It is my pleasure to be in a position to write a foreword for the final report from this, the Open University Students' Association's first ever formal research project.

The detailed exploration of the factors that influence student’s choice of modules is something that was needed and is very timely. It is no secret that the Open University is in a time of great change and has had to think carefully about its offering to address important issues such as student success and retention. In doing so, however, it has made some fundamental changes to how students enroll for degrees, modules, and the information available to them at each stage.

Hopefully, the issues highlighted within this report will enable reflection on whether those choices are indeed informing the correct institutional change and will help to inform future change.

None of this project would have been possible without the hard work of staff within the OUSA office. Particularly important in their input to the project have been Rob Avann, our Deputy General Manager who facilitated the staff restructure to highlight the need for a research function and Anna Vickerson, who has made the excellent infographics to support the project. The majority of my thanks must go to Research and Information Officer, Kate Buttery and the countless hours she has put into data collection, analysis and production of this report. Most of all, however, she has put up with me for the duration and has accommodated the many demands and challenges presented in a positive way.

I have been overwhelmed by the quality of the responses that all our participants gave us and the engagement with the follow up work to ensure the analysis represented what they had told us. Moreover, I have been incredibly pleased with how many of the Open University’s staff have been interested in the project and have wanted to keep abreast with what we have found out. This collaborative approach has been at the heart of the project and is something I hope OUSA can build on for the future.

The report that follows, whilst the culmination of this project, should not be considered as the ending but the first step on OUSA’s research journey. It has allowed us to grapple with the issues that come when researching a diverse and geographically dispersed population and with the issues that come when working across teams and with limited resources. Hopefully these lessons can help inform and develop our future work to ensure that representations to the University are grounded in evidence and fact so that OUSA can be seen to be truly offering a viewpoint that is representative of the student body as a whole.
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2.1 This report discusses the findings from the OU Students Association’s first research project with students about how they make their module choices. The research employed a range of qualitative techniques to gather information about student experiences, including social media discussions, a dedicated online forum, and semi-structured one to one interviews.

2.2 The data has been analysed to identify the module factors, or sources of information, which are considered by students when making their module choices. In addition, student feedback was analysed to understand the different types of motivations that appeared to drive their module choices.

2.3 The findings suggest a finite number of module factors which are considered by students, which expands as their experience of the Open University increases. Students identified certain factors such as clarity about module lifecycles, and better availability of sample materials, which would help to improve their ability to make informed choices.

2.4 The factors which appear to motivate students’ module choices appear to evolve as they progress through their study experience. Initially, students are motivated to select familiar subjects which they feel they will enjoy and succeed in. Newer students appeared to consider fewer sources of module information – perhaps due to less awareness of what was available, or because they only sought to confirm a choice they had already made.

2.5 As students progress through their study experience, their confidence and self-awareness builds, and their choices reflect a desire to find compatibility with their learning preferences or identified skill sets. For a number of the students interviewed, this has led to the discovery of new interests and talents, and even resulted in changing their qualification pathway.

2.6 The findings indicated a tension between providing students with a structure for their study, and allowing the opportunity for them to make discoveries in their learning which might alter their pathway. The introduction of qualification pathways and the reduction of 30 credit modules and increase in 60 credit modules were regarded as changes which were markedly reducing the flexibility for students during the course of their learning experience.

2.7 The research gathered a vast amount of insight about student experiences, which is discussed in more detail throughout the report, and in the discussions section. The key findings from the report will be presented to OU staff at two briefings taking place on Friday 16th and Monday 19th May. These will provide an opportunity to gather perspectives about the implications of the research findings in terms of current and future OU activities; as well as lessons learnt from the methodologies employed, which could inform future student experience research. The final report and recommendations will also be presented at the Learning, Teaching Student Support Committee in July 2014.
3. Background

3.1 The Open University’s mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, means that there is a vast number and variety of modules available for students to consider. Previous research in the Higher Education sector has considered decision-making about the pursuit of Higher Education, and the topic of study. However, it has not explored the subsequent choices made by students during the course of their study; perhaps in part because this is more limited in traditional degree pathways.

3.2 The Open University Students Association was interested to understand students’ decision making, and explore the following themes:

- There are common positive and negative factors which influence students’ decisions about module choice

- The types/relative importance of factors which affect students’ decision-making about module choice, are influenced by the available information; diversity factors; their previous study experience; their reasons for studying (e.g. to attain a specific qualification or for personal interest/development)

3.3 The objectives of this research were to:

- Recognise the factors which attract and detract students from selecting modules

- Recommend factors to improve student registration, retention and success on modules

- Recognise any Equality & Diversity implications resulting from factors likely to affect specific student groups

- Explore ways to assist student decision-making through provision of information
4. Methodology

4.1 The research project used a variety of methods to maximise the depth and breadth of student feedback. It was important to the OU Students Association to ensure all students felt they had the opportunity to take part in the research, and to ensure the results reflected as much of the diversity of student opinion as possible.

4.2 The project was conducted over a series of stages, which allowed for review of progress against the original research objectives, and adjustments to be made iteratively to the research design and analytical approaches. The initial project plan was approved by the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP), and colleagues from SRPP and the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) were consulted at key decision points throughout the process.

4.3 Recruitment of Participants

4.4 The research was broken into a series of stages, with different sampling methods used for each. The first phase of interviews were open to any student volunteers, to ensure that the project was as open and inclusive as possible. In several cases, individuals who had made comments on social media were contacted to invite them to contact the OUSA office if they were interested in taking part in an interview. This generated volunteers from a large number of students who had not had any previous involvement with the Students Association.

4.5 The second phase of interviews were conducted with a sample of students provided by the Student Statistics and Survey Team within IET from across the student population. Although the first phase of interviews did provide a range of different students, including a number who were new to OUSA, it was felt that using a sample would help to maximise the diversity of participants, and help to target particular groups such as male students and those under-25 years, who had been underrepresented in the first series of interviews.

4.6 No financial incentives were offered to participants to take part in the research project. Figures 1 & 2 overleaf summarises the range of participants who took part in the interviews, reflecting diversity in the students’ demographics and their academic background.
Figure 1: Age and gender of interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age 18-25</th>
<th>26-35</th>
<th>36-45</th>
<th>46-55</th>
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Figure 2: Higher education background of interview participants

- **New** = students who declared that they were studying their first or second module
- **Experienced** = students who declared that they had studied at least two modules
- **Previous HE experience YES** = those students who declared they had studied at University previously (including with the OU)

1

OU experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OU experience</th>
<th>Previous HE experience</th>
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<tr>
<td>New</td>
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<tr>
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<td>OUBS</td>
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</table>
4.7 **Stage 1: Social media launch**

4.8 Initially, a series of messages were shared via the OUSA Twitter handle (@OUStudents) and OUSA Facebook page (www.facebook.com/OUstudents). There were in excess of 6,000 Twitter followers, and 10,000 Facebook page fans at the outset of the research, these numbers continue to grow.

These methods therefore offered the opportunity to reach a large number of individuals to help promote the research, and crowd-source students' views on the topic, and successfully reached over 5,000 people (see figure 3).

4.9 The first social media messages linked to a Youtube video from the Vice President Educational Research and Support, as sponsor of the research project. The video explained the purpose of the research, and the ways in which students could get involved. The Youtube video was also shared with all OU students through an article in the winter edition of the OUSA e-magazine “OU Students”:

4.10 Social media messages asked a series of questions about the topic of module selection, and invited comments from students about their own experiences and opinions (see Appendix I). The hashtag #yourOUmodules was used throughout the social media campaign to promote the research and make it more easily recognisable to students.

