

S217 telephone interviews with students on 2016J presentation – summary of main points

Background

At the very start of the 2016J presentation of S217 a survey entitled 'Studying S217 – your OU Physical Science Module' was sent to 317 of the students registered on the module. This survey was part of a project looking to improve relevant resources/support to students as they started their studies on level 2 on S217. The survey was open from 30 September – 27th October 2016 with 90 students responding. One of the questions asked whether the student would be prepared to take part in a telephone interview and 62 students (46 male, 16 female) were happy for us to contact them. Telephone interviews were carried out in early January 2017 with 34 students (22 men and 12 women) who were studying S217 16J at this time which represents ~10% of the students initially surveyed. At this stage students were preparing for TMA04 (an examinable component of the assessment) and so should have engaged with several TMAs and quizzes. Students were very happy to discuss their individual experiences of various aspects relating to their study of S217 (use of forums, studying online etc), their reason for studying S217, their preparedness and the types of support they access if struggling. The students were all very keen to share their experiences both on S217 and of the paths they had taken (academically/workwise/interest-wise) to bring them to this point. (Appendix 1 gives the proforma used by the interviewers as the basis for each discussion.)

The interviewers were 3 academic staff from the School of Physical Sciences (1 senior lecturer and 2 staff tutors) and an Associate Lecturer (Science). These discussions were a valuable exercise in that these were two way conversations between the Physical Science students and the School and were very informative for the academic staff. As the amount of face-to-face contact with students has decreased in recent years this gave an opportunity for students to 'talk' to us and could be an important feature in the building of academic communities. Many of these students did not post to forums and so this was an opportunity for them to discuss their studies in Physical Sciences (to give feedback and to ask questions) which they clearly appreciated.

Below are summarised some of the key comments and feedback from students relating to their studies on S217 - full transcripts of all the interviews are available.

Full time Students

8 students (all male) mentioned that they were studying full time (ie 120 points that academic year) and the details of which modules they are studying are given in the summaries below. Points raised that module/qualification teams may be interested in are:

- 1) BSc Nat Sci – Chemistry pathway - S217 + S215 – one comment was that the Physics certainly helped with the Chemistry. Another comment related to the choice of the Physics module as it was 60 points (cf Biology which would have involved doing two 30 point modules) so it was felt to be better to only be doing 2 modules overall.
- 2) BSc Nat Sci – Physics pathway S217 + SXPA288 + MST224 – Concerns about clashes of TMA cut off dates. In Dec 2 modules had a TMA cut- off date in the same week and in March there is a week with all three modules having a deadline. However positively this student also commented that from an understanding point of the view there are benefits as there are '*.....lots of things that I have covered in a different element of a different module ..*'. .
- 3) Q77 - MST210 + S217 – one comment was that the modules seem to run in parallel unlike MST124 and MST125 which are '*intertwined in each other*'.

The student said

'...what I tend to do is just to do one or two units and get one and be behind in the other and then get on top of that one, but it then means I am behind on the other, so it just trying to close the gap between the two,.....'

....they are quite different topics, so as soon as I start to get my head around one the switch over becomes a bit disorientating....'

Part Time students

Most students are of course studying part time and most seemed to be managing well and were happy to discuss their approach to study alongside family/work commitments and how they managed their time and planned their studies. Some students though do struggle with having to do 60 points and would prefer to be able to do 2 x 30 point modules. One such student had done S217 on the previous presentation – reached TMA04 and then deferred with assessment banking and had now returned to complete the module.

Students new to the OU

Credit Transfer – a student coming in at level 2 on the open degree really like the bridging material for MST224 and wondered if there could be something similar for S217 even *'if just told you what topics so you could brush up on those skills'* during the period between registration and module start.

S217 as a standalone module– the **lack of experimental experience** was mentioned by one student (with other qualifications) who was doing the module to get into teaching (on the recommendation from someone in a school)

'The Open University looking at the physics side it is very mainly theoretical what we see rather than the practical or applied side of things.maybe showing some kind of practical session even if they were like video of experiments done by certain teachers to show some sort of phenomenon etc so that could be the bit that I found the practical side is quite low.'

