Student Consultative Meetings, April 2018
Summary

In April 2018 around 150 students attended face-to-face consultative meetings in Cardiff, Croydon, Dublin, Edinburgh, Manchester and Milton Keynes. Around 40 students attended online meetings using Adobe Connect; and a further 50 international students discussed the same topics over 10 days using an online forum.

The following is a summary of the discussion of the two major topics – ‘Induction’ and ‘Peer mentoring’. A huge range of views on both topics were expressed. This summary has been compiled using ‘response’ sheets completed by students attending the meeting plus input from staff who attended the meetings; from the recordings and chat box content of the Adobe Connect meetings; and from the input of international students to the online forum. The nature of the feedback makes it difficult to weight but where there were strong messages (that is, repeatedly mentioned), these have been drawn out. When the summary refers to ‘some’ students, this refers to points mentioned in three or more group feedback reports. Additional feedback that was invited from international students specific to their experience is summarised on the forum.

This summary will be used to inform action on the relevant topics. A report on action taken as a result of feedback will be reported back to students in late summer.
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Topic 1: Induction

1a. What should induction to distance learning at the OU look like?

**Strong messages**

*Induction content should:*

- Give a realistic picture of what distance learning is like and potential challenges.
- Help students to navigate the parts of the OU website that they would need to use, including how to find and book tutorials and where to locate assessment information, perhaps in the form of a virtual tour.
- Include an introduction to referencing and plagiarism.
- Provide guidance on how to work with your tutor, with clear expectations including around assignment return and options for extensions.
- Introduce students to the TMA system and how to manage, prepare for and write TMAs, preferably including a sample, marked essay or TMA.
- Include videos of other students talking about their experiences ‘warts and all’; preferably subject-specific.
- Signpost ways of developing academic skills and subject-specific knowledge, for example from the Library or on OpenLearn and FutureLearn.
- Introduce students to the option of having a mentor (if the University decides to introduce a mentoring scheme)
- Provide guidance on the challenges and tools of time management.
- Provide clarity about who you can talk to or ask for help and when.
- Enable you to access support and information relevant to your profile, for example disabled, school leaver, with caring responsibilities.

*Induction design*

The main message here was about introducing the OU community and enabling students to meet and interact with other students and staff, including on their upcoming module. Perhaps include face-to-face open/introduction day (or tutorial) to meet other students and staff; with an online equivalent. Welcome forums should be kept open longer. Additionally:

- Use a variety of channels including face-to-face, online, print, videos and forums.
- Enable students to use the time between registration and modules opening productively.
- Provide an early opportunity for personal interaction with your tutor, preferably face-to-face or by phone call.
- Be more streamlined and structured so information received is less repetitive, avoiding information overload if possible. This might include a structured ‘to do’ list or check boxes covering key areas located either on StudentHome or your module website (although it was noted that induction could not fully be built into module websites as each module has both new and continuing students).
Other suggestions

Content suggestions:

- Include subject-specific content.
- Include a welcome video from a tutor outlining their role – and make this approach consistent (students had experienced a variety of tutor welcomes).
- Include links to a comprehensive (optional) study skills package, including note-taking, particularly for those who have not studied for years.
- Include an A-Z index of all the different elements of induction.
- Include information for international students about how exams would work.
- Signpost sessions in Student Hub Live, including better promotion of recordings.
- Introduce concepts and expectations of a module, including assessment expectations.
- Introduce basic IT skills for those who need it.
- Provide an early reading list for the upcoming module to enable students to get ahead.
- Introduce the OU Disabled Students Group.
- Introduce services available to students, including the careers service.
- Provide more information about the online Library, the Help Centre and other services.
- Include links to OU social media.
- Provide key information and dates – times and locations of exams and tutorials.