4.11 A specific OUSA Research Forum was also set up within the Virtual Learning Environment which is available to all Open University students. The forum was entitled ‘OUSA Student Research’, and the spirit of the forum described this as having been “set up to hold discussions and seek feedback from students in relation to each OUSA Research Project. Questions will be posed by the OUSA Research and Information Officer, and students are invited to share their views and comments on the research topic. The forum will be moderated by student moderators”.

The forum was promoted to students via social media, and through posts in other active OUSA forums, to encourage students to visit and contribute their views. A series of questions were posted, similar to those in the social media schedule, to generate student discussion and feedback. There were 114 posts during the course of the research, from 26 different student contributors (see figure 3).
Stage 2: Interviews (first phase)

Feedback gathered via social media and the OUSA forum was then used to develop and refine a schedule of questions for one to one semi-structured interviews. The interview questions sought to gather student experiences of module selection and explore the contextual factors that influenced their responses (see Appendix II).

Students were able to register for an interview online, using the web-based system ‘Eventbrite’. This system allowed interviewees to select a convenient time and date for their interview, and provide their consent for taking part in the research and to any further contact. A range of times and dates were provided for interviewees to select from, including evenings and weekends, in order to accommodate individuals work and personal lives as much as possible.

With the exception of one face to face interview, the interviews were conducted using the Open University online conferencing system ‘OU Live’. This was felt to be the most appropriate tool as it was likely to be accessible and familiar to most students, and would allow some flexibility between using the video, audio and chat functions, depending on individual preferences. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours. Where the interviews were conducted using the video or audio functions, only the audio recordings were passed to a third party agency for transcription.

Stage 3: Interviews (second phase) and Social Media discussions

The feedback gathered through the first phase interviews was then used to inform the next stage of the research, to allow further exploration of the topics. The initial interviews did begin to indicate some differences in module choices based on study motivations and previous study experience, which could have been used to organise focus groups. However, it was felt that one to one interviews offered greater opportunity to gather detailed data from students.

The first phase of interviews indicated an apparent evolution in the way that students made their module choices. The schedule of questions for the second phase was therefore amended to better capture feedback from students who were new to OU study (see Appendix III), as well as those who were more experienced (see Appendix IV).

Students were given the option of taking part via OU live, chat messenger, telephone or email. Following feedback from the first phase of interviews, it was felt that offering a range of methods for getting involved might encourage more individuals to take part, and overcome any potential reluctance to use OU Live or technical issues associated with the system.
4.20 After each interview, the students were sent a diagram which used concentric circles to represent the relative importance of each of the factors they had discussed in their interview (see Appendix V). In many cases, this reflected the factors students discussed in relation to both their early experiences, and their more recent experiences. Students were invited to comment on the diagram and make any amendments to ensure it accurately reflected their experiences. All students responded positively to this element of the research, and provided a rationale for any amendments that they made to their respective diagram.

4.21 The project also continued discussions via the OUSA forum and social media channels during the second series of interviews. This included sharing insights gathered from the first series of interviews to provoke further discussion. The student feedback gathered during this period also offered an opportunity to reflect on how the first phase of interviews had been analysed. A particular discussion within the OUSA Research Forum led to the formation to separate coding frames to explore the module factors and motivation factors affecting students’ module choices.

4.22 The interviews from both phases and the forum discussions were then analysed using the coding frames that had been developed and refined during the project. The module choice diagrams gathered following the second phase interviews were used to derive scores for each of the identified factors. These helped to indicate their relative importance and differences between new and experienced students, and this has been highlighted in the findings sections.

4.23 Communication throughout the project

4.24 The OU Student Association recognised the importance of keeping key stakeholders updated throughout the project. The key stakeholders identified included members of staff across the OU, the Central Executive Committee within the Students Association, as well as the wider student body.

4.25 The social media campaigns, articles on the OUSA website and in the OU Students e-magazine, were central to communicating with the wider student body during the course of the research project. It is likely that these channels will also be key in communicating the final outcomes from the research.

4.26 Before the project commenced, the Vice President Educational Support & Research wrote to a selection of identified stakeholders across the Open University, to secure their interest and engagement in the research. Info-graphics were then shared with OU staff and the CEC at key stages to update on progress. These offered a visual and succinct way of communicating about the research and helped to build interest, particularly across the Open University. Figure 3 overleaf shows the latest info-graphic shared with key stakeholders, which summarises the student involvement in the research project.
**Figure 3: Summary of student involvement in the research project**

### Facebook...
- **Reached**: Over 5,200 students
- **Comments**: 254
- **Likes**: 41
- **Clicks**: 1,412

### OUSA Forums...
- **Discussion threads**: 5
- **Unique contributors**: 26
- **Posts**: 114

### Interviews...
- **8 Male**: 8
- **12 Female**: 12
- **Total**: 20 students
- **2 (18-25 years)**
- **18 (26+ years)**
- **9 Using OU Live**
- **6 Over the Phone**
- **1 Face to Face**
- **4 Via Email**

### Twitter...
- **39 Replies**
- **8 Retweets**
- **8 Favourites**

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*Taken from an Infographic shared with OU staff during April 2014 to promote the research*
Discussions with students through interviews, forums and social media generated a relatively finite number of factors which influenced module choices. Student feedback also indicated how module choices were influenced by underlying motivations, and these have been analysed and discussed separately in Section 6. It is important to note that as this research was qualitative, so it is not possible to assess the extent to which this is representative of the student body as a whole. The following sections summarise each of the module factors, ordered by priority/prevalence, based on the diagrams gathered in stage 3 of the research.

5.1 Cost

Most individuals who were interviewed mentioned cost; whilst a small few recognised themselves as being fortunate that it was not an issue or limiting factor, for others it made their decisions about choosing the right module absolutely critical:

“For continental Europe the modules have always been quite expensive and therefore I have carefully selected what I wanted to study”

“Cost is another issue, you know, even though sort of I’m working full time, money’s still something I have to take into account”

“... most importantly the funding because I’m a pensioner now, living on a fixed income and I didn’t know whether I would be able to afford it”
5.2 Assessment method

Students demonstrated a strong preference for TMAs and EMAs over examinations:

“...one of the things that might tip the balance is if there are two modules that are broadly, you know, as interesting, and one has an exam and one doesn’t, then I would almost certainly go for the one that doesn’t have an exam because I find ongoing assessment with the big assignment at the end much less daunting than an exam at the end.”

The justifications ranged from perceived ability in undertaking exams, time pressures, perceived reliability of marking, and effectiveness of exams as a tool for learning:

“I have avoided examinations because they involve a certain technique that I don’t have and I don’t have the time to make improvements in this area.

“...any exam which is, requires you to recall facts, figures and write large essays under pressure, that’s quite unknown, I haven’t done that for a very, very long time”

“At the end of the module I preferred a project than an exam. Learning for an exam means you are learning for a particular day. Preparing a project is more long lasting. Actually I had the impression I learnt more during a project than an exam”

For some students, experience of a module with an exam had confirmed their resistance, whilst others were more optimistic:

“I’d done an exam the year before and I’d done well in it but it was quite stressful and I thought, well it would be, another consideration, I don’t have to do an exam this year so that was another, you know, element of it.

