Support for Students. Teaching for Tutors. An Investigation into Ideas on Encouraging Students to Engage

eSTEeM Final Report

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* Please note that this report is written in the voice of the lead PI, Cathryn Peoples

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Table of Tables

1 Executive Summary

According to the social constructivist model of learning, social opportunities are considered to be important in an educational experience for their positive influence. The principle is that the learning can be reinforced through the interaction with others. When students engage in an online model of learning, however, they may do so with a view to exploiting the asynchronous benefits that it allows; the effect of this, however, is reduction in the opportunities for interaction and engagement with others. In a previous eSTEeM project, the goal was to encourage students to interact, primarily with their tutor but also with fellow students, to a greater degree than they might otherwise would. Additional support was provided to students through availability of the tutor and peers within Slack. Increased support opportunities were offered through the use of weekly group chats, real-time ad hoc chats in Slack, and the use of online diaries. While the goals of this project was achieved with some success, it was found that it was generally the more competent students, the students who did not necessarily need the support, who engaged. This second phase of the project has therefore been run with a view to identifying how to encourage the weaker performing cohort to engage with the tutor and their peers for the learning benefits it can bring. As with the first running of the project, additional support was offered through the use of weekly group chats in Slack, ad hoc chats, and online diaries, further supplemented with the use of peer learning. It is believed that the goals of this project were achieved to some degree, given the fact that a selection of the Tutor Marked Assessment (TMA) results were the same for the students who engaged and those who did not. (In the previous experience, the students engaging achieved significantly higher results than those who did not.) This second phase of the programme also varies in that another Associate Lecturer (AL) was involved in delivery of the personalised support programme, with a view to understanding of the impact of running the programme on a per tutor basis, and the overhead involved if this scheme were to be more widely applied. From the perspective of the co-AL, the scheme was found to be an extra commitment beyond the work that an AL commits to, and ultimately, the co-AL was glad when the programme came to an end, although he did find the experience to be a positive one. This was from the perspective of having very focused, short weekly tutorials, in addition to having the opportunities to get to know the subject material more closely. Recommendations coming from this project include that tutors should recognise the value of 'lurking' students, that students may not hear what a tutor is communicating until they are ready to hear, that students value the diary method of support, although may need guidance with its completion and maintenance, and that students may have unrealistic expectations about how much they can be given.

This report is structured as follows: In Section 2 Activities & Outcomes, the main activities which students were involved in as part of the personalised support programme are described, presented alongside artefacts which exemplify the activities. These are analysed in relation to the benefits which students received from the activities, and considered in relation to the related academic literature. In Section 3 Findings, the reactions of students throughout the year are explored, such as situations of student deferral despite participating in the personalised support programme. This is considered with a view to understanding the student behaviours despite the offer of a personalised support programme. In Section 4 Impact, the key conclusions from the personalised support programme are considered, in terms of, for example, the TMA results of students participating in the programme in comparison to those who are not, and the feedback which students returned mid-way through the programme and at the end of the programme. The report concludes in Section 5.

2   Introduction

Attendance at online tutorials can be low, and once students are there, engagement in a session can be limited. The research indicates that engagement is core to performance achieved (e.g., Lee, 2014). This research programme therefore seeks to examine the opportunities for encouraging student engagement. This project is the second phase in efforts to improve student engagement. In the first phase of the programme (Peoples, 2021), personalised support was offered to students to encourage their interactions with their tutor and peers. It was found during this study that a minority of students engaged, and that those who did engage were the naturally more competent students. A second phase of the programme has therefore subsequently been rolled out to examine the ways in which more students and, specifically, those who are weaker, may be engaged. Strategies deployed to achieve this mirror those from the first phase of the programme, in addition to further opportunities, including peer review.

2.1   Aims & Scope

The questions underpinning this research include:

RQ1: How to engage online students in working more closely with their tutor and peers?

RQ2: Which strategies for personalised support are more attractive to online students?

RQ3: Is it possible to engage weaker students in a personalised support programme?

RQ4: Is a personalised support programme an attractive opportunity to other tutors (in the sense of tutors not responsible for initially rolling out the personalised support scheme)?

3   Activities

3.1   Methodology / Research Design

The personalised support programme was offered to three cohorts of TM354 20J Software Engineering students. A Jisc Online Survey was used to solicit students interested in participating in a personalised support programme. Students were first asked if they wished to participate in an increased support programme (Appendix 10.1), and then sent a subsequent survey with a range of questions dependent on their response – see Appendix 10.2 for students participating, and Appendix 10.3 for students not participating.

In total, 61 students were invited to join the programme. Thirty-six students indicated participation and 25 opted out.

Students participating were invited to join the Slack environment, and this supported the majority of interactions under the programme. Interactions involved weekly group chats, completion of diaries shared with the tutor, scheduled 1-to-1 chats with students, and peer student support.

Two Associate Lecturers were involved in the programme, both involved with TM354 for several years.

Data has been collected using JISC online surveys, online diary entries, transcripts of text-based chats in Slack, and using the quantitative results of three TMAs. Surveys were disseminated mid-way through the support programme (Appendix 10.4), and at the end (Appendix 10.5).

The activities are described in further detail in the following sections:

At the beginning of the TM354 module tuition, efforts were made to gain an understanding of the students who were interested in engaging with the personalised support programme. All students across the three cohorts were contacted in a group email at the same time, and were offered the same opportunity. Questions were asked with a view to becoming more familiar with student personalities, in addition to appreciating the ways in which they may engage with the personalised support programme and the benefits that may be achievable for them.

The responses were informative, and helped to break down barriers between student and tutor. One particularly interesting question is what they are most proud of in their lives, on either a personal or a professional basis. In a number of cases, students will reply that they are most proud of their families:

"To pinpoint the one aspect I am most proud of would be my partner and family."
"Personally, my 3 children ..."
"My Son"
"These days, I'm proud of my family, and particularly the way my two young boys (4 and 8) are turning out. I should also mention, I have a very patient and understanding wife!:)"
"My son Frank, my husband Mark"
"My wife and children"
"Balancing raising a child, studying and working all full time."
"Probably my children - sorry!"

"I recently became a father in July"
"My son"

This helps to remind me as a tutor that these students have other significant priorities beyond study, and that they are also studying alongside real-life pressures. The evidence suggests that it is beneficial for tutors to take an active role in the personal lives of students, as this ultimately benefits their learning (Ansuategui & Miravet, 2017; Rimm-Kaufman, 2010). Taking this further, I ask students if they have any situations in their lives which will impact on their ability to study for the module. I find that this prepares me for individual needs and I believe that it may also have a psychological impact on the student, knowing that they have shared a personal situation with the tutor and, in the event that the situation becomes more prominent in their lives, it will be less unexpected to deal with for all involved. Several students answered "Yes" to this question, reinforcing the fact that they have competing pressures on their study ability. One student has dyslexia, one has epilepsy, one has found tutors to be of variable 'quality', one has an ill mother waiting for a liver transplant, one is studying multiple modules in parallel, and that one is working full-time alongside study. Some of these details could have been elicited from the student record, however, it is interesting to discover the information which students are willing to disclose.

It is also interesting to identify what students want to know about their tutor. Questions received during the initial survey include:

"... how you have overcome problems in your studies. What tools or techniques have you found helpful?"
"How do you find time in your day to do everything?!"
"I was quite curious about the bit about interplanetary networking. I had never really even thought about that, but I'm curious now. If you have any interesting reads to recommend, that might be something to pop in my reading list."
"What motivates you to teach students?"
"Any information about research or work you have done either inside or outside the OU would be interesting."
"How did you manage to break into the IT industry?"
"When and how would you most prefer to communicate. What do you most enjoy about tutoring TM354?"

