

Online module forums: Espoused, actual and improved

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Contents

Contents.....	2
1. Executive Summary.....	3
2. Aims and scope.....	4
3. Methodology	6
3.1 Forums.....	6
3.1.1 Selection of Forums:.....	6
3.1.2 Core metrics of Forum interactions:	7
3.1.3 Qualitative analysis of forum messages:.....	8
3.2 Survey.....	11
3.2.1 Closed questions.....	11
3.2.2 Open questions	11
4. Findings	12
4.1 Forum Messages.....	12
4.1.1 Interaction metrics.....	12
4.1.2 Message metrics	13
4.1.3 Message thematic analysis	13
4.2 Survey.....	17
4.2.1 Usage of module-wide forums	17
4.2.2 Expectations of module-wide forums.....	18
4.2.3 Participation in module-wide forums.....	19
4.2.4 Tutor group forum preferences.....	19
5. Concluding discussion	19
5.1 Aims	19
5.2 Designing the forums differently.....	22
5.3 Further work.....	24
6. Figures and tables	25
7. References.....	26
8. University approval processes	28
9. Appendices.....	28
6 Heading 1 – person identifier	29
7 Heading 2 – time stamp	29
8 Heading 3 – message title	29
9 STU005 Post 1.....	29
10 • 8 Jan 2019, 21:30	29
11 Significant Figures	29

1. Executive Summary

The main goal was to analyse what actually occurred in the T313 and T317 TMA and EMA forums and to make comparisons between them with a view to

- a) understand how students actually perceive and use these forums
- b) if there is any information that is commonly sought after, within each module respectively, which would benefit students on other modules on the qualification pathway
- c) if there is a case to design the forums differently.

This was achieved by analysing the forum responses to answer 8 key research questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative answers. Forum messages were collected for both modules for the 18J presentation. The qualitative analysis was done in NVivo through hybrid coding using deductive and inductive themes. The quantitative analysis was done using simple metrics in a spreadsheet. The analysis of the forum messages was complimented by a survey of 18J and 19J presentations of both modules, thus obtaining information on the students' perceptions.

There were a number of differences and similarities in the behaviour of the two modules' students, both of which a corroborated to some degree in published literature. There was no obvious 'information' which would be suited to collating for use on the appropriate qualification pathways. The design of the modules was considered against the findings and literature review and a few possibilities for further work discussed.

An emergent outcome was the development of a framework for qualitative analysis of forum messages for any module in any faculty.

2. Aims and scope

Asynchronous discussion groups have been long recognised as an essential tool in online distance learning allowing constructivist learning (Preece, 2000; Markel, 2001). Cheng et al (2011) and Shaw (2013) both suggest that student - centred discussion and interaction¹ in forums will increase learning outcomes. Even though sustained interaction is difficult to achieve (Thomas, 2002) and low levels are common (Breslow et al, 2013) the discussion forum is the most widely used asynchronous tool for group discussion in online courses (Moanes, 2016). From observation, the Open University is no different in its choice of tool or the low level of interaction (Thorpe, 2013).

Modules T313 (Renewable Energy) and T317 (Innovation: Designing for change) are two level three STEM modules containing projects with different foci (engineering and design respectively), which had the same forum moderator and similar forum types available for students. Each module had several module-wide forums consisting of a Discussion forum (for discussion activities contained in the module material) a Café forum (for social interaction) and a series of TMA and EMA forums (for clarification of the respective assignments). Both modules started forums with welcome messages stating what each forum is for in accordance with Rose and Smith (2007) and Mayne and Wu (2011) who recommended the idea that clear and simple instructions and setting of expectations needs to be provided to the students. The moderator adopted a similar structure and management of the forums in accordance with Salter and Conneely (2015). Moderator interaction across both modules was modelled on Mazzolini and Madison (2007) who suggest that the moderator needs to maintain a balance between too little and too much intervention and the timing of such *'Thus, the instructor should not response to every student post immediately when it is not directed to him in order to give other students the opportunity to response and comment on each other posts'*.

The focus of this research project was to analyse what actually occurred in these forums and to make comparisons between them with a view to

- a) understand how students actually perceive and use these forums by *qualitatively analysing* the forum messages in a similar fashion to Fayard and DeSanctis (2008) who recognised three 'language-games' of leaving information, high interaction with moderator and polite and honest feedback
- b) if there is any information that is commonly sought after, within each module respectively, which would benefit students on other modules on the qualification pathway
- c) if there is a case to design the forums differently. With the rise of social media learner-learner interactions often take place in the more informal media e.g. facebook, than the more formal university provided discussion forums (Hollyhead et al, 2012), which encourages the university forums to be used as 'take and go' forums e.g. 'I ask a question and get a useful answer' Wang et al (2015). If this is so, do we need to reconsider and rethink our expectations and usage of online forums.

¹ 'interaction' is used rather than 'participation' to more correctly represent those who are actually posting messages.

The initial plan was to analyse the forum responses to answer the following eight questions:

- ❖ How many forums are there, and what is the amount of interaction in each?
- ❖ What proportion of students are interacting in forums and with what frequency are students interacting in the appropriate forums ie are they discussing in the discussion forums, asking questions about TMAs in the TMA forums etc or are they jumping in on what they perceive to be an 'active' forum? Forums can fulfil an informational need with clarification and explanations (Moanes, 2016) as well as reporting errors. However forums can become difficult to manage and organise when clarification, reporting of errors, tutorial information and activity discussions are all in the same forum.
- ❖ What percentage of messages from students are about module material and website errors?
- ❖ What percentage of messages from students are related to tutorials (where it is, what can they attend, where are the slides, Adobe Connect not working etc)
- ❖ Do students respond positively to multiple tutor interactions e.g. is there a desire for a 'teaching presence' (Shea et al., 2005)?
- ❖ Is there a difference between T313 and T317 which could be attributable to module topic?
- ❖ Is there anything in the forums that could be ported into other modules that would help foster a learning community along a qualification pathway?

At a personal level there were my own scholarship goals to:

- ❖ develop a method of analysing forum messages
- ❖ use my increased qualitative analysis skills to be a more proactive AL in T8xx MSc projects requiring students to perform qualitative analysis themselves
- ❖ further develop my Qualitative Analysis skills, in particular using NVivo, so that I could become an eSTEEeM project resource
- ❖ learn how to write surveys in JISC and how to analyse them in NVivo, so that I could become an eSTEEeM project resource
- ❖ reflect and improve my own forum moderation

3. Methodology

3.1 Forums

3.1.1 Selection of Forums:

Two modules were selected which were both in STEM Level 3, had a relatively large number of students (400 – 600) and had the same forum moderator. It was felt that this presented an even baseline to compare the two forum responses. Both these modules had similar forum structures, namely: Café (for social interaction), Discussion (mainly for module activities requiring posting of messages in forum), each of the TMAs (for clarifying and querying assignments issues) and the EMA (for clarifying and querying EMA issues) and have projects as their EMAs but the content and aim of the projects is different (T313 is an engineering module and T317 a design module). Looking at the Visual Analytic Data (<https://sas-va.open.ac.uk/SASVisualAnalyticsViewer/VisualAnalyticsViewer.jsp>) from the Café forum 18J, which was deemed to be a good indication of student interaction for each module, it can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 that both modules had a similar number of student interactions during its lifetime. This was of the form of a general diminution in number of interactions with slight localised peaks: at start before TMA01, at TMAs and running up to the EMA.

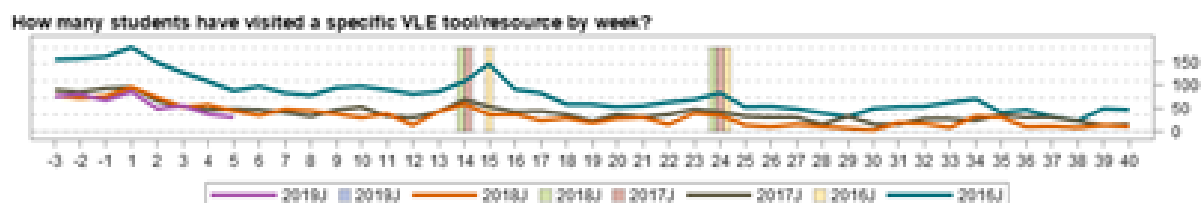


Figure 1: Number of T313 students visiting the Café Forum

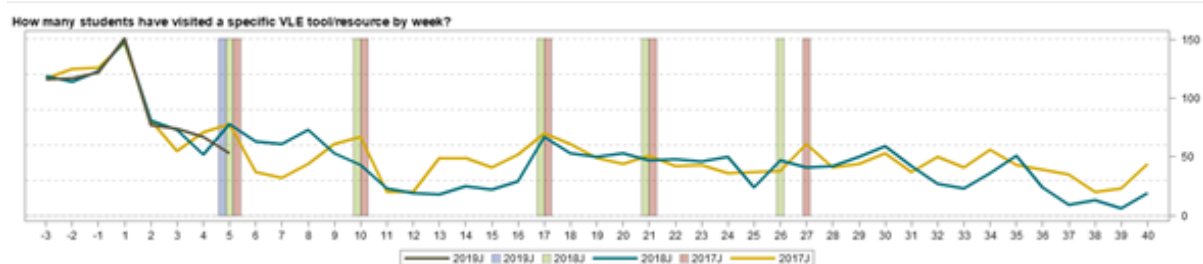


Figure 2: Number of T317 students visiting the Café Forum

Such a response has been documented by others (Thomas, 2002; Breslow et al, 2013). As well as this diminution of number of student interactions during the module lifetime, there is a peak pre TMA01 and thereafter at the TMA submission points and then in the run up to the EMA. The TMA01 and EMA forums were chosen for each module as being representative of each respective module as well as possibly affording the possibility of longitudinal information by inter-comparison of TMA01 and EMA forums. Thus, the final selection for forum messages for analysis was T313 (TMA01 and EMA) and T317 (TMA01 and EMA) all in 18J.

3.1.2 Core metrics of Forum interactions:

The interactions in each of these forums is shown in Figure 3 – Figure 6 (below) and each of the modules show similar student behaviour. The posted messages from each of these four forums were exported from the modules' websites in .rtf format. Core metrics were established for each of the forums using spreadsheets simple statistics and bar graphs.

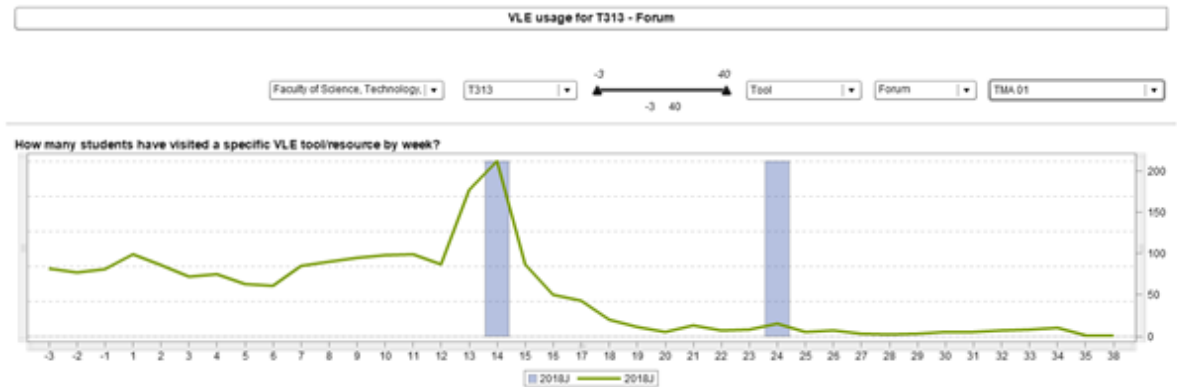


Figure 3. Number of T313 students visiting TMA01 forum

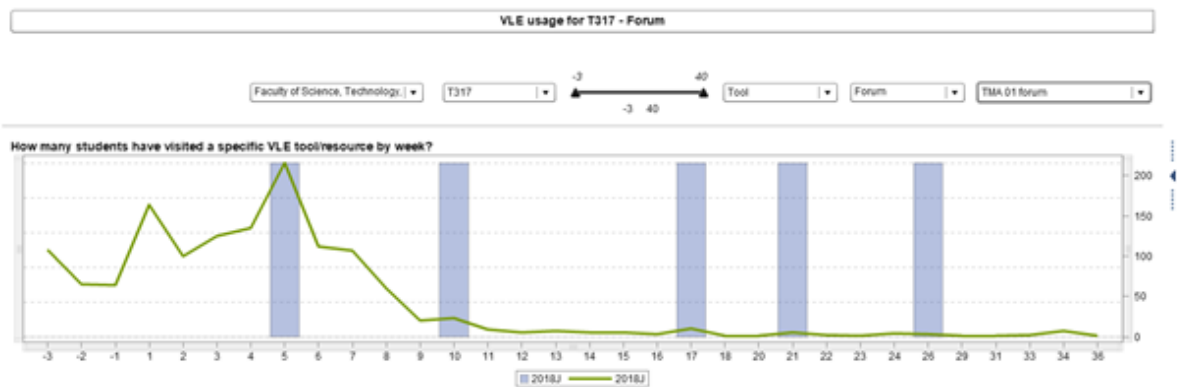


Figure 4: Number of T317 students visiting TMA01 forum

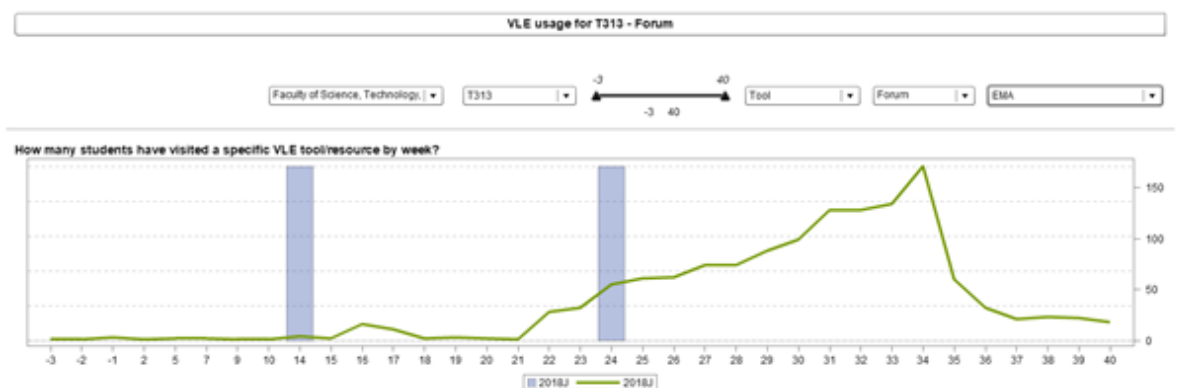


Figure 5: Number of T313 students visiting EMA forum

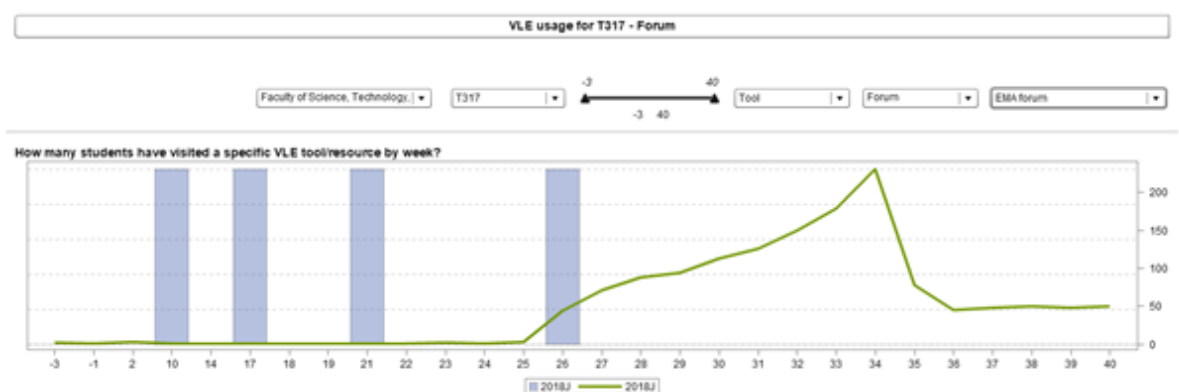


Figure 6: Number of T317 students visiting EMA forum

3.1.3 Qualitative analysis of forum messages:

Each 'page' of forum messages is exported as a single .rtf file. The files per forum were combined into a single Word document and depersonalised by removing any names from the messages. The Word files were then structured to import them into NVivo for analysis. The structure is shown in APPENDIX A.