“I hadn’t realised that, to start with, this course would have an exam at the end of it and I think the next one has as well, and I was really worried about it and I am actually, but I don’t know. Now I’ve sort of had a really good chance to look at the example exam paper and I’ve actually started doing my revision, I’m actually thinking now, I might actually enjoy doing the exam more than I have writing the assignment”

Whilst a significant number of students were put off by examinations, there was some discussion on the OUSA research forum about the relative benefits of exams and ongoing assessments in contributing to student learning, with one student making the following suggestion:

“You could have a mixture of formative TMAs that then led to assessed TMAs. This would give students the opportunity to demonstrate that they had learnt from tutor feedback.”
5.3 Student reviews

Students recognised the value of feedback from other students in helping to shape their module choices. Students felt there were limitations with the reviews, and often sought student feedback from more informal sources:

“Reviews are still invaluable, though generally only where there are several in order to get a balanced view - I think students should be strongly encouraged to provide reviews.”

“...the module surveys have the known drawback that they’re only people who’ve passed it...”

“I hadn’t looked at any student ratings on the website, on the formal OU website. I think the reason the social media stuff adds to it is because people haven’t got any reason to go on and say that stuff, you know, they’re not being prompted, they’re just going in and saying it, sort of off their own bat so that adds weight to it really.”

“...the official published student reviews aren’t what I go for - the main useful thing is to talk to present/past students usually via OUSA forums and sometimes OU ones.”
5.4  Face to face tutorials/residentials

*I like having the opportunity to attend face to face tutorials (relatively locally) so I will always look for modules that offer the opportunity to attend them.*

One student commented on the difficulty in making module choices based on this:

“…how many tutorials really. I try and have a look to see when they would possibly put them in because up front they don't really tell you how many face-to-face tutorials you're going to get and that’s, I sometimes feel that I need more than we have been set. I know we can always contact our tutors, email, phone, whatever, but I don't think anything can replace the face-to-face interaction, especially with a group”

Students placed a great deal of value on the opportunity to meet others face to face, and felt this influenced the quality of their subsequent interactions online:

“…once you’ve met them face-to-face, I found myself far happier to talk online to them, you know, in terms of the forums, leave messages and that kind of thing”

However, for some students, personal circumstances meant that they would actually seek to avoid modules offering some face to face activities:

*I don’t like residentials because it was quite difficult to get to the venue. Ours were in Belgium (4 hours in the car), Holland (4 hours in the car) or the UK (flights are expensive if you don’t book ahead of time).*

I also looked to see if there’s any summer schools because I can’t take enough time off to sort of justify going to summer school, even though I’d like to, I don’t think the family would appreciate it!
5.5 Credits/time required

The amount of credits offered on modules was mentioned by some students; pursuing a smaller course in order to be able to manage the workload, or a larger course in order to make faster progress through their course:

"The fact that it was a 30 point course was important as I wasn't sure that I'd be able to manage 60 points at that stage."

"Most of the ones that I've gone for so far have been 60-credit because I was hoping that I would be able to manage it and I wanted to sort of get the big ones out of the way. I don't know, I've just got this sort of thing in my head that the more credits for the module, the closer I am to the end."

Students’ comments suggested variations in how much work was associated with different sized modules, and how easy it was to estimate the required time for modules based on the credits:

"I think the idea that the OU says that you should be spending this, you know, these many hours on it, you know, I think in some cases you could more or less double that, you know?"

A number of students expressed frustration with the increase in larger credit modules:

"I don't like the look of the way things are going with course presentation methods, 60-point courses at L3 instead of a wider choice of 30 point courses."

5.6 Advice from OU tutors/staff

Some students were led by advice from Open University staff in making their module choices:

"I talked to my ...tutor... and she said, ‘Well’ because she wasn’t teaching it but she’d obviously background, she said, ‘It’s not as bad as it looks and it’s actually quite, it’s more multi-disciplinary than you think,’ and so I sort of decided, well OK, I’ll do it, I’ll see what it’s like and it turned out to be the best module I’ve done."

Nearly all of these individuals were new students, and regarded this as valuable, expert input:

"...they have got ...dozens of years’ experience of what students do and how people progress and develop and how they start off wanting to be X and turn out being Y. So I would say you know, listen, listen to them, ask them questions, and trust their advice."

OUA Research: Module Selection
5.7 Module timings & lifecycles

Several students discussed how their choices of modules were influenced by how the presentation dates fitted with timings in their own lives, and allowed them to progress through their study at an acceptable pace; for some this meant scheduling in the next module in advance, or overlapping modules, whilst for others, this meant ensuring a break between modules.

Many students reported avoiding first presentations of new modules, due to uncertainty about how the module would run. They also cited practical factors such as the absence of past exam papers, module statistics, or previous students or tutors to give a perspective on the module. This appeared to be a ‘tip’ shared between students:

“I’ve always avoided first presentations of a module, because I’d heard right at the beginning ‘try and avoid it’ because you know they have, you know things go wrong and mistakes can be made, so I sort of let the first presentation go, and then sort of come in on the second if that sort of suits what I was doing.”

Experienced students reported having chosen particular modules because it was the last presentation:

“I rushed into it, because it was in its final presentation

“...two of them are being presented now for the last time, so I had to skip half of level 2 in order to fit them in

“The one that’s historically been important for me has been ‘last presentation dates’ - catching modules before they go (5 modules I’ve done have been on their final presentation). Likely to affect a lot of folks at the moment with all the changes coming in.”

Several students made comments about how changes to modules could make it difficult to make informed choices:

“I have a fairly good sense of the modules, some of the modules I want to do, it’s a little bit frustrating because some of the ones I’m really keen on are finishing before I will get to them so I’m hoping they’ll be replaced by something similar

“Sometimes it’s a question of clarity about what “last presentation date” means too - in some cases it really is final, and sometimes it’s a review date and it’ll be continuing more or less unchanged, and sometimes it’s a significantly different replacement. Would help everyone if the OU could indicate which!”
5.8 Module descriptions/content

Several students mentioned the module descriptions as the first element that might attract them to a particular module.

For some students, the descriptions needed to reflect the right subjects and balance of content, which appeared more challenging with larger modules:

“The less specialised modules have chunks that I am not interested in and as there seems to be a trend towards 60 point combined things that may become more of a problem”

“I would expect a course advertised as interdisciplinary to contain a sufficient amount of each discipline to satisfy all those taking the course, instead of being 70% one discipline”

“I looked at the…30 point Science modules that are made up of 10 pointers. In both cases, one of the modules was not something I wanted to do making 1/3 of the module worthless to me”

Some students reported quite a visceral response to module descriptions:

“I was just browsing, really. I’d got partway through [module] and was really enjoying the whole thing, so browsed online to see what was available. The title drew me in.

…I looked for something that something within the course just grabs me and makes me think, oh, that could be good.”
Others emphasised how they would repeatedly read module descriptions before making a decision:

“I must have gone over the options about four, five, six times and sat down with all the paperwork in front of me and read through and thought, right, which one of these am I going to do? So yeah, it’s not an instantaneous thing, it is something that I do carefully consider.”

“I could write most of the course descriptions from memory because I read them all so many times.”

“…make sure you read the module description break down, see what the content is, go away and think about, go back few days later, read again, leave it for another few days again before making a final decision to make sure you’ll enjoy the content and what you’re doing.”

