Response to student consultation on systems and technology

Summary
This is a response to the consultation on systems and technology which took place between 29 September and 16 October 2017 on the student consultation website. The summary of student feedback is at https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=89828. This consultation was in several different parts and these are mirrored in this response document.

IT systems
First we asked a series of questions around students’ experience of our IT systems. This included:

- How do you feel about the availability of our systems: – are StudentHome and the VLE available to use when you need them?
- When we have planned maintenance of our systems, how much notice would you like and how would you like to receive this?
- What level of detail would you like to know about any systems issues we have?
- How would you like to be informed about any unexpected, unplanned systems issues that affect your use of our systems?

All the feedback was carefully considered. The key messages you told us were:

- Students would like a simple way of providing feedback on each page of our website – where their feedback would be acknowledged and responded to.
- Students think our system availability is good
- Students would like at least 1 weeks’ notice before any planned maintenance – more notice would be needed if the work could affect upcoming assignments
- Students had different views about how they’d like to be informed about planned maintenance – some would like emails, others want the option to opt out of these emails, others wanted text messages or information on a different web page that they could check
- Students wanted clear, concise information on what would be affected during the maintenance, alternative arrangements e.g. other ways to submit assignments and information on how to prepare, e.g. downloading study materials in advance.
- Students would like a dedicated page to show if systems were available, or if there were problems
- Students appreciate the use of social media messages when there are system problems
- There were mixed views about receiving information on what happened during IT incidents – suggesting that posting this on StudentHome might be the best place, so interested students can read more
- Students suggest that the timing and scale of the incident should inform the communications – e.g. if it is a small outage in the middle of the night, no direct communication would be needed.

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<th>You said</th>
<th>OU response</th>
<th>Next steps, if appropriate</th>
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<td>Maybe it would be worth considering the OU running a small site on a separate server, giving details of the availability of OU services – students could bookmark this and, in the event of being unable to access a service, check that site for information</td>
<td>We are working on a site that shows the availability of all systems. This has been tested internally and is currently used by OU staff.</td>
<td>We now need to finalise the content on this page to make sure it easily understandable for our students. Then we will communicate to students about the page and add links in to this site on relevant OU webpages.</td>
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<td>A week’s notice would be good. It would be good to know what systems are affected, and how long the outage can be expected to take. I also agree that an email and a least a week notice on any planned maintenance would be very convenient.</td>
<td>In the past we have given a longer notice period for planned maintenance, with reminders nearer the time. We will use this feedback to inform our processes going forward.</td>
<td>To discuss with other departments in the OU when we are planning maintenance and make sure we all understand the notice period that our students want and work to that. Your feedback will inform future notice periods.</td>
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<td>A simple feedback button on a module page, or a form to quickly fill out while the issue is current, would suffice as a method.</td>
<td>On our module websites, we already do have feedback buttons. This feedback goes directly to the teams that work on those websites and they use this to plan new features, or amend existing ones.</td>
<td>No action required.</td>
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<td>Our system availability is good</td>
<td>This is great to hear and we work hard to make sure our systems are as available as possible for our students.</td>
<td>We will continue to plan any IT maintenance work with the impact on our students at the forefront of the planning decisions.</td>
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<td>You wanted clear, concise information on what would be affected during any maintenance, alternative arrangements e.g. other ways to submit assignments and information on how to prepare, e.g. downloading study materials in advance.</td>
<td>When IT have to schedule maintenance that impacts our students, we consult with many departments across the University to plan the communications that are needed. This includes areas advising on alternate arrangements or impacts on deadlines etc.</td>
<td>We will continue to plan thoroughly for any IT maintenance that impacts our students and give you the detail you need to make decisions about your study and assessments, if they are affected.</td>
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<td>You appreciate the use of social media messages when there are system problems.</td>
<td>The links between the IT department and the OU Social Media team are good and we have clear processes to inform this team of any IT issues as soon as they occur. The Social Media team also contact IT if they are seeing our students raising issues with our systems on social media.</td>
<td>We will continue to work closely with the Social Media team to make sure the messages from the OU are clear, concise, timely and informative.</td>
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Qualification and module registration process
This part of the response addresses the recruitment websites and online registration and enrolment.

