

Final Project Report

**Towards A Structured Process for Involving ALs
in Module Tuition Strategy Design and Review**

Consulting front line practitioners about module design

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Executive Summary

Following the introduction of the Group Tuition Policy (GTP) in 2016, Associate Lecturers (ALs) were given the opportunity in 2017 to feed back into a review of the newly created module tuition strategies. In the STEM Faculty a Toolkit was provided to support the review.

This project examined how the review feedback was collected and acted upon for undergraduate modules within the school of Computing and Communications, with a view to develop a structured process that could be piloted within the school before disseminating recommendations more widely.

ALs have expertise in tuition as working most closely with the students they are informed about what works well for students. The intended impact of this project was the development of a process for harnessing AL expertise in the design and review of module tuition strategies.

For the review, feedback was collected through synchronous meetings, forum discussions and emails. This project gathered evidence of the feedback from meeting recordings and forum posts. The 2016 and the 2017 tuition strategies were compared to see what changes had been made as a result of the review.

Although the intention of the review had been to collect feedback about the tuition strategy designs, much of the feedback was about how the strategies had been implemented and some feedback was about other aspects of the AL role. The resulting changes to the tuition strategies varied from module to module. Not all changes were a result of the AL feedback. Module teams and staff tutors continue to develop their own views in the light of experience about how best to design tuition strategies. Some changes appear to have been influenced by what other module teams were doing.

If under GTP we continue to review module tuition strategies, it is important to allow strategies to stabilise and the tutors to develop their practice, and not to have a review with every presentation.

It is recommended that a review should be started on the module tutor forum, with ALs alerted by email. Then a synchronous f2f or online meeting should be held, followed up with further forum discussion.

As expertise develops and evidence of effectiveness of decisions is collected, this should be disseminated across and beyond the school so that future decisions can be based upon the expertise and evidence. We should learn from our ALs because they know how to deliver supported open learning at a distance to an exceptionally high standard.

The emphasis should be on increasing flexibility within the tuition strategies, to enable ALs to develop and work within a community of shared professional practice, to share expertise between themselves, to trial new ideas and to adapt to the needs of their students.

At the same time as reviewing the tuition strategy, staff tutors and ALs should have the opportunity to review how the strategy is implemented. Tuition strategies should be written in such a way that they allow ALs to use their professional expertise in providing dynamic and innovative tuition for the benefit of our students.

Aims and scope of the project

The project proposal was prompted by the 2017 10th eSTEEeM call for projects, in particular the identified **Supporting Students** priority area 1b) **Reflection on tuition strategies**.

Following the introduction of the Group Tuition Policy in 2016 and a promise made by the University (VC) and the Faculty (STEM Interim Executive Dean) in late 2016 that ALs would have the opportunity to feedback into a review of the newly created module tuition strategies, this feedback was collected for each module in early 2017. The Associate Dean (Regions and Nations) produced a STEM 16J Module Group Tuition Strategy Toolkit “to support module team chairs (or nominees) in reviewing each strategy and making changes in time for 2017J.” The strategies review was to be organised and owned by the Director of Teaching / Board of Studies in each school.

The earlier eSTEEeM project *Perceptions, Expectations and Experience of Group Tuition: towards a shared understanding amongst stakeholders* <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/projects/themes/supporting-students/perceptions-expectations-and-experience-group-tuition-towards> identified that ALs have expertise in tuition as they work most closely with the students and therefore are informed about what works well for students. Building on advice I received at the eSTEEeM pre-bidding workshop held on 18th January 2017, and consultation with the C&C Director of Teaching and staff tutors, my proposal was to explore whether we could develop a process whereby module teams can harness the expertise of ALs in a structured way when designing and reviewing module tuition strategies.

The scope of this project was to examine how the feedback was collected and acted upon for undergraduate modules within the school of Computing and Communications, and thereby to develop a structured process that could be piloted within the school before disseminating recommendations more widely.

The intended impact of the project was the development of a clear process for involving ALs in the design and review of module tuition strategies. ALs should have improved ownership of the tuition strategy, its currency and its effectiveness. There should be improved working relationships between module teams and ALs. As the project has progressed, it has become clear that the wider impact should be that there should be a process for capturing AL expertise to feed into a broader range of policy developments for the benefit of students.

It is expected that recommendations from this project will also have application to beyond the OU as many HE institutions now provide online and distance learning and have distributed teaching staff similar to our ALs.

