

eSTEEeM Project
Final Report
Dr Cathryn Peoples

Personalised Student Support Plans: Examining the Effectiveness of Support Recommendations made by Students

Keywords: accessibility of support, personalised support, student diaries, instant chat, online learning community, synchronous support, asynchronous support.

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Report Submission Date: 31 January 2021

Report Submission Date version 2: 19 April 2021

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1. Executive Summary (300-500 words)

The literature suggests that students want more from academic staff, from desiring to be treated with explicit respect [1] to being co-creators of their teaching and learning material [2] [3]. However, the latest National Student Survey (NSS) results indicate that only 69% of full-time students and 58% of part-time students in England, “*feel part of a community of staff and students*” [4]. This is one of the lowest results across the survey, indicating that there is potential to improve student satisfaction through the relationship that they have with staff and other students, in the creation of a learning community.

Recent debates on whether or not a student is a customer of the academic service that they are receiving may indicate some of the reasons why students feel dissatisfied. In 2017, it was described that, “*Around a half of students now see themselves as customers of their university*” [5]. While a student might be considered to be a customer from the perspective of paying for a service received, it may be considered to be impossible to treat them as a customer in relation to their University education. If they were to be treated as a customer in this scenario, they may not be challenged beyond what they are comfortable with. If they perceive themselves as customers, they will want to get the service they are paying for, in the sense of their degree. This is clearly not an acceptable situation. However, recognition of this notion of a student as a customer is important: Even if, as academics, we do not agree this [6], it is a situation that we need to work with and respond to.

Taking this idea forward, the NSS survey result may be considered to be a general indicator of dissatisfaction, and was somewhat confirmed in an experience by the Project Lead in a previous academic year, when there was a particularly high drop-out rate of Level 3 students of Software Engineering. Module deferrals generally take place without communication with the tutor in advance of their occurrence, therefore the reasons for deferral are therefore largely unknown. The deferrals were, however, an indicator of students being unable to progress with their study.

The goal of this project, ‘*Personalised Student Support Plans: Examining the Effectiveness of Support Recommendations made by Students*’, has therefore been to empower students through the support which I provide to them as their tutor, to respond to potential dissatisfaction with their study situation, and to help them feel part of a community of staff and students. As a consequence of creating an environment in which aspects of this potentially desired student experience are facilitated, it has been possible to examine the extent to which students in fact want increased support, their desire to be part of a learning community, and the impact which this has, firstly, on overall module retention, and secondly, on student performance and satisfaction. **Essentially, the aim of this programme has been to examine what students think they want and, if given what they think they want, to understand if this in fact responds to their needs.**

It was found during this study that the students who engage more regularly and routinely with increased levels of support are the naturally stronger and more competent students. The students who may benefit the most from more support and from a supportive learning environment were found to not engage. Overall engagement with the support on offer during the programme was therefore on a lesser scale than anticipated. However, it is significant to note that retention on the module during the academic year when the programme was running was significantly improved in comparison to the previous academic year. This finding is an interesting one, given who and how many students engaged. The finding may provide evidence that not all students wish to be part of a learning community, but that the fact of knowing that the support is available is enough to encourage students to continue with their study in a way which is satisfying to them.

2. Aims and Scope of Project

The aim of this project was to offer personalised support to students in a manner customised for each on a one-by-one approach, and bespoke for what they felt their needs were and the way(s) they would benefit the most. The objective of doing this was to help students to feel that they are a part of a learning community. The support was offered to two groups of TM354 students between October and June 2020. Recommendations were made to students in relation to how they wanted to be supported, which included the maintenance of online diaries, instant chat, a group environment in Slack, and scheduled interactions with me as their module tutor. Students were also encouraged to suggest their own approaches with regard to how they wanted to be supported.

The suitability of the personalised support approach was assessed mid-way through the project in January 2020, and at the end of the project in June 2020.

The success of the approach to support was assessed according to retention on the module, student satisfaction as indicated through qualitative survey responses, and TMA scores for students being supported in comparison to the students not being supported. The aim was to improve retention on the module, and to improve student satisfaction with their module experience.

3. Project Activities

Encouraging students to join the personalised support programme involved introducing the project to them verbally during an introductory online tutorial, distributing information about the project via the tutor group forum, and finally, a one-to-one email. All students were therefore given equal opportunity to join the programme. Activities to provide personalised support to students were shaped during the project to reduce the distance between the module tutor and them through providing a general online presence and support on a real-time approach, with instant support where possible. This involved primarily running online group chats for 30 minutes every Tuesday evening from 8.30pm, and supporting students completing diary entries. This also involved providing a dedicated one-to-one session with a student on a weekly basis. The main environment in which student support was provided was Slack [7].

Artefacts which capture evidence of the activities throughout the project are discussed in the sections which follow.

3.1 Weekly 30-minute Group Chat in Slack

As part of the support and the creation of a learning environment, 30-minute mini-tutorials were held every Tuesday evening from 9pm. There were three students who routinely engaged with this session. Supporting this weekly chat involved preparation of one of the questions from the module material and working through it with the students. Once complete, the session remained on the general channel for all members of the Slack environment to observe at their own convenience at a later date.

An example of a group chat session in Slack is presented below:

December 3rd, 2019

8:47 PM Cathryn 8:47 PM 15.jpg
8:48 PM pledgr.jpg
9:01 PM Cathryn Hi all, good to see you here
9:01 PM Student D Hi!
9:01 PM Student A Evening!
9:02 PM Cathryn is everyone surviving the TMA?
9:02 PM Student A Yep. Glad to have got through it!!
9:02 PM Student D Yeah, I'm gonna upload tonight
9:03 PM Cathryn you did a fab job submitting early, Student A
9:03 PM great

9:03 PM Student D Not happy with my answers to Q1 so will have another look first 
9:03 PM Cathryn okay

9:03 PM Student A I had to get it out the way  it was a tough one!
9:03 PM Cathryn are there any TMA-related questions? anything last minute?
9:04 PM Student D I'm good
9:04 PM Cathryn perfect
9:04 PM tonight I thought we might think about project issues
9:04 PM when they might arise
9:05 PM if I asked you to name as many categories of project issues as you can, what would you say?
9:05 PM what are project issues associated with, within the wider context of the module?
9:06 PM Student A Stakeholder management, lead times, communication, support, continuity - to name a few...
9:07 PM Cathryn okay, good risks
9:07 PM and if we were to fit them into the volere template according to categories, what might they belong to?
9:07 PM project issues.jpg
9:07 PM so, with that question, I'm referring to this list
9:08 PM pg. 117/118
9:09 PM Student A Stakeholder management - migration to new product, lead times - tasks, communication - documentation and training,
9:09 PM Is this on the right track?
9:09 PM Cathryn I agree lead time - tasks

9:11 PM stakeholder management, could be migration to the new product, or even a new problem

9:11 PM communication could be documentation, yes

9:12 PM **Student A** Stakeholder management is pretty broad and even incorporates the training element as well, being people related

9:12 PM **Cathryn** yes

9:12 PM some good ideas here

9:13 PM if you take a look at the Pledgr scenario above, could you make an attempt at any project issue here?

9:13 PM fyi, this question was from TMA 01 last year

9:14 PM **Student A** I'll try - head is frazzled after today though...!

9:14 PM **Cathryn** I know! it's hard at this time to think!

9:14 PM we're thinking about membership in this scenario

9:14 PM so there could be a risk to the business which is associated with membership

9:16 PM **Student A** Is the risk only associated with the Pledgr system or can it apply to the users?

9:16 PM **Cathryn** Within the generic category of 'Risks', what are the most serious potential problems for the business?

9:16 PM if it is associated with the users interacting with the system, this could be okay

9:17 PM **Student D** product shelf life?

9:17 PM as it can become obsolete...

9:17 PM  not sure

9:18 PM **Cathryn** maybe that it may need to be updated?

9:18 PM and that the next developers may find it difficult to do?

9:19 PM what if the business does not get members?

9:19 PM **Student A** No members, no revenue...?

9:19 PM **Cathryn** yes, Student A

9:20 PM here's the actual question: • h.Project issues: Choose any one of the project issues 18–26 listed on page 118 of Section 6.1 of Unit 2 and invent an example that could apply to the Pledgr software system. Only a short answer is required.
(3 marks)

9:20 PM what you've described would belong within the Risk category, as a serious risk to the business

9:21 PM **Student A** I was thinking more along the lines of system related issues but I guess if the system doesn't work as it should, the net effect is the same

9:22 PM **Student D** So it could be both, technical or business related risk in the Volere template?

9:22 PM **Cathryn** well, the system could still exist without members

9:22 PM yes, technical or business

9:23 PM as another example, there could be a project issue in that the creator pages may need to be moderated to ensure that the content is legal

9:23 PM this might be considered to be an Open Issue

9:24 PM if you were presented with such a question, I would advise to give it your best effort

9:24 PM we know this type of question is hard

9:24 PM and like to recognise the efforts made by students

9:25 PM so just to tie up the story of issues,

9:25 PM system development.jpg

9:25 PM I found this nice diagram

9:26 PM which incorporates a number of the areas which you were asked about in Qu 2 of TMA 01

9:27 PM that was quite a hard topic tonight

9:28 PM **Student A** 9:28 PM It was a bit - it's easy to overthink given the detail being worked through to date...