Design suggestions:

- Be memorable, fun, a positive experience.
- Be built into the study planner.
- Be available to students joining the OU at any level, not just level one.
- Be concise, avoiding information overload.
- Require only a single induction even if multiple modules studied.
- Be available across all platforms (including for Macs).
- Look like the module website to familiarise students with the format.
- Give clarity about processes while avoiding OU jargon.
- Give the opportunity to try out Adobe Connect.
- Be a blended experience e.g. provide a printed pamphlet of key information with links to more detail.
- Enable students to ‘sign up’ for all modules in advance in order to create a timeline of activity.
- Include an encouragement before registration, to study a 10 credit module as this could be the most useful introduction to OU study.
- Include an updated ‘Supporting you through your qualification study journey’ on StudentHome.
- Involve students in developing induction activities to make them interactive and lively.
- Involve students in user-testing of online content.
- Be tailorable to your own needs.
- Not include so much content in emails.
- Enable students to meet in a ‘new starter chat room’ on Adobe Connect.
- Start with reflective questions to identify your own strengths and weaknesses and tailor your own induction.

Several students suggested that some of the ‘induction’ information would be useful prior to registration as a ‘taster’ before signing up.
1b. What would be the key benefits of this induction?

Several students mentioned enhanced motivation and confidence as key benefits of a good induction. Induction was also an important opportunity to find out about the tools, tips and services available that would help students be more successful in their studies. This would help students feel prepared and should mean time saved later.

Community was also mentioned frequently – many students felt that being ‘inducted’ into the OU community, with the opportunity to communicate with other students and staff, set a firm foundation for their studies and created support networks for when motivation was needed. It was important to combat the sense of isolation experienced as an OU student.

‘Information overload’ was identified as a key risk when starting out. A structure timetabled induction that could easily be referred back to would help prevent new students feeling overwhelmed.

It was mentioned frequently that if students had a clearer idea from the outset what the experience would be like, and encouragement that other students had experienced setbacks and persevered, they may be more likely to ‘keep going’ themselves and meet their study goals.

Students also mentioned that a good induction would save them time in the long run as they would have a firm footing and be aware of the support and help available.

Other benefits suggested:

- To help you feel ‘more like a student’ and gets you in a ‘study frame of mind’.
- To know there are other people like you ‘out there’
- To give students a better understanding of what is expected of them and what they can expect.
- Learning the basics, perhaps previously forgotten, of how to study.
- Time management advice in induction would improve a student’s experience of study.
- To give you a realistic outlook
- To stop you feeling lost
- Decrease frustration
- Having a ‘one-stop-shop’ for induction would avoid repetition of induction within modules.
- Less daunting when you start your module
- Always available for reference back.
- Content about ‘what it’s like’ could be shared with family and friends so they could be more understanding of what’s involved.
- Remove trepidation
- Illustrate what level is expected.
2. BOC activities: How useful are they? What’s missing and what is not so useful?

A strong message was that students wanted to see more ‘human’ content, for example including case studies, links to forums and student story videos. Several students would like to see more information about the Students Association and student community more broadly. And several students would like to see a forum attached to the BOC so that there could be discussion with other students and staff, and any questions answered. This could be time limited.

There was some sense that the BOC may contain too much information, and the scale of its content could be off-putting. There was also some feedback that the BOC appeared to be repetitive, for example around the challenges of distance learning. There was some concern about jargon and students wanted to see explanations in plain English.

Some students were concerned that content was duplicated elsewhere, and that it would be frustrating to have to work through something twice – particularly if there were slight differences.

Many students thought the BOC would be helpful as something to dip in and out of; and generally welcomed the content listed. Some felt a chunk of the content about distance learning should be available in advance of signing up.

There was a strong message that students would like a checklist of some sort (printed or printable) not just within the BOC so that they could tick off elements of the induction they had completed.

Specific content that was seen to be useful included:

- The introduction to various websites (but potentially excessive)
- Time management skills
- Some qualification-specific content towards the end (to replace the Open degree section in the case of those not registered for Open degree).
- Information about assessment
- Equipment needed for study
- How to use forums
- Library information
- Who to turn to for support in different situations
- Study skills
- Free Office 365
- Videos / interactivity
- Disability and mental health (although these should not be ‘lumped together’ as is currently the case)
- Introduction to Computing helpdesk
- Benefits available for students

Content potentially not so useful:

- Keeping a study journal
- Pros and cons of distance learning – needed before sign-up!
- How are you feeling now?
- Some felt it was too early to introduce the Careers and Employability Services, others disagreed.
What’s missing?:

The biggest omission seemed to be the ability to interact with other student and staff – ‘the human aspect!’ It was suggested at very least a forum would be helpful alongside to talk to other students completing the BOC and to ask staff any questions.