This helps to reinforce that students are interested in the person they are interacting with and who is assessing their work.

Students engaged in a couple of ways with the personalised support programme. This includes the completion of personal diaries, 1-to-1 scheduled chats with their tutor, and weekly scheduled group chats with peer students and tutor.

3.2   1-to-1 Scheduled Chats with Tutor

Richard Foley held 1-to-1 scheduled weekly chats with one student, on Tuesdays at 2pm, which he reported to be successful. The student engaged in an effective manner with Richard, and they discussed progress in relation to the study calendar. They also discussed parts of the module which the student found difficult, and Richard highlighted the key points to watch for in the forthcoming weeks.

3.3 Diary Entries

Two students chose to engage with the diary approach to support, although both ceased to engage prior to the end of the module. When considering the ways in which the diary entries were completed, it is perhaps relevant to note that the module began on Saturday 3rd October 2020.
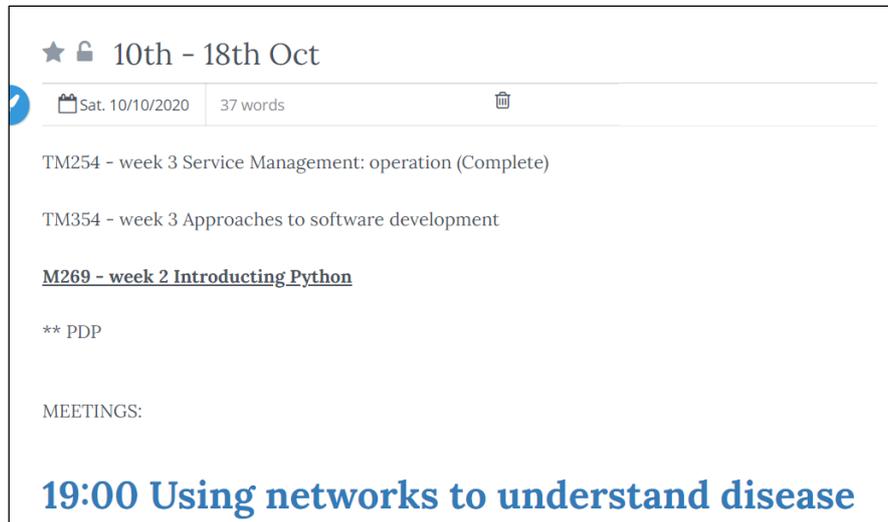
Figure 1 Student A Diary Entry 10 October 2020
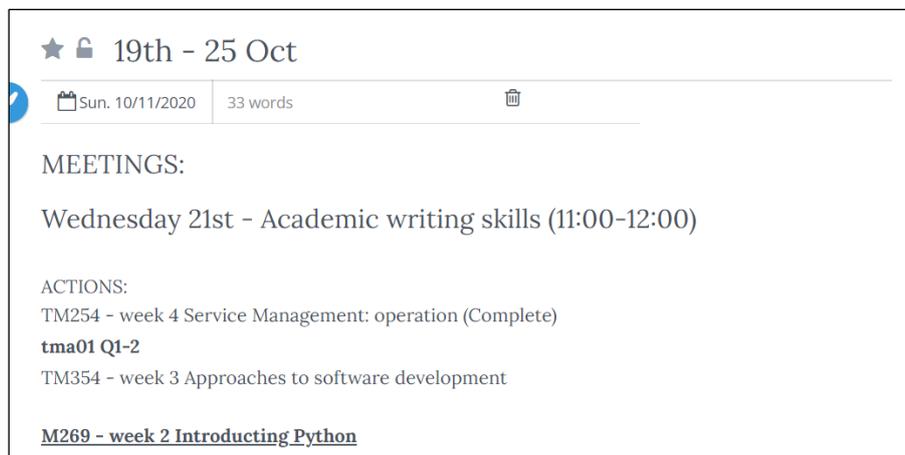
Figure 2 Student A Diary Entry 11 October 2020
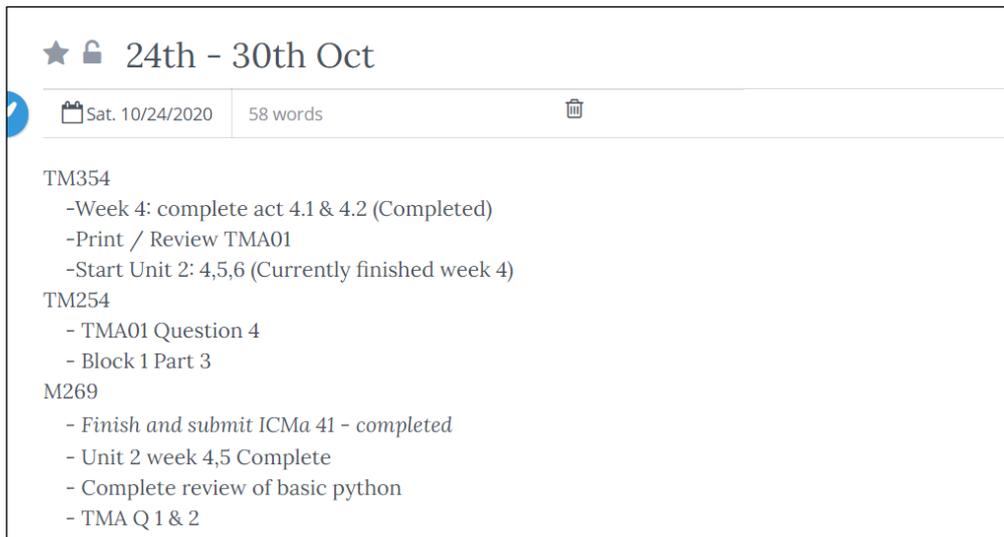
Figure 3 Student A Diary Entry 24 October 2020

The diary entries for Student A are presented in Figure 1 to Figure 3. Student A was not regular in completing diary entries in terms of frequency, completing an entry on 10th and 11th October, and 24th October; at this point, Student A ceased to engage with his diary. In addition to the irregularity of writing, Student A logged a range of topics, and not only those aspects specific to the module (TM354). It is perhaps significant to note that this student did not add any reflection to his diary entries, and that it acted as more of a recording mechanism for tasks completed.

The nature of the material logged made it difficult for the tutor to provide support which might be useful to the student, in terms of observing areas where particular challenges were being experienced, or personal events which affected the study experience.

Diary entries from Student A are significantly different from Student C's entries. Student A's entries are presented in Figure 4 to Figure 6.

The M Word

Wed. 10/28/2020 | 262 words

Dear Diary...

...and like a bad penny turning up, there it is. The wall, the searching for bootstraps, the M word. Motivation.

OK, so..... how to get through this?

In its previous incarnations, during my level 1 and 2 modules, a strong pot of coffee and an undisturbed weekend usually worked wonders. However, the rarified atmosphere of level 3 study (x2) doesn't really allow for piecemeal sessions of "c'mon, you CAN do this".

What's dragged me through these low-gear moments previously has been the mindset of thinking of my study timetable in the same way as my job. There are PLENTY of things that I genuinely am not fond of having to do in my employment; but a quick "you signed up for this, buster!" usually clears the fog, so to speak.

I think my reasons for wanting to get to the the end of this journey have changed, and therein lies some of the problem. When I began my study in 2008, I had a clear idea: get degree - open doors - new career - live happily ever after. Unfortunately time waits for no-one, and as I'm closer to fifty than forty nowadays, the end state is now more a matter of pride.

"I will get that cap and gown".....repeat ad nauseam.

So, comparing my (foolish?) pride against a clear career path - and the means to the end becomes a little less delineated. The focus is around somewhere......but where the hell did I leave it?

Anyway. Coffee time. Maybe an activity diagram for making a brew too?

Back Soon..

