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 following is a summary of the discussion of the two major topics – ‘Flexibility for Students’ and ‘Digital by Design’.

**Topic 1: Flexibility for Students**

What do you think of the proposed new pattern of module presentation? In general, students said they would welcome a more flexible pattern of module presentations and identified a series of benefits. However, there was a suggestion from a wide range of students that perhaps the benefits could be achieved with two or three rather than four presentations a year and a four presentation offer might be more complicated than necessary and lead to a diminished experience in some areas because of the necessarily smaller cohorts. Students articulated a series of questions that would need to be answered before offering judgement on whether the change would be a positive move.

Several students would welcome the ability to study more than one module at the same time but with partial overlaps.

Students would like further clarity on the following points:

- Whether the new patterns would apply to all 60 and 30 credit modules, and at both taught undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Whether modules with smaller populations, for example at level 3, would have fewer than four start dates.
• 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 needed clarification. Current advice is that students need to set aside for study ‘about 16–18 hours a week’ for a 60 credit module over 9 months but the new 9 month pattern refers to ‘20 hours a week’.
• What the impact would be on fees and student finance, whether fees would be the same for all options made available, and when fee increases would kick in with so many start dates.
• 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 would be possible, as this was an attractive option for some students.
• 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. Students commented that they would like to be consulted again when some answers to these questions have been clarified and before any final decisions have been made.

Other concerns:

• Not having viable student populations for some module presentations if student numbers are spread over four a year, with a fragmentation of the student body if students are learning at different times and pace. A critical mass of students is required for an excellent learning experience (for example for collaborative tasks, for a choice of tutorial locations, for vibrant forums) and to maintain a student community. Students may become more reliant on their tutor or drop out if there is less peer support.
• The operational complexity for the University of running four presentations a year and whether this would threaten an excellent study experience.
• The apparent complexity to students in needing to make decisions about pace of study and start dates.
• The potential costs of running four presentations and whether these would be passed onto students.
• Flexibility can cause students to procrastinate.
• Having more presentations starts should not lead to modules disappearing and a smaller curriculum. Maintaining a broad curriculum is important for students.
• It is important to balance consistency against excellence. The proposed new pattern of module presentation should not be applied in the same way for all modules if that leads to any decline in the excellence of the student experience, for example, because of low student numbers spread over four presentations a year.
• While the proposal states that tutor groups and tutorials will be kept or improved, it does not explicitly say that this will be the case for tutorials that are conducted face-to-face, which are extremely important to some students for high quality communication, effective learning, and the development of relationships. However, having more presentations could
undermine their effectiveness because, given fewer students per presentation, students might have to travel further to them and attendance rates could drop.

- The potential for an unwelcome break in study if some level 3 modules do not have the flexibility of multiple start dates.
- The emphasis given to ‘collaborative activities’ is noted, with several students raising concerns about these activities particularly where assessment results depend on other students.

**What other benefits do you see in addition to the ones already identified by the University?**
The University had already identified a series of benefit to the proposed module pattern. Other possible benefits included:

- The ability to complete a qualification more quickly;
- Increased student motivation due to the likelihood of being able to start studying closer to the point where a decision is made to study rather than having to wait.
- The ability to maintain a flow of study without long gaps.
- The option to postpone exams/EMAs for a short time would be welcome.

**How should the OU address your concerns?**

Students made the following suggestions:

- In addition to online and face to face consultations, the University should undertake a survey of students on the proposal, possibly by adding questions to the next end of module survey.
- The University should undertake detailed costings of the proposed new pattern of module presentation and fully understand the resource requirements needed to implement it successfully.
- As part of both assessing the viability of the proposal, and helping students if the proposal is implemented, examples of possible pathways for qualifications should be provided to illustrate how it would work.
- The University should pilot the proposal first and learn from the experience. It would also be worth considering a phased approach to implementation rather than managing sweeping changes in one go.
- Continuity should be assured for students already on their way to a qualification.
- Consideration should be given to the impact on the study experience of not having a viable number of students on each presentation. It is important to ensure that there are enough students to make each presentation viable.
- There should be early discussions with the government and other relevant agencies such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and the administrators of the disabled students allowance (DSA) to ensure that there are no problems with students being able to access funding for the new pattern of presentations and so that potential impact on students claiming benefits can be assessed.
- The University should ensure it invests in appropriate information, advice and guidance to support students in making the best choices of presentation pattern for them.