9:28 PM **Cathryn** 9:28 PM yes, and isn't it hard to pull that list of project issue types into your head on request

9:29 PM **Student A** Yep - I think it depends a lot on perspective too

9:29 PM **Cathryn** the issues themselves?

9:30 PM **Student A** More from the individual being asked - I spend my day to day within projects working for operations, I may see risks differently

9:30 PM **Cathryn** yes

9:30 PM a broad set of issues would be accepted for such a question

9:31 PM it can work to your advantage the fact that there are not always right or wrong answers for TM354 questions

9:31 PM although it means that it can also make it harder to feel confident

9:31 PM about your knowledge

9:32 PM Student D true



9:32 PM Cathryn great i hope that wasn't too much!

9:32 PM Student D are you on your weekend?

9:33 PM Student D not yet

9:33 PM quite busy this week

9:34 PM I only just finished work an hour ago

9:34 PM and working tomorrow as well

9:34 PM Cathryn aw no

9:34 PM at least you're getting your TMA out of the way

9:35 PM Student D yes, I'm not happy with my TMA tbh



9:35 PM but, I'll catch up with the next one

9:35 PM Cathryn maybe you will surprise yourself

9:35 PM good to chat with you both

9:36 PM Student D Thanks, have a good night!

9:36 PM Student A Yes, thanks Cathryn. All the best with the TMA!

9:36 PM Student D Thanks

9:36 PM Cathryn same time next week!



1



9:36 PM Student A Absolutely - see you then

These sessions generally ran slightly longer than they were anticipated to run, due to the interactions taking place during the teaching. These were quite face-paced teaching sessions and it was sometimes the case that students would need to reflect after the session on the material which has been covered during the session. I was aware that not all students were able to keep up with what was being covered during the chat, however, that is a consequence of the pace. The fact that these students continued to return to the chats each week validates the value they got from them.

3.2 Interactions between Students in Slack

The Slack environment facilitated interactions between myself as the tutor and individual students, and also between myself and the student group as a whole. A further opportunity provided through Slack was support of the interactions directly between students. A twenty-five minute conversation between two students in Slack is captured below. To give the context for this interaction, only one student arrived for the Tuesday evening group session. I therefore took the session to the student's private channel so he would feel less exposed and uncomfortable during a public one-on-one session with me. Mid-way through this session, however, another student arrived who had unintentionally missed the group session – he had forgotten about it. Once our teaching session had ended, the student initiated an interaction with the other student, and they spoke for twenty-five minutes in the public Slack channel.

Tuesday, January 28th, 2020

9:00 PM Cathryn Hi Student C

9:00 PM Student C Good evening

9:00 PM Cathryn Are you maybe the only one this evening again

9:00 PM Student C Oh no!

9:00 PM Sorry I didn't make it last week, something came up.

9:00 PM Cathryn no problem at all

9:01 PM let's move this to your wall, to not put you under too much pressure

9:19 PM Student D Oh, I just realised Tuesday is today



9:19 PM I thought it was yesterday

9:31 PM **Cathryn**  I thought you might be mixed up!

9:31 PM **Student C** Hi Student D

9:31 PM **Student D**  Hi

9:31 PM **Student C** Student D! Sorry

9:31 PM **Student D** No problem, my fault 

9:31 PM don't know what happened 

9:32 PM **Student C** I have an alarm set on my phone otherwise I'd always miss it!

9:32 PM **Student D** I usually remember 

9:32 PM and I remembered yesterday

9:32 PM **Student C** Lol. A day early.

9:32 PM **Student D** as I was sure it was Tuesday and I was upset that I couldn't make it

9:33 PM yeah, too many things happening in my life at the moment

9:33 PM trying to catch up with the TMA now

9:33 PM **Student C** How are you finding the TMA?

9:34 PM **Student D** this OCL is driving me crazy

9:35 PM **Student C** You're not alone there

9:35 PM It isn't easy. That forum post about it is quite big, so I guess a lot of people are struggling with it.

9:36 PM **Student D** I'm only on q2 now and the TM470 starts soon so I'm in big trouble 

9:36 PM true

9:36 PM **Student C** Oh no

9:36 PM I think you're doing quite well if you're on q2

9:36 PM **Student D** I was trying to find out if OCL is being used in a real world but it looks like nobody heard of it



9:37 PM **Student C** Really? What do they use instead? Do you know?

9:37 PM **Student D** Not sure tbh, plain English maybe?

9:37 PM **Student C** I imagine OCL would be used where safety is critical?

9:38 PM **Student D** It's possible actually

9:39 PM But there is not a lot of information on the web

9:39 PM there were some posts on the StackOverflow but very old ones

9:39 PM **Student C** I know. I've been looking to. It's very hard to find anything useful.

9:39 PM too*

9:40 PM **Student D** I think I finally almost understand it but not really sure, I guess I'll know once I get the feedback

9:40 PM Are you going to the tutorial in Bristol?

9:41 PM **Student C** No. That is too far for me. I live in Northamptonshire. Where do you live?

9:41 PM **Student D** Swindon

9:41 PM 45mins drive so I should be fine

9:42 PM **Student C** That is reasonable. I missed the one near me as I was on a weekend course. I think there is a revision one later towards the end which I will attend.

9:42 PM That is either Nottingham or Leicester which are both reasonably near me

9:43 PM **Student D** Yes, it makes sense to do the revision ones

9:43 PM **Student C** Just checked. Coventry! I wasn't even close. lol. I should be able to attend that one.

9:44 PM **Student D** I think I signed up for the one in Reading

9:44 PM **Student C** Yes. I was going to say that Reading would be the one for you.

9:45 PM **Student D** Yes, so I'll do one in Bristol and one in Reading, bit of travelling

9:46 PM I only just move to Swindon a year ago so before that I attended tutorials in Chelmsford, Colchester and Cambridge ;]

9:46 PM *moved

9:46 PM **Student C** Did you move for work?

9:47 PM **Student D** It's complicated, I was selling my house in Essex and decided to rent for a while to be more mobile and able to move when I find a job

9:47 PM quite a lot of jobs here around Swindon

9:47 PM better than Essex as over there most of them were in London

9:48 PM **Student C** What do you do, if you don't mind me asking?

9:48 PM **Student D** but I haven't found anything yet so I'm still stuck doing boring, menial job 😊

9:48 PM I work for Aldi Stores as a driver ;]

9:48 PM **Student C** You're looking for a job in computing?

9:48 PM Along the lines of what you're studying?

9:49 PM **Student D** oh yes, I started applying already

9:49 PM had one phone interview and it went ok but they finally decided that they want a graduate and told me to call them once I finish the uni

9:49 PM and the other one I went for an interview in person

9:50 PM and it was ok, I didn't do badly

9:50 PM but I didn't get the job as they found somebody better 😊

9:50 PM but again, I got really good feedback and was told to try again later

9:50 PM **Student C** It's good experience though

9:50 PM **Student D** yes, I wanted to start shopping around before graduating

9:51 PM **Student C** That's good feedback. Well done. Just unlucky that someone more qualified applied I guess.

9:51 PM I'm going to look for a career change. It will be difficult for me though as I think I'm quite old for a career change. I won't let that stop me though.

9:51 PM **Student D** I had to stop sending CVs now as I won't be able to change jobs for the next few months due to some personal stuff

9:52 PM you are never too old

9:52 PM age is just a number 😊

9:52 PM **Student C** Exactly!

9:52 PM I hope everything turns around for you soon and you get the job you want. Fingers crossed for you.

9:53 PM **Student D** Thank you, good luck with your adventure mate, hope it will work out for you as well

9:53 PM **Student C** Thank you. Let me know if you have any luck. I'd be interested to hear about it.

9:54 PM **Student D** Will do, I'll start applying probably after the exam

9:55 PM Bit tired today so I think I'm done with studying, gonna play some games now to relax 😊

9:55 PM **Student C** Good luck with the TMA. I'm off too. I'd better spend a bit of time with my wife before bed! Good night.

9:55 PM **Student D** Good night!

This interaction is interesting. The students begin to talk about subject-specific material, and then digress into a more personal conversation, led by their interest in different module tutorials, and their location. This then leads into a discussion on where they are based, their employment, and then some discussion about their job prospects. All of this conversation took place in the public channel which could be observed by anyone within our group. I felt really pleased at this point in the support programme, being able to gather the evidence of student comfort with one another, and essentially, the success and achievements of our learning environment.

3.3 One-to-one Student Session in Slack

As part of the support programme, one-to-one interactions could be scheduled with me. Only one student made use of this opportunity, and this interaction was held on a weekly basis. An example of a one-to-one session between us is captured below.

December 2nd, 2019

6:21 AM **Student A** Thanks Cathryn - I uploaded it 3 times in the end, as I kept finding niggly errors in grammar in my saved copy. I've left well alone now 

8:58 PM **Student A** Evening Cathryn - how are you? 