Figure 4 Student C Diary Entry 28 October 2020

So, here we go again.

Sun. 10/11/2020 | 311 words

Dear Diary...

OK, where to start? I suppose my chief concern is revisiting concepts I originally studied in 2010. At the time I was studying for a Diploma in Computing an IT, with M256 being one of the key modules to study on that pathway.
By my own admission, at the time I found the work a lot more conceptual compared with the tangible aspect of coding that I had studied previously. If I remember correctly this was also the second year I had studied two level 2 at the same time (the other being Team Working in Distributed Environments). The switch from coding to conceptualising caught me on the hop, and combined with a job promotion that threw my work/life balance out of the window; I struggled with the module, eventually gaining a grade 4 pass. Not my finest hour. Although my assessment work averaged a half-decent 77, an exam score of 44..... could have been better.

Fast-forward 10 years - I have recently revisited my M256 work. While it doesn't give me sleepless nights as it may have done way back when; my worry now is that things, times, processes change - particularly in this field. As an example, agile was barely touched upon by M256 in 2010, however in the interim is seems to have moved to the forefront of development.
Well.. I guess I AM actually here to learn, and just rehashing old concepts/ideas doesn't fall into that category.

Another self-inflicted concern is that this is the first (and hopefully only) year that I will be studying two level 3 modules together. Studying TM352 (Web, Mobile and Cloud Technologies) should keep me fairly occupied regarding coding, OOP, Java, Netbeans, Openstack, etc. What I need to ensure is that this doesn't come at the expense of valuable TM354 time.

I think I'll need a cunning plan......

Back Soon........

Figure 5 Student C Diary Entry 10 November 2021
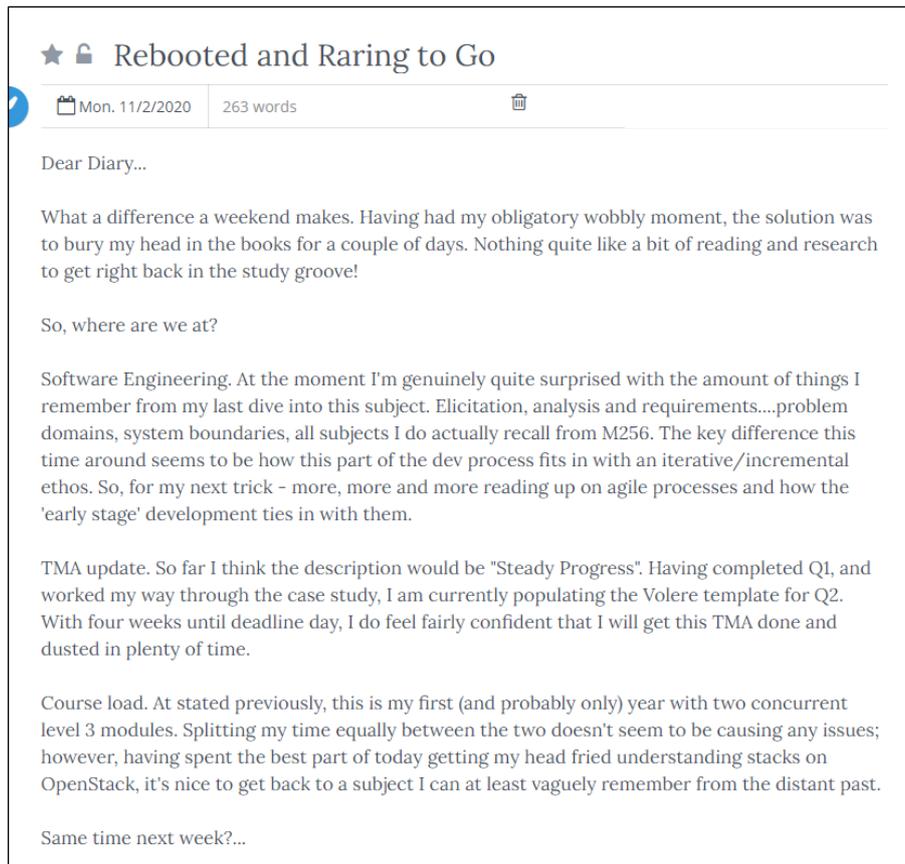
Figure 6 Student C Diary Entry 11 February 2021

As with Student A, Student C also logged on an irregular basis (28th October, 10th November, and 11th February). It was clear that Student C had given a lot of effort to the preparation of the diary entries, effort which was unfortunately unable to be sustained. When Student C ceased to continue with diary entries, I asked why this was the case. Student C revealed that it was the lack of feedback on his posts which caused him to lose interest. He indicated that he gave a lot of effort over what he was writing and then indicated that he became stressed over what he had written. The lack of feedback from the tutor may have compounded this feeling of anxiety.

It is interesting that students were eager to engage with the diary entries in both academic years, while one year the students continued to write while in the second year they did not. Information regarding the support programme was consistently shared across both years. In the case of Student A, events were being logged without being reflected upon. He may therefore have got little benefit out of this activity, and ceased to write on this basis. Student C, on the other hand, clearly did reflect and it might have been expected that he would have achieved the benefits of reflecting as written about by Belobrovy (2018). One observation about these diary entries is they do not actually reflect on the challenges of the specific module being studied, but they have a wider focus, and, in the case of Student C, are more of a whole life reflection. It might be appreciated that, for a mature students, there is a lot being disclosed here, without the possibility for support from a module tutor, and possibly also without the student needing particular specific help with. At his stage of life, it may be difficult for alternative directions to be taken, leading to a potential feeling of, "Why am I doing this? Why am I reflecting?" Wallin & Adawi (2018) examined the effectiveness of reflection as a teaching and learning tool, and it is interesting to understand how they accommodated it as an element of the formative assessment process. It might then be argued that more importance was placed on students contributing entries, in comparison to the use of reflection in this programme. Students were

guided in relation to the frequency of reflections, and the questions which should be responded to in their reflections. Hockings et al. (2017) consider the effectiveness of independent learning and indeed, how students can be supported in becoming independent learners. The role of a diary was examined in this investigation. As with the approach taken by Wallin & Adami (2018), students were given guidelines with writing the diary entries, including detail on an appropriate word length and the potential writing style which might be used. It could possibly be concluded that this lack of detail and guidance to support the use of reflection in this programme impacted on the ways that these students engaged with the process.

3.4   Student Peer Support

In this phase of the personalised support programme, the opportunity was taken to examine if a peer support approach could be beneficial. Particularly with the goal of attempting to encourage the weaker performing students in the cohort to engage, it was anticipated that students may feel more comfortable exploring their learning with another student in relative privacy. The students who indicated they were interested in this opportunity were therefore paired with another of a similar academic ability.

3.4.1   builder

You created this private channel on October 18th, 2020. This is the very beginning of the **builder** channel.
October 18th, 2020 1:49 AM **Cathryn** joined builder along with 2 others.
October 20th, 2020 8:12 AM **Cathryn** Hi, @Student C and @Student K , welcome to your channel.
9:20 AM **Student K** Hi @StudentC, hope everything's going well, how are you finding tm354 so far?
12:03 PM **StudentC** Hey @Student K ….so far, so good. I think! How about yourself? Ready to throw yourself back into it after a summer break?
October 22nd, 2020 3:47 PM **Student K** Hey @StudentC, yeah, just getting back into the swing of studying. Definitely finding the level 3 modules a bit more challenging!
November 17th, 2020 9:51 PM **Cathryn** Hi **Student K** & StudentC, please remember about this channel ...

