

Final Project Report

Perceptions, Expectations and Experience of Group Tuition: towards a shared understanding amongst stakeholders

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Report submission date: 26 July 2017

To the memory of Dave Edwards

Names of key staff associated with the project:

Anne Campbell and Mark Jones

ALs interviewed: Angus Walker, Sylvia Meichsner, Pat Allen, Chris Ashley, Alison Florence, Andreas Hohmann, Dave Edwards, Kim Littlewood, Lorna Sharpe, John Shone, Diane Saxon, Niusa Marigheto, Margaret Gilroy, Fiona Moorman, Helen Williams, Susan Smith, Audrey Brown, Pat Ryser-Welch, Ed Bartosinski, Alan Yate

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Executive Summary

This project was concerned with supporting the Open University Group Tuition Strategy by identifying and developing a common understanding across various stakeholders of good (group) tuition practice in the Open University. The intended impact of the project was to ensure students will receive effective student-centred tuition due to an increased shared understanding of the purpose of group tuition. As educators, our aim is to improve the student learning experience within The Open University and beyond.

Alongside a literature review, we ran workshops within and outside the OU to help develop appropriate questions to use in semi-structured interviews. The small project team then interviewed a group of self-selecting OU STEM Associate Lecturers (ALs). These ALs cascaded the interview process to a small group of further ALs, building up a group of 20 interviewees. All interviews were then transcribed and the common themes were drawn out from the transcripts, using thematic analysis. A number of themes emerged.

There is actually little published literature about the purposes of group tuition. Perceptions are formed through individuals' experience of tuition. We have found that ALs have a wealth of expertise so within the OU, we should look to ALs for an understanding of the purposes of tuition in groups.

Aims and scope of the project

The project proposal was prompted by the 2014 eSTeEM project call - Area 4 - Group tutorials for teaching and learning - to research the strategically important area of group tutorials for teaching and learning.

This project was concerned with supporting the Open University Group Tuition Strategy by identifying and developing a common understanding across various stakeholders of good (group) tuition practice in the Open University. Although tuition, and in particular tuition of groups, has always been core to The Open University's support model, it is not clear that all stakeholders (students, ALs, central academics, learning & teaching research staff, staff developers) have a common perception of what tuition is for and how it should be conducted. In particular, what do our students expect from tuition and is it the same thing that we offer? What we offer and what is expected may be far apart. The 2014 student consultation opened 'Pandora's box' in terms of expectations from many aspects of the University's offerings. This was especially true of group tuition.

Trying to identify a common understanding of what group tuition is trying to achieve was a very timely aim as the University was implementing a new Group Tuition policy that had recently been adopted by Senate.

The intended impact of the project was to ensure students will receive effective student-centred tuition due to an increased shared understanding of the purpose of group tuition.

It is expected that outcomes of this project will also have implications across the HEI sector, to inform staff developers as well as those who write teaching material for students. As educators, our aim is to improve the student learning experience within The Open University and beyond.

The specific goals were:

- to identify the perceived fundamental purposes of group tuition
- to develop a common understanding of the purposes of tuition across stakeholders

Activities

We initially conducted a comprehensive literature review to explore the current understanding of tuition within and outside of the OU. This included a review of literature available within the OU that may not have been published externally.

Early in the project, alongside the literature review work, we ran workshops with a variety of teaching staff (ALs and others) within and outside the OU to help develop appropriate questions to use in semi-structured interviews with a small group of STEM ALs.

The small project team then interviewed a group of self-selecting OU STEM ALs who had an interest in this area and who had applied to work with us. These ALs then cascaded the interview process to a small group of further ALs, building up a group of 20 interviewees. All interviews were then transcribed and the common themes were drawn out from the transcripts, using thematic analysis

We proposed to:

- (1) Explore what was meant by the term 'group tuition'. Conduct desk-based research, looking at relevant literature, including internal reports within STEM. Examine relevant policies within Science and MCT, of current group tuition approaches, practices and procedures. Look at group tuition practices within the OU, as well as developing an understanding of tuition research across the sector, in order to put the OU position in the wider context of the HE sector.
- (2) Examine existing data on tutor and student perceptions on group tuition, in particular by looking at the student consultation process which took place in 2014.
- (3) Investigate current perceptions of the purpose of group tuition amongst ALs and some internal staff. As part of this process, gather examples of current practice and delivery. Use a qualitative mixed methods approach. Begin by conducting small face to face focus groups with ALs on level one courses across the Science and MCT faculties. In addition, hold an online event for ALs across both faculties in the Talking Point site. From these focus groups, draw out key themes to create questions to be used in semi-structured interviews with ALs and relevant internal staff.
- (4) Conduct data analysis and synthesis of the research, with subsequent internal and external dissemination.

There was slippage in the timeline of the project due to work pressures on the team members. Robin Goodfellow from IET was assigned to advise us and was extremely helpful. However after he retired, there was no continuous effective replacement from IET and we worked mainly without support. We did receive some assistance from Agnes Kukulska-Hulme who gave some advice about a publication route.

The majority of the project plan was completed. However we did not manage to interview staff in internal roles because time for the project team and other staff became limited, particularly in the run up to and after the implementation of the group tuition policy.