Once in NVivo a series of themes was coded deductively. It was decided to approach this in the first instance deductively to set up a framework matched to the research questions (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). The main deductive themes were as follows: Question, Answer, TMA/EMA, and these are defined in Table 1 (below).

Table 1 Definition of main deductive themes

Theme	Definition of theme
Question	If the message was a question
Answer	If the message was an answer
TMA	The aspect of the TMA or EMA

It soon became apparent that there were additional main categories emerging that should be included and these are shown in Table 2 (below) with examples.

Table 2 Definition of main emergent themes

Theme	Definition of theme
Acknowledgment	If a message was acknowledging response e.g. saying thank you e.g: <i>'That was fantastic! Thank you, what a relief. I am also pleased for everyone else who had the same problem. Yes we do have to learn from this'</i>
Announcement	If a message was identified as being neither a question nor an answer, and is similar to the definition of independent messages by Thomas (2002) e.g: <i>'Oh, and don't forget to exclude the reference list at the end'</i>
Computer Problems	If a message was referring to computer problems that the student was experiencing e.g: <i>'Just when I've got all day to write my report.... I'm having a computer nightmare.... Laptop on a major go slow..... Word not responding messages..... Taking forever to do anything.... Help!!!'</i>

Tutorial	If a message was seeking a tutorial location or recording e.g: <i>'Hi I am away from home with the worst internet and have been trying to watch the online tutorial for the project but it has failed to load up. Been trying for days now and I have accepted defeat....Are there any slides available for these tutorials as it would be a great help Thanks'</i>
Out of place	If a message was more suited to the Café forum or the Discussion forum or other e.g: <i>'If you have some spare time, please take this, it takes less than a minute!'</i>

During coding, the TMA theme was inductively (Boyatzis, 1998) separated to cover a number of foci of the message as shown in Table 3 (below).

Table 3 Inductive foci of TMA/EMA theme

TMA Theme	Definition of theme
Choice of topic/product/project	A message concerning the student choice of topic for an assignment question or choice of project focus e.g: <i>'Have you seen Earthsider website? I came across it recently and has some quite interesting innovations. I'm designing a product to help maintain dreadlocks'</i>
Error in assignment question	A message querying or stating an error in assignment question e.g: <i>'Just looking at the TMA during my tutorial, and I've noticed the following in Question 7: "Papers should than 1000 words will not be penalised..."I'm guessing that there are some missing words there, as it doesn't make sense to me. What should that sentence read?'</i>
Extension of Assignment	A message concerning issues to do with submission extensions e.g: <i>'I had an extension on a few of my TMA's through the years. One time the date did not update, spoke with tutor and there was no issue. When I submitted away it went, tutor marked and all ok. As long as you have, which you have agreed with your tutor'</i>
Format	A message on format of assignment or format asked for in assignment e.g. specific table or diagram e.g: <i>'I've included the OU module spreadsheets as external appendices. So I've listed them in my Contents List and then any screenshots from them are labelled as 'see appendix X'</i>
Question clarity	A message asking for clarity on question e.g: <i>'Has anyone got any clarity on how much research we are supposed to be including? Some people say as much as possible, others are saying none and just explain the methods'</i>
References	A message querying how to reference, or location of references or date of modules references
Results	A message concern how results are calculated or when results will be available e.g: <i>'Do we get feedback on our EMA submissions? We don't get feedback on exam's, so was wondering if this was also the case for the EMA'</i>
Submission	A message relating to any submission issue e.g: <i>'Hi Disaster! I've been trying to submit the EMA and I get "this page isn't working"!!!Now the deadline is past.....'</i>
Time spent on question/module	A message concerning how much time is spent on module study or completing assignments e.g: <i>'Work has pushed me off schedule, under pressure to get Pres done this week coming. How long has it taken you to start and finish just the presentation assuming report was completed first?'</i>
What is/How to (concept)	A message asking what a specific concept or definition is or how to calculate/use/define it e.g: <i>'Hi, When calculating heat loss from a building does the total volume of the building include the roof space volume too?'</i>

Where is (concept)	A message asking where exactly information or example on a specific topic can be found e.g: <i>'One of the activities in the Financial appraisal techniques tells you to go and find the Costing and pricing calculator, looked for it in Block 4, I've searched for it on the site and nothing's come up. Is it actually the estimating prices spreadsheet and they just changed the name? Does anyone have a link?'</i>
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And finally, it was also decided to inductively code themes to do with sentiment. Sentiment in this case is like that defined by NVivo as 'general tone of content' (not that automatically assigned by NVivo), but is a more manual 'opinion extraction' (Tang et al., 2009) inductively coded and in addition to identifying the negative sentiments subdivides the normally used positive sentiment into help-seeking, sharing and supportive as defined in Table 4 (below). Thus in total a hybrid process of deductive and inductive coding was used (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which was proved to be effective.

Table 4 Definition of inductive sentiment themes with examples.

Sentiment Theme	Definition of theme
Help-seeking	A message which is actively seeking help with understanding as in <i>'Hope you are all getting on ok with the EMA! Does anyone have any tips for reducing the size of an image of an Excel chart in Word?'</i>
Negative	A message which is written in 'negative' terms e.g: <i>'Just got to vent....eurgh, I hate Q7! Have got to 500 words...now I need to find more content but that can wait for another day'</i>
Sharing	A message which in part of the message shares what the students has actually done e.g: <i>'I know what you mean. NPV & IRR tied my head in knots at first but I created a spreadsheet to calculate them using a few different discount rates and used the Project Costs one to help me and it all made sense after a few hours! Excel does have an NPV & IRR function which helps. It took me a long though to work out the point of the 'guess rate' for IRR. Good luck!'</i>
Supportive	A message which in part of the message supports/encourages by making suggestion, even if not answering question posed e.g: <i>'It's difficult isn't it? I guess you could ask some specialist manufacturers for an idea of component costs if you have enough information to give them i.e. drawings and specification or performance requirements, but even then a cost for a one off would be very different from a volume manufacture unit price and much would depend on how many units would be needed over time'</i>

The results of this thematic code analysis structure can be seen in APPENDIX B and will be described in the Findings Section.

3.2 Survey

Through discussion with the module teams and members of eSTEEeM it was felt that it would also be beneficial to do a student survey. Thus a survey was created for 18J and 19J students of T313 and T317 to ascertain their view on what the forums were for and therefore if the students did interact in an expected way. The survey was focused on four areas: Use of the module-wide forums, Expectations of the module-wide forums, Participation² in forums, Tutor group forums preferences; and consisted of both open and closed questions, which benefitted from the influence of Kador and Armstrong (2010) in the wording of the actual questions asked. A summary of all the survey questions is shown in APPENDIX C. This survey was then written using JISC online and published on <https://service.onlinesurveys.ac.uk>

A selection sample of students was provided by SSREC in Table 5 (below)

Table 5 SSREC selection sample of students

No. in sample	18J	19J	Total
T313	113	84	197
T317	99	49	148
Total	212	133	345

There was a total response to the survey of 31 students, distributed as follows in Table 6 (below).

Table 6 survey response distribution

No. of responses	18J	19J	
T313	11	6	17
T317	11	3	14
Total	22	9	31

Of these there was one student on T317 who did not think that the forums were useful and very few questions were answered so their data has been excluded in the quantitative analysis as being invalid. Thus the sample of T317 was reduced to 13.

The response from excluded entry: *'I did not find it helpful. It was a combination of people asking really obvious things, or people giving really cryptic responses. The best was from a tutor (a student was asking a question that was relevant to me) the response was to 'go and reread' a particular section of the text book. I'd reread it about 10 times hence why I ventured onto the forum. After that I didnt bother and used youtube predominantly'*

3.2.1 Closed questions

The closed questions were analysed using simple statistics and bar graphs.

3.2.2 Open questions

The open questions were analysed manually as there were so few responses.

² 'Participation' was used in the survey in order to include the lurkers (Lipponen et al., 2003). Elsewhere in this report the 'interactions' are used to more correctly represent those who are actually posting messages.

4. Findings

4.1 Forum Messages

Much time was spent depersonalising and structuring the messages that can be imported into NVivo. There was no set method for this so trial and error was used to finally optimise the structure required. The initial deductive themes were formed after a literature search and initial inspection of the actual messages with relation to the aims. Repeating and improving the procedure several times has resulted in forming a process and framework that can be applied to any set of forum messages.

4.1.1 Interaction metrics

The shape of the interactions with time through the module, as determined by the Café forum, was the same for both modules (Methodology Section, Figures 1 and 2). This helped to support the validity of a comparison between the two modules. The shapes of the interactions for both modules in the TMA01 and EMA forums was again very similar in shape (Methodology Section, Figures 3 through 6), again confirming the validity of comparison between the modules.

The Basic core metrics of the forum interactions (Appendix B, Table B.1) have some noticeable similarities and some striking differences. Similarities in absolute numbers for both forums are seen in numbers of students visiting VLE, number of students interacting in the Café forum, and numbers of students visiting the EMA forums. However, there is a low number of interactions for T317 students in TMA01 forum – there is no explanation offered for this low number.

Table 7 Percentage of interacting students in TMA01 and EMA forums compared to Café forum

	T313	T317
TMA01	23%	16%
EMA	26%	24%

The number of students who interacted in both forums was compared to the number of students who interacted in the EMA forum but not the TMA01 forum. For both forums the absolute numbers were again similar.

Table 8 Comparison of students interacting in EMA forums

	T313	T317
No of students interacting in both forums	21	23
Percentage of students in both compared to EMA interaction	41%	56%
No of 'new' students to EMA forum	37	38
Percentage of 'new' students to EMA interaction	64%	62%

For both modules it does appear that more students interact in the EMA forum than interact in the TMA01 forum. This may reflect a level of increased 'evaluation apprehension' (Leidner & Fuller, 1997) in the module cohort about the upcoming EMA.

The most striking difference in metrics is in the number of tutors/moderators interacting in the forums. There are more interactive tutors from T313 than T317. Excluding the moderator interaction, the number of additional tutors interacting in the four forums is as follows:

Table 9 Number of additional interacting tutors

	T313	T317
TMA01 forum	6	0
EMA forum	5	2

4.1.2 Message metrics

There are more messages in both forums by T313 students compared to T317 students both in absolute and percentage terms. Also, there is little difference in the ratio of EMA/TMA01 between T313 and T317.

Table 10 Message metrics per student in both forums

Student	T313	T317
No. of messages TMA01 forum	175	127
% compared to interacting students	80%	49%
EMA forum	308	284
% compared to interacting students	140%	109%
Ratio of EMA/TMA01 forum messages	1.8	2.2

Appendix B Figures 8 to 15 look at the number of messages per student in the forums. There is little difference in the median and mode calculations of the number of messages, and a similar trend in the average number of messages per student between TMA01 and EMA for both modules indicating an increase in the number of messages per student in the EMA forum. Again, this could be attributed to higher feeling of apprehension in students.

Also investigated was the number of messages posted by students in TMA01 forum compared to their postings in EMA forum Appendix B Figures B.1 to B.6. There appears to be a slight tendency for each interacting student to post more in the EMA forum than the TMA01 forum, which could align with the rationale proposed above, or possibly that the TMA01 forums had served as icebreakers.

4.1.3 Message thematic analysis

In the four main categories of topic of the messages Computer problems, Tutorial, Out of place, TMA assignment topic the first three categories returned few messages in the TMA01 forums, namely 4,1,0 and 4,0,0 for T313 and T317 respectively, but a few more in the EMA forums. These were 6,2,6, and 6,13,3 again for the two modules, respectively. The inference to be drawn from this is that the T317 students were particularly keen not to miss out on the EMA tutorials/recordings. The comparison in the number of focused assignment topic messages was similar for both forums (Table 11 and Figure 7 below). (Note that these numbers are different to the overall number of messages reported in the Messages metrics section as it is possible for a single posted message to contain more than one issue).

Table 11 Number of counts in the TMA/EMA theme for both modules

TMA	T313	T317	T313/T317
TMA01 forum	211	143	1.5
EMA forum	303	254	1.2

There are several noticeable points of interest in the analysis of the each of the 12 themes of the TMA/EMA topics.

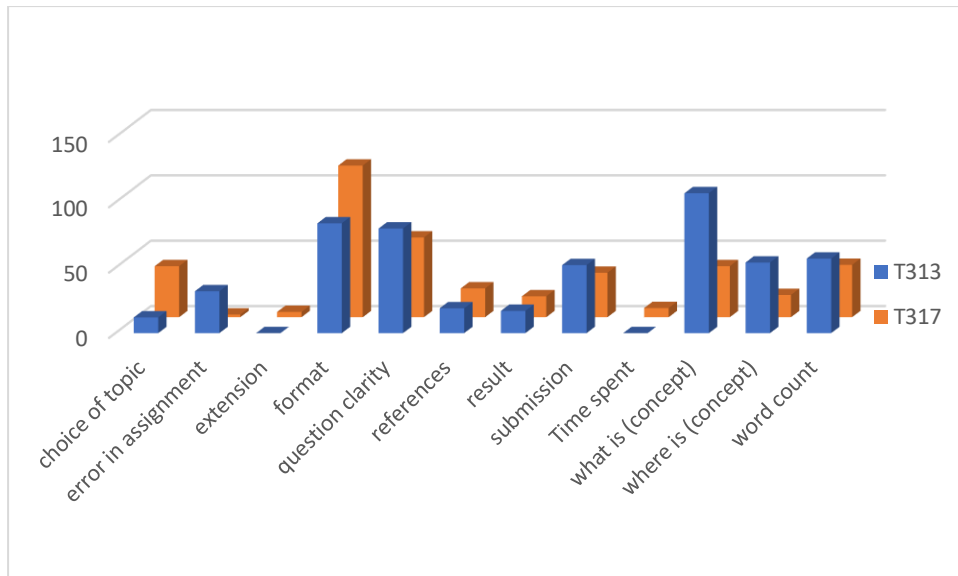


Figure 7 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme for both modules

Both modules had a high number of messages focused on format, question clarity and word count. These are three issues which recur in many module forums to do with assignments. The T313 students are more focused on 'what is/how to' questions and 'where is' compared to T317. This may be due in part to the nature of the modules. T313 requires more complex calculations and use of spreadsheets in the assignments.

It is also possible to compare the differences in the TMA01 and EMA forums for these topics, as shown below.