Figure 7 Peer Tutoring – Builder Pair

3.4.2   factory

You created this private channel on October 22nd, 2020. This is the very beginning of the **factory** channel.
 Add description Add an app Add people Send emails to channel
October 22nd, 2020 9:15 PM **Cathryn** joined factory along with 2 others.
9:27 PM **StudentV** Hello! Nice to "meet" you both

9:27 PM **Cathryn** Hi **StudentV** , good to meet you too 🙂
9:27 PM Hope you're well

9:44 PM **Student Y** hey 🙂
November 17th, 2020 9:51 PM **Cathryn** Hi **Student Y**& **StudentV**, please remember about this channel ...

Figure 8 Peer Tutoring – Factory Pair

3.4.3   visitor

Figure 9 Peer Tutoring – Visitor Pair

In practice, however, this activity had limited benefit, and was not actively engaged with in a way which might be considered to supplement student learning. According to Moore's Interaction Framework (Moore, 1989), the most valued interaction in the educational setup is between the student and instructor. The evidence from this paired peer learning supports this argument.

Ansuategui & Miravet (2017) discusses that peer tutoring depends on two factors, which includes the ages of the pairs and the continuity of the role (in the sense of consistently acting as a learner, or in some cases, responding to questions asked in an tutor-type role). Some argue that there is a benefit to having a peer tutoring relationship between students where one is between two and four years older than the other. Others argue that a peer tutoring role is most effective when peers are the same age. It is concluded that same age and cross-age peer tutoring is equally effective.

To compare this with the findings in this study, the Builder pair exchanged pleasantries when the channel was initially established, and did not engage again throughout the entire academic year.

Age was not considered when these pairs were formed, and instead academic ability was considered, with a view to pairing those of similar academic ability, with a view to maximising the opportunities that the students will feel comfortable with one another. The evidence reveals, however, that the students did not even get to the position of understanding the academic ability of the other student in the pair, as interactions were minimal. As with guiding students around how to write diaries, there may have been an opportunity to support also support them in operating as a partner in peer learning. The effort to remind students about the existence of their private channel had limited visible impact.

3.5   Students Interacting with One Another

While the peer support setup was largely unsuccessful in achieving its teaching and learning aim, the students did demonstrate ability to work with one another in a more spontaneous way within the #general channel in Slack (Figure 10).
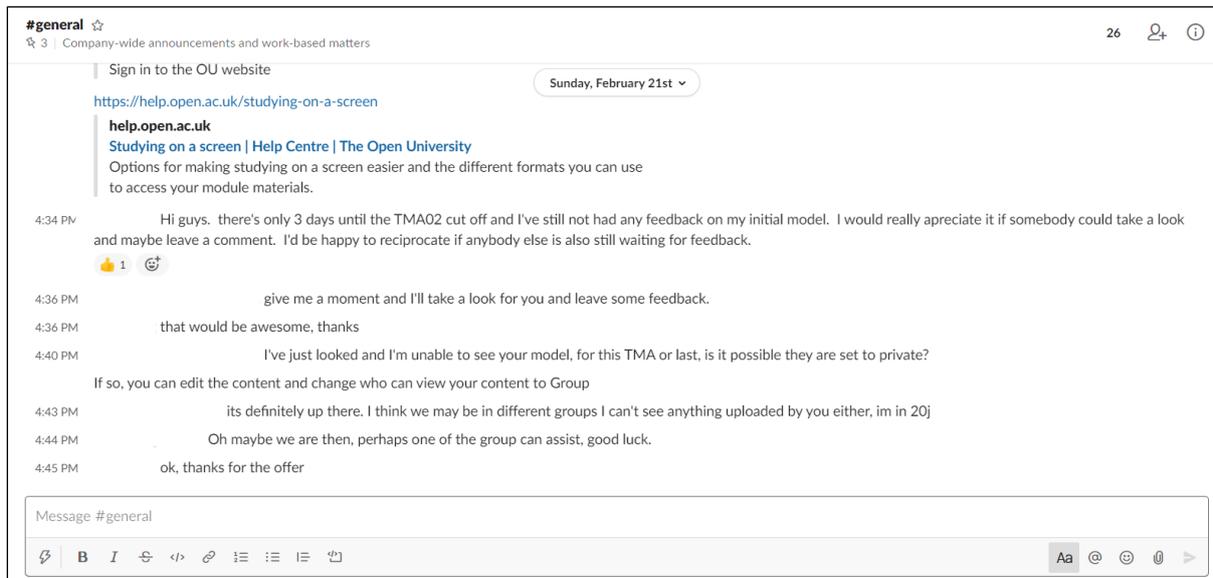
Figure 10 Spontaneous Interaction between Students in Slack

In the instance in Figure 10, one student needed another student to comment on his work in the module forum, and took the opportunity provided by the medium to ask for help. Another student responded almost instantly to respond to this student's need. It is interesting that these students could have used the University technologies to make this request, such as the module forum, but they instead decided to ask the question in Slack from this group of peer students.

3.6   Re-advertising the Opportunity to Join the Programme mid-way through

On February 2nd, 2021, the additional support programme was re-advertised through my tutor group forum.

Figure 11 Re-advertising the Personalised Support Programme Mid-way through the Academic Year

With this invitation, I included a screenshot of a section of the group chat which had been held the previous evening in Slack (Figure 18). The next day, I had one further student demonstrate his interest in the programme and asked if he could opt in. This reinforces that students may need to see the benefits before they will commit.

4   Findings

In the following sections, data is being examined with a view to understanding events which were notable in association with the programme, such as a student deferring the programme despite being involved in the personalised support, through to a student requesting a new tutor as he believed that he was not receiving enough support. Data is being examined in a qualitative manner on the basis of its content.

4.1 Students forgetting about and missing the 1-to-1 chats

There have been a couple of cases of students forgetting about and missing the 1-to-1 chat. The 1-to-1 sessions were generally held on Monday evenings. When rescheduled to the Thursday evening instead, after the student had missed the Monday slot, it was me who then forgot about it. I then scheduled this student's 1-to-1 for the following Monday, so he only had to wait 1 week to speak with me.

The fact of missing the scheduled chats confirms the overhead of this process, from both the student and tutor perspectives. It is additional to the processes that we are commonly familiar with and, once out of the habit, it took a couple of reminders to return to the routine. Routines are important in supporting effective education (Rawlings, 2017), but these instances of disruption to the routine are reminders that there are real people, managing busy workloads.

4.2 Student Deferral

On 18 January 2021, I lost my first student from the group, who was being supported through the personalised support programme.

During the first scheduled 1-to-1 chat with this student, there were no indications of any particular problems at this stage of the process. He told me about the work he was involved with day-to-day, and appeared motivated with the use of exclamation marks and smiling emojis. In the next session, he asked me a question about which software to use to create a model.

In the next session, he explained that he was just trying to pass the module, and that he wasn't aiming for 100%.

There was more of an indication of challenges for the student side in our final chat, when he disclosed that he was studying multiple modules in parallel. By mid-December, the student again gives concern that he is finding the experience to be challenging. This was the last time that I would speak with the student.

Sunday, January 10th 1:02 AM **Cathryn** Hi Student H, Can we pick up our chats again on Monday 18th January at 8.15pm?

Figure 12 Attempt to Communicate with Student H

At this stage, the student deferred his studies on the module. There was an element of regret when receiving notification that the student was deferring his study of the module. The signs had been given by the student, and they were unfortunately not picked up on at that stage, when it may have been possible to take some action to influence his decision. It could be considered that the student was giving silent signals (Ansuategui & Miravet, 2017), which were not picked up on.