Also missing:

- More focus on academic skills
- Include case studies of ‘what to do when things go wrong’ or ‘a day in the life of a student’.
- Include how to manage social media interactions
- More about the Students Association and Open University Students Educational Trust.
- An opportunity to practice joining an Adobe Connect ‘dummy’ tutorial
- Information on financial support, including planning, and Disabled Students Allowance.
- Tips for staying mentally healthy and building confidence
- More about help getting into work.
- Something about ‘University level learning’ rather than just OU learning.
- A ‘dummy’ module page to navigate
- Technical advice on software / hardware / operating systems to access module content.
- How to access your TMA feedback
- Information about other opportunities for getting involved with the University and giving feedback – for example, student societies, student consultation, focus groups and surveys.
- More information about using Library search and advanced search and citations.
- Exams should be covered in session 5, including sitting exams outside the UK.
- What happens if you fail a module.
- Information about professional accreditation of some qualifications.
- ‘How to’ guides which can be skipped
- More white space
- The ability to search on keywords easily.
- Tailoring to specific student profiles, for example younger students, working parents.
- Short videos to summarise each section.
- Information about GDPR
- A glossary for OU jargon.

Other suggestions:

- A guide to the BOC would be helpful – possibly on paper, or with keywords to select.
- Digital skills should be optional as many students may not find these relevant.
- Some elements of the BOC should be available when student reserves to find out more about how distance learning works.
- Include a live webchat link for any questions.
- Check that language is Plain English and that content is accessible. Terminology should be consistent.
- Encourage an awareness of access modules in case these are a more suitable starting point.
- Some students would prefer to avoid any induction and just get stuck into their studies.
- Make the BOC available to new students at any level.
- FAQs may be a more useful way to find some information.
- The BOC could be divided according to whether you need ‘help’ or ‘support’ or ‘skills’ or something else – support should be more obvious.
- There should be a quiz at the start of each section to see if you need to complete it.
- It was important the BOC was welcoming, as informal as possible and not intimidating.
- The BOC should acknowledge the diversity of the student body.

1 As many of the students had difficulty accessing the BOC in advance, this content may be already included.
3. Variations: Which induction activities should be universal, and which subject specific?

Subject-specific content might include:

- An overview of the qualification and key concepts, including different pathways if relevant.
- Study techniques where there are differences, for example writing, referencing.
- Links to different parts of OpenLearn for additional preparation.
- Elements of website navigation and assessment.
- Explanation of faculty structure.
- Equipment you need to study.
- Careers and employability advice.
- How to use the Library.

Other suggestions:

- There should be a separate induction to postgraduate study.
- Faculty-based pamphlets, leaflets could be circulated about where to look for more information.
- Subject specific content should be dynamically pulled in according to what you are studying.

4. Timings
4a: How long do you think students should be asked to spend on induction overall?

Many students felt 24 hours of work was reasonable, but a significant number felt it was far too much, particularly if mandatory. Even if optional, 24 hours work was for some off-putting.

Several students suggested induction should be the equivalent of a week’s work. The number of hours expected for a week’s work can vary according to what modules you are studying, and the amount of time expected for induction could reflect this. Two-four hours work was also a popular option, just covering essentials, particularly if it was mandatory.

Some students suggested that 24 hours work over the two or three weeks leading up to module start might be manageable to introduce you to OU study. There was also a view that it would depend on student need: 24 hours of work is acceptable if you have the option to skip over bits you don’t think are relevant or helpful and therefore can complete it in a shorter time.

Some students suggested time spent on induction would depend on the medium – considering not just online content.

4b: Should the BOC open or close at particular points in a student’s journey, if so at what points, or should it always be available?

Students felt the BOC should be open as long as possible, possibly opening two weeks before module start. There could be a link from StudentHome so you could go back at any time.