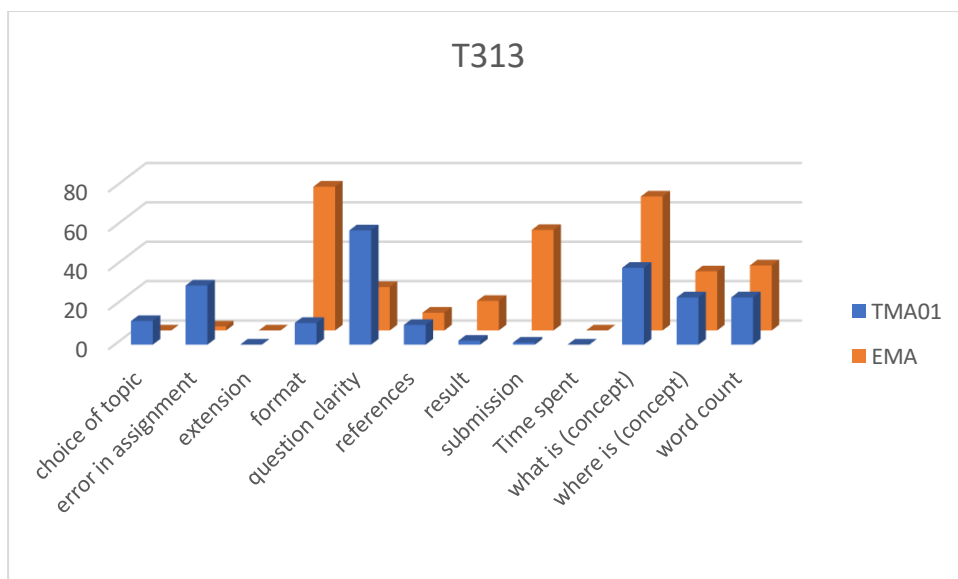


Figure 8 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme as a function of TMA01 and EMA forums for T313

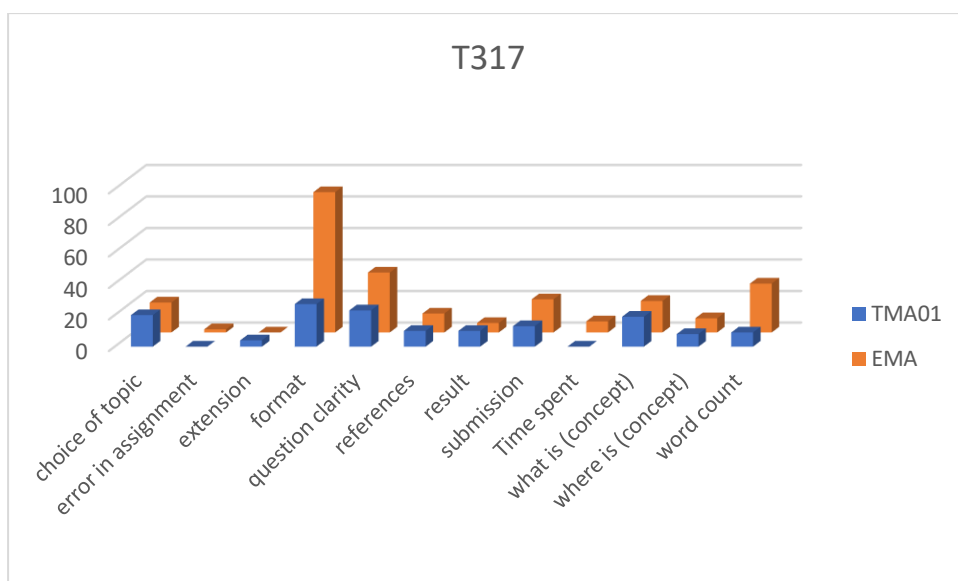


Figure 9 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme as a function of TMA01 and EMA forums for T317

The format and word count issues were clearly bothersome to both modules for the EMA. This could be because neither module has a simple essay type EMA but require reports with illustrations. With fixed and arguably challenging overall size limits on files for submission this will always be an issue, coupled with the fact that many students have difficulty in managing the challenge of writing concisely as well as compressing images (although T317 does provide guidance on the latter). The 'error in assignment' messages in T313 TMA01 forum arose because there were errors in the 18J TMA01 which were reported by many, e.g. *I think it's probably 'less' instead of 'should' How many more errors?*

The submission messages in the T313 EMA forum were in fact mainly due to a submission link problem in 18J. This was a good example of how a forum can be a useful support for students – several posted messages of panic and moderator/tutors were able to respond with supportive comments and suggestions e.g. *‘Hi I am on the same boat been trying for 40mins and on different browsers but nothing will load! Those 10 marks could really have made the difference for me. Is there anything that can be done?’* And *‘There has been a lot of discussion about this today, with conflicting messages. I have some sympathy for those caught by the IT issues, though (like many of my colleagues) I have been warning students not to assume they could go beyond midday yesterday without risking problems. I’m pleased to have been told that the 10% penalty has now been removed, so those of you who finally managed to submit the EMA today (early hours or whatever) should be OK for full credit - phew! Do learn from this however.....’*

Interestingly the ‘what is/how to’ and ‘where is’ messages for T313 are present in both TMA01 and EMA forums. Close inspection shows that there is little difference in the word length of all the ‘what is/how to’ messages when normalised to accommodate for the difference of 106 to 39 messages in T313 to T317 respectively. Figure 10 shows these bins (up to 10 words, 11 to 20 words etc) and they are consisted with the average, median and mode values shown in Table 13 below.

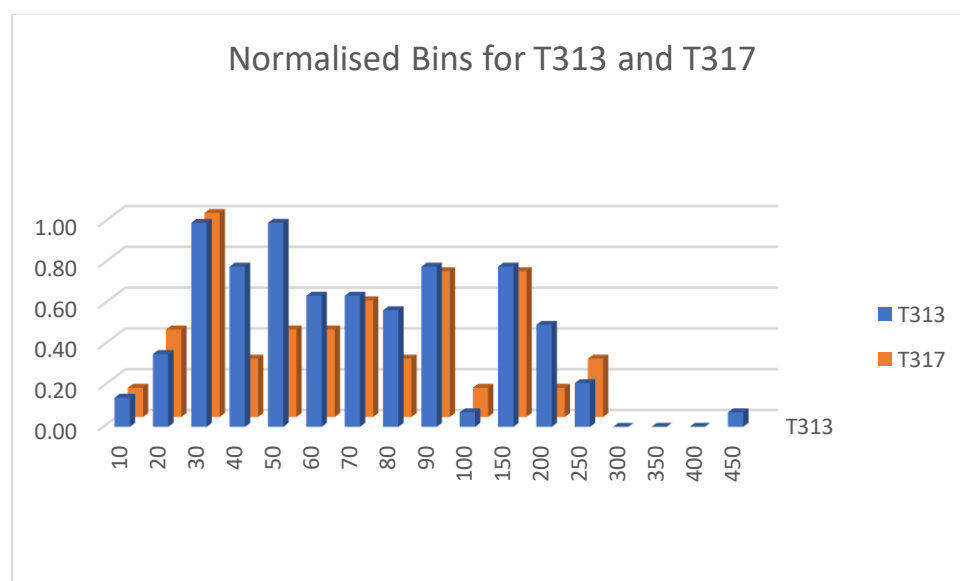


Figure 10 Normalised bins for T313 and T317 word count

Table 13 Basic statistics of the word count for the ‘What is/How to’ for T313 and T317

	T313	T317
Ave	74	70
Median	58	60
Mode	27	26

The 'type of message' analysis produced the following result. The ratio of Answers/Questions was 1.38 compared to 0.73 for T313 to T317 respectively, almost twice as much. This could be due to students posting duplicates of questions in T317 and possibly the additional number of tutors providing answers in T313. There were about twice as many acknowledgements in T313 as T317, indicating more appreciation for answers and information, and almost the reverse in announcements. As expected, the number of questions, answers and acknowledgements increased in the EMA forums compared to the TMA01 forums, again indicating students' heightened state of apprehension.

Of interest were the results in the 'sentiment' themes. The striking feature here is the high number of sharing messages (300) for T317 compared to T313 (87). Arguably this is to be expected since the very nature of a design course is to share and elicit feedback, respecting perspectives (and indeed T317 includes the resource of Open Design Studio for sharing designs and comments). The number of help-seeking, sharing and supportive messages increased from TMA01 to EMA for both modules. Does this mean that heightened apprehension courts heightened appreciation of support? What was unexpected was that the negative messages doubled from TMA01 to EMA for T317 (possibly indicating the time and frustration of students working to complete their projects in T317?) yet dropped by two-thirds for T313. This unlike trend could be ascribed to the fact that the T313 module did suffer from TMA01 'errors in assignment' messages (30). However, overall, the total number of these negative messages was not significant in total (31 and 20 for T313 and T317 respectively).

The last comparison to be made was that of the ratio of 'help-seeking'/'question'. For T313 the percentage ratio remained at approximately 40% for both TMA01 and EMA. In contrast the T317 TMA01 forum had a percentage of 93% for TMA01 dropping to 69% for EMA. There is no real evidence to say why this occurred, and to speculate would be unhelpful.

4.2 Survey

The survey returned a small percentage of response rate, but within the accepted norm of 5 to 30% (www.smartsurvey.co.uk) with that for the total number of students of 9% as shown below.

Table 12 Percentage responses for each module and year.

Percentage responses	18J	19J	Total
T313	9.7	7.1	8.6
T317	11.1	6.1	9.5
Total	10.4	6.8	9.0

The full results of the survey are shown in Appendix C

4.2.1 Usage of module-wide forums

In the clarity of what each module-wide forum was for there was no distinct difference between the modules – most students seemed reasonably clear, and again both modules used the module-wide

forum primarily to visit, read and post. Q3 showed the first real distinction between the two modules, with the T317 students posting solely to find information. In contrast the T313 students had more variety of reasons for posting including commenting and socialising. The similarity between forums in Q4 returns with most students being able to find the information they needed in the module wide-forum easily, 'often' or 'occasionally'. This was followed by an open question in the survey to supplement Q4. Both modules seem to recognise some issues to do with 'multiple threads', 'many students answering with different answers' and 'disorganised and incorrect answers' as reasons why information was not always found easily. It was also noted that the speed of response could be low. It does raise the reflection that perhaps one of the attractions of the numerous WhatsApp groups that have sprung up over the last few years is that a rapid response is achieved (although without any mediation it may not always produce the correct answer). Q5 went on to address some of these issues by asking if the student looked to see if the question was posted and answered previously before posting and both modules answered strongly in the affirmative, and it is corroborated in 18J that few students did actually ask repeat questions. The open question in support of this also reaffirmed that both modules' students did tend to read first and post second – if only for the sake of speed. The final question on usage of module-wide forums showed that both groups were again similar in that they claimed to infrequently use the forum to report errors – although as moderator I would say that the opposite was actually observed!

4.2.2 Expectations of module-wide forums

It appeared that neither module harboured strong expectations of the forum moderator spotting messages on tutorial locations and recordings and sorting it out, and several said they would contact their own tutor. From a moderator's view there are some messages inquiring about tutorials and recordings but they tend to be responded to by other students.

A key question was posed asking if a long message of tuition by a tutor was expected. There is some bias of expectation that the T313 students expect this and it is reinforced by the number of tutors posting in the T313 forums. Length of message is often seen as an indicator of amount of interaction (Hara et al., 2000; Lipponen et al., 2003; Hou & Wu, 2011; Romero, et al., 2013). Overall the results shown above indicate that the two modules behave similarly.

The qualitative survey responses acknowledged that students often share their struggles and opinions and that it is expected to get different views on topics from tutors. There does seem to be a sense that students would look to their own tutors for a more in-depth answer or response. Q4 on the expectations of time of responses were almost identical for both modules (within 24 hours). It is interesting to reflect that this may be an artefact of what was actually seen on the forums and of the fact that was the same moderator! Q5 on the clarity of the responses centred for both modules, on the 'sometimes clear', but 'too brief' and the free text answers to this showed equally diverse options from both modules. With respect to the pedagogical question of scaffolding and its appropriateness in forums the T317 students recognised the opportunity to receive only a brief clarification so that they could reflect and critically think for themselves. This follows the findings of Bowen et al., who noted that students recognised how they were able to use each other's posts to scaffold their learning and gain a richer understanding of module concepts. In contrast a couple of responses from T313 seemed to value full/complete comments from the tutor/moderator. It was odd that both groups would like longer responses, but yet do not expect tuition? Does this issue need exploring further?

4.2.3 Participation in module-wide forums

T313 seems to expect more tutors to respond to forums than T317. This is interesting and it is worth looking at the Level 2 forums of these pathways to see if this is something that is incubated from previous years. There is a sense that the T313 students experience contradictory answers, and again this may in fact be due to there being more contributing T313 tutors and thus more perspectives shown. Q3 queried the issue of if the module-wide forums were beneficial. There was no clear pattern of difference between T313 and T317 but both modules were generally positive. Beneficial comments included 'identifying errors in assignments', 'clarification', 'different perspectives', 'place to talk' and 'discuss together rather than alone' and 'sharing useful hints and tips'. A negative comment was that early posting on activities and TMAs was demoralising if one was not at the same position in study calendar – this indicates that delayed opening of assessment-based forums is probably beneficial. Q4 asked if any advice in forum useful to other modules in pathway. Only T313 saw this as useful and several students saw an opportunity for a 'maths support forum', with single requests on 'report writing', 'referencing', and interestingly experiences of students 'on the job'. When asked what else students would like to see addressed in module-wide forums there was a mixed bag of responses. The only point that came up across both modules was 'wanting to know something about the current state-of-the-art in the field'. This could be similar to the 'guru forum' identified by Hollyhead et al (2012). There was an interesting suggestion from T317 on the possibility of an 'ask the tutor thread' which may be worthy of further consideration, although it may be questioned that surely this is a Tutor Group Forum? Both modules thought that there was about the right number of forums.

4.2.4 Tutor group forum preferences

The results indicate that apparently the T313 students are more active in tutor group forums than the T317s. T317 tend to 'find and see' compared to T313 who 'find, ask, and see' ie they are more active. This does seem to align with the qualitative analysis on the forum messages. Interestingly both modules seemed to use the module-wide forums more than the tutor group forums. The main stated reason for this is the higher level of activity, and quicker feedback; which again fuels the desire of students to have a WhatsApp group. The last question in this part of the survey was on what else would the students like to see addressed in the TGFs. A forum based live stream was suggested by T317 – and this may bring into question the out-of-date design of forum communications compared to live streams and blogs with social media. Several students from both modules did not seem to have an interest in TGFs. There was also a suggestion from T317 to incorporate 'Design Challenges', but this would need to be investigated further as there are already opportunities in T317 for discussing activities and posting in Open Design Studio.

5. Concluding discussion

5.1 Aims

The eight specific questions outlined in Section 2 Aims and scope to form an understanding of how students actually perceive and use these forums and if there is anything to be ported into modules on the respective qualification pathways have been answered.

- ❖ How many forums are there, and what is the amount of interaction in each?

Each module has an Activity Discussion and Café forum in addition to one for each TMA and an EMA forum. T317 has a further forum for posting individual survey requests and T313 has a further forum for specific queries on the software package used in the module (now omitted). Similar percentages of each module's students were interactive and the number of interactions in the forums displayed similar trends in shape. The median and mode message lengths were also similar.

Table 7 Percentage of interacting students in TMA01 and EMA forums compared to Café forum

	T313	T317
TMA01	23%	16%
EMA	26%	24%

Table 13 Basic statistics of the word count for the 'What is/How to' for T313 and T317

	T313	T317
Ave	74	70
Median	58	60
Mode	27	26

- ❖ What proportion of students are interacting in forums and with what frequency

The number of messages per student in the TMA01 and EMA forums respectively were similar and both indicated an increase in the EMA forum, which is probably due to the 'evaluation apprehension' (explained earlier). However, it is unclear if these numerical similarities are influenced by the same forum layout for both modules or the fact that it was the same moderator for both modules.

Table 7 Percentage of interacting students in TMA01 and EMA forums compared to Café forum

	T313	T317
TMA01	23%	16%
EMA	26%	24%

- ❖ Are students interacting in the appropriate forums ie are they discussing in the discussion forums, asking questions about TMAs in the TMA forums etc or are they jumping in on what they perceive to be an 'active' forum?

The survey results showed the intended usage of each forum was reasonably clear to both modules (welcome and 'what the forum is for' messages were posted for both modules), and that students found it relatively straightforward to find what they needed although both recognised clear issues as being unhelpful i.e. multiple threads, a large number of

unique student answers and finally disorganised and incorrect answers. There were acknowledgements that students did tend to jump in on 'active' forums (and in fact was one of the reasons cited for not using Tutor Group Forums). All students had expectations of responses within 24 hours. Both forums had clear 'welcome' and 'what this forum is for' messages as well as asking for good netiquette. Not always were the guidelines followed but a short reminder from the moderator seemed to have a positive effect similarly to that of 'didactic guidelines' reported by Buelens et al (2009). Artis (2014) also suggested that moderators managed online behaviours effectively as issues arose.

- ❖ What percentage of messages from students are about module material and website errors?

There were only 0.40% error comments from T317 and 4.77% error comments from T313. It does seem that the students are generally concerned about 'format' and 'word count', a little more so than 'question clarity'. It is disappointing that students feel the need to query format and word count as it is hoped that there is sufficient clarity and explanation in the assignment information. There is some evidence from the survey that students post on the forum to get a quicker response than emailing the tutor or re-reading module material. There is sympathy with the students on this when modules publish different aspects about format and word count in a number of different locations on the module website e.g. module guide, study guide, project guide, assessment guide, assignment and EMA guidelines.