4.3   Unexpected Behaviour in Slack

On the week beginning 8 February 2021, I placed a message in the general channel to state that the weekly group chat would not be held this week, as I was holding a formal OU tutorial at the same time, inviting my Slack students to join that instead. On 9 February 2021, I then received a message in the general channel from one of the students who had signed up to the programme but who had not actively participated in the session, asking where the weekly group chats were taking place. This is because this year, I had decided to not hold the weekly group chats in the general channel, which everyone is able to access by default, and instead I created a private channel for the weekly group chat. The students who had indicated initially that they wished to participate in this activity were invited into this channel, and therefore, all students in the Slack environment were not necessarily able to see this. Given this student's interest of observing the group chat indicates that, while he was not an active participant, he wished to observe, perhaps with a view to joining in and becoming more active.

The next day (February 10), another similar interesting event happened. Within my Slack environment, there were several students from the prior academic year. They had not been active in the environment, however, when the student asked where the weekly chats were taking place, one of the past students also asked for access into this private channel.

This situation was quite surprising, as these students were not engaging in any other way yet they wanted to pull experiences and information from the environment. While it was positive to see that they were getting value from the experience, I also felt somewhat disappointed, as these students were not interested in giving anything back to the creation of our learning community, but only taking what they were able to from it.

In other unexpected behaviour in Slack, I had students who had indicated their desire to participate in the personalised support programme, however, in practice did not engage. I created a private channel in which to hold the weekly group chats. One week, I cancelled a session and communicated this to students via the #general channel. At this stage, students who had never engaged in the weekly chat sessions asked for access to them (Figure 14).
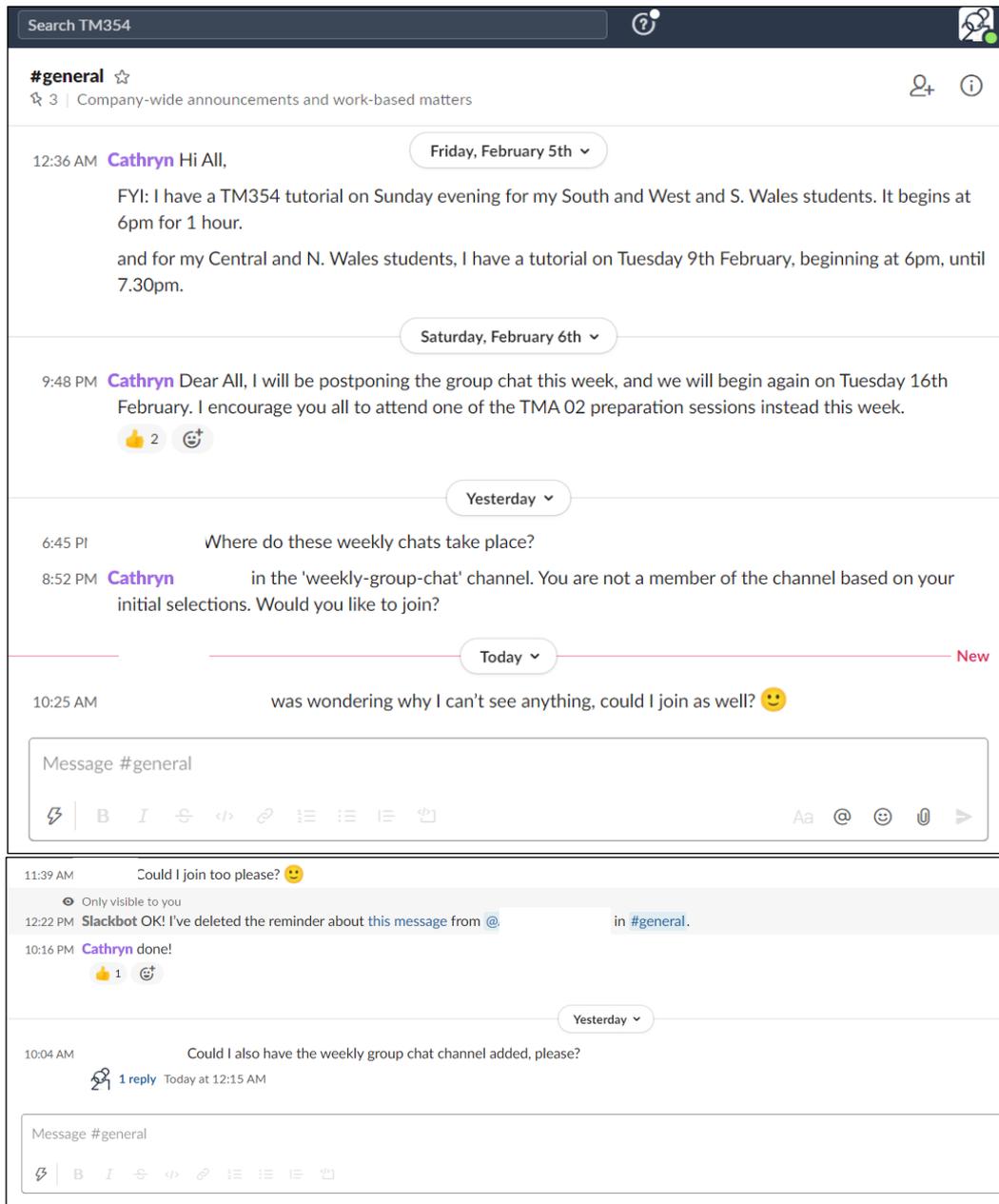
Figure 13 Evidence of Students Joining the Group Sessions in a Less Obvious Way

This indicated that, although these students were not active in their engagement, they were observing the activities without contributing. There is clearly a role to be played by lurking (Doyle, J. & Nieuwoudt, 2021; Lakes Matyas, 2017; Ruthotto et al., 2020).

Another unexpected situation was students who did not engage in a consistent manner, and then had questions about the TMA, with an expectation that they would be covered during the group chat session (Figure 15).
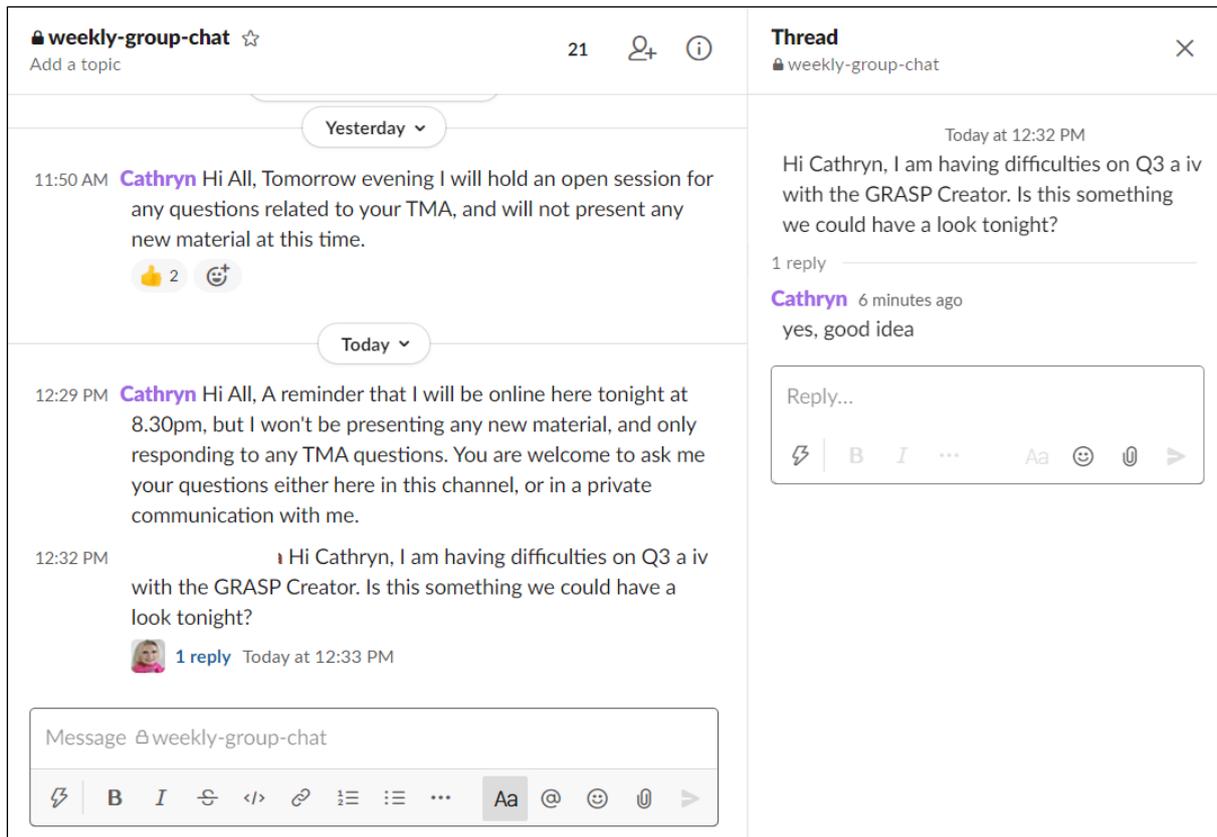
Figure 14 An Irregular Group Chat Attendee Influencing the Group Chat Direction