Recruitment websites:

- OU Homepage - www.open.ac.uk
- Courses (undergraduate) website – www.open.ac.uk/courses and the pages within it such as product pages e.g. www.open.ac.uk/courses/qualifications/r14 and ‘high level information’ pages such as http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding
- Postgraduate website - http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate and the pages within it
- My Account – where enquirers can save their shortlisted courses and results of planning tools.
- International website – www.openuniversity.edu

Online registration and enrolment:

- Registering for a qualification
- Choose your modules (used for selecting modules if you are registered on a qualification)
- Enrolling on a module (Used to hold and make payment for a module)

We use a ‘user centred design’ process to enhance and develop our online systems. This means placing the user (enquirers and students), and their needs, at the heart of what we do – from gathering insight e.g. feedback on experience and visitor analytics, to developing prototypes, testing and measuring the impact of changes. We are continually iterating and optimising our content, layout and navigation based on user research, analytics data and student feedback from activities like this one, as well as feedback from the wider University, including Associate Lecturers.

We are also working on a new initiative to actively ask users what they think of the website experience immediately after using it. We will use this valuable additional information to inform our future development and improve the digital experience on an ongoing basis.

We have made some significant improvements to the experience over the past two years and there is still lots more exciting work on our agenda to improve the digital experience.

Feedback on ‘look and feel’ of the recruitment sites

The sites underwent a ‘brand refresh’ in 2016, with pages restyled to be consistent with changes to brand colours and tone of voice. It has more engaging colours and imagery and we’re working with other departments across the organisation to ensure we have a consistent digital identity. As part of that piece of work, we are currently updating the design ‘libraries’ to ensure consistency of look and feel across enquirer facing areas of the OU web estate.

We have been refining the copy to make it clear and engaging, the imagery and video content on the recruitment sites has recently been updated to include greater diversity and to bring the content on the page to life.

We have made changes to the OU Home page to include more information about the benefits of studying with the OU, as well as making key content easier to find.

There will be additional changes to improve the layout of module descriptions and standalone module pages based on insight from user research and valuable feedback from this student consultation.
Ease of navigation

Delivering an experience that is easy and intuitive is a key focus for our team, and navigation is at the heart of that. We know that many of our users like to search for content or courses, and that our course finder tool does not deliver the experience we want.

Based on user research, we have made some improvements to the way it is presented, the mapping of search terms and the way results are provided, which have made measurable improvements. We recognise that this is a step in the right direction but there is more that we can do, so we have started a project to completely rebuild the course finder tool which will require significant IT resource.

We have made changes to the product page template to make content within tabs more visible – our initial changes altered the layout so the tabs appeared higher on the page and they were restyled to stand out more – this resulted in a 100% increase in engagement with the tabbed content. We are currently testing changes to the way content is provided in these pages and these will be iteratively improved ongoing.

We have made considerable SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) improvements to the site enabling users interested in study to find relevant content on the site more easily via search engines.

For those users that prefer to browse our website, there is a project underway to improve the information architecture of the site, which will make navigation easier for users as well as making our website more visible to search engines (like Google), meaning more people are able to find us and visit the website.

Depth of content

One of the biggest changes we have made to qualification pages in the past few years is to include detail of modules in Stages 2, 3 and 4. Previously only Stage 1 information was available, with later Stage information provided after reservation. This change means users can also access information about options to choose different routes through a qualification.

This additional content brings with it its own challenges around usability – we want to ensure users have the content they need and can understand it, but are not overwhelmed by it. So we are testing and implementing ongoing iterative changes to improve the way this content is presented, such as including more graphical representations, to make content more manageable for users to consume.

Some qualifications have a lot of choice so where this is currently displayed as a long list we are exploring options for displaying this differently e.g. in smaller groupings to make the content easier to understand

Assessment information is currently provided within module pages, we are reviewing ways to better present information about assessment and course materials.

We had insight that users needed more guidance up front about their most appropriate first step to studying with the OU and what they should consider to help them be successful. As well as clarifying content we created the ‘Am I ready’ tool [http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/ready-for-success](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/ready-for-success). Since its launch we have carried out additional user research and are refining it on an ongoing basis to ensure the results and next steps are clearly understood.

We identified some gaps in information around Fees and Funding and made changes to the high level Fees and Funding page [http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding) and added a ‘Finance Finder’ tool [http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding/finance-finder](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding/finance-finder) and clearer explanation of funding methods. User research identified that there was still room for improvement and we have recently researched a prototype of a new layout for this page which had a very positive response from users, so we will soon be testing on the site.
Insight also revealed gaps in understanding of the study experience so we are working ongoing on improving content to bring the study experience to life. We clarified content about how much time would need to be dedicated to study to manage user expectations and created a time-planner tool to help users understand how to plan around their own personal circumstances.  http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/time-planner

We have updated information on product pages concerning accessibility and disability support and we have insight from specialist accessibility teams about additional iterations required.