**How would the proposed new module presentation pattern work for you? Would you study differently?**

Current students used to the existing pattern in general felt like they would be less likely to study differently than those new to the OU. Some students expressed a concern about focussing mainly on the needs of the potential students of the next decade rather than the registered students of today. Whether students will study differently will in part depend on how effectively the new pattern and
its benefits is communicated to both enquirers and students. Several students expressed the view that they would welcome the flexibility to speed up or slow down their studies to fit in with other life events.

Do you expect that most students would be more or less likely to complete their module or degree?
There were different views expressed, with many students suggesting that there was insufficient information at present to make a judgement on this. The introduction of the new presentation pattern may be a contributing factor in improved module or degree completion, perhaps more as a result of students being able to study at different intensities rather than because of the particular start dates offered.

Are there other changes, other than presentation patterns, which we should be considering to improve flexibility for students?
- More flexibility in the area of assessment should be explored while at the same time maintaining the high standing and credibility of the University’s degrees. Suggestions included the use of vivas in extenuating circumstances, eligibility for compensation, review of capping of module results for resits and resubmissions, the option to choose between an EMA and an examination.
- Better induction and bridging materials should be considered, in particular to help students manage the transition between levels of study. Material and activities in the gap between modules (for example, between June and October) should be available for students to engage with, if they wish. Induction materials should include activities and a guided tour of the OU website.
- Access to module and qualifications websites, with preparatory exercises and background reading, should be made available to students earlier, to enable them to have the flexibility to make an early start on their studies if they wish. Students report that the University is not consistent in its approach to making these websites available early.
- The University should explore splitting up the 120 credit postgraduate modules into a series of smaller modules to reduce the upfront cost and potentially provide exit points with credits. This could be paying for subject and dissertation sections separately. Splitting up 60 credit modules should also be explored.
- There should be more flexibility in the order in which you can study modules and not such rigidity in the requirement for 120 credits at each level.
- There is scope for more flexibility in the way that online tutorials are run, for example, splitting into smaller groups for some activities.
- Taster materials, and indicative study timetables, should be made available consistently and early to students to help them plan ahead.
- The University should provide an online ‘student handbook’, with a table of contents, index and ‘who to contact’ information, in Plain English, instead of an A-Z store of ‘essential documents’. Also, given the University uses a lot of jargon an up-to-date glossary of terms should be provided, aimed at the student audience.
- While not necessarily of interest to all students, the University should be transparent and maintain for students up-to-date summary information on its developing strategy in student-friendly Plain English, with a link to the complete documents.
Topic 2: Digital by Design

What other benefits to ‘Digital by Design’ do you see in addition to the ones already identified by the University (listed)?

- To provide a much richer learning experience, including activities and content that can’t be replicated in print.
- Content can be added during presentation for interest, support or to keep up-to-date
- We are competing with other Higher Education Institutions who are going digital
- Global connectedness and student communities
- Students can study from anywhere in the world
- Don’t have to carry books around – a phone or tablet is enough and all your materials is in one place
- To take advantage of rapidly advancing technologies
- The student of 2025 will likely be much more used to digital study
- It is important we ensure students are fully prepared to engage with the digital world

Several students taking were hostile to the list of benefits suggested and explained why they did not feel these were valid or relevant. Across the meetings a number of benefits were identified in addition to those already listed:

- Positive impact on the environment.
- Makes collaborative work easier to undertake and be more effective.
- University can act on instant real-time feedback from students.
- Has the potential for students to be more connected with each other through online communities.
- Being able to see the tutor despite the distance can help build relationships.
- Accessing videos is easier via links than having to put in a DVD.
- University has access to learning analytics to help improve the student experience.
- Access to a wide range of additional online or digital resources.
- Reassuring and confidence-building to be in instant contact with other students exploring the same topic.
- Provides a good springboard for going on to do research.
- From a reputational point of view, it will be important for the OU to continue to position itself as a leader in learning design, not a follower.
- Good for searching in some respects.
- Ability to download work in chunks
- Being able to see the tutor despite the distance helps build relationships.
- Can access from anywhere, anytime.
- Online tutorials provide flexibility.
- Prepare students for the world of work by using new digital tools.
- Provides accessibility for students who have difficulties with print.
What issues/concerns has the University missed? (listed)?