8:59 PM **Cathryn** Hi Student A, I'm good, thanks, how are you?

8:59 PM **Student A** Relieved mainly, getting all the assignment work out of the way at the weekend - phew

8:59 PM **Cathryn** That was great!

8:59 PM You're well ahead of the gang!

9:00 PM **Student A** That's good to know - I was worried I might need an extension! It takes me a while to get motivated with assignments but once I'm in the zone, I keep going!

9:01 PM **Cathryn** There have been quite a few extension requests, so you really have done a great job

9:01 PM and you are early too

9:02 PM **Student A** Fantastic! It was quite a big assignment to be honest, one of the largest I've prepared. Hopefully the content of mine is up to scratch

9:02 PM **Cathryn** 

9:02 PM are you progressing with your reading now? or having a day or two break?

9:04 PM **Student A** I'm taking this evening off - I think I earned it lol. I was on my vive vr headset earlier playing

Star Trek bridge crew, it's funny what one can do with free time 

9:04 PM **Cathryn** 

9:04 PM you are up to date with your reading anyway, aren't you?

9:06 PM **Student A** Yes, I finished block 1 and all the study guides. I was surprised that unit 4 went so quick but then some of the content was covered earlier, anyway. When do the programming bits come in to play? I'm slightly

apprehensive as it's been ages since I touched java 

9:07 PM **Cathryn** There's not so much programming in this module, Student A.

9:07 PM From memory, there is some practical aspect in TMA 03

9:10 PM **Student A** Ah ok. I was actually pretty good with java in m250 and pretty much nailed the coding. M256 just lost me as the joy for programming got lost in all the heavy detail. Oddly enough, I enjoy learning the engineering concepts in this module and how agile is actually implemented in development. It's a methodology that kept me interested in m253, so looking forward to exploring the application further

9:10 PM **Cathryn** I'm just reminding myself of last year's TMA 03

9:11 PM yes, there are some Java files provided

9:11 PM **Student A** I think I already downloaded the files

9:11 PM **Cathryn** I had another student tell me today that they are enjoying the module too 

9:11 PM **Student A** Not put them in netbeans yet though

9:12 PM **Cathryn** It's nice to have positive feedback

9:12 PM **Student A** It is a good module if you keep up - and the support is appreciated too!

9:12 PM **Student A** I quite liked the activity model in the tma, and seeing all the different perspectives from students

9:13 PM **Cathryn** yes, isn't it interesting just how many interpretations there can be



9:13 PM **Student A** I saw one student is doing this with 2 other modules

9:13 PM **Cathryn** you'll be involved in a similar type of task in TMA 02

9:13 PM **Student A** Absolutely! I see it at work all the time

9:13 PM Ok cool

9:13 PM **Cathryn** yes, there are students who are studying 3 Level 3 modules!

9:13 PM and some starting TM470 in February

9:14 PM **Student A** I hope they are shift workers and don't have a 5 day working week!!

9:14 PM Good grief

9:16 PM **Student A** I can just cope with the pace of this module and work right now, I think Last year thought me a thing or two about studying 2 level 3 modules! I get that it's good to get them out the way, but I'd likely fail if I took 3 on!

9:17 PM and all is good at your work at the moment?

9:18 PM **Student A** Hope they succeed in any case....Not bad, just started a new project for temperature increase rate measurement of manufactured plasterboard. Fun with source code, ladder logic and scada integration. Just throwing in



the field equipment and containment over the next 3 weeks

9:19 PM That's alongside my vm trials and windows update server integration



9:20 PM No rest at all really

9:20 PM **Cathryn** sounds very busy indeed!

9:20 PM do you get much time off over xmas?

9:21 PM **Student A** It's my preference - helps time fly!! Sadly no, only 25, 26 of December and 1st Jan. I'm doing a load of admin tasks over Christmas. I used all my holiday up to support my last 2 uni modules as I couldn't keep up in my normal time

9:22 PM **Cathryn** at least the atmosphere is nice in work at xmas

9:22 PM and lots of chocolate seems to float round

9:24 PM **Student A** We had a colleague who on the 1st of December would come in with tinsel in the adjacent office



and decorate everyone's computer I absolutely love chocolate- it's my one weakness, specifically Lindor!

9:24 PM **Cathryn** oh goodness! that's a great idea!!



9:24 PM I like the boxes of thornions

9:24 PM they've got a Christmas box out

9:26 PM **Student A** It can make or break friendships that one, one of my mates went nuts when he saw the Christmas display on his desk!! Oh my....I'm not safe alone with chocolate in the office!! That reminds me, last year we were all given advent calendars by the company, we never had one this time - I'll investigate...

9:26 PM **Cathryn** oh really???

9:26 PM lol, that's funny!!

9:27 PM **Student A** We also have a Christmas dinner paid for in the canteen in a couple of weeks It's a funny place!!



9:27 PM **Cathryn**

9:28 PM **Student A**, I have scheduled to speak with a TM470 student at 9.30pm, so I'm going to have to run in a couple of mins

9:28 PM I'm glad to hear that you are generally okay with the module

9:28 PM Will you be around tomorrow night?

9:29 PM **Student A** It's cool - I'm pretty happy with the progress this last week I'll be there tomorrow Hoping the



opposite answers don't come out for the tma See you then!

9:29 PM **Cathryn** excellent, **Student A**, talk tomorrow!

This student was exemplary in his interactions with me. He would be present in the chat in advance of our scheduled time, and he would always greet me a couple of minutes prior to the scheduled beginning of the session. This conversation easily flowed, through the discussion about the student's TMA submission, his current progress on the module, and then digressed into his paid employment. With this student, I always found that there was no trouble with keeping the conversation going, and the sessions would often last longer than was initially intended.

3.4 Reviewing the Suitability of the Personalised Support Approaches

Reviews were carried out on the suitability of the personalised support approach in both January and June 2020. In January, the objective of the study was to examine how satisfied students were with their support, with a view to providing them with more opportunities to adapt the approach taken. I also took the opportunity at this time to extend the personalised support to any students who felt that they were struggling. One student did sign up at this point, who was relatively active in his participation in the weekly group chats, although especially around the time of TMA submissions. The objective of the study in June 2020 was to examine the overall satisfaction of students at the end of the academic year and the contribution which they felt the scheme had on their module performance.

3.5 Presenting my Research at Advance HE Conference

This research was presented at the following conferences:

1. C. Peoples, "*A Case Study into the Effectiveness of Personalised Tuition for Final Year Distance Students*," Advance HE Teaching & Learning Conference 2020: Teaching in the Spotlight: Creative Thinking to Enhance the Student Experience: From Curriculum Design to Student Success, 9th July 2020.
2. C. Peoples, "*Personalised Student Support Plans: Examining the Effectiveness of Support Recommendations made by Students*" presented at the 9th eSTEEeM Annual Conference: Informing Student Success - From Scholarship to Practice, 29 April 2020.

4. Findings

The primary objective of this project prior to its beginning was to improve retention on the TM354 module in comparison to the retention during a previous year. This was achieved – in 19J, only one student deferred the module, and this was not completely unexpected as he had similarly deferred the module in the previous academic year for personal reasons. He was not being additionally supported by the personalised programme, and I only found out that he had deferred the module after it had taken place. Due to a lack of engagement from the student, there is perhaps little that could have been done to encourage him to stay on the module.

The findings from the project are considered in terms of the engagement with the support programme, the profile of the students who chose to engage with the programme, the TMA results achieved by students engaging with the programme in comparison to the students who chose to not engage, the support which students found in their diaries, and the peer support which took place during the year. These are presented in the following sections, alongside some further miscellaneous topics which arose throughout the year.

4.1 Limited Engagement with the Personalised Support Programme

One finding from the study which I reflected on throughout the academic year and considered ways to influence it was in relation to the number of students who wanted to participate in the programme. When I first set up the programme, I believed that the majority of students would participate, and it would be the minority of students who did not. At that very early stage, I wondered how I would be able to provide all students across the two cohorts with the amount of personalised support that I was proposing to offer each. However, the reality revealed that this was not something that I need be concerned about as, despite offering the support to all students, they did not demonstrate similar levels of interest in it. My feeling throughout the year persisted with the thought that the number of students participating was a minority of students, and that there are other students who may benefit more from the scheme than those who were involved. This has been a relatively unexpected outcome of the programme.