The specific goals were:

- Observe the 2017 process by gathering evidence of the different approaches used, how engaged the ALs were, the involvement of key school staff, the information fed back and the resulting changes to the tuition strategies.
- Evaluate the 2017 process to see what appears to be the most effective method of consultation, what ideas emerged and are there any lessons to learn.
- Recommend a future process so that AL input can be collected, reviewed and acted upon in a structured and transparent manner.

Activities

The project start was delayed due to pressures of other work. There was also a concern that the University-wide SFTP (Students First Transformation Project) launched in 2017 may change the tuition model and render this project irrelevant. The project plan and timescale was revised with a proposal to complete an observation report of the feedback that was collected and to analyse how this affected the module tuition strategies, with a view to making recommendations for the future, by the end of 2018.

Two colleagues Sharon Dawes and Simon Savage were recruited to the project to help gather evidence. Informed by notes collated by the C&C Deputy Director of Teaching we watched meeting recordings and collected forum feedback. We used Trello as a shared workspace. We compared the 2016 and the 2017 tuition strategies to see what changes had been made as a result of the reviews. This has now been written up as an internal report ready to share with the C&C Director of Teaching. It is timely because as Lead Staff Tutor I was invited to contribute to a STEM Board of Studies discussion on tutorial provision asking how we can improve interactivity and attendance at tutorials, and to follow up with a meeting with my Director of Teaching.

I am writing a journal paper including a literature review to explore the relevance of this project to the wider HE environment, in particular for HE institutions where there are distributed teachers.

Findings

The number of ALs on the modules included in this project ranged from 6 up to around 30. Responders were self-selecting. Response rates ranged from 27% (7 out of 26) up to 83% (5 out of 6) of ALs on a module.

Although the intention had been to collect feedback about the tuition strategy designs, much of the feedback was about how the strategies had been implemented and some feedback was about other aspects of the AL role.

Feedback on the tuition strategy designs included:

- Most tutorial titles were OK but some tutorials needed clearer labelling.
- Some tutorial descriptions needed to be reviewed and revised, for example, to clarify that the content could vary according to the needs of the students who attend and to tell students they will get more out of the session if they come with questions.
- Descriptions should be sufficiently broad to allow ALs to exercise their professional judgement. Tutorials can be organic and take a different, more student-centred direction at times, which is the concept of creative teaching as structured improvisation (Sawyer 2004).
- Some ALs felt that online sessions should be longer than one hour to allow more scope for interactive activities. Other ALs preferred shorter and more frequent online sessions. It was understood that session length can be varied by negotiation with the ALs when implementing the tuition strategy.
- A single tutorial should not try to cover too many topics.
- There was some doubt over whether students read the descriptions. There was a feeling among some ALs that students don't attend tutorials based on the descriptions. They trust the ALs to deliver appropriate tuition.

Feedback on implementing the tuition strategies included:

- ALs would prefer to see a more even distribution of tutorials across the available time windows.

- Daytime sessions are a useful alternative to evening tutorials.
- Some ALs would like a standard set of resources and more guidance for each tutorial, as would some Staff Tutors. There was a feeling that there must be a lot of duplication of work by different ALs preparing similar tutorials. At the same time, this can restrict the organic, bottom up development and evolution of AL tutorial resources and approaches.
- On larger population modules there is greater scope for ALs to deliver tutorials in pairs because there are likely to be more ALs in a cluster.
- There was a willingness to trial new ideas next time round.
- ALs often message their students with a more specific agenda for an upcoming tutorial.
- Attendance at some face-to-face tutorials was very low. Maybe an online tutorial would be better next time.
- The wider choice afforded to students did not always increase student uptake of tutorials.
- There was not always collaboration between the ALs in a cluster, particularly on established modules where ALs had already developed their individual tutorial practice. There was felt to be scope for greater collaboration. Finding time to plan collaboration was perceived to be a problem.

Not all ALs are of the same opinion. For example, views differ on whether an online tutorial should be longer than one hour. Some would like more guidance on tutorial content than others. This is to be expected depending on the experience and personal preferences of each AL.

Following the consultation, the resulting changes to the tuition strategies varied from module to module. Some tutorial descriptions were reworded. Some session lengths were changed. Some time windows were widened. Overall the emphasis among ALs and Staff Tutors was on increasing flexibility for implementing the strategies.

Some sessions were split into separate sessions on different topics. On some modules, regular ad-hoc drop-in sessions were added, with no particular content, to help students with any questions or issues that had arisen.

There were no changes to some strategies where the feedback suggested the ALs were happy with the strategy as it was, and the feedback was more about the implementation than about the strategy itself.