Data and evidence was first collected at an Esteem conference workshop in April 2015. This was followed up by an online workshop run in the Talking Point site in June 2015. In these workshops we explored the concept of tuition, especially group tuition, and identified differences in perceptions between different stakeholder groups including staff tutors, ALs, central academic staff and academic support staff.

This data and evidence then helped us to design an appropriate questionnaire that would focus on the specific aspects of group tuition that would be beneficial to look at (see appendix A).

Following the completion of the questionnaire, we conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with four volunteer ALs, who had answered a call to support Esteem projects. These ALs then, in turn, conducted similar interviews with 3 or 4 ALs each. The interviews, which were recorded with permission, were transcribed and investigated using thematic analysis to draw out the key themes.

Findings

Looking at the published literature, there is actually little literature about the purposes of group tuition. Perceptions are formed through individuals' experiences of tuition.

We have found that ALs have a wealth of expertise so within the OU, we should look to ALs for an understanding of the purposes of tuition in groups.

A number of themes emerged from the thematic analysis. These are the perceptions held by the tutors interviewed:

- Tutors see their role as facilitator not teacher
- Building student confidence and maintaining motivation are important reasons for group tuition
- Social interaction/sharing form the basis of group tuition and are essential to its success.
- Teaching threshold concepts and developing skills are reasons for students attending tutorials
- Collaboration/group work help students develop their skills through peer interaction
- Assessment is often seen to drive tuition although tutors would generally prefer the focus in tutorials to be on learning rather than assessment.
- Challenging students intellectually is seen as important but not actually essential to good tuition
- Students are seen to have changed over the years, leading to lower attendance at tutorials both face to face and online.

Successes

We presented a prize winning poster at the 5th eSTeEM conference in April 2016.

We have been able to use the understanding we have gained in our academic work in module production, in giving seminars internally and externally, and in Senate. This has been particularly important in the recent period of GTP implementation. We are being vigilant in trying to remind colleagues of the purposes of tuition in groups, in particular that the key issue is not timetabling. There is still more to be done within the scope of this project and it is hoped that we will be able to revisit and re-engage with its aims in future.

In September 2015, we took part in a conference on digital pedagogy in Doncaster. From the pre-publicity it was clear that not all stakeholders in the tuition process (students, tutors and other relevant staff) have a common conception of what tuition is for and how it should be conducted, particularly in a digital learning environment. This conference gave our project a further dimension and the opportunity to explore attitudes and perceptions with stakeholders outside of the Open University and from other roles beyond the academic. The web designers and TELs that also attended had a range of alternative perceptions to share.

Further to this, and through offering a seminar, an invitation has been extended to offering a talk for ELC.

Impact

a) Student experience

Impact on student learning has been indirect through our increased understanding of the purposes of group tuition. This understanding is being applied when working with our colleagues to design module tuition strategies, write module materials and in writing online staff development materials for ALs to use. We are also able to apply our own increased understanding when developing our ALs through tutorial visits and other development events.

Students everywhere have similar support needs and expectations of tuition. We can apply what we have learned from Open University tutors to a wider set of tuition models.

The project is contributing to student success through increased expertise that has been passed on to our STEM ALs and other ALs in delivering group tuition through staff tutor discussions and staff development. Online staff development materials for ALs draw directly on the outputs of this project and invite a wide range of staff from all faculties to reflect and share their own thoughts on the purposes of tuition in groups - which has an effect on their practice and hence on their students.

The inclusion of a discussion around the role of tuition in several level 1 modules has also raised this idea in the minds of learners. It is clear that this needs to be further developed in the future.

The above benefits apply to students not directly involved in our project, indirectly through the ALs who we can develop with the expertise gained in the project. All students benefit from better informed and engaged tuition.

b) Teaching

We have had many conversations with colleagues promoting our findings. We have delivered presentations on our findings. We have run AL staff development sessions to share our expertise. The project has impacted how we write in module production, especially at level 1.

Ann has gained SFHEA with a practitioner enquiry based on this project and Anne-Marie is in the process of doing the same.

Our project was included in the Learn About Fair at the online AL staff development event held March 2017.

We have run workshops at two external conferences and we have submitted a case study to the Journal of Open Learning. We expect that disseminating in this way will have impact outside the OU.

c) Strategic change and learning design

It is early days but we are gradually influencing module content and tuition strategies. We expect that others will have an interest in what makes effective and engaging tuition, and will be willing to share examples of good tuition practice, as well as reflecting on what they feel are students' perceptions of a tutorial. This, in turn, should influence how materials are developed, the design of teaching and learning materials and a desire to better understand the expectations of students.

List of deliverables

Case study: **The perceptions of STEM Tutors on the role of tutorials in distance learning**

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Submitted to Journal of Open Learning Feb 2017 Still under review.

Seminar slides: Perceptions of Tuition: Implications For Module Tuition Strategies

Author Ann Walshe with acknowledgement to project colleagues, on Scholarship Exchange at

<https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/Wiki/Document.aspx?DocumentID=2072>

Presentation: **Esteem 2016: Associate Lecturer perspectives on supporting students through tuition in groups**

Poster: **Esteem 2016: Associate Lecturer perspectives on supporting students through tuition in groups**

Appendix

Appendix A: AL questionnaire