Components of Support for Students on S217

1) Tutorials

Students value both the face-to-face dayschools and the online tutorials. There were many positive comments about the dayschools in particular and students do also value the online tutorials and the recordings.

(A couple of students had not been aware of the tutorial support which is of concern.)

Several students were disappointed not to have more face to face support as they value the chance to meet tutors and other students as well as the opportunity to ask any questions. One student looked back to her experience on MST124

'with MST124 last year, I miss them. There was one every kind of five or six weeks and it was really nice to go and see... get your questions and I used to hang around and the end and I used to talk to my tutor about stuff and this year I felt...

obviously the pace of the course I find difficult and then I feel maybe a bit more alone...'

2) Forums

Many students look at these but very few said they posted. One student suggest they be made larger (commenting that he presumed there was one for each cluster) to increase activity whereas another said that he stayed 'clear of it ' as it may make you feel '*...well behind the curve sort of thing...'*

3) Tutors

As would be expected no questions were asked about individual tutors however it should be mentioned that many students did comment very positively on how responsive and supportive their tutors were when they asked for help if struggling with a difficult concept/problem.

Study Resources

Some students commented on their disappointment at the module being completely online however there were also some very positive comments about things that worked well online. A lot of useful discussion about how they study was recorded and here are just some of the main points/issues raised:

Looking for other resources beyond the online module material to support their studies– most students are Googling, going to YouTube or using other books to support their studies and in particular to help with problems as they work through the module.

Other Books – In discussion two students **were not aware of the list of recommended books** on the module website. Several students had bought the S207 books and several have bought other physics books often looking for more worked examples–

eg

- Halliday and Resnick – one student works more from this than the material on the website

' ...have kind of been using the core summaries and reading up on the sections from out of that, in the course book and then, if there is something, like I get stuck in a TMA I go and read that section off of the website...'

- a book entitled 'the University of Modern Maths ' (physics book with ~2,000 pages with lots of problems written out – so gives a different explanation for the student to work through so gives another way of phrasing the explanation of various problems)
- Other websites – most students are Googling and going to You Tube looking for answers to areas where they are struggling, for more worked examples or for other lectures– specific websites mentioned were physics.org , a HyperPhysics website, Khan Academy.

Difficulties referring back or making links within the module material –

'..I find it a bit of a disadvantage when I want to refer back to something because I can never find it..'

'it is hard to flick back and to see where you made a note to remember this bit or to see where you had arrows to show you this is relevant to this or something like that. This is what I am finding hard with the online thing is linking things together and going back. '

These students had resorted to printing out the material to help with finding things and to be able to add annotations (eg arrows making links) and their own notes. However, one of these students did also point out that

'...the best bit about it is that you can flick up another screen with a video on or what do I say, a moving graph or plotted graph all sorts of things like that, which is all good,...

One student who had previously studied S207 was very positive about the interactive nature of the online study on S217

'..I have to admit that in working through it there is a lot more in the course content that I get out of online that I couldn't have from a book, a lot of the interaction and things like that, so that I think has helped me understand it better this time. With the S207 I felt there were times I was reading the course material and not understanding it and having to move through just to keep up with the pace, but with S217 especially the online content a lot of the detail through the videos or through the interactions online my understanding has become a lot more cemented through that and now I am actually finding that compared to where I was previously I am a lot more comfortable. I look back on things I do in the TMAs and I think wow I am actually quite impressed with myself and my views on that. '

The request heard most often from students was please could they **have more questions and worked examples**.

Students were very positive about the quizzes finding them helpful –

'..I really like the quiz questions by the way I find they are really helpful questions, but I mean for the energy questions for example there are three quiz questions and I have done all three of them, that's all there is. For the momentum questions I could really do with 10 or 20 really easy ones before moving up ...'

One student commented that they had to be done as they are needed for the TMA.

Another student particularly liked the video questions

'Well, I do them first and then I watch the example if I am stuck and then as soon as they do the following step from where I am stuck then I stop the video and then I continue again and see how far I can get against the video...'

And would like to see more of these inserted to break up the text as sometimes there seems to be just pages of text to read.