After realising that it is the minority of students who wish to engage with increased levels of support, an important outcome of this research became a desire to understand the reasons why some students may not engage with it. When students were initially asked if they wished to opt in or opt out of the programme, I asked them their reason for taking their action. In relation to students who opted out, two students told me the reasons why, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of Students who Opted Out of the Support Programme, and the Reasons Why

ID	Date of Birth	Previous Academic Qualifications	Other Modules Currently Studying	Special Circumstances	Prior Performance	Main Reason for Opting Out?
1	Mar. 1976	HNC or HND (including BTEC & SQA equivalents)	TM351 Data management and analysis,	N/A	Grade 4 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Fail, Grade 2 Pass, Deferral, Fail, Pass, Distinction, Pass, Pass, Fail, Pass (Medium/Low)	<i>“I opted out as it felt that it may require more organizational time to dedicate to the course. As my study time is limited and more than a little random I felt that having a more organised support structure would only infuriate the tutor! As I write this though, it maybe that more structure is what I need to get more from the course...”</i>
2	Sep. 1985	UK first degree with Honours - eg BA/BSc Hons	TM351 Data management and analysis, TM352 Web, mobile and cloud technologies, TM470 2020	N/A	Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Distinction, Distinction, Pass, Distinction (High)	<i>“In all honesty, it sounds quite good. I just have to manage my time so meticulously to ensure I have time for everything. I don't want to risk participating when I'm unsure of the amount of input that would be required.”</i>

In both cases, these students believed that they would be unable to commit the time to the programme. They therefore equated more support with more time from their perspective.

In the June 2020 review, I again asked students for their reasons for either opting in or out of the support programme, which are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 June 2020 Review: What was your Reason for not Engaging in the Personalised Support Programme?

<i>What was your Reason for not Engaging in the Personalised Support Programme?</i>	
Student I	<i>“I have always worked very independently and felt I would not be able to offer good feedback to the tutor if I were to be involved with the support programme.”</i>
Student J	<i>“I did originally opt in but due to working full time and personal pressures, I didn’t follow up on the emails.”</i>
Student k	<i>“I had been scoring highly in previous modules without much support, and the programme had a time commitment involved. I do struggle to fit in studying as it is so I didn’t want to commit to anything else.”</i>

Three students responded to this question, and again highlighted the time restrictions that they operate under. Interestingly, another student described that he would not be able to “offer good feedback to the tutor”, in the case that he was involved with the programme. This response indicates that the student was aware that there would be a ‘cost’ to operating in the programme, and as the support was being offered for a research project, he would be required to feed back his perspectives on the programme. Essentially, this again relates to the time angle, however, it is interesting that the student was thinking that far ahead when making his decision to participate or not.

I was also curious to understand if students had any doubts when opting out of the programme, and asked them this question as part of their June 2020 review. The survey responses are presented in Table 3. While they were cautious of being involved in an experimental mechanism that would require their time, I was interested to understand if they were somewhat curious to experience what was on offer.

Table 3 June 2020 Review: Did you have any Doubts when Opting Out of the Support Programme?

<i>Did you have any doubts when opting out of the support programme?</i>	
Student I	<i>“Not at the time, but ... I felt I would have benefitted mid way through the module.”</i>
Student K	<i>“I thought that regular contact with a tutor may have been useful but was reluctant to commit in case I didn’t have time.”</i>

Two students responded to this question, with one again saying that the draw on his time was a significant enough reason for him to not commit to the programme. The other student indicated, however, that he had felt that he would have benefited from being exposed to the programme mid-way through the module. It was really disappointing from my perspective to receive this feedback, as I had communicated with students throughout the academic year that they could join in with the programme at any stage. Unfortunately, this evidence suggested that my message had not been received by this student.

4.2 Profile of Students Engaging with the Personalised Support Programme

Eleven students initially opted in to the personalised support programme. The students who engaged the most with the programme were the more competent students, the ones who had achieved the higher marks. This assessment on student ‘competency’ was reached on the basis that six of the eleven students had achieved at least one distinction in their prior modules. It is also perhaps significant to note that, out of the eleven students who indicated initially that they wished to participate in the programme, only six of these students were regularly i.e. on a weekly basis, involved (Student A, Student C, Student D, Student B, Student L and Student E). Incidentally, five of these six students had achieved at least one distinction in their prior studies.

To give some characteristics of the students who were involved: The oldest student was 44 years old, and the youngest was 21 years old. The students were predominantly male. Two female students indicated a desire to participate in the programme, one participated a little and then dropped out, while one did not participate at all. One of the female students was a Degree Apprentice. I had several international students join the programme, which included two Polish students.

One of these Polish students told me that he had never spoken to an OU tutor throughout his studies. I also had several students involved who were employed by Her Majesty's Services. I had one student participate who had physical disability, and I had a couple with mental disability. The students who engaged in the programme are characterised using the detail in Table 4.

Table 4 Profile of Students Engaging with the Personalised Support Programme

Student	Date of Birth	Previous Academic Qualifications	Other Modules Currently Studying	Special Circumstances	Prior Performance	Reason for Opting In	Type of Personalised Support Received* (in practice, are these being used? ✓ yes, x no)
A	Jul. 1981	Higher National Diploma (HND)	N/A	N/A	Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 4 Pass, Grade 4 Pass, Pass, Pass, Pass, Pass (Medium)	<i>"I have found the last few modules very challenging to focus on and digest. Specifically M256 and M353 - I struggle with taking in heavy and condensed detail. Also, despite good grades through modules previously, I often let myself down at exams, despite how much effort I feel I put in."</i>	1 ✓ 2 x 3 ✓ 4 ✓ 5 ✓
G	Jan. 1976	Other qualification at equiv. level to GSCE A*-C (SCQF 5)	TM470 Feb. 2020	N/A	Grade 4 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Pass, Pass, Pass (Medium)	<i>"Stay motivated and focused"</i>	2 x 3 x 4 ~ 5 x
C	Jul. 1974	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE)	N/A	N/A	Distinction, Distinction, Distinction, Distinction, Distinction, Distinction, Pass, Pass, Pass (High)	<i>"I try not to ask for help from my tutors unless I really have to. Maybe a personalized support plan would suit me better."</i>	4 ✓ 5 ✓
D	May 1983	2 or more A-Level, SQA Highers or equivalent	TM470 Feb. 2020	N/A	Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Distinction, Pass, Pass (Medium)	<i>"To learn as much as possible from this module and get the best results"</i>	1 x 2 x 3 x 4 ✓ 5 x
B	Nov. 1988	Other qualification, level not known	TM352 Web, mobile and cloud tech.	N/A	Graded 2 Pass, Distinction, Distinction, Pass, Distinction, Pass (High)	<i>"I keen to explore how a different approach to support would work and benefit my studies."</i>	1 ✓ 2 ✓
F	Nov. 1986	NVQ Level 2, or SVQ, GNVQ or GSVQ at	N/A	N/A	Grade 4 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 4 Pass, Grade 4 Pass, (Medium)	<i>"Struggles with previous modules."</i>	1 ✓ 2 x 3 x 4 x 5 x

		Level 2 (SCQF 5)			Grade 3 Pass, Pass, Pass, Pass (Medium)		
N	Apr. 1996	Undergrad Credits from UK HE institution but no HE Qualifcn	TM353 IT systems: planning for success	CMT Type 1A, Scoliosis, Scheuermann's Disease Under 25	N/A	<i>"Life is hectic."</i>	1 x 2 x 3 x 4 x 5 x
L	Aug. 1997	2 or more A-levels (or equivalent)	TM351 Data management and analysis, TM352 Web, mobile and cloud tech., TM470 Feb. 2020	Under 25	Distinction, Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Distinction (High)	<i>"Any help is good, I think you'd be silly not to opt in!"</i>	1 x 2 ✓ 3 x 4 x 5 x
J	May 1985	Advanced Apprenticeship at Level 3 (SCQF 6)	TXY227 Change, strategy and projects at work	Degree Apprentice	Grade 4 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Pass, Pass, Pass, Grade 4 Pass, Fail, Pass, Pass, Pass (Medium/Low)	<i>"No detail given"</i>	-
E	May 1990	GCSE A*-C, O Level A-B, CSE1, Intermed 2, Credit Stand.Gr	TM351 Data management and analysis, TM352 Web, mobile and cloud tech., TM470 Feb. 2020	N/A	Grade 3 Pass, Grade 3 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Grade 2 Pass, Distinction, Pass, Pass, Distinction (High)	<i>"I think it would be stupid not to. It has proved helpful and I am grateful of the extra support."</i>	1x 2✓ 4~

The reasons which students gave for engaging in the programme included struggles with prior modules, and the opportunity to use the programme as a tool to support their motivation.

Personalised support is characterised in column eight of Table 1 according to: 1: PDP; 2: Supported on an ad hoc basis using Skype or Slack; 3: Scheduled interactions; 4: Group chat in Slack; 5: Diary. In this column, I have captured the support techniques which the students initially indicated that they would engage with, and using 'P' and 'x' to indicate if they did in fact engage with the approaches that they indicated they would. Some students were ambitious, indicating that they wanted to participate with every approach on offer, while other students were more cautious. The more cautious students, such as Student C, made effective use of the resources that he identified initially that he wanted to use. Other student, such as Student F, trailed techniques that he thought might be useful, but then unfortunately dropped off the programme.

4.3 TMA Results: A Comparison of the Results of Students Engaging with the Programme with those Achieved by Students Not Engaging

One of the major indicators by which the success of this project is being measured is according to the impact which the personalised support programme is having on the TMA scores of the students involved. These are summarised in Figure 1.