Some students felt some of the content would be best included in a BOC for prospective or reserved students to find out a bit more about OU study before they sign up. Registration could ‘unlock’ other more detailed parts. There was also a suggestion that if the information was more broken up it could be referred to for completion at particular times – for example, assessment.

The vast majority of students felt that the BOC should always be available to be dipped into, although there was some support for having a closing date by which it should be completed (potentially the same date as TMA01 – or two weeks into the module) to provide some incentive. The BOC could be ‘read-only’ after this time.

Several students would like to see at least a link to the BOC, possibly some of its content, integrated into the module website, and module websites opened earlier.

Several students suggested a ‘check box’ approach so you were easily aware of what you had completed (or felt you didn’t need to complete) and which parts were still to be looked at. This could be completed as part of TMA01 in level one modules. The option to skip sections was important.
4c: Are there any other points in the student journey where this type of BOC would be helpful – when, how and what might they include?

Between levels, an introduction to the new level might be helpful in order to focus on study skills at that level – the new expectations for independent learning and critical thinking.

Much of the content of the BOC would be relevant through the lifetime of a module or qualification, for example using Adobe Connect or using the Library. If there were subject-specific content, this would be useful when moving on to the next module.

Other points when a specific BOC would be useful include:

- When preparing for an EMA or exam
- When returning to study after a break
- When making career plans
- For credit transfer students starting study at a higher level.
- Between modules to brush up on skills
- When you change your qualification
- Prior to registration so you know what to expect (‘induction-lite’)
- At the end of study to think about what to do next.

5. Compulsion

5a. What would the benefits/drawbacks of the BOC being mandatory?

It was noted that apart from assessment / exams there is not much that is ‘mandatory’ as part of an OU course – it is up to the student how they engage with the materials – so the definition is problematic. The word itself is off-putting and adds pressure. But the information could be built into the materials as a core component of a module. Several students felt that if the BOC was thought by the OU to be fundamental to student success then it should be mandatory. Some students suggested other words could be used, an example being ‘highly advised’.

Suggested benefits of being mandatory:

- Students would be more prepared for their studies, motivated, confident and more likely to meet their study goals.
- Being mandatory might be the incentive students needed to find the time to complete it;
- It would ‘break people in’ to OU study gently.
- Could create a level playing field in terms of familiarity with the information covered within a cohort.
- It should save tutors’, Student Support Teams’ and other students’ time in having to explain things that are covered in the BOC (or listen while tutorial time is spent on these things).
- It should stop the same things being asked repeatedly on social media.

Suggested drawbacks of being mandatory:

- Off-putting (this appeared to be the strongest message – it should be something you want to complete because it will be helpful and welcoming);
- Daunting in the level of expectation from the outset of your studies;
- De-motivating – it should be so useful you want to do it;
- Just not possible within the time available – could make you fall behind before you’ve even started;
- Some of it is unnecessary for some students;
- Distracting from the interesting topics you want to study;
- Waste of time;
- Against OU values if essentially made an entry requirement.
- Applies too much pressure to gain ‘badge’ when it should be there to help.
- Earning a ‘badge’ seems ridiculous to some.
5b. Are there any activities that should be mandatory? If so, which ones?

Expectations around assessment, including return of marked TMAs and referencing, was the most popular answer (although it was suggested this sh/could be covered within modules).

Another strong candidate for being mandatory was the role of the tutor and tutorials, including how to engage with both.

Several students thought it could be mandatory to work through a checklist of the topics so you have shown you know what’s available even if not every section has been completed. One group suggested a colour-coded or traffic light system to highlight the most and least important parts.

Other suggestions on information that should be mandatory:

- Time management
- How to use the Library, in particular where to find the referencing guide and SCONUL.
- Where to find the qualifications fora
- How to use the dashboard
- How to find your way around on your module website and StudentHome
- Some students thought Digital Skills induction should be mandatory but others completely disagreed.
- Making clear that tutors and forums are there to help, even if you think your question is ‘stupid’. ‘Studying is about learning new things, not about hiding what you don’t know. Nor about having to hide the fact that you already know a lot. Everyone learns differently.’
- Sessions 1-5
- The quiz, or similar, to check students knew the relevant information even if they had not completed all the content.
- Activities and quizzes
- Subject specific induction, in particular if there are essential skills.