However, comments from other students suggested that not all individuals had drawn all of the relevant information from the module descriptions, or in the lead up to the start of the module to assist in their choices and subsequent preparation:

“I have spoken to many students that were taken aback that they had not heard from their tutor only for me to guide them online to the relevant module description that confirms that they are not allocated a tutor for their chosen module. All of this information is available to the student pre-registration.”

“…some students don’t read all the stuff that they’re given, I guess this is always the case, so we’ve got a study companion, we’ve got an assignment booklet, there’s also the website and people are coming in and asking questions and you think, you obviously haven’t read the assignment booklet, because all that information is very clearly set out in the assignment booklet.”

“I had nine days, yes, to familiarise myself with it [the module website prior to the start of the module], and that’s why I was quite shocked that these other people didn’t know and I thought well why didn’t they use those ten days? I was in and out of the website, you know, up and down, pressing every button, going in everything and of course you can see the whole year.”
Module delivery

This factor was only mentioned by a few students during their interviews, but was much more prevalent in forum and social media discussions. Students valued studying through a variety of means and were generally put off modules delivered entirely online:

“I prefer modules which offer a multi-modal approach to delivery; so modules that use course books, CD-ROM’s, DVDs and course websites. Modules that are delivered wholly online and without an allocated [tutor] would put me off choosing a particular module.

Another student discussed their experience of an online module in the OUSA research forum:

“I find the online format needlessly cluttered, restrictive and time and energy consuming (currently doing 1 online and 1 largely online course). The way they are organised feels one dimensional, you can go back and forth to find information but that’s it, there’s only so much that fits on a (tiny on-the-move) screen, whereas normally I would have a number of books in use at the same time, spread around me, with notes between the relevant pages. Technology has great things to offer and it is wonderful that courses can be accessed digitally… (a lecture with good camera work showing things up close and from a theatre view, interaction between students, and a discussion forum afterwards, that made people feel part of a university and the many questions asked were answered in detail afterwards), but education shouldn’t be restricted to it, that is not widening access, that is shifting access”

However, one student reported during interview that they had completed a module online, and were actually more positive about this delivery method as a result:

“Two of my… courses were “designed for online” - in that they had books, but were written for online - and whilst in the first of them I was ranting and raving about the “bitty” style, I actually was absolutely fine with it after a while, and only really used the online materials for the second of the two
More experienced students discussed the value of being able to preview course materials:

…wanting to get an idea of things such as chapter lengths and writing style.

Some modules in social sciences posted a couple of pages online. Not much, but I was able to read the table of contents and get a first impression. I appreciated that.

One student used this to gauge the likely quality of the module.

…they were incredibly professionally done, very high quality reproduction, so it looked as if someone had really taken care in the module development.

Students had been able to view module materials at Regional offices, via Country Coordinators, or by viewing Openings courses where the materials were used. These opportunities were either no longer available or not accessible for some students, and it was suggested that being able to access tasters of the materials online would be of benefit:

Something like sample chapters would be nice to see how heavy the content is… having something similar to the Amazon preview version of course materials would be useful.

I really think it would be a marvellous help actually, if you could have some kind of, you know, taster of what it’s like.
This appeared to extend beyond just the course materials:

"I really think it would be brilliant if they could view samples of this information [module calendars] before they decide on their chosen module."

Some more experienced students were put off modules which tried to limit their study only to the materials provided:

"[I am put off by] An insistence that you shouldn’t go beyond the module materials - people should be able to get a good pass up to and including a distinction from the materials but actually telling people not to research is a disgrace.

"...those modules where they say, the course material is all you need, it’s limiting. I think half the fun is going outside and looking and getting sidetracked and eventually pulling it all together into a nice coherent answer with some hopefully interesting insights."
5.11 Pathway/Qualification requirements

Some students valued guidance which set out their pathway for them:

“"You’re virtually led by the hand aren’t you, I think it’s quite clear what I’ve got to do next and the person… sent me a very, very good, detailed email of exactly what I’d be doing each year, so that’s fine, I’ve got that and I know exactly where I am.

Whilst others felt this was quite restrictive:

“"...you really don’t have that much freedom to deviate from the curriculum and I think it is a shame because it’s one of the things that distinguishes the OU from everything else, this ability to pick and mix.

“"...even though I can understand why, there’s only a couple of choices at certain levels because we have to do certain modules. I was hoping that there would be, I don’t know, just perhaps something a little bit different within them.

“"I also feel that for too many degrees there are too many compulsory modules. Being able to do smaller ‘free choice’ modules allows some degree of enjoyment and personalisation.

One experienced student recognised that modules had to be chosen as pre-requisites for subsequent modules:

“"Is it compulsory so that a module at the next level can be done. Sometimes in science and maths to do a specific level 3 you have to have done a certain level 2 module first.

There appeared to be some confusion amongst students about the requirements for module completion at each academic level:

“"I’m not entirely certain what the situation is because one or two people, including my tutor have suggested that you actually don’t have to do a second Level 1 module and when I’ve looked at my pathway on the website it’s perfectly plain that I do have to do another Level 1 so that’s something, when it gets nearer to when we have to pick the next module that’s something I’m going to ring up the support and check to be certain because if I don’t have to do another Level 1, I probably would rather go straight onto Level 2, but there’s a little bit of confusion there about what the requirements are.
5.12 Module statistics

This information was only mentioned by two more experienced students during their interviews, one of whom discussed this from a hypothetical perspective:

I think more data for each module would be useful. There is a danger some people would become over-reliant on this system and often modules change between each term, but something such as a visual rating system or % pass rates, amount of people taken the course, feedback, enjoyment rates etc. - basically hard numbers of people who liked and disliked the course but in a clearer, more accessible format than it is now.

5.13 Pedagogical tools

Students offered a variety of views about different pedagogical tools that they had experienced within previous modules, which could potentially influence subsequent choices. It appeared that using online facilities for collaboration could create some issues for individuals:

I think it’s actually very helpful for that sort of thing where you’re doing something broad ranging because, and everybody’s doing something different, because it’s always good to get alternate views … I think it just helps bring part of that, we’re all working together type thing… it’s a shame that the tutor group forums, people don’t often post as much, a lot of people are scared to post because they don’t like being criticised. I just think it, if nobody tells you you’re doing something wrong you’re just going to carry on making the same mistakes, I think it’s a very useful element.

Whilst, this was regarded as a bonus for others:

I think we had that type of thing where the tutor had put up some questions etc. on the group, or the course forum, and then we’d sort of go back with ideas and we could read other people’s ideas etc. and those I found very helpful because people can’t see when you’re red-faced and you’ve asked a daft question!
Other students did not enjoy reflective exercises, particularly where these formed part of their assessment:

“I do find a requirement for ‘reflection’ exceptionally tiresome, but I have had to put up with it, and it wouldn’t stop me if it was a module I REALLY wanted to do (though if it was a marginal one, it would)... making reflection part of the assessment means that you are doing it for that reason, rather than actually being honest about it.

[Put off modules by]... Self-reflection as an integral part of the module, attracting marks.

5.14 Summary

Most of the module factors related to objective information about the module; a number of these were relatively consistent with factors discussed in existing research (Kardan et al, 2013), such as Course characteristics, Students workload and Number of time conflicts. It is apparent that many of the module factors are likely to be a product of the information that is made available to students, and that some of these are therefore relatively unique to the Open University context. Two module factors related to more opinion-based sources which appeared to be quite influential despite their subjective nature.
Although the research was largely focused on the module factors that students considered when making their choices, it became quickly apparent that the individuals motivations for studying, were pivotal to the factors they might consider. This became particularly apparent from the forum discussions which took place prior to the second phase of interviews:

“…study goal may influence priorities; if a course is needed for accreditation, or salary improvement, interest in a specific course may not be a priority, but subject matter can be, so the employability factor itself can influence other criteria”

The module factors have been summarised in order of priority, based on the diagrams collected following the second phase interviews.