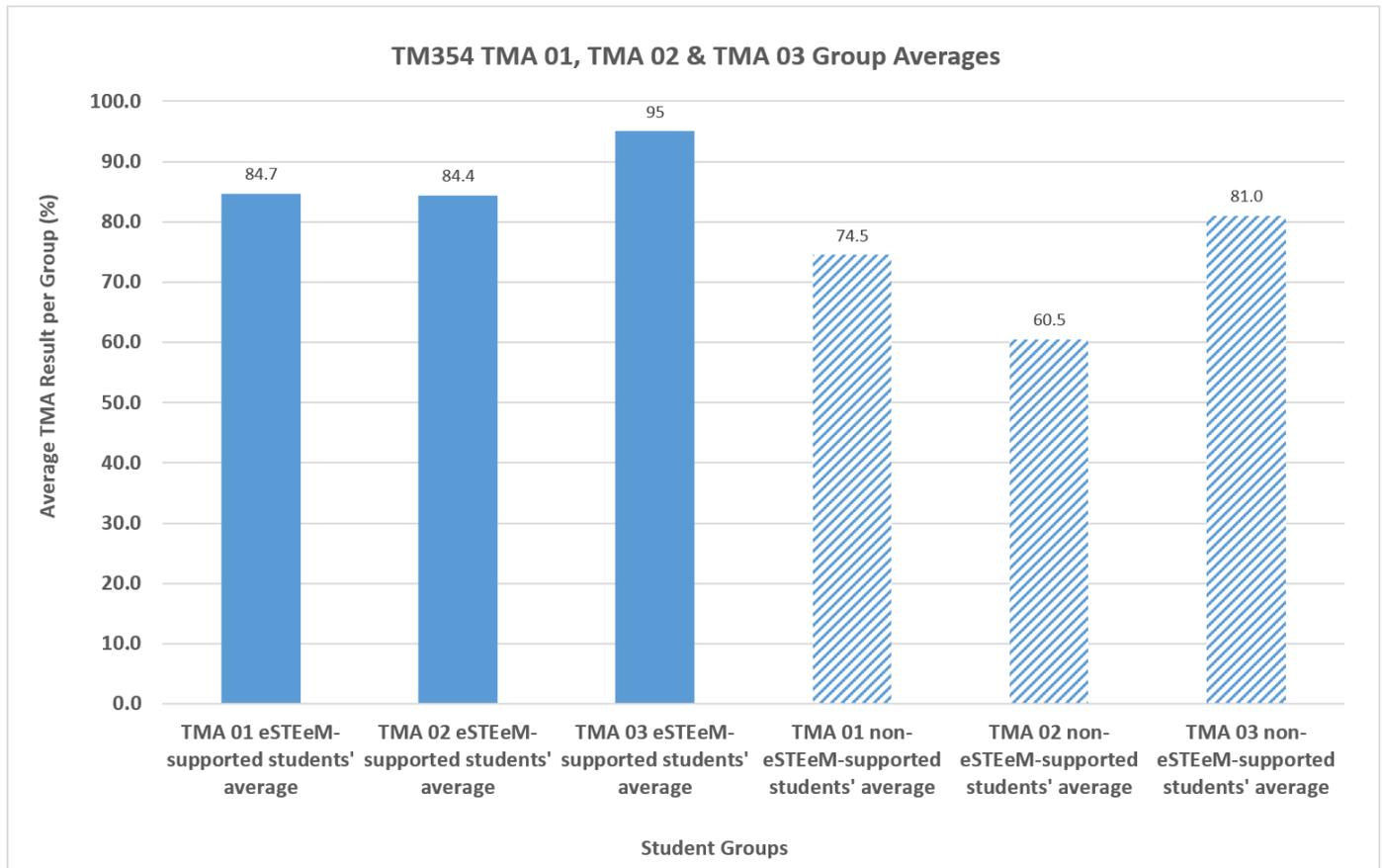


Figure 1 Difference between TMA Results for Students being Supported in Comparison to those Not Being Supported

In analysing these results, I was interested to understand if the students who were participating in the programme would achieve higher marks than the students not participating. As shown in Figure 1, this indeed was the result, which was encouraging for the support programme. For TMA 01, there was a variation of approximately 10%. For TMA 02, there was a much wider variation, of approximately 25%. Finally, for TMA 03, there was a variation of 14%. These results therefore gave indications that the support was helpful for students. However, it should be recognised that, given it was the more competent students who were engaging with the support programme, it is difficult to determine the extent to which their natural competencies are shining through in this result.

4.4 Diary Entries made by Students as Part of their Personalised Support

One finding which has been particularly interesting is the number of students who participated in the option of recording a diary entry as part of their personalised support. Students knew that I would read it and that we may or may not have a conversation about it, and they continued to regularly and routinely maintain the entries throughout the year. Two students routinely contributed to their diaries. Some students, however, initially began recording diary entries, but ceased to continue with this option as they progressed throughout the academic year. For example, the diary entries captured in Figure 2 and Figure 3 were the only diary entries which one student made.

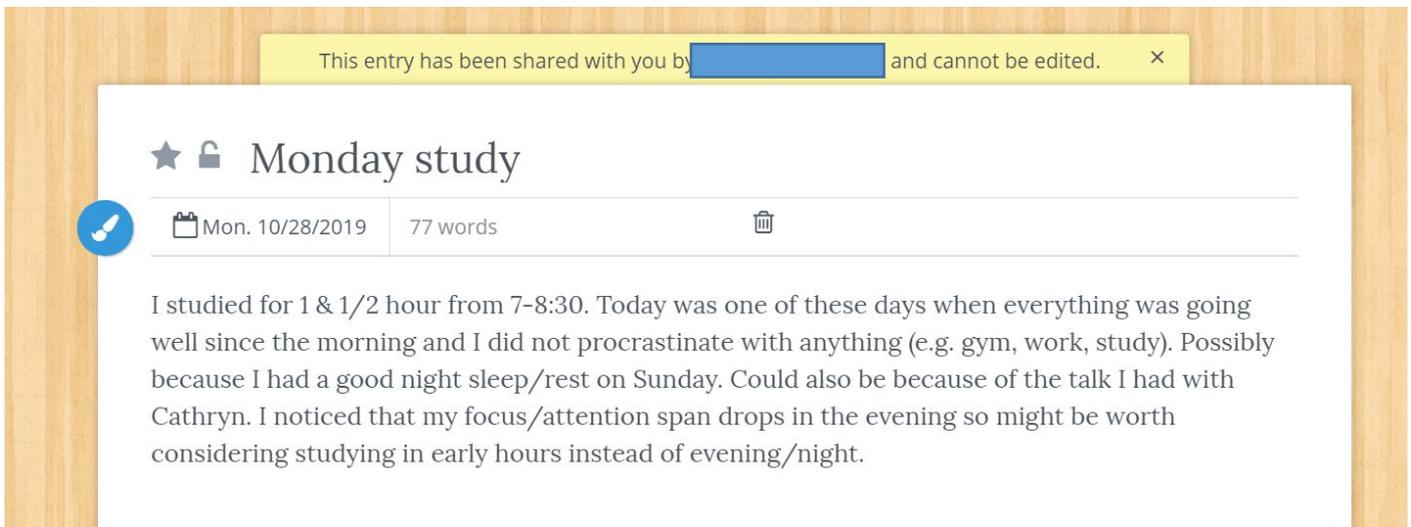


Figure 2 Diary Entry 1/2

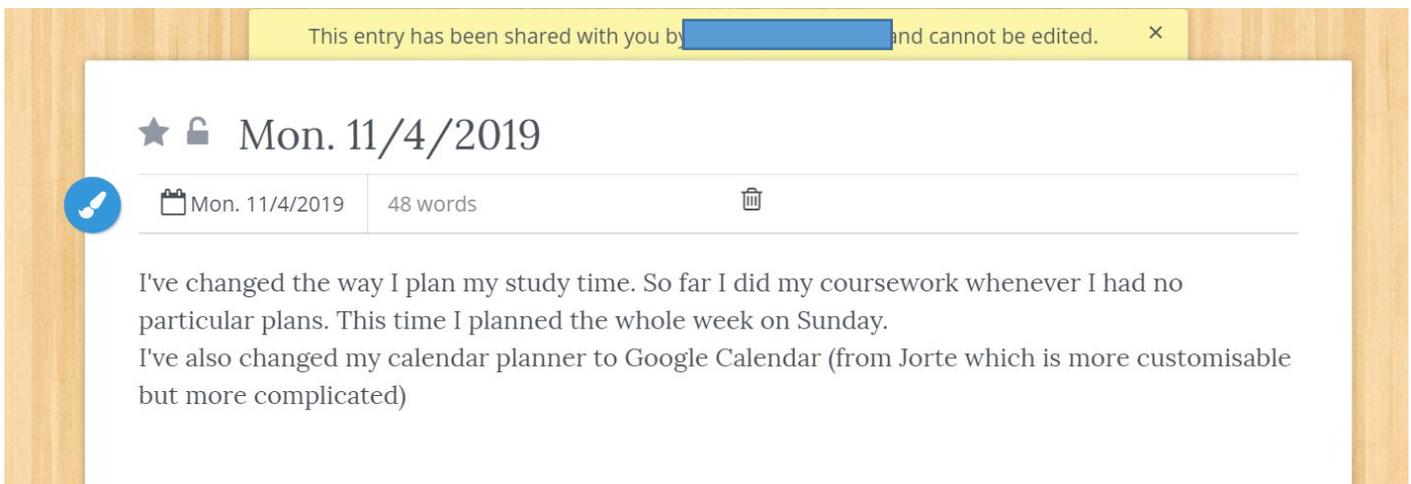


Figure 3 Diary Entry 2/2

In these entries, the student gives evidence that he is aware of his weaknesses in relation to study, and what changes may need to be made to help him continue to make progress. However, he was not able to explore this within the support on offer.