I felt that the responsibility during the group chat was to respond to students who consistently attended the session, however, as the student who attended sessions in an irregular way asked, I responded to his query. This left me feeling rather guilty about the situation.

4.4 TMA Performance Results

One of the major goals of the programme was to try to positively affect TMA performance results, assessed through comparing the results of students who engaged with the programme in comparison to those who did not.
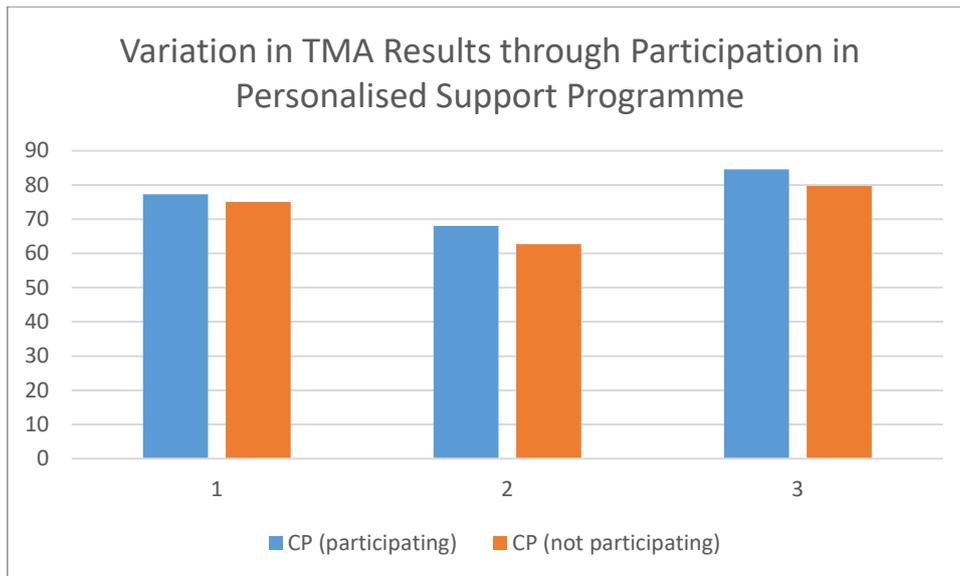
Figure 15 Comparison in TMA Performance Results for Students Participating in the Personalised Support Programme (CP)
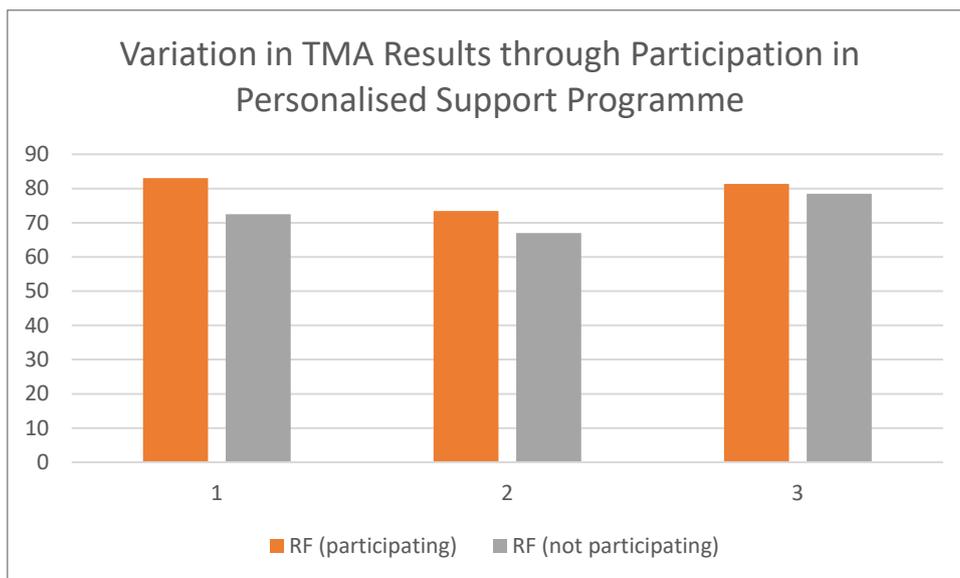
Figure 16 Comparison in TMA Performance Results for Students Participating in the Personalised Support Programme (RF)

In relation to TMA 01, for students participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 75, SD = 10.56) and RF observed (M = 73, SD = 13.66); for students not participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 77, SD = 9.3) and RF observed (M = 83, SD = 9). For TMA 02, for students participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 63, SD = 14.2) and RF observed (M = 67, SD = 17.22); for students not participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 73, SD = 16.1) and RF observed (M = 73, SD = 13.7). For TMA 03, for students participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 79, SD = 15.7) and RF observed (M = 78,

SD = 11); for students not participating in the personalised support programme, CP observed (M = 84, SD = 8.3) and RF observed (M = 81, SD = 7.9).

Table 1 T-Test – Difference between Tutors

CP & RF	0.23109

Table 2 T-Test – Difference between TMAs

	TMA 01	**TMA 02**	**TMA 03**
CP	0.15605	0.17704	0.12685
RF	0.038753	0.210038	0.279559

4.5   January 2021 Review

Student satisfaction was reviewed mid-way through the programme, in January 2021. This was to assess their needs and expectations, and if there was a need to adapt them. It is interesting that students responding to the survey included both those who were participating in the increased support programme, in addition to those who were not. In doing so, it appears that students appreciated the opportunity to have a voice, and equally, to have a pair of ears to listen to them. When analysing these responses in greater detail, however, it is revealing that students are not communicating anything in particular that needs responding to; they all appear to be happy with the module and they do not wish to make use of any further support. This may be representative of their satisfaction with the module in general, and desire to give something back when they know their support is helpful for the research being carried out.

One student who signed up for the programme, but failed to actively participate in practice acknowledged this fact. He recognised that support was offered and it was his responsibility to make maximum use of it. Another student found the support helpful, and made a suggestion as to how the programme's design could be further customised to respond to his needs – he felt that this could be achieved by having less planned group chat sessions, and to have more of a free-form time instead.

4.6   June 2021 Review

A similar review was carried out at the end of the module in June 2021. Again, it is interesting that students responded who both were and were not taking part in the personalised support programme. It is also interesting to discover that students participated in the survey who did not respond to the January 2021 review, and indeed who were not participating in the personalised support programme.