- ❖ What percentage of messages from students are related to tutorials (where it is, what can they attend, where are the slides, Adobe Connect not working etc)

There were few interactions related to tutorials. T313 returned 0.45% and T317 2.59%

- ❖ Do students respond positively to multiple tutor interactions e.g. is there a desire for a 'teaching presence (Shea et al., 2005)?

There did seem to be an expectation that T313 students expected long responses from a number of tutors. In respect of the scaffolding pedagogy (Oliver and McLoughlin, 2001; Salmon, 2002) being desired or expected the T317 students did seem to recognise the opportunity from shorter postings to reflect, critically think, and post again. T313 students on the other hand did seem to expect several tutors to respond to forums. It is important to not make the moderator's or tutors' interventions perceived as 'immediately evaluative' (Fabbri, 2018) which could then discourage students from providing their own opinion, and thus the opportunity for scaffolding.

- ❖ Is there a difference between T313 and T317 which could be attributable to module topic?

The T313 students were more active in the themes of 'What is/How to' and 'Where/is'. It is possible that this is due to the module topics and more definitive calculations being required in T313. This can lead to the problem of students asking and sharing how to do the calculations, which would be inappropriate for the assignments. Indeed there were some extreme sentiments both pro and con expressed by students on this in both the survey and the forum messages. The 'type' of message revealed there were almost twice the ratio of answers/questions for T313 compared to T317. This may in part be due to the number of tutors interacting in T313. T317 on the other hand showed a higher number of 'sharing' compared to T313. This could be intuitive bearing in mind that T317 is a design module where perspectives are important, placing value on sharing and eliciting feedback. From the survey the T317 students admitted to using the forums to find information as in 'take and go' forums e.g. 'I ask a question and get a useful answer' Wang et al (2015). whereas the T313 students also sought to comment and socialise. This is in alignment with the rise of social media learner-learner interactions taking place in the more informal media e.g. facebook, Whatsapp than the more formal university provided discussion forums (Hollyhead et al, 2012).

- ❖ Is there anything in the forums that could be ported into other modules that would help foster a learning community along a qualification pathway?

Hollyhead et al (2012) looked at the use of forums within two faculties (Technology and Business) and found a difference and furthermore that a question or guru forum – was observed within the Technology faculty where it was *'used to carry knowledge forward from one cohort of students to another and perceived as a valuable resource when maintained'*? If this proved to be true then was there an argument for promulgating information from these forums through their prospective pathways. Although some level 3 modules specify that precursors of certain level 2 modules would be advantageous all too often this does not happen. If there was a source of information brought forward from the forums it may help these students who have omitted level 2 to feel more 'included'. There was however no obvious knowledge to be carried forward from the T317 module. The T313 module indicated that there might be a case for a forum on some of the basic skills required e.g. significant figures, energy units. These are module topics in the precursor module T213 but not all students have completed this module, but the T213 module text book is provided as a pdf resource.

5.2 Designing the forums differently

There are some interesting findings to do with the design of the forums.

- ❖ The use of the EMA forum to post messages and receive quick responses about EMA submission difficulties supports the need for an EMA forum. Hopefully submission difficulties are infrequent but there should be a space where panicky messages for EMAs/exams can be posted and responded to. This supports the case for an EMA forum.
- ❖ There appears to be several reasons why students do not like interacting on forums. Examples cited are:
 - a) it takes too long to find information
 - b) it takes too long to get a response
 - c) questions get curtailed/ended by moderator
 - d) students, not tutors respond to questions

The first two can be managed by 'good' forum management of merging threads and daily interaction by the forum moderator. The third issue is about the necessity for keeping ethical forum values. The fourth issue needs to remain because removing student responses is to remove opportunities for learning. However there is a tension between ii and iv and it is important that tutors/moderators do not jump in too early, thus shutting off any opportunity for scaffolding – it may be a good idea to mention the time of response along with the opportunity of scaffolding in the welcome message.

- ❖ As far as is possible 'like' rubric information, e.g. formats and word counts, should be clustered together in an accessible, and clearly noticeable, space on the website. Tutors/moderators can then refer student to one location for the answers. This could remove clutter from TMA and EMA forums
- ❖ Students from both modules recognised uses of forums to be 'identifying errors in assignments', 'clarification', 'different perspectives', 'place to talk', 'discussing together rather than alone' and 'sharing useful hints and tips'. It is still worth explaining that each forum is for at the start of the module. More importantly it is essential that all tutors understand what the forums are for and the pedagogy that is planned/expected by the module team.
- ❖ There is a need to give moderator access to forum before students, in order to place the welcome and 'what this forum is for' messages. Posting these messages after students have commenced discussions can lead to a disorganised forum at the outset. All the module ALs need to be involved or at least informed of the role and pedagogy of each of the module resources. For example in the forums it is of little use if scaffolding is expected and then tutors jump in early with responses.
- ❖ Assessment clarification forums should not be opened too early ahead of the actual assignment so that early posters do not scare off and demotivate students following the study calendar more closely.

- ❖ The idea of 'ask the tutor' is interesting. At first it could seem attractive and maybe create more student postings. However what would the difference be between this and a tutor group forum, which arguably is 'ask the tutor'? Also this could create a host of 'admin' messages like asking for TMA extensions, and possibly non-module focused questions could occur.
- ❖ The idea of have a 'latest development' forum is interesting. At the moment interesting latest development messages are usually posted, for both forums, in the News feed on the website, or occasionally in the Discussion forums. These can be appropriate but the effect of current state of the art information is diluted if the feed and forum also includes module material errata. It is suggested that errata are moved to resources rather than News feed and that the latter is retained for state-of-the-art and interesting developments in the field. As a rejoinder for the argument that 'errata needs to be published overtly and quickly' posting in forums and emails from tutors should be sufficient for these errata.

5.3 Further work

- ❖ The investigation could be extended to T213 and T217 which would allow comparison between them, and the work presented here.
- ❖ The forum messages could further be interrogated to determine the levels of interaction (*independent, quasi-interactive, interactive (elaborative) and interactive (negotiating)*) suggested by Thomas (2002)
- ❖ To close the loop of whether the interactions do in fact affect the student performance it is necessary to collect performance data into the analysis and compare the effect to those found by Cheng et al (2011).
- ❖ Is there a role for the more recent technologies like WhatsApp if they can be harnessed to sit the pedagogy of the module? Nearly every module starts a WhatsApp group. What is the attraction of these over module forums? Is it the ease of access and use, speed of response, privacy away from tutors? It would be worthwhile running a survey/focus group about WhatsApp usage amongst students and tutors to see what benefits, if any, could be achieved with the newer technology.

6. Figures and tables

Figure 1: Number of T313 students interacting in the Café Forum

Figure 2: Number of T317 students interacting in the Café Forum

Figure 3. Number of T313 students interacting in TMA01 forum

Figure 4: Number of T317 students interacting in TMA01 forum

Figure 5: Number of T313 students interacting in EMA forum

Figure 6: Number of T317 students interacting in EMA forum

Figure 7 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme for both modules

Figure 8 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme as a function of TMA01 and EMA forums for T313

Figure 9 Number of message topics within the TMA/EMA theme as a function of TMA01 and EMA forums for T317

Figure 10 Normalised bins for T313 and T317 word count

Table 1 Definition of main deductive themes

Table 2 Definition of main emergent themes

Table 3 Inductive foci of TMA/EMA theme

Table 4 Definition of inductive sentiment themes with examples.

Table 5 SSREC selection sample of students

Table 6 survey response distribution

Table 7 Percentage of interacting students in TMA01 and EMA forums compared to Café forum

Table 8 Comparison of students interacting in EMA forums

Table 9 Number of additional interacting tutors

Table 10 Message metrics per student in both forums

Table 11 Number of counts in the TMA/EMA theme for both modules

Table 12 Percentage responses for each module and year.

Table 13 Basic statistics of the word count for the 'What is/How to' for T313 and T317

Table B.1 The basic core metrics for each of the two forums in the two modules.

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8. University approval processes

- *SRPP/SSPP – Approval from the Student Research Project Panel/Staff Survey Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number 2020/001 16/1/20*
- *Ethical review – An ethical review was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Reference number HREC/3468/Jones 18/3/20*
- *Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration number IAR: 28-04-28 26/2/20*

9. Appendices

APPENDIX A – How to analyse forum messages in NVivo

APPENDIX B - Core metrics of forum message responses

APPENDIX C – Survey results

APPENDIX A - How to Analyse forum messages in NVivo

1. Structuring forum messages for analysis in NVivo

Download (export) forum messages.

This creates one file per 'page' of forum messages, this will need to be repeated several times.

Amalgamate all pages into one - this could create a document of ~ 100 pages.

The export creates 'lines' between messages. Edit the document to remove these. NVivo sees these as entities.

Depersonalise forum contributor for each message remembering to only create new identifier for new person . E.g. MOD001, TUT001, STU001 etc. This can be done fairly quickly using Ctrl+F and replace.

Use the Word 'Outline' facility in view to check that the correct structure for each message and headers has been used.

6	Heading 1	–	person identifier
7	Heading 2	–	time stamp
8	Heading 3	–	message title
	Body Text/Normal	–	actual message

Figure A.1 Allocation of heading type to message components

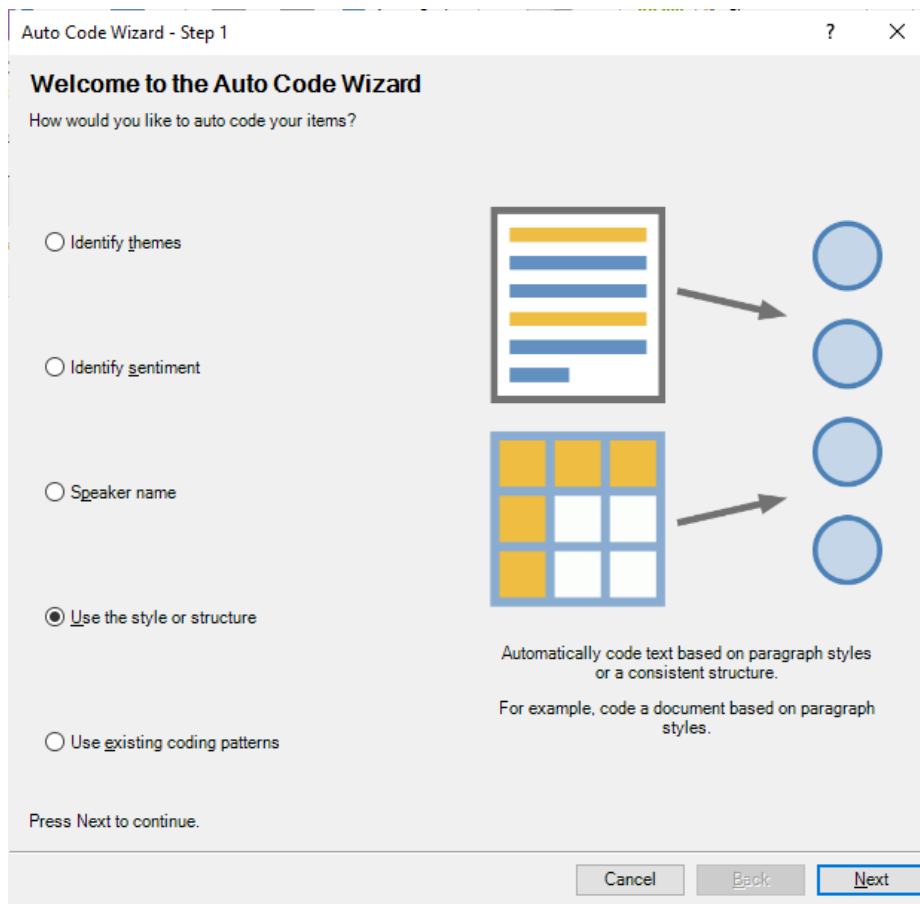
9	STU005 Post 1
10	• 8 Jan 2019, 21:30
11	Significant Figures
I'm not sure if this has been asked already or if I've missed it somewhere but... To how many significant figures should we give our answers? Thank you	

Figure A.2 Example of correctly structured message

This structured message file can now be imported as a file into NVivo.

2. Autocode using paragraph structure

The structured file can now be coded using the Autocode wizard following the steps shown in 'paragraph' structure.



This creates cases for each component to be analysed ie each heading level.

3. Assigning Attributes

It is possible to assign attributes such as word count, time elapsed before response etc by assigning an attribute with suitable name on each case to be considered, via case properties.

4. Assigning Nodes

It is now possible to code appropriate nodes. Four Aggregations of nodes was appropriate at the start, having decided these at the start.

Examples of 'type'

Acknowledgement ie thank you

Announcement ie neither question nor answer just fact

Answer

Question

Examples of 'sentiment'

Help seeking
Negative
Sharing
Supportive

Examples of TMA/EMA aspect

Format
Time Spent
What is (concept)
Where is (concept)
Results
Submission
Extension
Question clarity
Word count
References

Examples of other themes

Out of place – should have been in different forum
Computer problems – software or xxxxxx
Tutorial – find recordings, location
Admin e.g errors

5. Finally, the NVivo file which has been coded can be queried

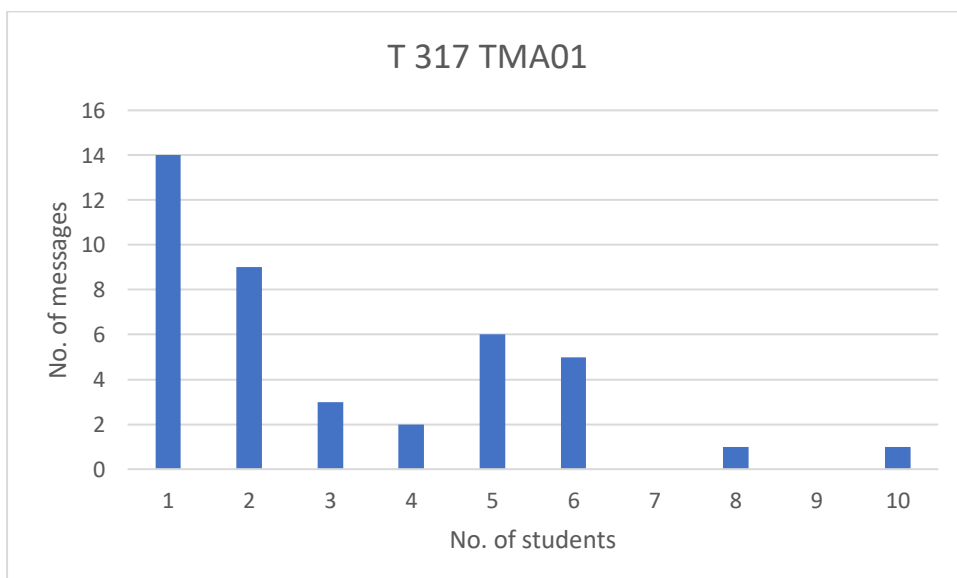
Relationships between case, nodes, and nodes & cases, can now be queried in NVivo to see numerical and graphical relationships.

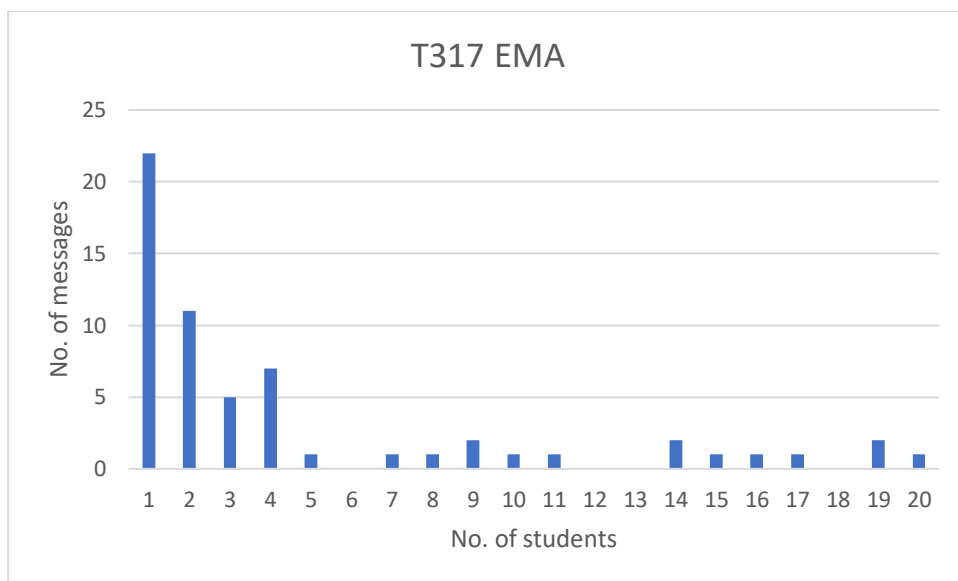
APPENDIX B - Core metrics of forum message responses

Table B.1 The basic core metrics for each of the two forums in the two modules.