In relation to the two students who routinely contributed diary entries, the ways in which the diaries were written were relatively similar, in that they both wrote using a reflective narrative that gave insight into both their study and personal lives. The ways in which these students prepared their diary entries helped me to support them, as I was aware of the amount of work and effort they were giving to their studies, and the factors which were frustrating their study. Examples of diary entries from each of these students are presented in Figure 4 to Figure 6 (Student A) and Figure 7 to Figure 9. (Student C).

4.4.1 Diary Entries from Student A

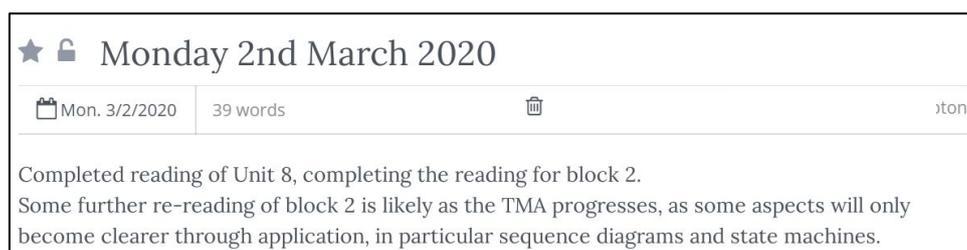


Figure 4 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student A 1

★ 06/1/2020

Mon. 1/6/2020 114 words

Read through unit 5, sections 5 and 6.

Things are certainly becoming more challenging now, with lots of intricate detail needing to be absorbed.

Whilst I am fine with the concept of invariants and constraints - applying such logic as a suitable OCL expression is particularly difficult as it is not always possible to make such clear judgement on the necessary requirements to be applied.

The generalisation / specialisation relationship makes more sense as this relates back to superclass and subclass relationships, so it is easier to picture the hierarchy involved.

I aim to complete reading for sections 7 and unit 8 tomorrow, with a view to attempt the TMA later in the week.

Figure 5 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student A 2

★ 06/1/2020

Mon. 1/6/2020 114 words

Read through unit 5, sections 5 and 6.

Things are certainly becoming more challenging now, with lots of intricate detail needing to be absorbed.

Whilst I am fine with the concept of invariants and constraints - applying such logic as a suitable OCL expression is particularly difficult as it is not always possible to make such clear judgement on the necessary requirements to be applied.

The generalisation / specialisation relationship makes more sense as this relates back to superclass and subclass relationships, so it is easier to picture the hierarchy involved.

I aim to complete reading for sections 7 and unit 8 tomorrow, with a view to attempt the TMA later in the week.

Figure 6 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student A 3

4.4.2 Diary Entries from Student B

★ Tue. 11/26/2019

Tue. 11/26/2019 205 words

I've had a hectic week or so up to now. I anticipated the busy period so I was ahead on my study, fortunately.

Today I had most of the day off work so I used it to finish off reading the parts of the units I hadn't read yet.

I did a small amount of work on the TMA which meant I've answered all the questions apart from the one which involves creating a new model in the group activity. They are only first my attempt so not great answers, but it is a basis to go forward with. I imagine I will have to completely rewrite some of the answers.

Attended the tutorial tonight which was very helpful as usual. This is the first time I've ever felt like I am starting to get to know fellow students!

I've just read over my question one and if I'm honest, I think I have only half answered the question being asked, so this is something I will most likely have to go back and address. I will prioritise the questions I am more confident of getting a good mark on first though and then come back to these towards the end if I have time.

Figure 7 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 1

★ Wed. 12/18/2019

Wed. 12/18/2019 69 words

I intended to make some progress with TMA02 tonight, but I couldn't motivate myself to continue with it. Instead, I worked my way through section 5. I am finding the SAQs and exercises quite challenging at the minute, even though I think I have a reasonable understanding of the module materials. I went over my notes and realised I am not retaining too much of what I have read.

Figure 8 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 2

★ Sun. 1/26/2020

Sun. 1/26/2020 120 words

I been reading for around 30 minutes to an hour most days this week. I had a good day studying today and feel I got a lot of work done.

I've now read up to Unit 7 Section 3 which means I only have section 4 to read to stay on schedule for this week.

I did a bit of work on the TMA and answered questions 3 a i and 3 a ii although I have spotted a couple of small changes I need to make. Having read questions 3 a iii and 3 a iv, I think I am in a position to make a reasonable attempt at answering them and I intend to do this tomorrow evening.

Figure 9 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 3

I found the diary entries to be a useful artefact in a number of instances to appreciate circumstances in the students' wider lives, and the impact which this might have on their studies.

4.5 Peer Support

Through setup of the group chat environment in Slack, students were supported in their interactions with one another. In Slack, students were able to see when their peer students were online and available for chat. In one example of this, there was a conversation between Student C and Student A on Tuesday 26th November 2019. This conversation took

place at what was supposed to be the group session, however, only these two students arrived and they proceeded to chat between themselves. During this session, there was a very nice synergy between the two students, and they were able to sustain a conversation with little interaction from me until around 9.20pm (approximately 20 minutes). Student C left a diary entry later that same evening. In it, he described that, *“This is the first time I've ever felt like I am starting to get to know fellow students!”*.

4.6 Area of Concern

One area of concern which cropped up during the year was in the support which some students were asking for in relation to their TMAs. Some students (the majority) were satisfied with asking during the group chat. I did not receive any assessment queries from students who are not involved in the personalised support project.

There is one student in particular, however, who asked quite a lot of questions in relation to his TMA. For one TMA, he asked something about every TMA question as he has worked through them. In a particular incident, he didn't participate in the group chat, although was online, and immediately after the group chat ended, started to ask questions directly to me. I had shared with students during the chat a sample TMA question from a previous year, the student's answer, and my marking and feedback for a particular student's submission. My 19J student didn't understand the reasons why I had deducted a mark and asked was it because of a very minor labelling issue, a reason which wasn't in fact detailed in my feedback. He also told me that he had attended another tutor's tutorial, and let me know the ways in which this AL's advice differed from mine. I didn't respond to his message immediately that evening, and when I went to respond to it the next day, I found that it had been partly edited and partly deleted. The student explained that he had made a misunderstanding in the feedback which I had left, and that he was under pressure to submit a TMA for another module at the same time (he was studying 3 Level 3 modules in parallel, and will begin a fourth in February 2020). That day, he sent more messages, questions about his TMA, which I answered. Again, he asked a question about something detailed very clearly in the TMA specification, in relation to the number of words for an answer to a question. I didn't respond to this question immediately, and when I went to respond to it the next day, I found it had been deleted.

This pattern continued. In relation to the comments which he left for students, which is a required component of the TMA, the specification states very clearly that this should be 150 words. He made contact to let me know that he has written 240 words, and asked if this would be okay. Then he asked if it is okay if his comments overlap across the two sets of feedback (ideally, they won't). When I say that it depends on the extent to which they overlap, he asks if he can send me his comments for review. At times I am struggling to respond to him; this is mainly due to the fact that he will ask the same question several times but in different formats, and it feels that he wants definite clarifications for his questions, which is difficult to give in the case of his TMA.

I didn't always respond immediately, and on one occasion after not responding immediately, the next day I received contact from SST. Student L had contacted student support to request an Individual Support Session (ISS) with me, requested on the basis that he needed to clarify the TMA questions. The request was also cc'ed to my Staff Tutor, with an attachment to the email about 'Respecting Students'. I replied and let them know that I would be able to support the session, and informed them that I had already responded to 58 questions from the student about his TMA. My ST stepped in and told them that this was unacceptable and that the TMA should be submitted. When I told SST that I had responded to 58 questions, they told me that the student had given them a very different impression. I went ahead and held the ISS, and then marked the student's TMA, which scored 100%.

This situation certainly caused me to reflect on what I had offered to this group of students. While I had used Slack in the past (since 2014) to support project students, I had never actually used it to support students of a taught module, such as TM354. This student did go on to register a mental illness with the University, however, at the time of the support provided, there was no indication of this in his student record. Increasing my availability to this particular student may have proved too much of a temptation for him, and this is not typical of how students interact here, based on the six years of my experiences.

4.7 Students asking me how I am

I found it interesting that the students which I was providing additional support to asked me how I was when we began to talk. This is not something which I am familiar with in my prior experiences. I think in the case of this student group they are very aware that they are benefitting from extra advice and support. It may also indicate that they feel comfortable and familiar with me, and are genuinely interested in how I am doing.