Two of these students acknowledged that they feel that they would have benefited if they had participated in the personalised support programme, and communicated their regret at not joining in. Two students feel that it was the correct decision to not participate, and one student acknowledges that he does not know if he should have joined in or not, given that he didn't try it. Major benefits of the programme which students communicated at the end include: that it help to protect against as much isolation, that it facilitated engagement with students and tutors, and that it created a scenario where more help could be received without feeling that the tutor

is being 'bothered'. It was also identified through this investigation that students may not participate in the programme as it would be, '*another thing to do*'.

4.7   Partnering with another AL

Interviews with the second AL, Richard Foley, involved in the programme are presented in Appendix 9g) and Appendix 9h), carried out mid-way through and at the end of the personalised support programme. It was very insightful to get Richard's perspective on the programme, and the ways in which it impacted on him. One significant finding from my perspective was the fact that Richard felt that involvement in the programme helped him to get to know the module material more closely than he did before. This was through the fact of having very focused weekly small-group sessions with students on a specific module question. Richard acknowledged that he would not continue to use instant chat tools after the support programme finished, as he feels that he can be instant in his communications with students via email. however, Richard also noted the benefit of using instant chat as he found that he could have a text-based conversation with a student while he was taking a break from exercising. Finally, it was interesting to identify that Richard was relieved when the support programme completed. He fully committed to everything that was asked of him during the period. In this personalised support role, however, there is a commitment required from the tutor beyond what we normally do, in the sense of the tutoring experience encroaching into more aspects of our lives and our time.

Partnering with an AL in a more active way has been a helpful experience from my perspective. While we are assigned a mentor when new to a module, this can be more of a passive relationship, as opposed to more frequent interaction for the purpose of tutoring a module. In working more closely with Richard, I found it interesting to understand how he feels his subject-specific knowledge has expanded as a consequence of participating in the programme. This led to a realisation that other Als also have doubts with regard to their teaching capability. Richard also shared his marking notes with me, which supported me in that process. I feel this was a positive experience, almost one of peer tutoring (Healy et al., 2020). One of the reasons that this relationship was a beneficial experience, certainly from my experience, may be due to the fact that I wanted to work with Richard, after having met him at a meeting in the past. I was aware of Richard's experience and his personality, and I felt I could work well with him. Richard proved indeed to be the perfect partner on this journey – he was receptive to any requests made and had the autonomy and responsibility to carry the programme of work forward.

5   Conclusion

It might be described that a 'handful' of students got great benefits out of this support programme, however, as with the first year of running the programme, only a minority engaged with it in practice (RQ1). It is believed that aspects of this programme were not communicated effectively enough, and that all students were not able to hear what was being communicated. Students largely revealed that they did not participate because of the time overhead, however, the essence of this programme was to provide support in any way that the students might benefit

from. It is therefore from this perspective that the objective of the project was not communicated effectively enough.

Students are not particularly creative in the ways in which they wish to be supported and, as with the first running of the programme, preferred that I make recommendations in relation to the ways in which they be supported (RQ2). As with the first academic year, students got most benefit from the weekly group text-based chat session in Slack.

Given the fact that TMA results were generally the same for students who engaged and who did not engage, it is believed that there was greater success with encouraging weaker students in the programme (RQ3). When the programme was trialled in the previous academic year, the results of students who engaged were significantly higher than those who did not.

As a tutor, I got the benefits out of this programme that I hoped to get, that of greater familiarity with my students. The students who participated were also enthused by the level of support which they were receiving. I am not offering a similar level of support this year, and I must admit that I do miss it as part of my tutoring role. Partnering with Richard in peer-support was also a positive experience from my perspective, and I felt more of a community of teachers and learners at that time.

The other AL involved was ultimately glad when the increased support programme concluded (RQ4), due to the extra overhead which it involved. It is therefore recognised that the programme may not be equally attractive to tutors additional to CP, who initially established the programme idea.

the key teaching points which have been elicited as a consequence of the project are discussed.
1. Students do not hear until they are ready to hear.
2. Students get teaching & learning value out of 'lurking'.
3. Students value the diary method of support, although may need guidance with its completion and maintenance.
4. Students may have unrealistic expectations about how much they can be given.

6   Impact

While the strategies employed during the personalised support programme have not been rolled out more widely across the department, there has been personal impact from the perspective of the tutors involved. Working more closely with another module tutor on a weekly basis has really helped to reduce the distance between us and create a greater sense of community. This activity is a feature that I would be in favour of going forward in my work with TM354.

7   Deliverables

The deliverable for the project is this report.

The following publications are planned which build upon this work:

A paper which includes an examination of the role played by diaries in supporting learning, and ideas on how to support students completing diaries in a more effective way.

A paper which includes an examination of the message which is communicated through the use of emojis by a student.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Initial Survey to Inquire if Students are Interested in Joining the Personalised Support Programme

Do you wish to opt in to the Co-designed Student Support project?

Yes	36 (59%)
No	25 (41%)
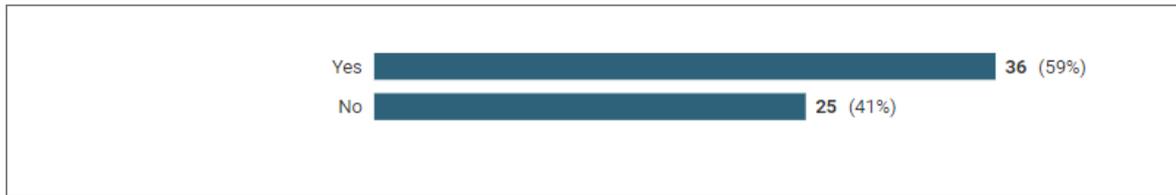
9.2 Survey Questions Asked when Students Indicated Participation in the Personalised Support Programme

Page 1: Getting to Know you - Opt In

1. What is your student ID?

2. What are you most proud of in your life (personal or professional)?

3. Do you consider yourself to be more practical than creative?

○ Agree

○ Disagree

4. Do you have any situations in your life which might affect your ability to study for TM354? If yes, how can I support you more suitably?

○ Yes

○ No

5. Has your experience of distance education lived up to your expectations, and in response to your answer to this question, why?

6. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

[text input box]

Page 2: Tutor Support

7. In your opinion, what makes a tutor approachable?

[text input box]

8. Is there anything you would like to know about me?

[text input box]

Page 3: Personalised Support

9. You have decided to participate in the co-designed and personalised student support. What is your main reason for opting in?

[text input box]

10. Do you have any ideas on how you would like to be supported? If your answer to this question is yes, what are they?

[text input box]

11. Would you like me to support you in the creation of a Personalised Development Plan (PDP)?

○ Yes

○ No

12. Would you like me to support you on an ad hoc basis using instant chat (Skype or Slack)?

○ Yes

○ No

13. Would you like to join in with a module Facebook group for students who are involved in this support programme?

○ Yes

○ No

14. Would you like to participate in paired peer learning with another student from the group?

○ Yes

○ No

15. Would you like to schedule our interactions on a set routine in advance?

○ Yes

○ No

16. Would you like to participate in a group chat at a scheduled day and time every week with me and other members of your TM354 group about TM354 business?

○ Yes

○ No

17. Would you like support with planning your day-to-day life, so that you are better able to manage your studies?

○ Yes

○ No

18. Would you like to participate in a group chat at a scheduled day and time every week with me and other members of your TM354 group about non-TM354 business?

○ Yes

○ No

19. Would you like to create a diary log and share it with me?

○ Yes

○ No

9.3 Survey Questions Asked when Students Indicated No Desire to Participate in the Personalised Support Programme

Page 1: Page 1
1. What is your student ID?

[   ]

Page 2: Getting to Know you
2. What are you most proud of in your life (personal or professional)?

[   ]

3. Do you consider yourself to be more practical than creative?

○ Agree

○ Disagree

4. Do you have any situations in your life which might affect your ability to study for TM354? If yes, how can I support you more suitably?