We have added student and employers testimonials to areas of the site such as Can I do it?, Time Planner, Fees and Funding and Careers and we are currently using videos from the recent ‘Open Diaries’ campaign, with stories of students and a tutor. This is an area we plan to expand over time.

Registration

We are pleased that overall you have found it easy to register and pay for your study. The registration and enrolment system is one of our longest standing online systems, which means we are looking at how we can modernise both the technology and how we can improve how you use it. A key aspect of that is continuing to adapt to the varied and changing funding landscape for higher education across the UK whilst keeping, and improving, the personalised information you need to identify and apply for funding relevant to you.

StudentHome

Feedback on StudentHome was largely positive but the team who manage the site are very grateful for all your input, which they are working through in detail so that future updates can be fully informed by the consultation. Your feedback on the Help Centre is monitored daily and used to inform improvements so please do keep sharing your views there so we can ensure it meets your needs.

Your module content online

This part of the consultation addressed a wide range of areas and tools. It is not possible to comment on them all individually but here is a summary of the key themes we have identified and a response for each area.

General feedback on module website user experience, design and navigation

The overarching user experience and navigation of a module website is made up of a number of elements, which include the design of the user interface on different types of devices and the presentation and delivery of content for individual modules.

We are continually iterating and improving our systems based on feedback via a range of channels, including the comments on this forum, usability and accessibility testing, and the feedback received via the ‘feedback’ link on all module and subject websites. We can’t act on all comments and suggestions for improvement but we would like to let students know that all comments are read, reviewed and triaged by our team and forwarded to relevant module and content teams across the University whose work impacts on the user experience of module websites and the delivery of content.

Online content, formats and downloads

Following direct feedback from students, we have been actively working on improving the experience of the 'View of single page' over the past year. These changes include:

• The inclusion of landmark diagrams and interactive content and media.
• Improvements to the visual design making it consistent with the standard view of online content so that students have a better mental model of how this 'view' relates to the standard online content.
We are continually assessing the provision of content to keep up with advances in technology and student preferences and are actively working to improve the options for printing and downloading content across module websites.

**Assessment and tutorials**

Access to assessment details, dates and scores is a frequent theme we review when looking at student feedback. The study planner currently shows the assessment deadlines, including exams, as orange labels (which are a link to the assessment page) and provides access to assessment resources. The assessment page displays key documents and the assessment table showing deadlines, links and scores.

As a result of our regular reviews of user feedback and following on from a question raised in a previous consultation, we have reviewed, designed and implemented (as part of the March 2018 VLE upgrade) an update to the display of assessment information. These changes include:

- Weeks containing assignment deadlines are highlighted in the study planner, which ensures these weeks are clear in all views of the study planner.
- We have added submit and collect feedback links to the assessment table on the assessment page to make it easier to access the online eTMA system and access iCMA feedback.

Since the March 2018 VLE upgrade, the Tutorials page has a redesigned Events calendar, which now shows past events collapsed as default. The next event is highlighted and all booked upcoming events are listed, with links to the online room and the names of tutors assigned to host the event.

**Study planner**

As part of a previous VLE upgrade, an update to the study planner ‘all weeks’ view was implemented to remember which weeks were expanded/collapsed by individual users on both desktop and mobile, enabling users to see the weeks they have left open to engage with.

The ‘current weeks’ view, showing the calendar current week open by default, will remain as the default study planner view on the module website homepage to ensure that assessment deadlines, booked tutorials, and collaborative tools and activities that are date sensitive are visible to all users. Removing this default view could negatively impact a user’s progression if upcoming deadlines and timed-based activities are not visible on entry to a module website and are missed by students.

To help students bookmark and easily return to important concepts or individual pieces of learning, we added a new ‘Saved for later’ feature to module websites as part of the June 2018 VLE upgrade. This function was developed in direct response to student feedback and is managed via easily accessible links on the study planner and content pages. In addition, smaller changes have been made to make it clearer where you were last by making design changes to the ‘Within this document you last viewed’ link within module content.

The requirement to change the default view of the study planner view based on what a student is currently studying will remain on our feedback review list to be investigated again as improvements to module websites are planned. This would need to be carefully considered against the risks of not displaying imminent deadlines, learning events and activities.

**Forums**

There is an active project currently looking at the functionality of forums and how much of it is currently used in different contexts e.g. different types of forums: tutor group, community etc. Work on the usability
of forums will follow on from this and will consider how much time users now spend in forums on mobile devices.

**Finally**

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this forum for their feedback. If there is something that you would like us to consider, we'd be happy to hear from you – just use the 'Feedback' button at the bottom of your module website.