Other points related to induction

- It was suggested that students receive a reminder at a certain point if they have not completed the BOC; or if new material was added.
- It was suggested that the completion rate should be monitored – the BOC should be so good that people want to do it. There should also be research comparing completion with final outcomes to see if those completing the BOC did better.
- This induction provision should be marketed as a selling point of OU study.
- Labelling induction as a ‘course’ was unhelpful and off-putting.
- Some students suggested the BOC should be assessed or award some credit, but others were strongly opposed to this.

5a. Poll on whether the BOC should be mandatory or not:

At most meetings students were asked to raise their hands to show whether they thought the BOC should be mandatory, optional or a mixture, with some activities mandatory and some optional. For most meetings there was no formal count, but numbers available suggest that around 20 per cent of students voting though the BOC should be mandatory, 30 per cent optional and 50 per cent a mixture of the two.
Topic 2: Peer mentoring

Students were provided with the following reasoning for the introducing peer-mentoring:

To raise student confidence, increase study motivation and build student community with the intention of improving student retention, progression and achievement. Some benefits could be:

- Aiding engagement with modules and qualifications
- Contributing towards a sense of belonging, reducing isolation
- Supporting particular groups of students, for example BME (Black and minority ethnic), to help close the attainment gap
- Increasing student satisfaction
- Promoting better awareness of (not replacing) support available
- Sharing study tips to enhance learning and confidence
- Enabling mentoring skills development that will enhance employability

Q1: What benefits have we missed?

- Enabling students to avoid dropping out or deferring.
- A contribution to network-building in their chosen field.
- Prevents tutors or Student Support Teams being overloaded with minor queries.

Q2: Relationship between mentor and mentee

The pairing of mentor and mentee could be done in a number of ways:

- Within subject areas
- Across subject areas but within faculty
- Across faculty
- Aligned by tutor group cluster
- Allocated at random

As a secondary option, pairing could also be allocated according to geography (that is, after any subject-based allocation has been made).

Which option is your preference and why?

The majority of students felt it would be useful to be paired with someone in their own subject area as they may be best-placed to empathise with the study demands faced. However for other (fewer but numerous) students, as it was clear to them that the peer mentor was not meant to replace your tutor’s academic support or the Student Support Team’s information, advice and guidance, this was not such an important consideration, and felt that they may have more choice of mentor and a fresh perspective. Being on different qualifications would also reduce the risk of inadvertent collusion.

For a significant number of students, geography was very important as they would like the opportunity to meet up face-to-face with a peer mentor. Another suggestion was that matches could be made along nation boundaries, in particular for international students.

Other points:

- Former students could be linked to a tutor group cluster and run their own online / adobe connect sessions to answer questions or students could request 1:1 session.
- There was strong support for a ‘try before you buy’ process to avoid unhelpful matching.
- There was support for a matching system, possibly based on life experience (BME / disability / carers / age).
- Matching might look different at different levels for example at level one a mentor could be more general, looking at supporting the introduction to distance learning.

Following discussion, students were asked to raise their hands as to which relationship they thought would be best. Within subject areas was the most popular, followed by across subject areas but within faculty. There was a small amount of support for across faculty or random. The alignment by tutor group cluster was not understood. There was significant support for secondary geographical allocation.
Q3: Concerns

Students were provided with the following list of concerns:

1. Information given by mentor potentially unreliable;
2. Time pressure on mentor in addition to their own studies;
3. Whether there would be sufficient suitable candidates for mentors who would be good listeners, empathic and meet student needs.
4. Some students’ perspectives may not be relevant for others.
5. Students have different preferences for contact, for example phone/online.
6. Relationships should develop naturally and not be pre-allocated.
7. There would be risks to manage around safe-guarding, data protection and plagiarism.
8. There should be a ‘try before you buy’ initial period before committing.

3a. What’s missing?