4.8 Students asking me Questions about Myself

Related to students asking me how I am, as discussed in Section 4.7, I also found that the students who I interacted with on a regular basis increasingly asked me more questions about myself. Again, this was something which I am generally not familiar with in previous experiences. Questions asked include:

Student A Have you attained CCNA / CCNP in any case?

Student A What was your thesis on?

Student A Did you get to play with some decent kit?

Student B Do you program? or have you specialised in to another niche of computing?

Student B What are your thoughts on procedural programming?

Student B I can only dream of completing a PhD, baby steps eh? How was it for you? Did you find it consumed you for the period that you undertook it? If I may, what was your research project?

Student B I don't know how you do it. A PhD is a outstanding feat. You must have developed a good disciplined routine, are you also a night owl?

Student B I assume you shop on Amazon?

Student B OCD?

Student B Do you have any hobbies or do much in your spare time?

Student B Anything specific exercise wise?

Student B Just OU? or do you do something else?

Student B What music are you in to?

Student B Wow that's pretty cool, it must be interesting being a researcher. Do you get freedom to set your hours, and tackle areas you wish to?

These questions were asked of me in a private one-to-one basis, and it may indicate that students were trying to get more of an impression of who I am, a fact which I feel helps to create the learning community.

4.9 Students adjusting to the increased support

As discussed above, only a minority of students wished to participate in the increased support programme. It is interesting that, of the students who choose to participate, there was an adjustment required on their part to make use of the support being offered. As captured in the conversation below, Student B admitted that having a conversation with me seemed an odd thing to do, given that he had had less interactions with tutors in the past.

Student B That would probably be easier, do you want me to phone you? This does seem strange to me, previously interactions with tutors has been very minimal, mostly just TMA feedback after marking.

4.10 Students going Quiet

As discussed above, while some students initially signed up to participate in the programme, they were unable to see it through in reality. The evidence of one of my attempts to continue to interactions with one student is captured below.

Student F:

Monday 4th November, 2019

Cathryn Hi Student F, thank you very much for your diary logs. I see that you have completed some planning exercises, which is a great approach for organising yourself and your work.

Saturday 16th November, 2019

Cathryn Hi Student F, how are you? how is study?

Thursday 28th November, 2019

Cathryn Hi Student F, How are you? Please do let me know if everything is okay with you and your studies.

Monday 2nd December, 2019

Student F Hi Cathryn. Sorry for not replying for so long. I haven't been well for last few weeks and I am still behind with my TMA work. I will do my best to submit as much as I can for Wednesday.

Cathryn Hi Student F, Thank you for your message. I'm sorry to hear that you haven't been well. Do you have any particular questions in relation to your TMA? Is there anything I can help you with?

Student F Nothing specific I can think of at the moment. I think I just need time to do the work.

Cathryn Okay. Just let me know if you have any questions, no matter how small.

After approximately one month of communication attempts, the student did eventually respond, letting me know that he had not been well and that he was trying to catch up with his work. After that time, he again stopped replying to my messages, as shown below:

Tuesday 3rd December

Cathryn Hi Student F, How are you? Will you be joining the group chat this evening?

Student F Sorry. This time I think it was more beneficial for me to carry on with my TMA. I will submit it at some point this evening.

Saturday 14th December

Cathryn Hi Student F, How are you?

My feeling, reflecting back on this situation is that to push an interaction any further would be unacceptable. The student had clearly shown that he was not inclined to continue the interactions and, at that stage, I stopped making any further attempts to communicate.

A similar situation occurred with another student, as captured in our interactions below.

Student G:

Tuesday 26th November

Cathryn Hi Student G, How are you? How is everything?

Student G Hello Cathryn how are you, my progress towards tma 1 is pretty slow

Cathryn If you need any help, Student G, let me know

Wednesday 27th November

Student G Good evening

Cathryn Hi Student G

Student G I just wanted to share that I have progressed I bid ,I needed to rework on Q1b which pull me bit behind,I cannot figure how to formulate out Q1c about Agile big A or small as I can't find any related material. Can you pls navigate me?

Cathryn Hi Student G, If you refer to the slides which I sent for the TMA 01 Preparation tutorial, you will find some advisory material here for this question.

Student G I looked to it and I found it minimum source information

Cathryn The information is presented on slide 11

there is a short paragraph in the book on this, let me find it ...

pg. 36

Student G I am going to try to explore on the very little information, thank you

Tuesday 3rd December

Cathryn Hi, How are you? Will you be joining the group chat this evening?

Saturday 14th December

Cathryn Hi Student G, How are you?

In the case of both of these students, they were weaker students. There may have been many factors impacting on their competencies as students, which can include competing factors in their private lives. I did not get to learn the reasons why these students ceased to engage, however, it is clear that the support programme did not respond to their needs. It is felt that neither of these students were interested in being part of a learning community.

4.11 Positive feedback on the use of Slack

I have used Slack with students since 2014, and I consistently receive positive comments from students on its use. Some of the students involved in this programme communicated this to me, as captured below.

Student E also, I know this is your project - this is a great idea btw

Student E again - this slack thing is ace

Student E I hope so, even though this will be my last year, for future students, it will definitely be beneficial. Should be implemented throughout the OU modules

8:57 AM **Student E** ok thanks Cathryn. And no worries - appreciate you have other student / modules to deal with! do you do this Slack / additional help program with the other modules?

9:32 AM **Cathryn** thanks. Yes, I use it with my TM470 project students. In the past I have always only used it for project students. In fact, your group is the first time I've used it for students who are not project students.

9:34 AM **Student E** thats good - the more the better (downside is that it obviously keeps you more busy though!) do you think this system has a good chance of rolling out OU wide? im done after this year, but for future students, it would be great

9:34 AM **Cathryn** I honestly don't know.

9:36 AM **Student E** its a shame that I get extra help due to a lucky dice roll - whereas Im obviously glad for it, I can imagine students that dont access to their tutor like this feel like they should have the same opportunity. I hope it does though, its a very good idea.

9:37 AM or even if it was limited so the slack channel was open say for 2 hours on a wednesday evening. That way tutors dont feel overwhelmed potentially getting questions every 2 minutes. So you have to wait for a week to get a reply and then can discuss within that period

9:38 AM **Cathryn** Yes, isn't it interesting, your experience is very tutor dependent

9:39 AM there may be some issue with offering what is an open source tool on such a widespread approach

9:39 AM and it might be the novelty which is attractive

9:39 AM OU systems are provided, but they don't appear to be widely used

9:39 AM if Slack was offered in a routine and regulated approach, could it fall victim in the same way?

9:56 AM **Student E** you say OU systems are provided - but I don't know about one in the whole 3 years of studying in the OU. Tutors may also not know about it perhaps? The big benefit with slack is that you can reply whenever you have a few spare minutes due to it having a mobile client. I think that is quite attractive to tutors maybe?

10:12 AM **Cathryn** Well, I just refer to the tutor group forum. In saying that, I started with the OU in September 2016, this is the first year that I have used mine, and I have only been effective in eliciting a couple of students to respond to me here!

10:13 AM Slack suits me perfectly, and as you say, you can answer something very quickly on your phone. Certainly, it allows me to keep close to my students, which I think suits both them and me.

10:14 AM Though there are also downsides of that. I can open a message in a spare moment, not be able to respond to it fully because of what I'm doing at that time, then push it backwards into your mind. Because it's been opened, you don't get that notification about it again. Although I do try to set reminders on communications like this.

10:16 AM Another risk is that you try to respond to a student quickly, too quickly, which can have its obvious consequences.

10:17 AM And something else that I'm thinking about is this 'instant culture'. Does it put too much pressure on everyone, thinking they have to do everything immediately? Particularly in the case of students, is it too much pressure? How do you react if you see someone has opened your Whatsapp message and doesn't reply until the next day?

10:26 AM Student E Reminders - with me and I imagine most other students, you reply within a day or 2 at most (normally within hours), if it ever exceeds that, I would give you a polite reminder incase that happened. Answering too quickly - yes, but I would imagine that would be quite minimal. how would it work if I asked what colour an orange was and you said purple - then in my tma I wrote about purple oranges and you marked it down as wrong? Instant culture - It is already here really, or at least will be in the very near future. the Ministry of Defence have moved to their Cloud system. Meaning most work can now be done on an iPad from anywhere in the world. Pros and cons really. Illegal mobile use - probably best not to do that in case it ignites the petrol! (although I think there is scientific studies that say thats wrong, however, best to be safe than sorry!)

Reviewing this conversation, this was not a superficial way in which this student was feeding back to me on his experience within Slack. He was engaged with the programme, and I feel he was also providing me with material to support my research, that being the ultimate aim of using Slack with this group.

4.12 Students Driving their Support Approach

When initiating this project, I found it very interesting that the students did not have any ideas on ways in which they wanted to be supported. They all accepted my ideas, without any modifications required. As the mid-way point in the project, I asked the students if they wished to adapt their support approaches in any way, but, with the exception of one, they were happy to continue as initially planned. Their survey responses to this question are captured in Table 5.