6.1. **Interest:**

This was the key motivating factor mentioned by almost every student interviewed:

“I’m here because I want to learn and because I want to enjoy it.

*Most important is to study something you enjoy. You have to give a lot of time to studying and if you’re not enjoying it, then it will become a chore.*

Students felt a sense of security of studying a familiar subject, and this seemed particularly important for those studying at HE level for the first time, or who were early on in their study experience:

…”...I wanted to challenge myself in one respect but I also wanted something underneath that was in my comfort zone. I was good at languages at school and just decided to sort of sort of underpin the sort of challenging course with... something within my safe zone...
However, other students discussed the importance of selecting modules which offered the opportunity to learn something new:

“…a couple of times I’ve found content that’s been repeated 3 times throughout my modules, so variety really is key to keeping me engaged.

Furthermore, a number of experienced students (and those with previous Higher Education experience) had actively chosen unfamiliar modules:

“…deliberately choose something relatively unfamiliar and which will challenge me because just studying to reinforce, to sort of just get a credit for something you already know isn’t really development and I mean, and yes, there’s an enjoyment element of it but I also want to be, to try and develop myself, develop my interests.

A number of students reported having taken a Level 1 course which provided a broad foundation in a subject area that interested them:

“[Module] was more, you know, all of it was interesting to me, so that was, and most of what I study will probably be arts based so it just seemed the most sensible place to start really.

It appeared that students’ experiences on previous modules had a strong influence on their subsequent choices, leading them to discover new interests, or identify subjects to avoid:

“The second course I did contained an introduction to a number of pure topics, and I think that was what sealed the deal. I really enjoyed that part of the course so I wanted to continue in that vein.

“I liked the way the short science modules gave me a taste of subjects I would happily have ignored forever.

“I got a lot of that from [module] which is multi-disciplinary where you basically were covering bits of each of the arts faculties and I really, it’s not that I didn’t like the philosophy bit… I just sort of felt that just wasn’t me.
Several students recognised that their enjoyment of modules might influence their subsequent choices:

...one of the things I'm keeping in the back of my mind is, yes, I've got these things that I think I would like to do next but I don't want to be too fixed in that approach because it's quite possible that a chapter I come to in a couple of months' time will make me think, oh OK I want to study, you know, I don't know, history or something that I just wasn't expecting, so that's a major thing for me is just the breadth of art subjects that we're doing.

...it's a funny one really because you'll sort of do a certain amount of study on English and think, oh yeah, I could definitely do this, you know, as another, you know, an English course. And then you'll get another week, you know, two months later that's English and it's not so enjoyable.

There appeared to be a strong relationship between interest and perceptions of likely success:

I wouldn't study something that I don't find interesting as I've found this to lead to bad marks and potential failure.

...there are certain subjects which I found really interesting but I'm not entirely sure that I would be able to score as highly as other subjects, in terms of, you know, essay scores, that kind of thing...

However one student's comment in the forum discussion suggested a realisation that areas of interest and potential success might not always be related:

...the things that interest me most aren't necessarily the things I am good at (or have the most aptitude to learn well).

The definition of success varied for students, and this appeared to be linked to their background, and future study intentions. Many students reported that their study was driven by a desire to prove themselves; this appeared to be particularly prominent for those who had not studied at Higher Education level before:

...you're a success by your own standards.

I messed up my A-Levels at school so didn’t go onto Uni then and I've always thought when I retired I would do a degree.

... it’s always been something at the back of my mind, I never went to university from school, went straight into work and it’s always sort of niggled at me slightly that I didn’t get any qualifications.
I would actually be the first person out of; I don’t know how many generations, to get a degree which sort of pushes me on a little bit more.

…the plan is to do a Masters... when I finish this so I’m really aiming, if I can possibly manage it to, you know, get a first. And so I need all the points I can get hold of.

In one case a newer student did not initially have a clear sense of what assessment scores might represent success for them:

I think I got 58 for that. And then the next two I got 72 for each of them, but I don’t know whether that is an average, or a good mark, or should I do better?

Only one student discussed an occasion where a module decision had been driven by enjoyment rather than success:

I did withdraw from one module, despite the fact I was doing well, I got an 80% mark in the TMA, I found I just wasn’t engaging with it, I wasn’t enjoying it and I thought, well what is the point of putting myself through it when it’s not what I’m studying for?

### 6.1.1 Sources of information about interest/enjoyment

A number of students reported being encouraged by student reviews which demonstrated their enjoyment of the subject:

If other students have done it and enjoy it, it doesn’t necessarily mean they do well at it but if they enjoy it, that’s definitely a big plus point.

Whilst more experienced students also used this to help judgements about level of enjoyment, they tended to seek this feedback from students that they knew:

I’ve got a couple of friends who’ve done this course and thoroughly enjoyed it and so I kind of trusted their judgement if you like.

Several students discussed how they relied on the module descriptions to spark their interest:

I’m sort of reading through and thinking... that looks boring or that looks good.
The title drew me in.

...searching through the modules for what grabs me and makes me want to find out more.

Some students were drawn to module descriptions which contained subjects that they felt they had an affinity for, and might be more likely to succeed in:

“...I’m paying for it and I’m putting a lot of effort in, I don’t want to pick something that I’m very unfamiliar with just in case…”

“...that was the field that I worked in, I worked with literature and creative writing and so I suppose I’m naturally drawn to those subject areas…”

Students relied on assessment and tutor feedback to inform them about their success on a module, which is likely to have a powerful impact in retaining students during the course of a module:

“...getting good feedback, I suppose, from tutors and, you know, surprising myself…”

“...it’s nice for me because it really matters to me to get a good degree, it’s nice for me to know that I’m making a good start…”

“The first time I got a mark in the low 70s was a big achievement, because the previous two had both been in the 60s, so to get from a 65 to 70 was, to me, you’ve crossed over the grade boundary, that’s an achievement”
In one case, tutor feedback resulted in an immediate module change:

"I started my course as a beginner. Well after the first tutorial my lecturer said, you know, “You shouldn’t be here, you’re too, level’s too high, standard’s too high”.

In some cases, students recognised how tutor feedback could help to enhance their confidence, and inform them about their skills and abilities. This in turn, could be significant in influencing their subsequent choices:

[Tutor feedback]… might compliment you on something that you, some aspects or some skills that you’ve got, it’s definitely that, it’s not just grade related really

…even my tutor said you know, “Maybe you ought to consider the creative writing route”, and you know, I think actually maybe that is the right route for me … that might be the right way to go.

Tutor feedback continued to offer valuable developmental feedback for experienced students as well:

...even when you get a really good mark, they’ll still show you how you could have approached something differently, you know, have you considered this?
6.2 Career

A number of students noted that a primary motivation for their study was career-fulfilment:

"I realised that I didn’t have a Plan B so if I was made redundant, I was a bit sort of stuck."

"I kept coming up against younger generation who were qualified to a much higher degree than me, with academic, to degree level academic qualifications, and that to forward myself in a career... I needed to have a degree."