Other risks mentioned included:

- That the mentor could bring the University into disrepute;
- Resources required to implement would not be value for money.
- That it would be difficult for students to understand the process and expectations.
- The possibility and implications of the mentee becoming dependent upon the mentor.
- The issue of confidentiality
- Added confusion about who to approach in particular circumstances.
- Mentoring is a skill that takes training and experience to develop.
- How mechanisms could be developed to monitor quality.
- Potential detrimental impact on the tutor-student relationship
- Mental health issues impacting on the relationship.
- The accountability (and need for supervision) of mentors.
- Liability if something went wrong (for example, wrong advice given).
- What would happen if things go wrong.
- The impact of pairing students with different learning styles.
- Providing disabled students with mentors sufficiently trained or experienced to mentor appropriately.
- Overly high expectations of the mentor and/or the process.
- That there will not be enough volunteer mentors to meet mentee needs.

3a. What’s there that shouldn’t be?

Some students felt ‘try before you buy’ didn’t fit in this list, although there was support for the idea.

3c. What would be your top concern from the perspective of

i. a mentee or

- Receiving wrong or misleading advice
- Whether you would be allocated a mentor who was appropriately empathetic and met your needs, particularly in terms of timely responses.
- Boundaries or expectations being unclear.
- What would happen if things go wrong
- Worries about mentor motivation.

ii. a mentor

Amount of time available was the top concern.

Also mentioned – knowing how to respond in certain situations and what level of advice to offer; whether there would be sufficiently clear boundaries and adequate training available; the risk that mentees would become overly dependent.
3d. How can we address these concerns?

The strongest message was the firm guidelines would be needed. These should include:

- Time expectations – both in hours required per week and in length of time for relationship.
- Clarity about what content was ‘allowed’ or expected for discussions between mentors and mentees and what wasn’t.
- How communication methods would be agreed or matched, for example whether phone, email or forum contact was expected, how quickly a mentee would receive a response.
- Clarity about roles and expectations – the role should not be to dilute the role of tutor, and academic advice should be very clearly out of scope.
- Acknowledgement by all parties that the mentor was for support and should not be relied upon for information, advice and guidance.

Training would be needed for both parties around:

- Expectations
- Data protection
- What to do in various situations if the relationship becomes challenging
- Equality and diversity

A key way identified of addressing the concerns raised was in implementing a rigorous recruitment process (see below), however others thought this would be too off-putting for potential mentors.

Many groups felt that a ‘group’ mentoring scheme, possibly forum-based, involving ‘drop-in’ sessions or based on a ‘mentor bank’, would address many of the concerns listed, including mentor availability and possible safeguarding issues.

This might work by individual mentor students being assigned temporary ‘mentees’ based on topic / availability. After the original contact, an assigned mentor could then initiate a private conversation with the student. This would also enable mentors with different skills and experience to be matched up with appropriate mentee queries. Others felt however this would lose the valuable element of building up a personal relationship between the mentor / mentee. Some students suggested that ‘mentor-led’ discussion forums might address some of the concerns raised but provide similar benefits.

Several groups of students suggested the matching process was important – either through enabling mutual selection or by mentors and mentees submitting questionnaires to be matched according to experience, need, availability, preferred communication channels or other relevant criteria.

Other strong messages

- Processes would be needed to monitor the activity taking place, to provide check-in points at regular intervals and to evaluate the process and the outcomes including feedback from mentors and mentees.
- A process for managing the relationship if things went wrong was needed, including a ‘no blame’ cooling off period and procedures for bringing the relationship to an end immediately if necessary.
- Supervision, coaching and support for the mentor were important (see below).

The following were also suggested:

- A fixed scheme of meetings to manage expectations.
- Development of quick and easy tools for communicating.
- Provision of a ‘safe space’ on the OU platform where students can interact or face-to-face events where mentors can meet with mentees in a group environment.
- Both parties should sign an agreement of expectations to avoid later misunderstandings.
- Have a code of conduct in place; and possibly a contract.
- Evidence of informed consent was needed from both parties for appropriate data sharing.
Q4: Getting involved (mentor)

4a. How would you like the University to recruit mentors?

- Some groups wanted to see a similar application and recruitment process as for a paid position of employment but others thought this was too off-putting and unnecessary. A ‘light-touch’ recruitment might include the University detailing the attributes required of mentors and potential mentors submitting online applications outlining how they match. This process could play an important role in self-selection and enabling potential mentors to judge their own suitability and what they were taking on.