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5. Has your experience of distance education lived up to your expectations? In response to your answer to this question, why?

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6. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

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Page 3: Tutor Support

7. In your opinion, what makes a tutor approachable?

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│◄                               ►│
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8. Is there anything you would like to know about me?

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9. You have decided to not participate in the co-designed and personalised student support. Can I please ask your main reason for opting out?

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9.4   January 2020 Survey

What is your Student ID?

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How comfortable do you feel with TM354?

[text box]

Have any unexpected events affected your ability to study for TM354?

[text box]

With hindsight, would you have managed the first half of the module differently? How?

[text box]

Is there anything you would have liked me to have done differently during the first half of your TM354 experience?

[text box]

Are you currently participating in the personalised support project?

○ Yes

○ No

9.5 May 202 Survey

What is your student ID?

[text box]

Did you participate in the personalised support programme?

○ Yes

○ No

Yes

Did you have any doubts when signing up for the personalised support? If yes, what were they? If no, why not?

[text box]

If you used a diary to provide personalised support, why was the diary an effective option for you?

[text box]

What were the main benefits to you of the weekly group chat?

[text box]

Are there any other support techniques you would have liked to have tried in practice?

[text box]

As we come to the end of the module, how comfortable do you feel with TM354?

[text box]

What do you feel was the main benefit of the support programme to you?

[text box]

In your opinion, why might the majority of students not have engaged with the personalised support programme?

[text box]

When learning something new, it helps to:

○ Talk about it

○ Think about it

No

What was your reason for not engaging in the personalised support programme?

[text box]

In hindsight, was the decision to not opt in to the programme the best decision for you? In response to your answer, why?

[text box]

Did you have any doubts when opting out of the support programme? If yes, what were they?

[text box]

Did the fact of the support programme's existance have any impact on your module experience? i.e., did you feel reassured knowing that it was something you could opt in to at any stage? If yes, in what way?

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[text box]
```

As we come to the end of the module, how comfortable do you feel with TM354?

```
[text box]
```

When learning something new, it helps to:

○ Talk about it

○ Think about it

9.6 Appendix Interview with Richard Foley (December 2020)

Interview with Richard Foley
18 December 2020
by Cathryn Peoples

When running the personalised support programme as an individual AL, it is difficult to capture explicit costs, from the perspective of the time of running and supporting such a scheme. This is due to the fact of, as an example, assessing a quick question in an instant chat message which may not contribute a significant cost, however, it is overhead when considered in the overall scheme. Overhead in this situation may also be due to the need to find the answer to the student's query or to remember to respond at a time when one is more available. While, as the Project Lead, I am happy to do this, if such a scheme were to be rolled out in a more universal approach and to be applied by all ALs, it is important to have a feel for the cost overhead of this activity. This is one of the critical roles which Richard is providing.

An interview was held on 18 December 2020 with Richard, to capture his perspective on the programme at the end of Semester 1. One of the first things that Richard said during his interview was that as soon as he agreed to participate in the programme he regretted it. The idea, and possibly the novelty of the approach was attractive, however, the reality of the work involved in carrying it out was less appealing. Once exposed into the programme nonetheless, Richard's opinion changed and he acknowledged that it is not as much work as he thought it was going to be. He also confirmed that he is enjoying the experience.

In terms of the support which Richard is providing, he has one 1-to-1 chat at 2pm on Tuesdays for 10 minutes. The rest of the support that he is providing is through the group chat each Tuesday evening at 7pm for approximately 30 minutes. In his group chat, 4/5 students join the session. Richard enjoys these chats as someone in the group generally responds to a question, which he likes.

Richard's opinion is that because we have a different pedagogical approach, the students are more interactive. The practice that is generally used in OU tutorials today is that there can be a tendency for ALs to go through "lecture material" again during the session. Richard's opinion, however, in relation to what we should be doing during a tutorial is to issue a set of questions (in advance if possible) and to work through these. The tutorial approach of presenting "lecture material" again, however, has possibly become more prevalent than it should otherwise be.

During our conversation, Richard also reflected on the idea as to whether a teaching session which is more frequent and of a shorter duration is more effective. During our Tuesday evening sessions we are able to examine an individual aspect of the module material as opposed to, for example, 'everything to do with Block 2'. In a 'day' university, there are weekly tutorials. It might therefore be questioned that there are only 3 tutorials in a semester, as in the OU.

From participating in the conversation with Richard, it caused us to both reflect on our teaching approaches and strategies. Richard, for example, reflected that he might give the answers away too quickly. I, on the other hand, reflected on the sharing of teaching material. Richard had shared some of the material for the group chat session for me to use. He also shared his marking notes for TMA 01. I used the teaching material for one of the sessions, however, felt aware that this material was borrowed. I did not use Richard's marking notes for TMA 01, again from the reason of feeling slightly uncomfortable to do so.

One interesting finding from Richard's group is that the students who are participating most strongly in Richard's group chat did not attend the formal OU tutorial. This finding is in contrast to my experience, as the students attending the weekly sessions also attend the formal OU tutorials.

Both of us agreed during the conversation that there is a different feeling when marking the work of a student who we are supporting through the personalised support programme in comparison to one we are not. This is from the perspective that it is disappointing if they do not get the correct answers when there is more of a personal connection with them.

Richard described that this experience has made him think about things, such as the use of past students' work to support the teaching process. He said that he has found participation in the project quite beneficial and overall, he is happy that he is involved in the experiment.

9.7 Interview with Richard Foley

Interview with Richard Foley
7 July 2021
by Cathryn Peoples

On beginning the second interview with Richard on 7 July 2021, he drew my attention to a 1960's song, "*Glad it's over*". Richard enjoyed the experience throughout the academic year and got different experiences out of the process (as will be discussed shortly), however, he was glad that the additional support provision was drawing to an end.

One of the main aspects that Richard enjoyed was the fact of bringing the tutorial back to what he felt was the way that tutorials should be conducted. In tutorial sessions, it is common to find that an Associate Lecturer will present a series of slides, in a manner which is similar to a lecture. When tutorials are carried out at a brick university, there may be more variation between the concept of lectures and tutorials, with tutorials being a more practical examination of the subject material. This aspect has been somewhat lost through the online mode of operation in general. Through our provision of weekly group session, we followed the more traditional format instead. Richard's plan is to carry this forward in his tutorials in 21J, focusing on one or two specific questions during a session as opposed to trying to cover too many topics, touching on each only briefly as a consequence. This will be achieved through focusing on individual subjects and questions during the group chat. As a consequence of the programme of work in 20J, Richard now has his material prepared for future academic years. Through preparing in this way, Richard feels that he has really got to know the module material better, by examining individual aspects of the content closely throughout the year.

Richard and I shared our group session material in a centralised repository in OneDrive, however, we mostly used only our own material in practice. As Richard acknowledged during the interview, our teaching notes can be quite personal, in the sense that how one Associate Lecturer talks to students may be quite different to the way that another AL does. This left each of us in a position of preferring to mainly use our own material for group chats.

Richard indicated that he is quite unlikely to continue with the approach of communicating with students via Slack. From my perspective, I like the instant chat ability of Slack, and the fact that I can be notified of a short message through my phone. Richard, on the other hand, feels that email provides enough of an interactive chat for him – he is notified of an email arrival by his phone, and he replies as instantly as he can. He prefers to keep his communications consolidated in this way. Richard did, nonetheless, reveal a degree of satisfaction with being able to use Slack to carry out a chat session while he was away from home. On one particular day, Richard was cycling and he had a 10-minute instant chat session scheduled with a student. Instead of having to return to his desk, he was able to carry out the chat on his phone, which he found useful. However, in general, Richard admits that he is not a person for using new technologies.