18J	T313	T317
No of students visiting VLE	440	520
Max no. of students interacting in forums	220	260
No of students interacting in TMA01 forum	51	41
No of additional tutors interacting in TMA01 forum	6	0
No of messages posted by students in TMA01 forum	175	127
No of messages posted by moderator/tutors in TMA01 forum	91	46
Ratio of number of messages by students: number of messages by moderator/tutors in TMA01 forum	1.9	2.8
No of students interacting in EMA forum	59	62
No of additional tutors interacting in EMA forum	5	2
No of messages posted by students in EMA forum	308	284
No of messages posted by moderator/tutors in EMA forum	97	22
Ratio of number of messages by students: number of messages by moderator/tutors in EMA forum	3.2	12.9
No of students who posted in both forums	21	23
No of 'new' students posting in EMA forum	37	38
Ratio of EMA forum messages: TMA01 forum messages	1.8	2.2
Change in no. of tutors posting in EMA forum	-1	2

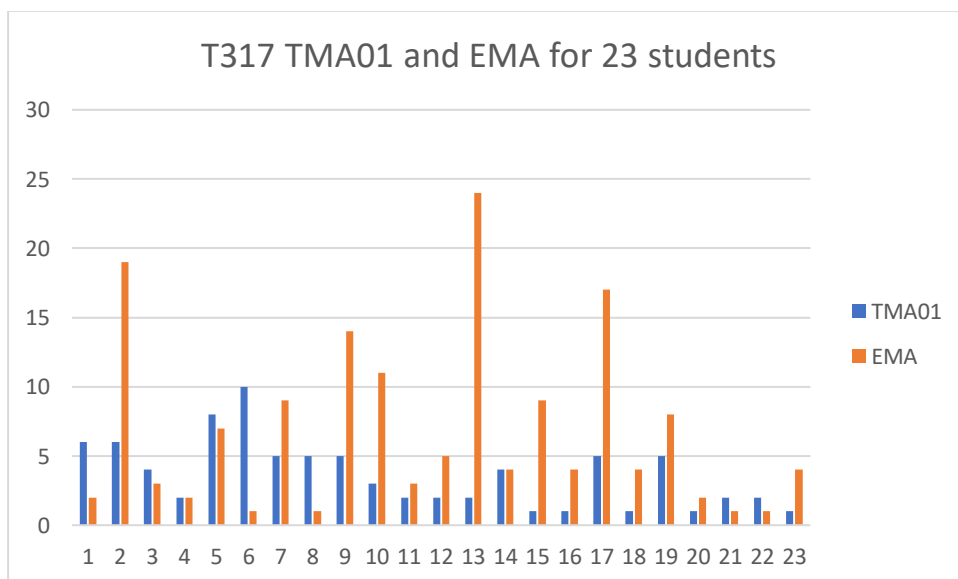
The following graphs show the number of messages posted per student:



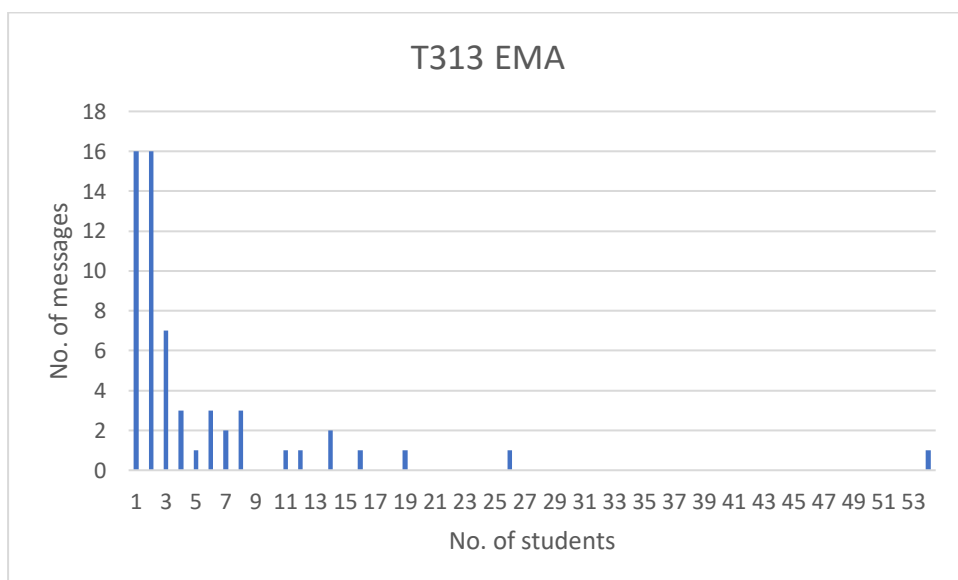
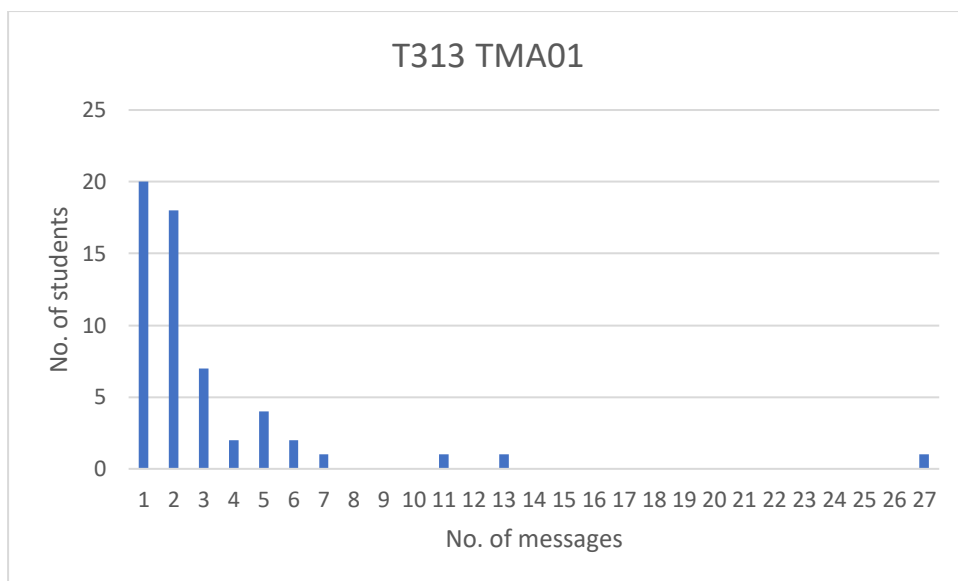


T317	TMA01	EMA
ave	4	5
median	2	2
mode	1	1

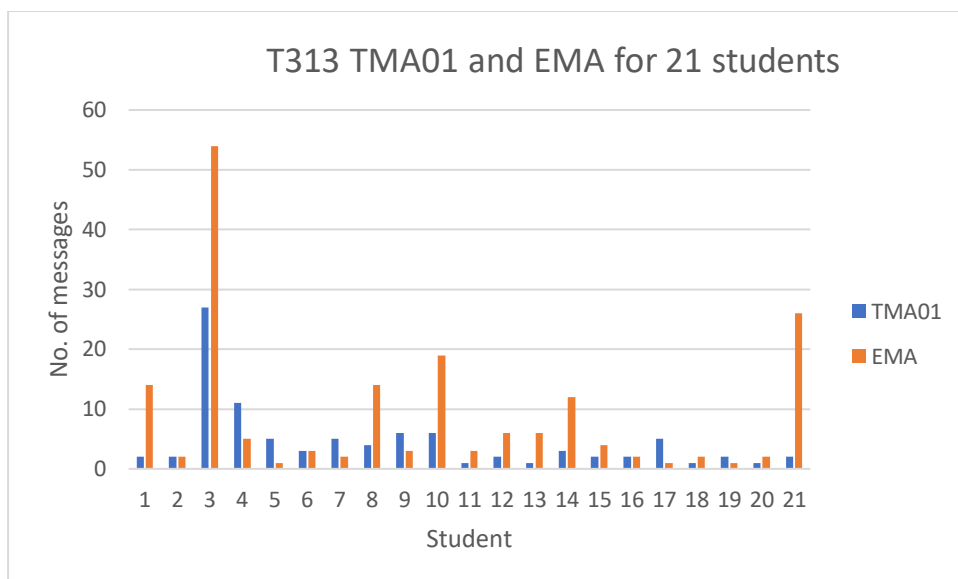
And to see if there is any difference between number of messages posted by student in TMA01 v EMA forum



There is a slight tendency for students to ask more in EMA than TMA01.

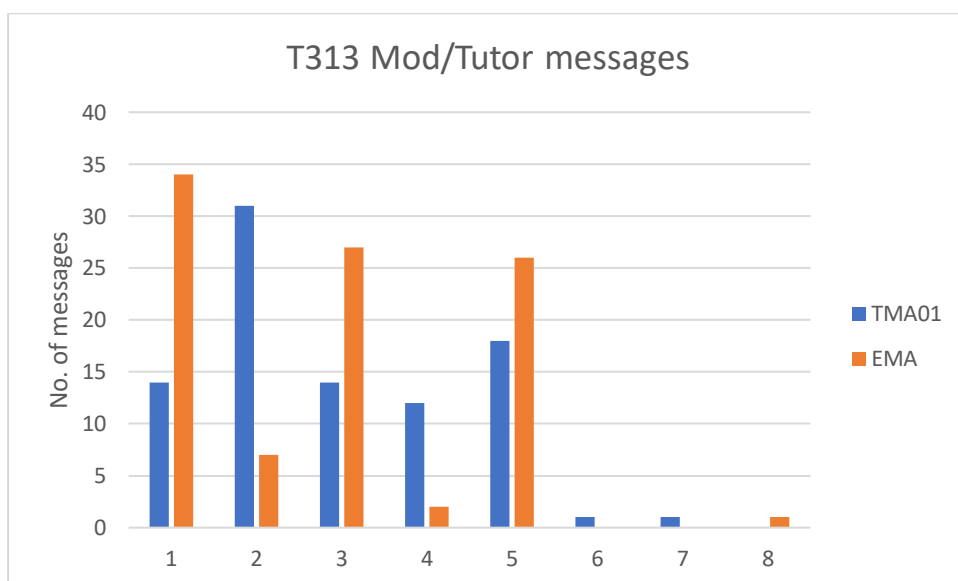


T313	TMA01	EMA
ave	3	5
median	2	2
mode	1	2



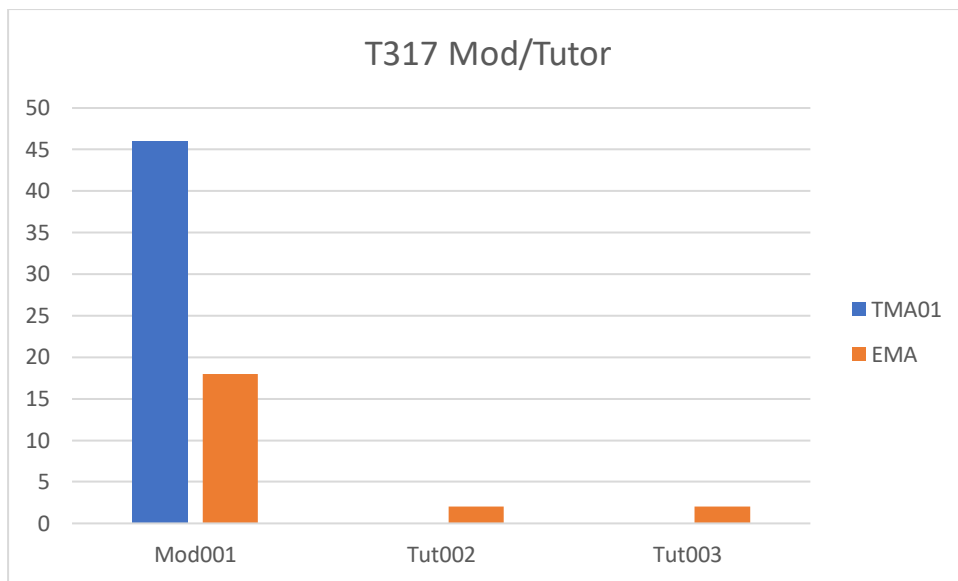
There is a slight tendency for students to ask more in EMA than TMA01.

Comparison of number of messages per moderator/tutor for T313



Three of the tutors clearly posted more in EMA forum cf TMA01 forum.

Comparison of number of messages per moderator/tutor for T317



Clearly less messages in EMA forum by T317 moderator

APPENDIX C – Survey results

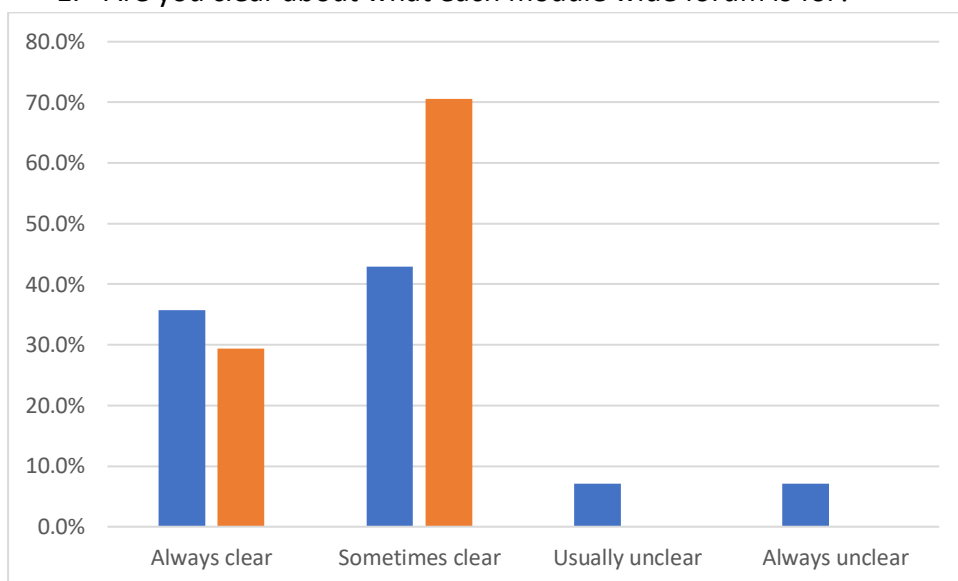
Legend on graphs below:

T317	
T313	

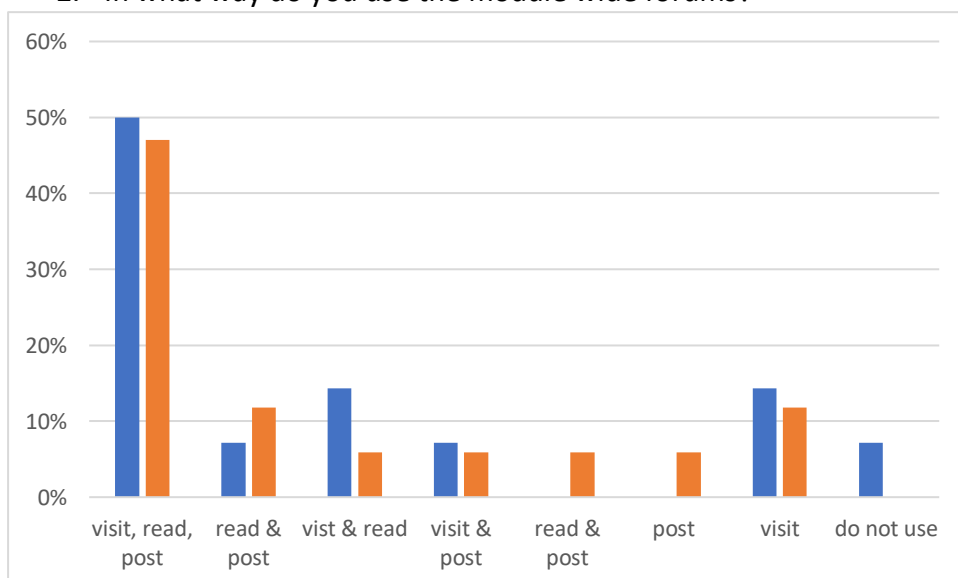
Free text responses are tabulated below the appropriate question to which they refer.