Summary of Qualification Intentions of Students Interviewed

Qualification	Total students	Female	Male
Q77	8	1	7
BSc Nat Sci	14	5	9 *
Open	6	3	3 ⁺
Diploma in Physics	1	0	1 [°]
Certificate in Phys	2	2	0
Standalone	3	1	2

* of these 9 students - 2 were studying the Chemistry pathway and 1 the Earth Sciences pathway

⁺ one student although on the Open qualification was following the IOP accreditation route

[°] this student had originally been registered on Natural Sciences qualification and deferred on S207 14J – transitional fees implications meant that he was advised to transfer to the Diploma

Summary of Discussion of Ambitions/Career implications

Ambitions/Career Implications stated	All students	Female students	Male Students
Teaching/qualification in teaching	7	3	4
To obtain a degree in Science		-	1
Higher qualification		3	1 (in pharmacology for career change)
Work at a university		1	-
Scientific work/physics area		1	3
Help in current employment		-	1
None careerwise/professionally as studied for interest		-	9
None discussed	7	4	3

Summary of reasons stated for studying S217

Reasons stated for studying S217	Female students	Male students
Love of subject from an early age but changed to other areas of study or did not complete early studies*	4 ⁺	-
Pure interest	3	11
For physics knowledge for career/work related	4	4
As part of Q77	-	3
Started BSc Nat Sci and did well in Physics	1	-
To help with employment		2
Not discussed		2

* 3 of these students had started Maths and Physics A levels - 1 had been directed towards medicine, 1 had struggled with the Maths and changed subject area, 1 only completed 1st year (personal reasons)

1 student was not able to study A levels as she did not have Chemistry GCSE/O Level which was a requirement

Summary for Female students:

Of the 12 students interviewed 6 students have first degrees (Music, Geophysics, Geology, Psychology, Computer Engineering) and 1 student had completed the first year of a degree in Medicine.

Those students working (6 full time and 2 part time) tended to be in education settings (teachers or learning assistants) or some sort of administrative role – one was in a manager role.

4 students are currently caring for families

1 student is currently studying 120 points at level 2 – S217 , SXPA288 and MST224

Summary for Male students:

Of the 22 students interviewed one has a PhD in Chemistry and five have first degrees (Electronics, Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Statistics, Geology). Several students have studied at ONC,HND level often in engineering type areas.

13 students are working full time and 2 are working part time –varied types of work in many different sectors eg mechanics, engineering occupations, IT, police, actuary etc .

6 students are not in employment and 1 student is currently caring for family.

8 students are currently studying 120 points (some are working either full or part time and some are not in employment):

Q64 1 student - S217 + S209 (Earth Sciences Pathway)

 2 students -S217 +S215 (Chemistry Pathway)

Open Degree 1 student - S217 + SXPA288 + MST224 (but is looking to transfer to Q64 Physics and Astronomy pathway)

Q77 3 students - S217 + MST210

1 student is currently studying 90 points – S217 +MST125

2 students had deferred with Assessment Banking on S217

Appendix 1

Interview Proforma

*Thanks for agreeing to have this chat this morning and for completing the survey/questionnaire. Hope you have received the email with a little info about this interview and so are ok for us to use any information - will this be ok? , happy for us to record this? – we can then transcribe interviews from all taking part to make sure we make good use of all the information given to us is .
I will start the recording now.*

This is a chance for you to tell us a little about how you are finding things/some of your reasons for being on this qualification/module.

The four broad questions were:

1. Why are you studying S217? (*What brought you to this module*)
(*registered for ? Same as when they started?*)
(*Motivation for qualification/module*)
2. How do you feel your studies on S217 are going? (or perhaps 'how do you think S217 is going so far?')
(*Confidence – relate this to their survey response from beg of module?*)
(*Preparedness*)
3. A question relating to: when do you study? and How do you fit your study in around other things?
4. What have you done when you have faced problems?
(*Link to Q3 and try to explore any resources used eg tutor/forums/ etc*)
(*Try to avoid getting on to issues concerning Group tuition/online module etc*)

Thankyou (name) that has been really helpful.

Is there anything further you would like to add or anything you would like to tell me?

(Finally) Thankyou for doing this – we are doing quite a number of interviews over the next week or so and will be using the information to consider whether any further support/resources would help specific groups of students. It has been really interesting this morning to hear how your studies on S217 have been going.

Thankyou for time today.