Some students remained focused on choosing modules based on interest, but acknowledged how the subject might complement their current career:

"...it’s sort of compatible with my job, you know, because it’s all about analysing and, you know, text and that sort of thing, so again it’s, you know, it’s, it is kind of linked to what I do."

For others, interest in a subject had actually led to the discovery of a new potential career path:

"They led me in the right direction to where I’m now switching career from something that had reached a dead end to taking a leap in the dark towards... something new and important, whatever that might turn out to be."

6.2.1 Sources of information about career

Two experienced student detailed using the module descriptions to make choices based on career relevance:

"I was always interested in how far it fits to my current or upcoming job. If there were contents which did not fit to my career plan, I have not taken the module."

"I think maybe, it was for the [Module], I think it might have been in, it might have been in year one or something, and it did just kind of appear then, I found it quite interesting, especially for what I want to go into, so I just clicked on it and read it and it sounded really interesting and so I signed up to that one instead of doing what I originally planned to do."
Another student reported needing more information to establish the relevance of a module to potential career paths:

Another big big help would be what employers think of the course, or potential jobs/areas you could use the module content in. For example, I’m looking at [Module] as my next module, and it looks kind of interesting but also have read reports of it being a lot of work and reading, but it would be useful to know what kind of real-world job or work I could apply it to would be useful in making that decision of if it’s worth it.

6.3 Recognising/establishing new skills

A number of students discussed the value of learning new skills during the course of their modules, though for many new students this appeared to be retrospective, rather than necessarily having influenced their original choice:

…the first course has been really good and just getting you settled in… it’s particularly good at teaching you how to learn, how to be an independent student which I think is, you know, is very valuable and very useful.

Others discussed having made conscious choices about their modules in order to ‘test’ their compatibility with distance study:

I began taking short courses (in business) that were 10 or 30 points to ensure I could manage the learning style.

Students recognised how ‘learning to study’ with the OU and distance learning, might improve their ability to study and select future modules:

…the next module I hope will be easier, because I should know what to expect. I didn’t know what to expect. Bearing in mind that I’ve left school umpteen years ago, and as I’ve been told that academic learning is completely different to ordinary education.
More experienced students emphasised the importance of learning about study skills for new students, and how these early experiences influences future module choices:

“As you go on as well, you don’t need so much advice, you don’t need so much help, in the beginning though, especially for new people coming in to the OU, when things are so different to what they’re used to, I really think level 1 people need a lot more, a lot more help.”

“...the biggest thing for brand new students, especially those who’ve not studied before is they really should do some formal study skills training... learning that people do learn, do do things differently.”

Some students were already aware of their own skills prior to commencing their OU study. More experienced students expressed frustration about modules which they felt enforced certain learning styles on students, which might not be compatible with their own strengths:

“Studying isn’t only with the OU, it has been over my entire life both formally and informally. So I came to my most recent OU degree with a strong knowledge of how I learn best

“...nothing I’ve done with the OU has really changed my perception of how I learn. It’s got me increasingly irritated by modules that try to tell me how I should, though.”

Others noted how their self-awareness had improved during the course of their study with the OU, by experimenting with different learning styles:

“I came knowing how to study maths and physics but not how to study the social sciences and I have discovered that I need to approach them in different ways… The OU gave me the opportunity to find that out and the confidence to experiment”

“...it has allowed me to test other methods and appreciate that they may well work for other people!”

“The more studying I do the more I understand how best I learn”
6.3.1 Sources of information about skills compatibility

Students discussed a range of sources of information about modules, which they explicitly considered in the context of their personal skills. This included the module descriptions:

…the topics covered sounded interesting, and most were things I’d at least encountered previously. I had covered the entry criteria, so I was happy that the level would be about right.

Some students made comments about their strengths and weaknesses, and how this had influenced their module choices, by avoiding modules using certain pedagogical tools:

“I also know certain things absolutely don’t work for me - collaborative learning. I am quite happy to work with others and to help people, but actually getting to grips with something tough happens when I’m on my own with it.

Some were frustrated by modules where certain pedagogical tools were enforced on students, or formed part of the assessment method for individuals:

“people are talking about their experiences of doing these other modules [involving group work], that sounds like it’s not working fantastically well because inevitably you get a student who doesn’t really want to do too much or hasn’t got the capacity to do too much towards the finished product, so that might, I’m much better working, if I’m doing, you know, coming up with a finished product, I’m much better doing it by myself, so that might affect, you know, kind of going against what I just said about contact with other people. It’s nice to have the contact and be able to support each other and to see each other at tutorials and stuff but to actually be jointly responsible for an outcome, I’m not so sure about.

I have a real issue with the way they are increasingly trying to direct HOW people learn - for example in [Module], they required us to produce a wiki for our own use. It was great to have as a facility, and suggesting people try it is a good idea, but requiring it is too inflexible.
One OUSA forum comment also suggested how the delivery method needed to be compatible with the module content:

… if you are studying a module which makes frequent use of computer software, animations etc… then studying it online might have advantages as it means the whole thing is more integrated. Conversely, a module with a very high volume of reading might well be more off putting online.

Students were resistant to online only module delivery as they felt it restricted their opportunities for study or that it was not effective for all of their study requirements:

Online only content/ large amounts of online content - the point is that we’re meant to be study at times that are convenient for us, not when we have an Internet connection. With the best will in the world, my smartphone (screen size!) is not a suitable study tool when I’m on the train... A book on the other hand...!

I keep books and I consult them again. I can’t learn deeply enough off an online resource, it’s only (barely) adequate for a superficial first run through.

I would be very nervous if some people are suggesting that all of the course books might be online or any more of them. I’m one of these people, I do find it difficult to read for long periods online, so I would always want to have the course materials as much as possible in my hands.

Some more experienced students had developed workarounds to improve their studying success, which potentially prevented them for having to avoid certain module choices on the basis of module delivery:

…the OU has shown me that some ways don’t work for me. I’m thinking particularly of the seemingly never-ending audio and video clips in [module]. It turns out that I don’t absorb information well from that sort of thing. Fortunately there are transcripts for most of them, which helped

“With DVDs I see no point whatsoever in talking heads or talking over pretty pictures that add nothing to the commentary. Where the clips were useful was in Science, especially the Volcanoes course where you really needed to *see* what was happening alongside a scientific description. Where they aren’t useful is when the pictures are a distraction from the ideas being presented and then I just look at the transcript”
Although students recognised the value of student reviews, they highlighted the need to consider these in relation to their own skills or personal circumstances:

“I always read the reviews on the module pages, and if I knew someone who’d done it, I’d ask them. But I take it with a pinch of salt, as my personal strengths and weaknesses are not entirely typical.

…it’s very rare that I take other people’s opinions on things which are very personal to myself because I know what I’m capable of, I know how I work.

I do take them into account but I never read that many of them due to the layout of them, and because someone studying OU full time will find a L3 completely different to someone who works part time and has 2 children to look after as well as L3 study. Without that added level of detail I don’t think they’re particularly useful in giving an accurate view of the modules, but certainly have their use and getting a feel.

6.4 Ability to manage workload

Students were keen to ensure they would be able to not only manage the commitment of studying a particular module, but OU study in general:

…I think you really need to appreciate that to study from home, you know, it takes a lot of commitment, and you do have to find time to study...

This appeared to be a particular concern for students early on in their study experience, and became less of an issue as they became more experienced. However, this was very much influenced by the individual’s current personal circumstances:

…it’s a bit of a worry sort of thinking, can I fit this in, you know. And I must admit the first year I suppose… it was quite intense I suppose because I was sort of new to it and everything.