Use of the module wide forums

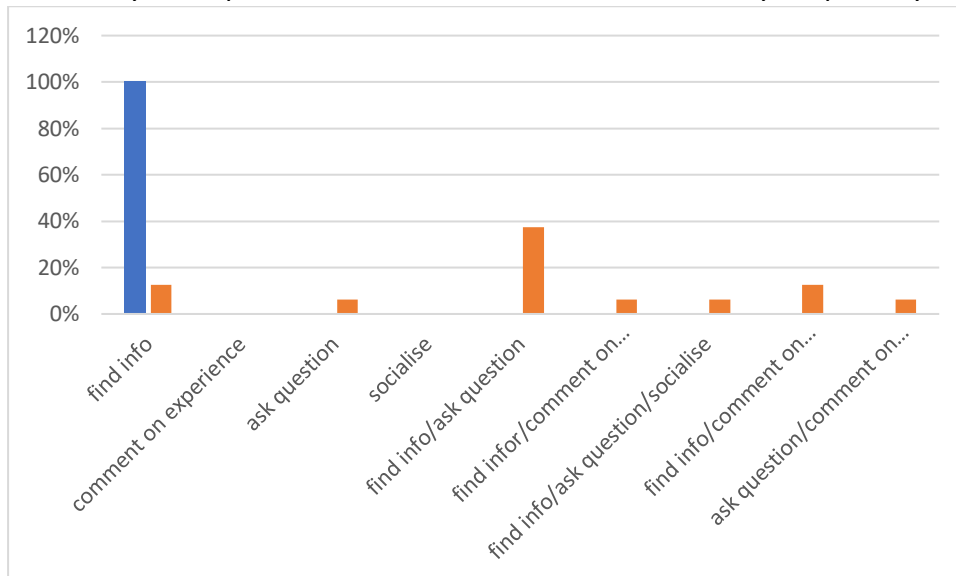
1. Are you clear about what each module wide forum is for?



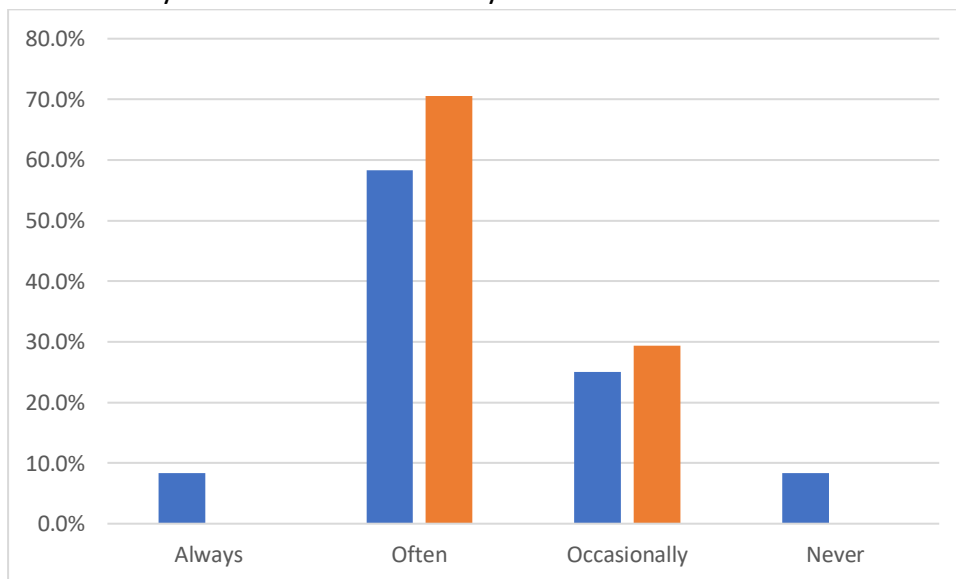
2. In what way do you use the module wide forums?



3. If you do post on the module wide forums what is your primary intention?



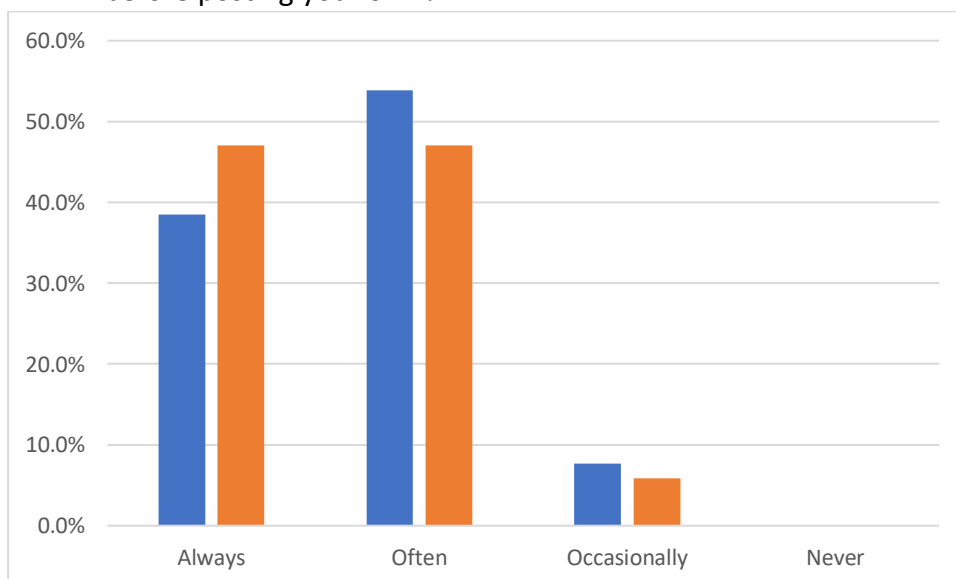
4. Can you find the information you need in the module wide forums easily?



T317	T313
<p>The forums are often a bit hit or miss. Sometimes a tutor will answer a question. However sometimes tutors are very vague in their answers (to avoid giving away TMA answers etc), but this can just lead to more confusion and frustration. Also students answering incorrectly can lead others down the wrong route. And finally there are the questions that just go unanswered.</p>	<p>Depends on specific nature of my question</p>

Mostly unorganized comments and non-constructive.	Because sometimes there is too many entries into this forum where students require extra information about errors which are made on TMA's
Sometimes I am able to find answers to questions I have before the forum participants post the relevant information. For example when waiting for a moderator/tutor to provide specifics. This is not a complaint by the way I am simply saying that it takes time for others to respond and because of that certain questions take some time to be answered in the forum. For example in low traffic threads. Some of the forums were not well advertised. For example there is a forum provided on this module for the purpose of asking other students to provide feedback on their designs; treating them as potential users of their product. I do not recall this being mentioned in the module materials or any tutorials. I only discovered it existed by accident when browsing other forums.	Sometimes the water is muddied by only students responding and no tutor input
information can get lost in the multitude of threads and discussions	Multiple threads
	So much to read through, can't search
	I only look for ideas not specific answers to any question

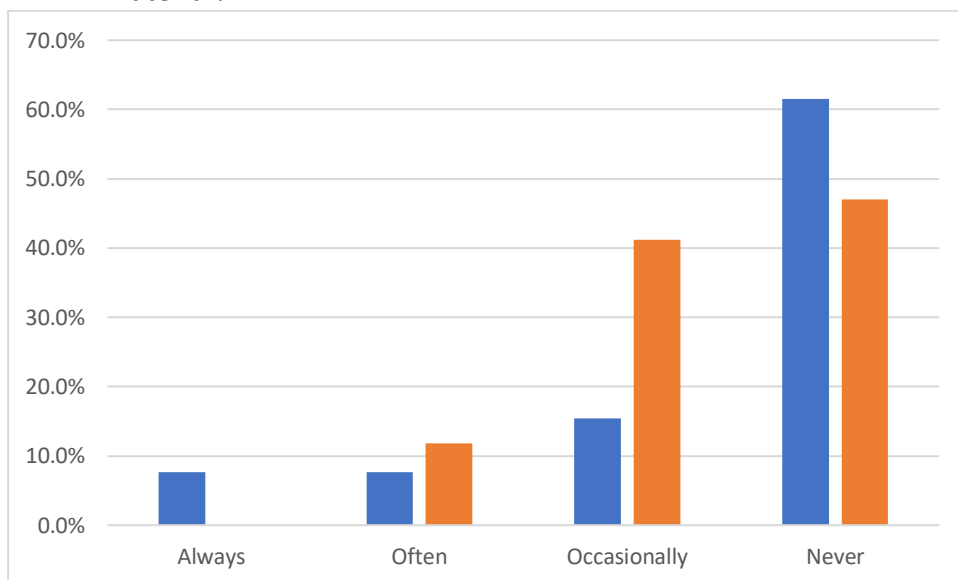
5. Do you look to see if your question has been posted and answered previously, before posting your own?



T317	T313
My process was always to enter in the forum, read up to date and if I have any doubts present a query to the forum members. In doing this I would avoid repetition and many times my question was already asked by someone else unless hidden inside an obscure series of chats.	There is no need to ask the same question. So, it is easier to find relevant information in the forum.
It is often quicker to read the responses to other students questions than it is to wait for responses to my own. It also save cluttering the forums.	Because it's most likely that other students have come across the same issues in the TMA's
Takes less energy than to write a new post.	To keep the module forum tidy by avoiding creating duplicate threads - and to save the moderators work
I've come find most of the posts published on the forums from other students generally ask questions concerning the tmas. This is helpful when it comes to tackling the tmas as you probably want to ask the same query regarding a question from a tma etc. However checking the forums beforehand can save you asking and if the question has been asked by another student generally others have replied including the tutor to clear things up and you can also join in on that thread.	Save me asking same sort of question unnecessarily
I tend to be a reserved person and so shy away from asking questions in an open forum where it can be avoided.	Always keep up to date with TMA/EMA threads.
I do not wish to add unnecessary messages which ultimately clog up the forum.	there is a lot of information in the hardbook to go through and refer
If I have a question I will look at existing posts ,but I do not do an exhaustive study. I always feel free to ask any question.If it has already been answered someone will answer it again or direct me to a thread.	I don't always check back to look at my previous enquiries
I do look back at previous questions, but maybe i could research more through all areas. i.e. TMA (1,2,3) forum and also main forum.	So I don't waste the time of participants and administrators
Would read through module forum before posting, for 2 reasons to keep up to date with other students progress/concerns and also see if others had same question as I did.	save time or not appear stupid.
It makes sense to search for the answer to a question i am seeking before posting a new thread. This way i can add to the discussion if my query is part answered. Further input can be useful to others and its always nice to see if	Saves time and duplication

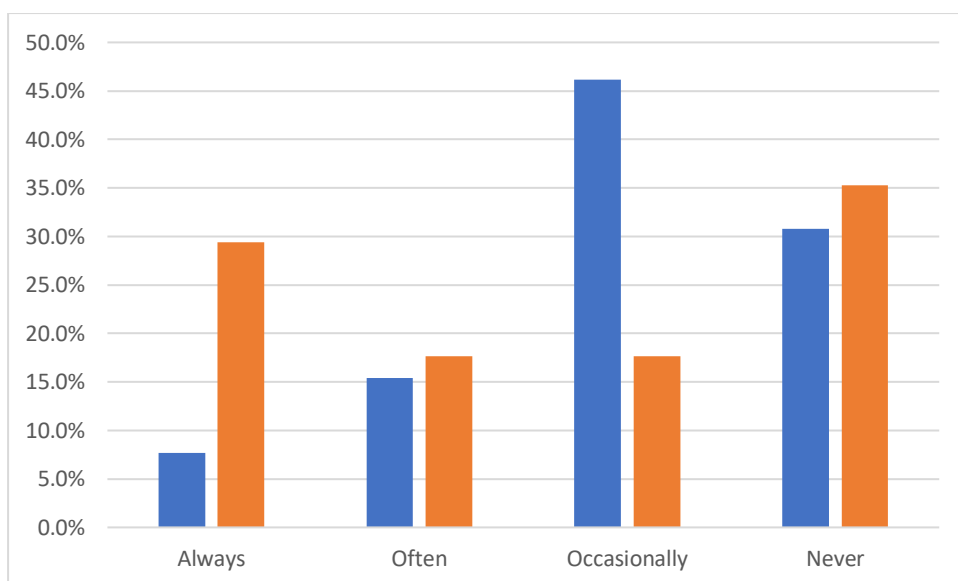
other students are in a similar positions. i.e. stuck on a question or topic	
To see if the question answers my concern	I use the search option to find threads of similar subject content using key world's before I post my question
saves duplication	To not waste other people time by asking a question that was already asked
	To avoid creating additional threads and to save everybody time.

6. Do you use the module wide forums to report errors on the website or in the module material?



Expectations of module wide forums

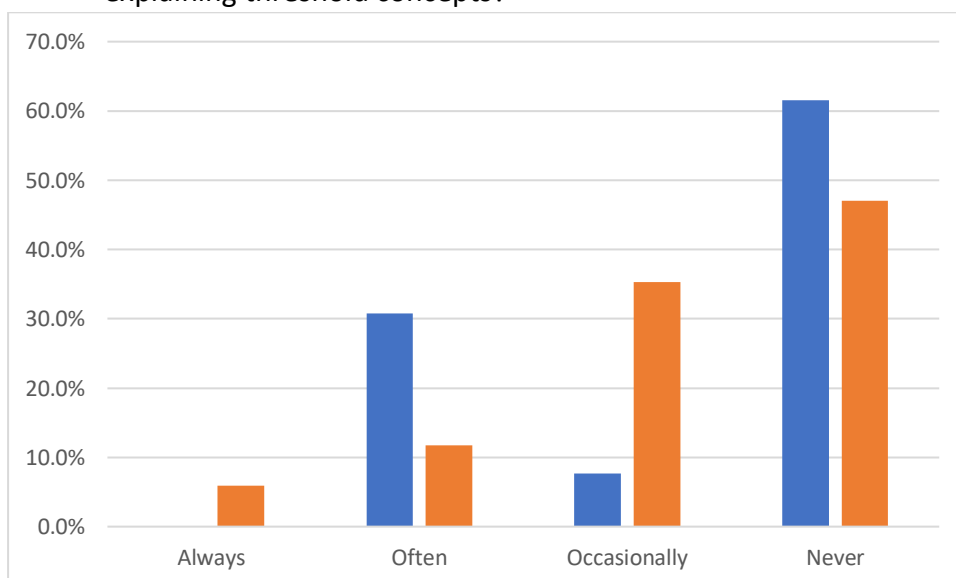
1. If you are reporting about tutorial locations and/or timing do you expect the forum moderator to see your comment and sort it out?



