

The next phase of work, the design phase, began in December 2017. In this phase we are using student input (along with feedback from OU staff and tutors), to develop possible solutions that will meet the needs you have said are important to you, to help us build the best student experience.

If you would like to receive further information on this work as it progresses, please do let us know and we will make sure we include you in future updates: Students-First@open.ac.uk
Appendix 1: Flexibility

Questions raised about the potential introduction of four presentation start dates:

You wanted clarity on:

- Which modules, and what levels the new study patterns would be applied to
- Whether modules with smaller populations, for example at level 3, would have fewer than four start dates and the impact on continuity
- What the arrangements would be for modules of 30, 20, 15 or 10 credits or whether these modules sizes were part of the University’s plans for flexibility going forward. Smaller chunks of learning have a number of advantages for students.
- Whether a full-time student would be able to continue to study 120 credits over 9 months.
- The number of hours required for study per week in the new model in relation to the number of credits studied
- What the impact would be on fees and student finance
- What the impact would be on the flexibility of deferring, with or without assessment banking.
- Whether it would be possible to study more than one module at the same time but with partial overlaps
- Whether the process for applying for a student loans and the disabled students allowance (DSA) could be adjusted to fit in with four presentations a year; and whether there would be implications for students claiming benefits or council tax discounts.
- How the proposals will affect students well on their way to completing their qualifications who may (or may not) wish to change their pattern of study.
- How the University will support the progression of students who do not obtain the module result they need to study the next module they have registered on.
- How three-month long modules would work with embedded residential/field schools.