In previous consultations you have told us your concerns about digital content...

- Issues with too much time looking at a screen and distractions while doing so
- Difficulties in retaining information when reading online
- Different note taking skills are needed
- Broadband connectivity sometimes a problem, particularly when travelling
- Lack of physical reminder to study
- Not so easy to search for content or flick through to gauge progress
- Technology/device compatibility issues with VLE
- Skills gap for some students

Additional concerns suggested:

- There were serious concerns about the lack of inclusivity of this approach both in relation to learning styles and connectivity.
- ‘Value for money’ and affordability are also serious concerns. It is not clear whether ‘digital by design’ will maintain quality and value for money, or whether costs may be passed onto students for printing, having fast broadband, and maintaining the right up-to-date hardware and software. Although module websites remain open for 3 years after the end of the student’s module presentation, 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. Allowing students to keep a digital version of the module materials to go back and look at years later would be a possible option to help address this.
- ‘Blended learning by design’ is important, a combination of print, online and face-to-face providing the variety essential to a better study experience.
- There is an issue of digital exclusion with not all students being able to afford the latest mobile device or have the level of access to a PC needed for online/onscreen only study.
- While print versus online/onscreen is a false dichotomy, at very least 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 proper referencing to online activities.
- Issues such as ‘screen fatigue’ for those who already spend much of their working life using computers should not be underestimated.
- ‘Inclusive by design’ is key, because students with disabilities can find some aspects of digital a barrier to study rather than an enabler (e.g. Issue with JAWS accessing the transcripts in videos). It is important for students with disabilities to road test software and any accessibility issues to be overcome.
- There is a significant concern about IT security and reliability. If all module content is online, any security breach or server down-time have a huge impact on students. Vulnerability to hacking and viruses is a serious concern.
- There needs to be a recognition that the OU is different from other higher education providers as a result of the wide range of learners it attracts. A seemingly single-minded approach to embrace digital would not be appropriate at the OU, which attracts so many disabled students.
- There was a concern raised about the OU’s capacity to maintain and develop the ‘digital by design’ approach. For example, resource is needed at a basic level to ensure links are not broken and that online content is kept up to date.
Having a number of books or other documents open at the same time can be very useful and it is hard to replicate that kind of experience on screen. Books are also easy to annotate and highlight. Also, in some cases, two screens would be ideal to work with online material and this is not possible for everyone.

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

Preparedness for digital study is an issue. ‘Learning how to learn’ materials need to be of high quality and well sign-posted, with a digital skills module being part of induction or preparation for those who need it. It needs to be made clear to potential students what they are signing up for and that a requirement for study is to be prepared to engage in the digital world.

Lack of support for a range of operating systems (such as Linux and Mac) and compatibility issues across platforms are a serious concern.

There is a risk of obsolescence of hardware and software in an age of accelerated change.

While for some potential students gaining digital skills will be important, for others this will not be the case.

The way forward should be grounded in research and evidence about how and when people learn best, using different media, and taking fully into account health and safety issues related to onscreen study.

There was a frustration with the emphasis on digital skills being the answer to student concerns about online/onscreen-only modules. Many students pointed out that they are very digitally competent but that does not mean that online/onscreen learning works for them.

There will be a lack of differentiation between the OU and other online, and in some cases free, courses, for potential students should an online offer only be available.

What are the three most important of the benefits and issues identified by students?

Not all student groups identified the same top three benefits and issues. Identified here are what appeared to be the most-mentioned.

**Benefits**

1. To be able to study from anywhere in the world at any time
2. To be able to have access to up-to-date and relevant content
3. To be in touch with academic and student communities to support your studies.