- Another popular suggestion was referral from tutors or tutors encouraging particular individuals to sign up.

- Others thought that it should be anyone who wanted to volunteer, recruited through StudentHome and other student-facing channels or targeted emails to those studying level three modules (perhaps who received a particular grade, although others disagreed).

- It was suggested that alumni could also be recruited as mentors although there was a risk that some of their knowledge could quickly become out of date.

- Best practice on appointing volunteer mentors or other voluntary roles should be sought from external organisations.

- Mentees should be encouraged to become mentors in the future.

4b. What would encourage you to get involved as a mentor?

Some students focussed on their motivation – to give something back, to help others, for self-development or for employability reasons. Several mentioned they would like the mentor role to be recognised in some way, for example by a certificate. Clear benefits should be articulated to potential mentors through a variety of channels.

Others thought that the clear expectations, training and guidance (detailed elsewhere) with a well-structured programme, clarity about time commitment and support/supervision and feedback were important in deciding to sign up. A drop-in ‘find out more’ event was suggested (F2F or online) where students could talk to staff and other potential mentors about what’s involved before making the decision to sign up.

It was also suggested that students would be more inclined to sign up as part of a team; or if they knew they could drop out at any time.

There was strong support for peer support for mentors, for example through a forum or peer mentoring network that would demonstrate there would be support if you signed up.

Financial incentives were mentioned several times but these have been ruled out by the University.

4c. Should there be any sort of selection for mentors, and what might that look like?

Opinion was divided from those wanting a full and rigorous recruitment process to those who thought the opportunity should be available to all students, perhaps at level 3 or similar. On balance most feedback did suggest some form of ‘vetting’ was necessary.

A majority of feedback suggested mentors should have obtained a minimum benchmark of academic results. Others felt this was unnecessary as the role was not that of a tutor and student achieving less high marks may have other valuable skills and experience to bring to the role.

Other points / suggestions:

- There should be a checking process that mentors have studied, for example, the relevant subject at the relevant level if appropriate.

- Feedback from previous mentees should be used to assess suitability of mentors.

- Potential mentors should be asked to complete a questionnaire including any current mentoring skills or experience.

- Mentees should be able to view a range of potential mentors and choose the most suitable.
• A selection panel for mentors should be a mix of students and staff.

Mentors should:
• Be proactive / passionate about wanting to do the job. They should be questioned about their motivations.
• Be asked to provide a character reference
• Be organised, encouraging, patient and show empathy.
• Have completed the module that their mentee was studying.
• Be familiar with the rules and regulations relevant to their role.
• Be assessed for competence after training.
• Be assessed for social skills through a face-to-face or phone interview; possibly via role play of possible scenarios.
• Have a good grasp of English.
• Be checked for criminal record.
• Have a mental health risk assessment and personality test
• Be DBS checked.

4d. What sort of training, advice and support would you like the University to offer to mentors?

As well as the guidance and training mentioned above the following were suggested:
• An online peer support group for mentors, perhaps a forum or live chat was a strong message.
• Supervision for mentors by staff (including a ‘hotline’) who can be spoken to about any issues, perhaps access to counselling and checks on time management (so mentors do not fall behind with their own studies).
• It would be good to get something tangible out of the experience that could be added to your CV for example a certificate, an NVQ or a reference on your Higher Education Achievement Report. Training could be in the form of a Badged Open Course.
• Training would be needed on how to respond to your mentee in specific situations, including how much advice could be offered (or not), perhaps on specific assessments and where the mentee should be referred in specific situations – a list of ‘dos and don’ts’. Case studies would be helpful. Likewise for when things go wrong.
• A face-to-face day or weekend-school or online programme of events lasting around 4-5 hours could be used to deliver training.
• Access to the mentee’s module website and assessment questions so relevant questions can be answered and specific advice on assessment avoided.
• Training should involve time management, communication skills, positivity, basic safeguarding, self-awareness and dealing with stress. Counselling training was also suggested or mentors recruited from students who had studied counselling modules.
5: Getting involved (mentee)

5a. How would you like the University to recruit mentees?