I’m looking to see how many study hours I’m going to need to put in and sort of balance it with my work and home life as well, ‘cause certain years have been more difficult than others.


6.4.1 Sources of information about workload

Whilst ability to manage the workload was a particular concern for newer students, the information sources they consulted to consider this factor appeared to be relatively limited. Some used advice from tutors or OU staff, to give them some reassurance:

“…finding out the commitment, I talked to a couple of tutors and the student registration service were very, very helpful I have to say in helping me make my mind up.”

One new student felt that statements relating to credits/time in module descriptions were of limited value:

“It’s got here, most OU students study part-time to gain either 60 credits a year, studying for about nine hours a week or 60 credits a year studying for about 18 hours a week. That is very general, that’s a very general statement, because some people learn quicker than others, so it all depends on an individual.”

More experienced students appeared to use information from a variety of sources, including student reviews:

“…there is a range of views there and I actually like to read the negative ones as well because it’s good to know what you’re up against really.”

“…read the reviews to find out if a module is particularly heavy.”

One student explained how student reviews also helped them plan their approach to modules:

[Speaking to other students to find out]… in some modules, there’s a sort of certain month where you really need to get ahead or, prepare sort of a bit extra; one of the TMAs is sort of weighted a bit more than another…”

One student considered start dates to ensure effective management of their workload:

“There was the option to do [Module] alongside the other course - the description mentioned that the two courses had been designed to fit together. I decided to stick with one to start with in case I got overwhelmed. I ended up doing the two courses with a couple of months overlap which worked really well for me.”
Another student had taken a more innovative approach to help test whether they would be able to take on more workload in future module choices:

“I was going to toy with the idea of doing 120 per year so this year I found a free course in music composition which is only six weeks and so I ran that and my OU course together, just to see what it was like, and it convinced me I only wanted to do 60 points a year.”

6.5 Student and tutor interaction

Students felt interaction not only offered opportunities to socialise, but enhanced their study experience:

“I know that face to face must be more expensive but I always find my whole OU experience so much more enjoyable and valuable when there are more face to face sessions.”

“I’m also on the sort of unofficial Facebook groups for my course… I’m a very regular Facebook user and they are massive in their significance you know, taking away the feeling of distance learning.”

“I mean it’s nice feeling like you’re at a proper university which is what, one aspect of having a face-to-face tutorial is, and meeting your tutor and the other students makes you really feel like you’re at university and that lends a certain authority to the course.”

“…you get a lot from talking to your fellow students, everybody thinks in a different way and I’ve learnt a lot from them.”

Whilst some saw the value of group work as part of their study, some were put off by the use of Wiki’s or mandatory group assignments which were assessed:

“…I think that’s great, being able to do sort of group work, because you know, nobody’s an island, nobody works independently, I think there’s very few areas of employment where you would be working in total isolation…”

“…people are talking about their experiences of doing these other modules - that sounds like it’s not working fantastically well because inevitably you get a student who doesn’t really want to do too much or hasn’t got the capacity to do too much towards the finished product…”
One student noted that the tutor was unlikely to influence their module choices due to the low likelihood of getting the same tutor twice:

"I’ve never yet had the same tutor for modules, even in the same area, subject area.

However, tutor support did have a far-reaching effect on subsequent module choices for one student:

"…if I’d have done the second half of that course, I thought I might have the same tutor, it just wasn’t right so I then switched to my comfort zone and I’ve moved, switched pathways…"

"…if a tutor is good and inspires me, works with me, I would try and keep them if possible…"

6.5.1 Sources of information about student interaction and tutor support

Students tended to mention tutorials/residentials in the context of considering the level of student and tutor interaction, though students did not always find this information easy to obtain, as outlined in Section 4.4.

Individuals discussed the difficulties in establishing interaction with other students during the course of their module study and in several cases had instigated their own arrangements during the course of the module to enable this:

"I have suggested or tried to contact people on the forum, and because of the data protection, you know, I can’t, although my email address is on, no one had been in touch with me… so it is quite a lonely existence.

"…they have an interactive café [inaudible] it’s in [Location] so it’s a bit far for me but a lot of the people around [Location] actually meet up on a Saturday morning.

"We’ve built some of our own support structures, using external technology, e.g. Facebook and google+ which is really useful.

6.6 Summary

Students discussed a range of motivating factors which influenced their module choice, and impacted on what module information they might consider to help inform their decision-making. Some of these were motivations related to internal factors such as personal interest or realising success, whilst others were more external, such as career development. Some motivation factors were more apparent for certain student groups, or appeared to change or emerge over the course of students study.
Module factors: is the information too much, too little, or just right?

7.1 There are a relatively finite number of factors about modules which are considered by students when making their module choices. This is perhaps unsurprising, given students will be limited by the information that is made available to them. However, it is apparent that the range of information sources considered by students increases with experience. This appears to partly be the result of building their contacts with other students or OU staff, and an increased awareness of what information is available. Student feedback indicates the wealth of information available about each module, which in itself could be overwhelming:

"While I feel a lot of this information is probably available on the OU website - I would like to see more simple summaries of it on module description pages with links to further reading, rather than all the info being presented up front sometimes."

7.2 There appeared to be a number of areas where students were keen to obtain more information about the module to help inform their choice. Several suggested having access to sample module material on the website, which was something not consistently available for all modules. This was particularly pertinent for certain student groups where it was much harder to visit OU locations to view the materials.

7.3 Views about student reviews were mixed, and students indicated a greater reliance on informal reviews from trusted sources. However, it is possible that including basic information about the source of the student providing the review could help students to judge the personal relevance of the review.

7.4 The timing and lifecycle of modules appeared to be increasingly important for students in their module choices, particularly as they progressed to Level 2 and 3. Students made suggestions about how information about module developments could be shared more proactively to help inform their decision-making:

"I think more detailed advance information about new modules… if I’d known a bit more about what was going to be different in the new versions, then I’d have chosen [differently]."

"Would also help if there was some sort of system whereby people could sign up for alerts about a particular module."
7.5 Advice from staff was particularly important to new students, and there was an appetite for the OU to provide this in more proactive ways:

“...perhaps we could be checked up on a little bit more during our courses, even if it’s a bit more personal approach, occasionally I might get a, you know, an email from the OU at the end of my, or nearing the end of course saying, ‘Have you thought about what you’re going to do next yet?’ you know, just might be a little nice to have the personal touch.

It is possible that the Student Support Teams implemented in February 2014 are well placed to assist in this way.

Module factors: are students asking the right questions?

7.6 It is clear that students do not consider all of the information available to them in order to make their module choices. This could simply be a product of the volume of information that is available:

“There’s a lot you can read about, and is worth doing but to a certain extent I think some students will know what they want to do and doing too much digging can lead to confusion.

7.7 However, in some cases, it seems that the choices made by students are not entirely rational; they perhaps avoid seeking out too much information, and are happy to base their decision on their own instincts about what will work for them. In some cases, they might seek out information simply to confirm a choice they have already made:

“I think I must have looked at the foundation courses and saw what people had to say about those, and if you like that gave me confidence to go for it, but I’d already made my personal opinion that that was the one I was going to do.

This appears consistent with existing research which suggests students use a pre-existing preference to shape the information they consider, rather than collecting information from the diverse study programmes available (Tavares & Cardoso, 2013).