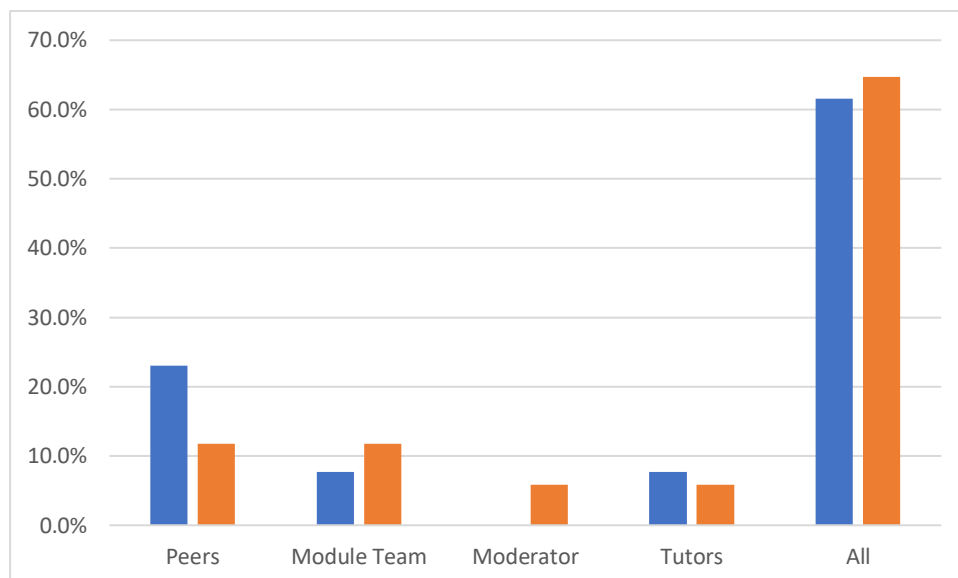
T317	T313
No	No
I don't think this issue came up.	In some courses there are delays in students or tutors posting
I never had a problem with t317 but have attended an online tutorial with t356 and the tutor not turn up. I believe it was a communication error and by the time the tutor did arrive half the students had left the room, however i think the tutorial still went ahead. The tutor apologised either that night or the next morning and created an alternative tutorial for anyone who had missed the one previously.	I can never attend tutorials - I watch the recordings
I have not had any difficulties in this regard however. If such an issue arose concerning a tutorial conducted by my tutor I would contact them directly. If it concerned another I generally observe the module team successfully resolving such issues. In general they simply contact the relevant tutor; or other involved individual on behalf of the student and post the results of their query. This is effective but as I previously mentioned queries may take some time to be answered. In the case where queries are urgent I have observed them posting contact details for the relevant department of the university who can help. This occurs in a timely manner. I have not seen any failures. With regards to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic they have been upfront about potential issues and have kept us informed	A tutorial was recorded. No contact details were given on the slides. The tutor was not my own tutor. I had some questions. I asked in the module forum. There was no response.

about potential issues with regard to tutorials ahead of time.	
I think if I had a point I would contact the tutor directly. Maybe then I would post to the group.	The tutorials tend to be fixed and changes are not made. For another module: my tutorial with my tutor was in Belfast. I live in east of England. I instead attended one in London with a different tutor.
No not really, I think its quite well resolved. Before Covid anyway	Have not used for this purpose
My tutor was based about 600 miles from me and others were closer, tried to relocate tutorials but to no avail, other students advised of nearer tutorials but tutorial booking system was not structured to allow you to have face to face tutorials with other tutors. Highlighted at beginning of my course, and as course progressed I realised that how the course progressed it maybe was a good thing to stick to tutor, there were the options to take part in online tutorials from other tutor, which gave a different but equally relevant view on things.	Tutorials cancelled and some clusters only being left with one online tutorial very late on in the EMA. This has left some feeling like there is an imbalance between clusters where those with less access to tutorials are at a disadvantage.
The above question is not applicable to my experiences.	Inappropriate forum used to post changes to online tutorial timing
cant recall any currently. However discussions over tutorial material availability is often seen	

2. Do you expect to get tuition on the module wide forums e.g. a long message thread explaining threshold concepts?



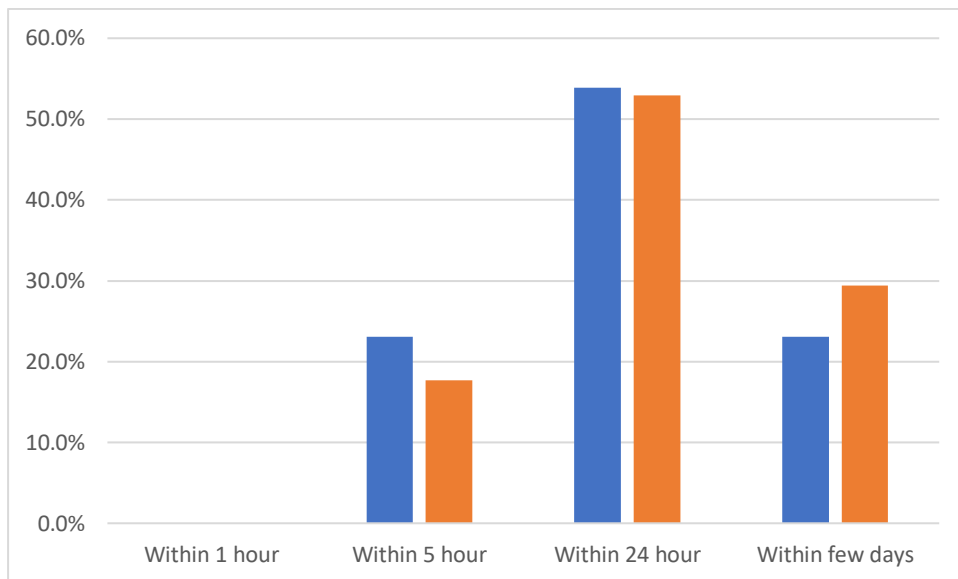
3. Who do you expect to respond to your queries posted?



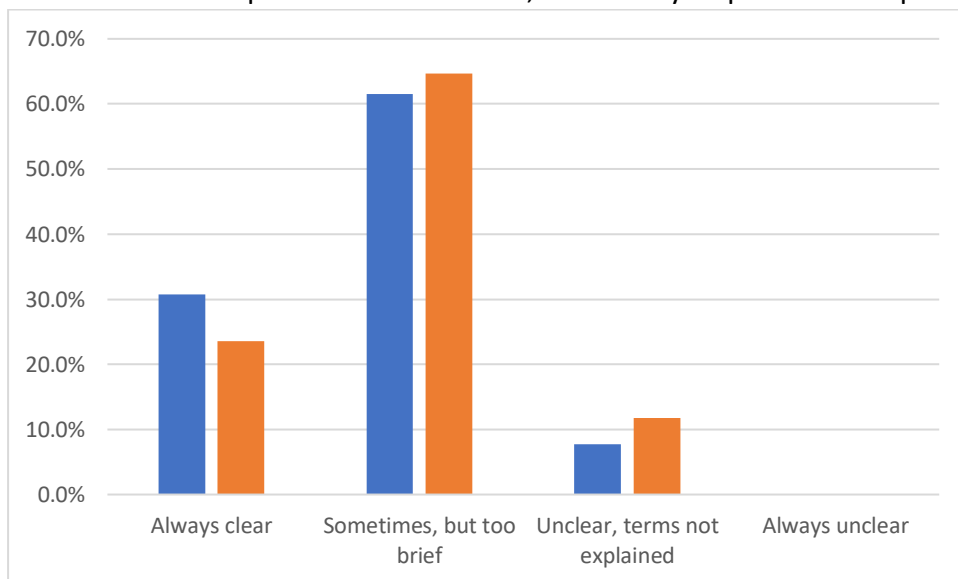
T317	T313
Peer responses show others level of understanding, serves as a comparison to my understanding and perhaps another perspective on the same learning materials. Module team: reinforcement of ideas taught, more technical response, not a direct answer bit leading me to think and solve a problem. Moderator: where to find information in the case that no response is received or its urgent. Tutor: as moderator and module team, perhaps more tailored to the individual or the tutor has established a rapport.	Module team: module topics in general, changes in the material, TMAs and EMA Tutor: tutorial, answering questions concerning TMAs, websites Peers: websites and explanations
Clarification of concepts I don't quite understand. Links to external resources that explain the concept better. Clarification on TMA question intent. A means of having technical issues reported and resolved.	Peers, often share thier struggles. The module team cannot provide suitable guidance. The moderators remove posts that give to much guidance and tutors tend to be more responsive and answer questions better by email.
The forums are a place to discuss your understanding with peers and to generate new ideas and innovations either for subject content or study methods	Moderators have given good/reliable info and often give useful links/examples by referencing back to module material. Students are good for support but can go off topic or will go into far too much detail, particularly if that is their industry/hobby !
peers - their ideas or knowledge of the questions asked ou staff - a clear and relevant answer	Clarification of concerns or questions about course materials and TMA presentation
From peers	Responses are mostly good.

I do not expect the forums to be another tutorial. My questions are often general, clarification or just sharing knowledge. Anyone can answer. My only disappointment this year has been the Tutor group forum ..no participation or introduction from the Tutor and little participation from students.	as we all have different understanding on the subject, I expect naturally to get an alternative view to mine
Peers tend to (in my mind) understand the reason behind the question, not try to force out a teachable moment. My own bias though.	Peers are useful for basic info and support/guidance, module team and tutors are good for reliable info although sometimes they use the same style as the module, moderators are good at ensuring discussions in particular around TMA/EMA questions do not stray too far into answers or just off course.
I'm happy with the responses, they give you a head start in your search. The answers leave you to do your own searching and not giving you the answers.	Tutors to answer queries regarding course content, module team to answer queries regarding admin issues, moderator to monitor behaviour I guess and send queries to the correct person
Answered all to Q21, dependent on who the question was posted to, I would hope for guidance for clarity from any but not the answer, which if the moderator picked up that trading answers were going on then post would be removed.	Peers - discussion and opinion Module team - responses to clarify errors or changes to the module content. Moderators - respond to clarify appropriate use of forums. Tutors - Answer questions relevant to all students and prevent accidental misinformation from peers
Peers will give answers / opinions. Hopefully, OU staff will give informed answers only.	peers = possible answers module team = solid answers or excuses moderators = answer or excuses tutors = solid answers
suggestions and support, socialising	Peers for general talk such as would be exhibited in a common room or bar. The team, moderators or tutors on matters of fact
If the query is regarding a TMA question just clarification on whether I am headed in the correct direction or offering a different way to view the question to allow myself and peers to discuss and solve amongst ourselves	I often find the peer responses are often more emotive and the others less so, however accurate information is often provided by OU employees
	Not really .. I'd expect helpful, civil comments. Especially from tutors and module team.

4. Typically how quick were the responses on the module wide forum?



5. Are the responses received clear, or did they require more explanation?

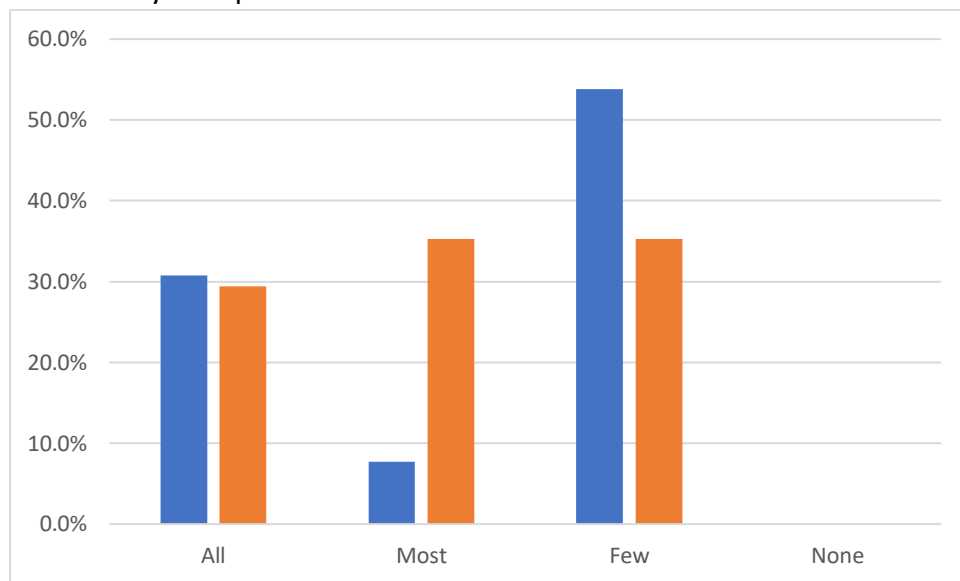


T317	T313
No	It depended on the tutor answering the questions.
There are always participants that get lost in excessive detail and fail to grasp the purpose of constructive discussion.	It feels like the module team are not allowed to answer questions and moderators remove any useful guidance

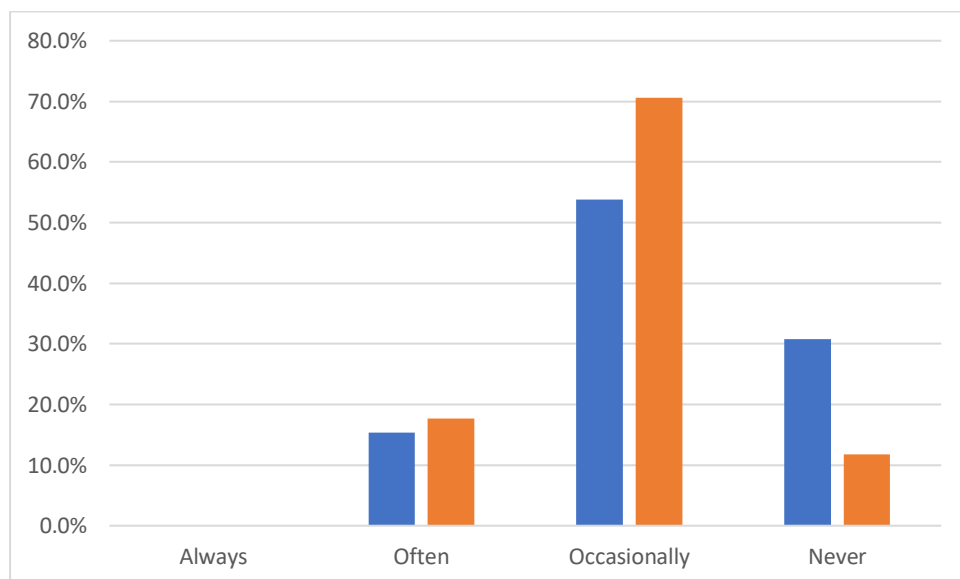
I don't think I asked a question but from what I could see most were were answered by both peers and ou staff, generally with staff providing a clearer answer than peers.	See Q22, cannot remember specifics as last years presentation.
Examples might be where the module team reply that they have forwarded some issue to the relevant parties but have yet to receive a response. They then post the full details when they receive them.	I sometimes had follow up questions
I think all the responses I have had were suitable to the forum medium. I would seek direct tutor contact by e-mail or phone if the forum did not help.	All staff when answering seem to try thier best to give a clear answer to the query.
I often fail to be adequately precise in my question, leading to general or vague questions, or completely missing the point.	there is a lot of information, so it helps to see the general feel or direction
Same as Q22 answer, i think its better to guide people along the way and not give them answers.	I tend to find that if the message is uncllear it's because I haven't understood the initial problem but I sometimes need more clarification
Replies were sometimes a little of track, but not unexpected, subject was broad and not always easy to be exact.	The biggest problem was with EMA responses. EMA responses by all participants overcomplicated the entire process. Tutors having differing opinion on the requirements and subjective input was confusing
I cannot remember an exact example.	answer give but refers to another post somewhere.
The answers are clear on non TMA related topics and they are more than willing to state if they dont have the answers. On TMA topics they would give somewhat cryptic answers in order for us to do the thinking..which is appropriate	Looking for concepts not "this is how I did it"
	Often Thai is the case when discussing ema or tma questions a tutor is unable to fully comment on an answer or direction to take
	No
	Students have on occasion been a little brief, generally the tutors are better as there answers are more complete.

Participation in forums

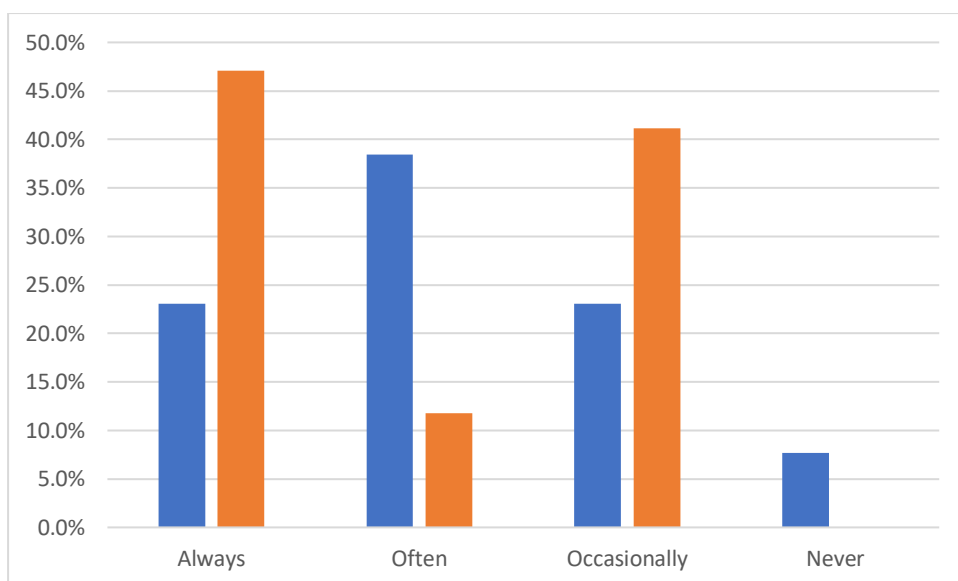
1. Do you expect all tutors to contribute to the module wide forums?