Not all changes to the tuition strategies were a result of the AL feedback. Module teams and Staff Tutors continue to develop their own views in the light of experience about how best to design tuition strategies, for example to maximise flexibility and not to inhibit the professional judgement of the ALs delivering the tuition. Some changes, in particular to the descriptions, appear to have been influenced by what other module teams were doing.

Recommendations

This project looked at how module tuition strategy reviews were undertaken in order to develop a structured process for such reviews. However, the fundamental fitness of the Group Tuition Policy (GTP) was not under review and any changes to the strategies are necessarily constrained by the limitations imposed by the GTP and the systems implementing it. The fitness for purpose of the GTP itself should be questioned particularly because it has led to an unwelcomed erosion of the tutor/student relationship which is a USP of the Open University.

If under GTP we continue to review module tuition strategies, it is important to allow strategies to stabilise and the tutors to develop their practice, and not to have a review with every presentation.

The time window for reviews is limited by the bureaucratic systems requirement for reviewed strategies to be fixed well in advance of the next presentation and probably before the current presentation has ended. This limitation does not make sense pedagogically because it forces reviews to take place mid-presentation before they have been fully tested.

A schedule for reviews should be drawn up well in advance. The review schedule and meeting dates should be shared with ALs as early as possible with reminders closer to the time. Payment to encourage all ALs to participate and take ownership is recommended.

It is recommended that the review for each module should be started on the module tutor forum, with ALs alerted by email. Then a synchronous f2f or online meeting should be held, and this should be followed up with further forum discussion. The staff tutor on the module team is well placed to assist the module chair in conducting the review.

Changes with reasons should be documented.

If we want to encourage a consistency of approach, proposed changes should be shared across all module teams in the school. This could take the form of an annual briefing or coordination meeting. But this contradicts a richness of approach, which is what ALs provided before GTP was introduced. Consistency of approach does not guarantee a consistent student experience because clusters differ in geography, size, number of ALs and who those ALs are.

As expertise develops and evidence of effectiveness of decisions is collected, this should be disseminated across and beyond the school so that future tuition strategy decisions can be based upon the gathered expertise and evidence. We should learn from our ALs because they know how to deliver supported open learning at a distance to an exceptionally high standard.

The emphasis should be on increasing flexibility within the tuition strategies, to enable ALs to develop and work within a community of shared professional practice, to share expertise between themselves, to trial new ideas and to adapt to the needs of their students.

At the same time as reviewing the tuition strategy, staff tutors and ALs should have the opportunity to review how the strategy is implemented. Tuition strategies should be written in such a way that they do not hinder a satisfactory implementation. We want to empower our ALs to use their professional expertise in providing dynamic evolutionary tuition for the benefit of our students. ALs need to understand that they can be innovative in their tuition.

Successes

I presented at the October 2018 EDEN 10th Research Workshop in Barcelona and my accepted paper is published in the conference proceedings. My project mentor Helen Donelan provided detailed feedback to help me with my submission.

Impact

a) Student experience

This project is contributing to school discussions around developing tuition policy. Improvements in the appropriateness of tuition provision will benefit students.

b) Strategic change and learning design

The findings from this project are feeding into discussions with the Director of Teaching to influence

tuition policy.

Discussions with colleagues involved in all aspects of module tuition will influence the direction taken.

c) Teaching

I am currently developing my work into a more extensive paper including a literature review with the aim of publishing in a journal.

List of deliverables

1. [Walshe, Ann Towards a Structured Process for Involving Distributed Teachers in Facilitation Strategy Design and Review.](#) In: *10th EDEN Research Workshop Towards Personalized Guidance and Support for Learning* (Duart, Josep M and Szűcs, András eds.), 24-26 Oct 2018, Barcelona, Spain, pp. 254–260. Deposited in ORO
2. Internal report to Director of Teaching
3. Journal paper in preparation

References

1. Sawyer, R.K. (2004) Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation, *Educational Researcher*, 33(2), 12-20, doi: [10.3102/0013189X033002012](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033002012)
2. **STEM 16J Module Group Tuition Strategy Toolkit**, STEM GT Module review 16J Toolkit draft.docx, Internal document.
3. Walshe, A. and Gallen, A-M. (2017) Perceptions, Expectations and Experience of Group Tuition: towards a shared understanding amongst stakeholders. eSTeEM Final Report 2017, *Open University Internal Report*. Available on the Scholarship Exchange at <https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/Wiki/Document.aspx?DocumentID=2089>