There was strong support for the suggestion that struggling students should be referred via their Tutor or Student Support Team or using analytics. There was also strong support for opening up the scheme to all students, or all new students. Other suggestions included:

- Scheme advertised through a range of channels including a leaflet in a welcome pack setting out how and why to sign up and what was involved.
- Offered to students who have struggled but passed their previous modules; or those that struggle with TMA01.
- There is a risk that by making mentee-ship too voluntary and self-selecting you can miss the students who would benefit most from a mentor.
- Mandatory participation for struggling students should be considered – providing that students had warned that this was a possibility.
- The programme should be introduced as part of induction, with students required to opt in or out so that they can’t miss the possibility.
- Tutors could encourage students they thought would benefit to sign up.

5b. What would encourage you to get involved as a mentee?

Suggestions:

- The prospect of extra advice and support;
- Having someone ‘non-official’ to listen to study concerns;
- Providing a connection and sense of community
- Scheme widely promoted through a range of channels
- The option to link up to ‘someone like me’ for example, BME, disability, caring responsibilities, career ambitions.
- If you were struggling with your OU studies.
- If there were things you wanted to talk about that weren’t directly relevant to your tutor.
- Launch event with social element and option to meet (or choose) your mentor.
- Ensuring the process was confidential and without stigma.
- A clear explanation of the benefits.
- Case studies from previous mentees (or personal recommendation from someone who had previously participated.)

5c. Should there be any sort of selection for mentees, and what might that look like?

Suggestions:

- Allocated by tutor or Student Support Team referral.
- Use a ‘matching panel’ where potential mentors and mentees submitted a completed questionnaire. These were then assessed for suitable matches, and could each prioritise from a range of possible matches. Applications could include a high level of detail to be matched appropriately.
- See also idea for mutual selection below.
- There could be criteria including whether a student has struggled at a previous stage.
- Telephone assessment of suitability of mentee.

5d. What sort of training, advice and support would you like the University to offer to mentees?

Students would need clear information about how this would work in practice. A list of what this needs to include is detailed in 3d above. Expectations and boundaries must be very clear and a recognition that your mentor is just another student who will not necessarily have all the answers and will have study pressures of their own. Advice on how to get the most out of the scheme would be helpful or assertive training for students who are nervous/anxious about talking to a mentor.
Other points

- There was a significant minority of students who did not feel that such a scheme would add value to the student experience. This was for a variety of reasons, including associating high risk with the concerns articulated above, that they didn’t feel that they would personally wish to be part the scheme as either a mentor or mentee, or that they felt resources to run the scheme would be better spent improving current student support services or tutor support.

- Given the concerns associated with the mentoring scheme, there was strong support for strengthening other relationships and communities within the University. For example, an alternative approach based on ‘study buddies’, perhaps encouraging more in each module forum, could be considered. Encouraging stronger tutor group and tutor-student relationships would also be an alternative, which might include provision of the ‘online room’ as a place to meet and chat. Study days and use of module forums were also suggested. These ideas were particularly explored in the Online International Students Consultative Meeting.

- Terminology – if this is online only it should be called ‘e-mentoring’. However some felt that the term ‘mentor’ implied a hierarchy and preferred the term ‘buddy’ or ‘e-buddy’.

- It was suggested that mentor / mentee matching could be done using a forum so relationships could be developed and 1:1 mentoring relationships would grow. This would enable relationships to develop around common experience, for example students with caring responsibilities. Comparisons to speed dating were mentioned several times.

- There could be a ‘one-off’ mentoring forum (synchronous – perhaps a series – or asynchronous) between levels where students who had successfully studied at, for example, level three ‘met up with’ students about to transition from level two to level three to talk about their experiences and answer questions. This could also work around module choice. There was lots of support for mentoring between levels.

- There should be some sort of ‘thank you’ for mentors – perhaps an end of year social event.

- Filtering of mentee applications could involve referring mentee applicant to alternative forms of support, including online training modules or external organisations.

- A couple of groups suggested that Student Support staff should have time to study and they would therefore be able to provide the role in a paid and accountable capacity.