**Issues**

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<th>Top three issues</th>
<th>How might the University address them</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unsuitability of 100 per cent digital content for effective learning.</td>
<td>Ensure that learning and teaching is blended (with a place for printed materials and face-to-face learning) and ‘inclusive by design’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connectivity.</td>
<td>It is very important that the University provides learning materials that are fully downloadable in a format that is easy to study ‘offline’ where connectivity is a problem. It is also suggested that students could be provided with USB sticks or DVDs containing the material so for those with poor access to broadband, so that they didn’t need to download content. This could overcome the issue of storage on student devices. It was suggested that the University should lobby government(s) for improved broadband, although a number of students thought this was unlikely to provide a solution in the short term.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessibility and affordability.</td>
<td>Ensure that barriers to digital access are addressed. The digital requirements of disabled students need to be understood, with students involved in the testing of software. The University should seek to influence government policy so that the funding gap between the disabled students allowance (DSA) and what students need for digital learning is bridged. The University should also explore the possibility of a contract with an IT supplier to enable student discounts or loans. There should be no hidden costs such as links to websites that require a subscription payment. There should be an awareness and consideration given to the amount of material some students currently needed to print.</td>
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Based on your discussion and looking at the ‘Digital by Design’ proposition what changes would you like to see?

**Students would like to see the proposition amended along the following lines:**

- Rather than ‘Digital by design’, the University’s approach should be ‘Blended learning by design’. Instead of the delivery of all modules online or onscreen as a blanket strategy, the way forward should be to deliver ‘blended learning’ with printed texts as a continuing part of the approach. Many students liked having the option of being able to access all their learning materials online but also wanted high quality printed material for core content.

- The University’s approach should also be ‘Inclusive by design’, with good quality printed materials available to those students who have a preference for print. While there was recognition that printed material would not contain all the rich digital experience, this could be designed to signpost digital activities to enable blended learning. (The approach to how this would be paid for required further exploration. For example some suggested that it could be added to the module fee for those who requested it but this was strongly opposed by others and there were problems highlighted with this approach including how this would fit with funding arrangements and the potential for creating a two-tier approach.)

- With regard to alternative activities, the University should explore the possibility of making them available more widely, not only for those in secure environments and with stated accessibility issues.

- The following were also suggested:
  - The majority of students taking part in the online consultation would prefer to use printed textbooks as the core of their courses, with technology used to enrich that core material.
- Properly indexed material should be available be it in book or pdf format. This is particularly important for disabled students.

- There should be a University policy on the recording of tutorials, given tutorials are an important part of a ‘blended learning’ approach and the University previously agreed to develop a policy in this area.

- The proposition cited literature texts as an example of material that may be specified as print. However, there are examples that could be drawn equally from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

- For the proposition to work in practice the OU must have a resilient and robust IT infrastructure, and strong quality assurance to give students confidence in ‘digital’ study.

- There should be consideration given to the development of an ‘academic community’ as well as a ‘student community’, involving the students, the module team and Associate Lecturers.

- First contact with the module tutor should be earlier to help build relationships.

- The concept of a single point of contact for disabled students should be explored. This would be a named individual who would be a point of contact for a disabled student throughout their student journey with the OU. (Currently, disabled students can find themselves having to repeat the information they provided previously to a different member of staff, leading to delays in getting the support they require, or they are asked to submit medical evidence more than once for a condition that does not change.)

Around 5-10 students commenting on the draft summary as part of the online meeting felt it underplayed the strength of student feeling on these topics.

Activity: Student experience

Students at face-to-face meetings were asked to take part in an activity about the student journey. Lists of student needs were presented, which had been identified through previous consultation with students, and students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that these needs were important to students. Across the Student Journey, 75 per cent of feedback agreed with the needs that had been surfaced, with 9.2 per cent disagreeing that they were relevant. This was usually around areas such as ‘I need information about alumni employability’ which might reflect students who are studying to meet goals other than employability. Those needs will now be refined based on your feedback and used to inform improvements to the study experience.

9