2. Have you ever found contradictory answers posted in these module wide forums?



3. Have you benefited in your module from using the module wide forums?



T317	T313
My tutor group forum was sparse but the module wide had lots of people who had advanced beyond my point of learning asking questions or identifying errors so that I knew about the issue before reaching that stage.	It is a place for clarification if there are contradicting answers given in the other forums.
My main use of the forums is for clarification of TMA questions. Sometimes they can be a bit vague, or easily misunderstood.	Sometimes errors in assignments are identified in the forum.
I found them quite disconcerting, especially if you fell behind in your studies. There would always be someone way ahead that seemed to have all the answers. This was quite demoralizing and counter-productive. Conversely, there would always be someone late to the party using the forums to 'catch-up'.	Kept me on track with TMA and helped me feel connected to other students.
If I was unsure about a tma question it may already have been asked and answered in the forum. If not then i'd ask my tutor in the tgf. Otherwise I wouldn't really seek information from the forums.	I usually found contacting tutor directly by email more informative and constructive
In particular I find questions and responses from my peers useful; even when I don't share their issue. This is because they often give me a different perspective on how they are thinking about an issue which sometimes provides me insights I might not have considered otherwise.	Personally, it's been for simple clarification of something and not necessarily technical.
My initial "go to" place if I have questions, just want talk, or contribute to other people. I have been surprised that as I have advanced through the OU the forums seem to have become less lively ,with a handful of "usual suspects".	its a place where its possible to read alternative views from those with better experience in the field

For example, the poster question on TMA05, how people have solved referencing on that (where, how). Also appending past TMA's instead of wasting wordcount on re-explaining the context of my concepts.	It reminds me that I am not alone. The value of the modules is not purely academic. The value is also in recognising that others struggle with the concepts as much as I do, and that there is somebody to explain further in a way that doesn't necessitate a phone call
The wider the span the better chance of getting more info. To narrow and then there could be delays in the answers	Extremely useful, just needs greater control on structure and better, more objective input from tutors regarding key course assessment.
Gathering of collective thoughts on a subject or point could offer some clarity to a situation. Did not rely heavily on forum but used as a tool, one of several, to help here and there. Probably an osmosis process where information was being gathered and forming a greater understanding of a subject topic.	same person(s) has asked similar question so answer more likely to come.
Forums allow you to post ideas which can then be peer reviewed. This feels less daunting than if a tutor is involved.	Handy with past exam papers leading up to exams - not so much in EMA's
The times I have used it have helped me	Yes especially for the t313 ema project, allot of key information was located there
it was useful to have a point of contact with students and others that was open and all could discuss together, instead of single line communications to the tutor.	Useful hints and tips for tmas
They often represent the first response to peer concerns and questions. Having a module team or OU rep respond allows to have ourselves heard which is an important connection between the distance learner and institution. A sense of community can be described	Helped me to understand topics better and to share my experience with other students.

4. Is there any information or advice given in the module wide forum that you think would be helpful to other modules in your pathway?

T317	T313
No	No
No	Some of the mathematics info and support could benefit from being in a separate forum accessible to all STEM modules as the principles are common.
I cannot think of any.	Regarding assignment and report writing. It would be nice for the guidance to be uniform across modules. I.e. how to lay out headers/footers, name of document, word tolerances etc.

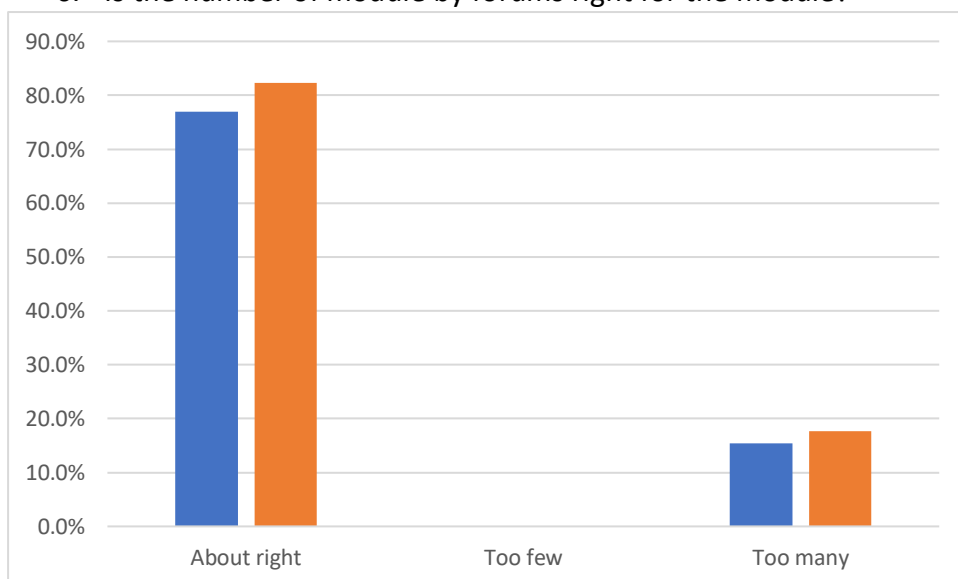
My pathway is nearly over .	yes, it appears there are some students who are in the field who work on the systems which we discuss, that practical aspect could be made as examples to eg renewable energy sites
No sure	Statistics and maths workshops always welcome
Mine was set up good, forum headings for each part of module (TMA) as we worked through. The tutor also had a tutor group module forum set up.	Yes sometimes
Not really	Information on how to reference correctly or IT issues
Cant think of any currently	Unsure
	Some of the generic maths and approaches/skills carry over to other STEM modules.

5. What else would you like to see addressed in the module wide forums?

T317	T313
Perhaps it could be informative to know more about what a tutor is doing, they are our closest contact to the world of engineering design yet there is a distinct anonymity to them. A forum post once a week from a tutor about something that is happening in the industry, what they are working on, inspiration, what the future holds for budding designers and what we could do next (study, placements etc)	I would like to see the TMA's and EMA's criticised when they have errors and then I would like these errors corrected and the EMA/TMA updated accordingly or compensatory Marks issued.
Perhaps a dedicated "ask a tutor" thread. Tutor responses vary. If you are lucky you have a tutor who is very engaged, but this isn't always the case.	A separate current affairs/media forum as often things come up on TV and news that has a link to module, but can clog up the normal module forum with unnecessary chatter - Have it there if people want to see it / contribute.
nothing	I think module teams/tutors could do a bit more to feel "present" during a module. Apart from other student and moderator input, it can feel a bit as though you're on your own during studies.
There are no issues that I think need to be addressed.	if there could be some form of invitation to visit real working sites be it a wind generator or solar plant that can go a long way in information cementing especially for most of us not in the field
I think the forums are already open to all on as broad a range of topics as the students wish. Ultimately it is the participants that make the forums.	Nothing. Nothing pastoral anyway. I find that the people who are going to moan will moan a lot if given the chance.

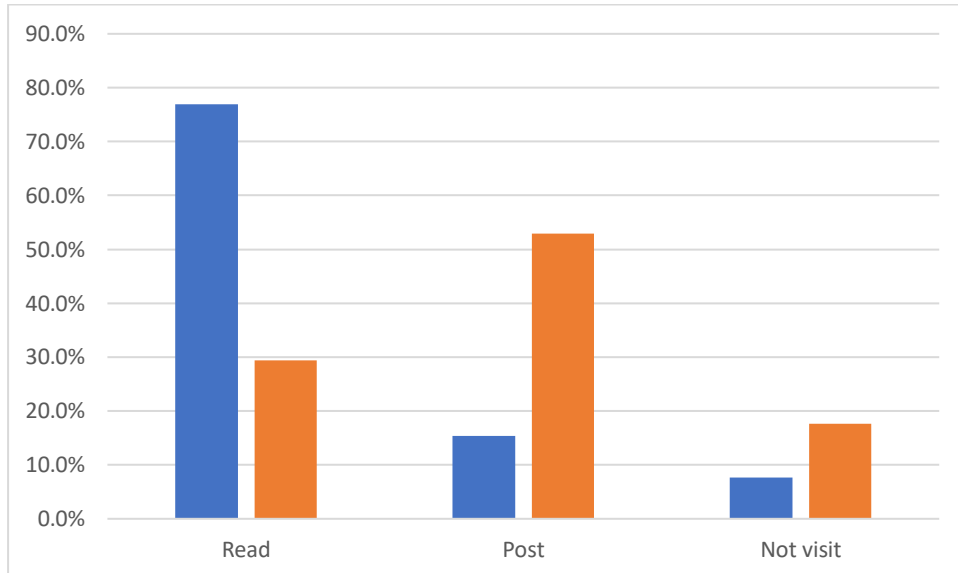
When i start i tend to be quite far ahead of the other students (I worry about time to study so go racing ahead) In modules it might be interesting to know at what pace everyone is at ? (use the tick marks as a way of seeing where everyone are in the study / module) it might ease my panic :-)	some moderators act like 'god'.
Module wide forum worked well on the whole, a few erratic posts, but to be expected as forums are not everyone's field of knowledge.	Their usefulness is course dependent some courses they are very active others very much less so.
consistent responses from tutors as I asked if I could include something to be told it was illegal where others had been told they could use it	Student support or pastoral care
Forums being organized and categorised in a way that information does not get lost outside of the context of the title of the discussion. It makes it difficult to look back through threads to find answers to questions posed under unrelated titles	Not sure
Generally the forums cover a wide range of topics. Archived topics would be useful	Nothing, good balance of forums.

6. Is the number of module by forums right for the module?

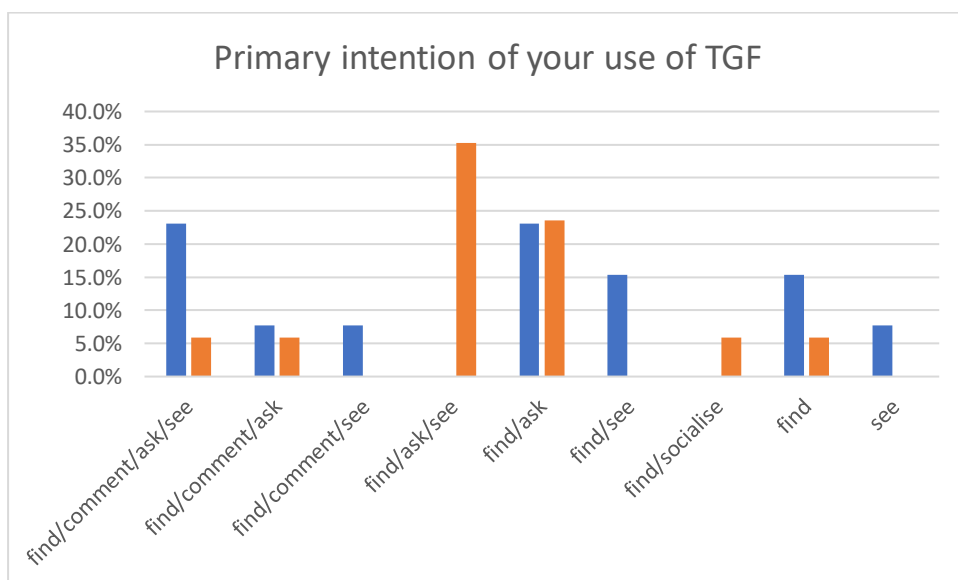


Tutor Group Forum preferences

1. Do you read, post, or not visit the tutor group forums?



2. If you do use the tutor group forums what is your primary intention?



3. Do you prefer to use the tutor group forum or the module wide forums?

T317	T313
------	------

More users online and broader feedback with shorter response time	Module wide forum is for all students. Tutor group forum is for your own tutor group where you can ask questions that need no clarification in the module wide forum.
A larger group means more chance of a reply. Also some other tutors use the forums more than my own.	It's better when you know the students and tutor
I think the popularity and peer traffic for module forums are different with each module. T317 TGF wasn't used and had maybe one post for the whole module, however the MWF was widely used by all. Alternatively both sets of forums for the modules i'm currently studying now are also widely and regularly used. The use of forums probably comes down to the number of peers in the TGF, its content and how vocal the tutor is on the forum.	Tutor group forums in my experience are very rarely used, module wide forums are far more active.
The module wide forums are for general questions. I would use the tutor group forum for more specific questions such as those relevant to tutorials; or to read information about such.	Tutor information more objective than module forum. Too many "opinions" on module forum
Did not use. Either waffle from other students, repeated questions with different answers, or cryptic responses.	I've been lucky to have very responsive tutors, so any technical questions are generally emailed to a tutor. So the module wide forum seems more fitting for general queries
The module wide is my most visited for most issues. The tutor group can and has been helpful for specific things but it now seems very little used. (Current module, not T317)	due to time constraints it's good to visit whichever forum maybe open and even check for recordings in case missed information
Smaller group, less participation, my questions are never questions only relevant to my or a tutor group (overseas student, never actually see anyone)	I don't think I've used the forums much on T313 tbh, It's been a pretty straightforward course. I have used the forums a lot on S295 though.
Well there is more info on the wider forum, more questions and more people to answer.	more likely to get a definitive answer quickly.
More so used module wide forum, that seemed to be the most used forum to be fair, tutor posted info as required on tutor group forum, for example regarding tutorials. Did tend to contact tutor by e-mail when further clarity was required, but that was not too often.	Depends to some degree the interaction with your tutor, some are excellent in using this facility as a sort of ongoing tutorial. Others do not seem to be aware of their existence
The tutor group forum seems more personal.	Well often the module wide forum has more moderators or tutors attached to it and responses are often quicker than tutor group forums, but for group work I prefer the tutor group forum

I get a balanced response from using both	Smaller and less intense to use, less reading and less competitive.
There is generally more activity in the module wide forum, however during T317 tutor group activities were more frequent due to the group project	Nothing is ever posted on the tutor group forums, they seem a little redundant
	I use both, still not clear to me what the difference is between the two forums

4. What else would you like to see addressed in TGF

T317	T313
Design challenges - something fun to pull people together and interact. Something that relates to the course material but is also abstract.	Nothing - Who uses them ?
Nothing	More information regarding progressing course objectives and how to achieve these particularly TMA presentation and requirements. It was pointed out to me, too late, on 2 TMAs how I should have conducted my approach to performing these. My subsequent marks cost me a 2:1. I'm not blaming the tutor but I did feel exposed and susceptible because I felt, in hindsight, there was a lack of information and detail in explaining how the expectations and how to perform the particular type of TMAs in T313 as opposed to other types of TMAs in other courses I did for my degree.
I have no issues with the tutor group forums.	i think it is just right
Some kind of amalgamation with the electronic tutorials and a forum based live stream.	Nothing
Nothing additional to its obvious intent	More guidance for ema projects
Tutor to be a little more active in the forum. I had seen other comments from wide forum that tutors in other groups haven't responded to some questions. Which is frustrating, even if the tutor would like to see if the group respond, which would make the tutor group forum a little more engaging	Inaccessibility for mobile phones needs sorting

Tutor group forum seemed to work alongside module wide for, personally I thought it easier with the greater number of views in module wide forum. Most student seemed to be using the module wide forum as it was structured as course went along and a wider audience. The tutor group forum seemed to work as I expected with notes from tutor as required.	Nothing, scrap them.
Specific tutor group issues however these dont too often crop up. Often the tutor group is just as distant to me as the module wide forum. If face to face tutorials took place i would feel i know the people in the group better and would most likely interact on the forums more frequently	