7.8 In some cases, it seemed that, rather than ignoring information, the student had committed to seek ways to overcome things that could have been seen as potential barriers to their study:

“I think, you know, ‘cause I think as soon as that thought comes into your head, you’ve already made that decision. You’ve just got to do it, then, you know, and then everything else, time, money, whatever, it’s, yes it is difficult fitting things in round full time employment, fitting things round a family, it is hard, but if you think it, you know, if you think that you need it, then you need to do it, and you’ve just, you’ll find the time, or you’ll find the mode of studying for you, and you’ll do it.
In circumstances where choices were harder to make, students reported employing more ‘peripheral’ module factors to help them make a satisfactory choice. This is consistent with previous research on broader student decisions about Higher Education (Davies et al, 2009).

However, many students appeared to be heavily influenced by their earlier module experiences; having discovered retrospectively those module factors that they should have perhaps taken more notice of in their decision-making. It is possible that particularly those students with no prior Higher Education experience, or experience of Open University study would require more assistance in knowing the right questions to ask of the available information in order to help make their module choices.

What motivates students in their module choices?

Module choices made early on in the student journey are heavily led by interest, and the individuals’ sense that they feel comfortable or familiar with the subject. This is consistent with other studies: “Most students pointed out vocation as the main reason to make this choice… defined as a passion or a strong feeling of suitability for a particular programme.”

Students recognised that interest was a key motivator in their study, and would subsequently increase their likelihood of performing well. Whilst interest remained very central to the decisions of more experienced students, this was increasingly represented in modules which presented challenges or offered opportunities for new learning. It seems that with retrospect, students realised the benefit of exploring subjects they might not have initially chosen, expanding their interests and motivating them to consider different modules:

I was happy with Psychology until I did Social Psychology – it was [module] – it was a brilliant model, I really loved it, and it made me think that I wasn’t so interested in cognitive psychology, which was the one that I would... the other compulsory I would have had to do for the degree, the Psychology degree. So, because it had made me interested in Sociology, I went on to do [Sociology module].

Students also increased their confidence in and understanding of their own abilities, interests, and learning preferences during the course of their study. This appeared to help students make better use of information about modules to assess its compatibility with their skill-sets and study objectives. More experienced students reflected on the value of having experimented with different learning styles, even though they had not necessarily explicitly considered this in their module choices at the outset.

Certain motivating factors, were central to students’ decision-making, and could sometimes ‘override’ other module factors that might normally deter the student from certain choices. This was particularly apparent for more experienced students who reported a range of ‘workarounds’ to help them overcome factors which could have otherwise influenced their module choices.

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5 Tavares & Cardoso (2013), Enrolment choices in Portuguese higher education: do students behave as rational customer? Higher Education vol.66: p305
Students demonstrated how their module choices were influenced by their previous study experiences; having discovered new interests or realised new skills they possessed:

…my experience is that you start on a course and you have a plan, and you have a path set out, and as you travel down that path, doors open, opportunities arise, and actually you refine it and it changes, and it’s a you know, sort of, a process that is always ongoing, really…

I’m sure there are people who get into that position where they suddenly realise it isn’t quite for them, although you know, yes I want to study, the pathway I’ve chosen isn’t quite for me.

Motivation factors and Qualification pathways

Whilst some students valued the clarity and structure of qualification pathways, others resented the way in which their choices were mandated. This frustration was also apparent in relation to the increasing number of 60 credit modules rather than 30 credit modules, which students felt limited their choices.

The evolution in students’ decision-making approaches resulted in a variety of changes to students’ subsequent module choices, from simply selecting different modules, to complete changes in their qualification pathway:

It was doing [module] that ultimately led me towards the [subject] degree I’d no intention of studying for when I first started. [Module] was so good I wanted to learn more.

Some students demonstrated a desire to remain on their qualification pathway, despite the temptation of other possible routes:

I could have switched focus away from [Subject] and gone for [Qualification], but I wanted to stay on track.

Switching to [Qualification] would have felt like a failure, and so I would have just given up... but I really wanted the [original Qualification], so I just psyched myself up and decided to push through.

One student appeared to have some questions regarding their qualification choice, but did not seem to have considered changing their pathway:

It has been eye-opening to me and more involved in the sort of, the in-depth analysis of things so I’m not sure if perhaps I made a mistake at the beginning and perhaps I should have gone in another direction or yes, I’m correct in doing what I’m doing. I’m not sure if I’ll really realise that till I get to the end.
In one case, it took some period of study before one student realised that they were able to break away from the recommended pathway:

“I probably quite restricted myself because of what the OU website said at the time, it was, you know, if you want to do this degree, have this degree, you should do these courses, and so I kind of had that in my mind to begin with and then as time went on, I realised that wasn’t the case, you can do whatever you wanted, so, that’s definitely changed.”

Students discussed frustrations for those who change pathways and have to either undertake additional modules, or revert to lower level modules to fulfil qualification requirements:

“I’ve got 30 credits that I can’t, that are no use to my degree because they’re just sort of, they’re just, they’re not on the pathway so therefore they don’t count.

…and some of them are actually, are coming back to do a Level 1 after having done other Levels, so it must be, you know it must be then really quite frustrating because a) it’s a Level 1 when they’ve been used to studying at a higher level and b) they’re used to getting their teeth into something which, you know, by definition we’re not really doing.”

Given the apparent evolution in students’ decision making processes, Qualification Pathways present an interesting challenge. Whilst students embark on a chosen qualification, it is the discoveries made during the course of their study journey that appear most significant in their module choices. Existing research suggests “students link vocation with the possession of specific personal characteristics…they incorporated the perceived features of study programmes in the perception they had about themselves, shaping this preference”\(^6\). It is important that students study experience offers them opportunities to challenge their preconceptions about their areas of interest and personal strengths, and study pathways with enough flexibility to allow them to deviate based on their discoveries, even if this means moving away from their original qualification intention.

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\(^6\) Tavares & Cardoso (2013), Enrolment choices in Portuguese higher education: do students behave as rational customers? Higher Education vol.66: p305
Recommend factors to improve student registration, retention and success on modules:

- Provision of foundation subjects which allow tasters of a range of topics
- Further develop the use student reviews
- Encouraging and supporting students to experiment with different learning styles
- Develop the use of formative assignments which allow students to evolve their understanding of learning and assessment styles
- Increase the number of 30 credit modules available for students

Recognise any Equality & Diversity implications resulting from factors likely to affect specific student groups:

- Target support to those who are new to the Open University and who have less/no previous HE experience
- Ensure pedagogical and assessment tools are aligned to the subject matter
- Consider what measures can be made to ensure better inclusion of overseas students or those with certain disabilities or family commitments, who find it harder to engage in face to face activities
- Recognise how students preferences for certain learning styles is potentially linked to their chosen subject

Explore ways to assist student decision-making through provision of information:

- Maximise the flexibility to students at outset of their study, and explore how this could funnel into qualification pathways
- Support students in identifying the ways in which they might want to interrogate available information about the modules on offer to them
- Explore ways to layer the provision of information and use effective signposting, so as not to overwhelm students
- Improve the quality and timeliness of information about module lifecycles
- Increase the provision of sample course materials across all modules
9. Appendices

Appendix I: Social Media Schedule

Appendix II: Interview Schedule (first phase)

Appendix III: New Student Interview Schedule

Appendix IV: Experienced Student Interview Schedule

Appendix V: Module Factors Diagram: Example from Stage 2 Participation
10. References


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