Table 5 January 2020 Review: Do you wish to adapt your support in any way? If yes, how?

<i>Do you wish to adapt your support in any way? If yes, how?</i>	
Student A	<i>“Maybe to have an agenda ahead of chat sessions, to help to prepare for more detailed discussions on subject material.”</i>
Student B	<i>“No, all good from a tutor-student perspective. However, I wish there was more student-student interaction within the chatrooms. Though this is based on personalities.”</i>
Student C	<i>“No. I find the support I’m currently receiving is perfect right now.”</i>
Student D	<i>“Nothing comes to mind, it was very helpful so far.”</i>
Student E	<i>“I really cannot think of something. Perhaps bi-weekly tutorials that consist of asking any questions (over mic and with other students) may be helpful, but I don’t think it is necessary. Keep up the good work!”</i>
Student F	<i>“I am not able to remain consistent with my initial plan and see no point in continuing receiving personalized support as there is not much my tutor can do to help right now.”</i>

Student A asked for an agenda ahead of our one-to-one chat sessions, so that he could prepare. I explained to him, however, that the purpose of these sessions was to create a corridor-type conversation, a quick chat, as opposed to anything too scripted.

4.13 Possible Reasons why Students may not have Engaged with the Programme

An interesting group of students is the students who did not engage with the offer of increased support. However, understanding the reasons why they have not engaged is not as simple as asking them, as they are unlikely to respond. I therefore asked the students who did engage with the programme if they had any idea as to why other students may not engage. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 June 2020 Review: In your opinion, why might the majority of students not have engaged with the personalised support programme?

<i>In your opinion, why might the majority of students not have engaged with the Personalised Support Programme?</i>	
Student A	<i>“This is a level 3 module with a lot of work to get through. Many students will already be overwhelmed with this on top of other modules they may be studying.”</i>
Student B	<i>“Perception of extra work. Individuals may not be confident to talk/discuss topics in a group. Slightly intimidated by the tutor – student 1 to 1 contact.”</i>

Student C	<i>“I think some students might think it would create additional work or they need to commit more time to their study.”</i>
Student D	<i>“Lack of time maybe”</i>
Student E	<i>“Maybe it wasn’t advertised as well as it could have been. Maybe a feature on the website rather than an email / mentions in a tutorial. However, I believe it should be the standard, so no opting in or out is necessary. You would have to be a complete fool to not sign up for additional support, even if you don’t use it. THE ONLY reason I can think of not signing up for it is that you believe you may give the tutor extra work and may not want to give them extra pressure (doubt it, but some people may be overly nice ...!).”</i>
Student M	<i>“There may have been multiple factors, one could be that they may have a background and knowledge of software development”</i>
Student H	<i>“The workload can sometimes be intense with OU, some students don’t want to bite off more than they can chew.”</i>

From the feedback received, it became clear that the students all perceived the support programme as involving more work from the student perspective. This is an interesting take on the situation, as it might not be assumed initially that the offer of support would result in more work for the student. This may therefore indicate that students are working under very time-constrained conditions.

5. Impact

To assess the overall impact of the programme in achieving what I had originally set out to do, I asked students what impact they perceived that the support programme had on their module experience. The responses to this question are presented in Table 7.

Table 7 January 2020 Review: Is Personalised Support Benefiting your Study Experience?

<i>In what way is the Personalised Support Beneficial to your TM354 Experience?</i>	
Student A	<i>“It helps to add an element of coaching and discussion to help understanding topics.”</i>
Student B	<i>“Good contact and support with yourself (the tutor) knowing I have someone to talk issue through with. This stops the ‘boiling pot effect’ getting working up over minor problems.”</i>
Student C	<i>“The support I have received to date has been the best experience of any module I have studied. I particularly find the short weekly tutorials beneficial and the contact I have with you feels much more personal than it has been in previous modules.”</i>
Student D	<i>“It is extremely beneficial as it makes me think more about the module material and it also keeps me motivated.”</i>
Student E	<i>“As above – it has been fantastic, quick responses in Slack have been much appreciated.”</i>
Student F	<i>“Received good feedback and suggestions in the beginning”</i>

A common finding returned from the students is that they benefitted the most from the connection to me as their tutor, for different reasons. One reason was to have someone to talk issues through with and another was quick response to questions.

Benefits of the support programme (Table 8) included the maintenance of motivation, seeing the course material from a different perspective, and knowing that there is someone ‘out there’ with a quick response to a question.

Table 8 June 2020 Review: What do you feel was the main benefit of the support programme to you?

<i>What do you feel was the main benefit of the support programme to you?</i>	
Student A	<i>“Motivation. I feel that if I hadn’t had the engagement with my tutor, I would not have performed so well as I am prone to procrastination.”</i>
Student B	<i>“Reading back group discussions that may have presented ideas and information in a different manner. Everyone learns differently, so explaining a topic from various angles is always helpful. Tutor understanding my personal life issues and getting to know me.”</i>
Student C	<i>“The whole relationship with my tutor felt more personalized. It didn’t feel like my tutor was there to ask questions only when I was stuck, but was there to explain things whenever I needed help. My tutor also noticed areas I could use additional support and provided me with guidance based on my diary entries, which was also very helpful. Although the weekly chats were only half an hour, we covered a lot of material during this period and it helped me to better understand the subject. It was also a good way to get to know other students and felt very much like the face-to-face tutorials I had when I was a student many years ago.”</i>
Student D	<i>“Kept me motivated all the time and resulted in better scores.”</i>
Student E	<i>“Slack. I appreciate it may be a tiring prospect for tutors as they are “always contactable”. However, I would suggest mentioning to students that even though the tutor may be online, the tutor is not obliged to return a message instantly. But having Cathryn there was always a great load off my mind – I knew she would return a message ASAP, very rarely waiting more than a few hours which was fantastic. This really, really, really should be a standard throughout the OU. I have found this module to be far superior in learning the materials quickly and this is often due to the extra guidance. With today’s technology, this really should be the standard.”</i>

Student H	<i>“Feeling as though I always had someone to reach out to. Dr Peoples was always so prompt and patient with my questions. Best tutor I’ve had throughout my entire OU experience.”</i>
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List of Deliverables

Presentations:

C. Peoples, "*A Case Study into the Effectiveness of Personalised Tuition for Final Year Distance Students*," presented at the Advance HE Teaching & Learning Conference 2020: Teaching in the Spotlight: Creative Thinking to Enhance the Student Experience: From Curriculum Design to Student Success, 9th July 2020.

C. Peoples, "*Personalised Student Support Plans: Examining the Effectiveness of Support Recommendations made by Students*" presented at the 9th eSTEEeM Annual Conference: Informing Student Success - From Scholarship to Practice, 29 April 2020.

The following list of deliverables from this project have not yet been finalised, but are in preparation. It is my intention that these will be submitted for publication in relevant Journals.

‘When More Support is Offered, Who Engages?’

This paper will involve an analysis of the students who engaged with the support programme, with a view to understanding who this type of support appeals to.

‘What do Students Think they Want?’

This paper will involve a discussion of the findings from the January 2020 Review. It will analyse the suitability of the approaches to support which have been provided on a per student basis, with a view to understanding if students are satisfied with what they think will improve their study experience.

‘What do Students Want?’

This paper will involve a discussion of the findings from the June 2020 Review. This will present a clearer perspective on the support strategies which were effective for students throughout the academic year.

‘Diary Entries from Undergraduate Students’

I want to provide an examination of the ways in which students log diary entries, reinforcing which approaches encourage students to continue with the support tool, and which approaches students cease to continue with.

6. Figures and Tables

6.1 Figures:

Figure 1 Difference between TMA Results for Students being Supported in Comparison to those Not Being Supported

Figure 2 Diary Entry 1/2

Figure 3 Diary Entry 2/2

Figure 4 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student Student A 1

Figure 5 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student Student A 2

Figure 6 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student Student A 3

Figure 7 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 1

Figure 8 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 2

Figure 9 Exemplar Diary Entry from Student C 3

6.2 Tables:

Table 1 Characteristics of Students who Opted Out of the Support Programme, and the Reasons Why

Table 2 June 2020 Review: What was your Reason for not Engaging in the Personalised Support Programme?

Table 3 June 2020 Review: Did you have any doubts when opting out of the support programme?

Table 4 Profile of Students Engaging with the Personalised Support Programme

Table 5 January 2020 Review: Do you wish to adapt your support in any way? If yes, how?

Table 6 June 2020 Review: In your opinion, why might the majority of students not have engaged with the personalised support programme?

Table 7 January 2020 Review: Is Personalised Support Benefiting your Study Experience?

Table 8 June 2020 Review: What do you feel was the main benefit of the support programme to you?

University Approval Process

- SRPP/SSPP – Approval from the Student Research Project Panel/Staff Survey Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number 2019/103.
- Ethical review – An ethical review was obtained according to the Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Reference number HREC/3359/Peoples.
- Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration number XXXX *Note from Cathryn: I don’t appear to have this number.*

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