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Maria Townsend, Emma Champion & Gwendoline Berndt

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Case report: supporting students with assessment by replicating open-door tutorials in online distance education – the student experience

Maria Townsend , Emma Champion and Gwendoline Berndt

School of Engineering and Innovation, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

Standard online tutorials at The Open University, based in the UK, are generally tutor-led with the tutor setting the agenda and content. This study investigated the inclusion of online student-led drop-in tutorials to support assessment on an OU level one module. The aims were to gauge the value to students of this style of tutorial, to understand their behaviour during the sessions and to assess their overall experience. Data were collected via two student surveys, confidence polls at the end of each tutorial and one student-led focus group. Other evidence used included attendance data and student achievement on the module. Twenty-three percent of the cohort attended at least one drop-in session. The students surveyed indicated that this style of tutorial was a valuable addition to the overall tuition strategy. The majority arrived at the start of each session and stayed until the end, rather than 'dropping in and out'. Most reported that listening to questions from other students was useful, even if they had no question of their own to ask. The overall findings were that students value this style of tutorial. Those who attended reported increased confidence in subsequently completing assignments. There were also some indications that attendees gained higher assessment scores.

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Introduction

The Open University (OU), based in the UK, is an open access distance learning institution offering undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. The majority of students are part-time, fitting study around employment and/or other commitments. Comprehensive distance learning materials are created by academic staff in module teams. Students on modules are supported by associate lecturers (also known as tutors) who provide regular synchronous online group tutorials in addition to individual help by email, video calls or phone. Although strongly encouraged, attendance at OU tutorials is not mandatory.

Standard OU online tutorials are tutor-led, in the sense that tutors decide the structure and content in advance. Frequently consisting of PowerPoint slides interspersed with activities such as quizzes and polls, they are intended to be

CONTACT Maria Townsend  maria.townsend@open.ac.uk  School of Engineering and Innovation, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6BJ, UK

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interactive (rather than a lecture) to enrich the print and online module teaching material produced by module teams. As Prosser and Trigwell (2014) have emphasised, 'teacher-focused information transmission teaching' is best avoided as it tends to lead to students adopting a surface approach to learning. Thus, the role of the OU tutor is to facilitate learning, i.e. acting as a 'guide on the side' rather than as 'the sage on the stage' (King, 1993). OU tutorials are usually organised in geographical groups, known as clusters, to limit the number of students who can attend a single event. Consequently, the same tutorial topic is repeated in different clusters.

Despite tutors' best efforts, it is often difficult to encourage students to participate in online activities, sometimes leading to a didactic, presentation-led approach, rather than a facilitative and student-centred one. Although students value these standard tutorials (Butler et al., 2018), the online environment can create barriers to active participation. The reluctance of students to contribute and interact in synchronous online tutorials was highlighted as long ago as 2012 (Kear et al., 2012) and, although progress has been made, this remains a challenge. Butler et al. (2018) proposed that inclusion of more variety of tutorial types might increase engagement. A possibility could be more widespread use of 'drop-in' tutorials.

Drop-in tutorials (sometimes termed open-door or walk-in tutorials) are often used in face-to-face higher education settings. When COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020 forced all teaching to be delivered online, a number of face-of-face institutions attempted to replicate the drop-in experience in an online setting (for example, Bickle et al., 2021; Mac an Bhaird et al., 2021). Although the OU had scheduled online drop-in events on some modules pre-pandemic (as an adjunct to standard tutorials), attendance had often been disappointing, perhaps because the purpose of such sessions had not been entirely clear to students.

In an investigation into the role of tutorials in distance learning (Campbell et al., 2019), a strong view held by STEM tutors was that students expected tutorials to help them prepare for assessments. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) also emphasised assessment as a major driving force behind student learning, which is particularly true in distance learning settings such as at the OU. Regular continuous assessments ensure that students stay motivated and pace their work according to a module study calendar. These assessments are known as tutor-marked assignments (TMAs).

Given the findings above, the objective of this study was to assess the efficacy of online drop-in tutorials that have the explicit purpose of supporting assessment. These were introduced on an OU level 1 introductory interdisciplinary module *Environment: journeys through a changing world* (module code U116). Typically, around two-thirds of U116 students are new to OU study, with the majority of the remaining third taking U116 as a second module within their qualification. In this case report these cohorts of students are referred to as 'new' or 'continuing' respectively.

The purpose of the drop-in tutorials, which were in addition to standard tutorials, was to provide students with the opportunity to ask questions about assessment tasks. Two surveys and a focus group were analysed to investigate student usage and experience. The overall aim was to gauge whether online drop-in tutorials specifically supporting assessment were valued by students in terms of increased confidence in tackling assignments and therefore an effective use of limited tuition hours.

Method

The project implemented, and evaluated, a change to the module's tuition provision by including online drop-in tutorials to support assessment for the 20/21 U116 student cohort. Tutorial details, consisting of a title and a description, were published online to students. Careful consideration was given to the wording to set student expectations that the drop-in tutorials would not be presentation-based, would not be recorded, and that students should come with questions for tutors. Care was also taken not to imply that direct answers to TMA questions would be given. The title for each tutorial was in the form: *TMAxx: Drop-in with your questions*. To avoid discouraging attendance at standard tutorials, the online drop-in tutorials were within the 10-day period prior to the TMA submission dates and were thus an opportunity to ask questions when students may have started preparing TMA answers.

U116 has seven TMAs and each student had the opportunity to attend one drop-in tutorial prior to each TMA submission date with the exception of TMA01 where they had two opportunities. With six clusters for tutorials, this meant that across the presentation there were 48 drop-in tutorials. At the end of each drop-in tutorial tutors ran a poll, analysed in Excel, asking students to indicate whether or not their confidence level had changed as a result of attending. Tutors also provided overall feedback to the project team after each drop-in session. This feedback is not considered in detail in this case report.

Students were surveyed (online) twice. The first survey was sent to a representative sample of 600 students in late November 2020 after TMA01 and TMA02 drop-in tutorials. This included all students who had attended a drop-in tutorial plus a random selection of non-attendees. For students who had not attended a drop-in tutorial the purpose was to establish their reason for non-attendance. The second survey was conducted in late May 2021, just after the end of the module. Only students who had attended at least one drop-in were invited to respond. Although 285 students were in this category, only 130 could be surveyed due to restrictions the university imposes on the frequency that a student can be surveyed in any one-year. Survey data were analysed in Excel. A direct comparison of individual student responses between the two surveys was not possible.

Students who had attended a drop-in tutorial and responded to the first survey were invited to take part in a one-hour student focus group held online in April 2021. To encourage open discussion, two experienced OU students who had not studied the module led this, using a set of five semi-structured open questions and prompts supplied by the project team. Students completed a form to provide informed consent via email. The focus group was recorded, transcribed and main themes identified but given the low student attendance, a detailed analysis was not undertaken. The themes were used as a means of corroborating or otherwise the results of the surveys.

The assessment performance of students who attended drop-in tutorials was compared with the average U116 overall module score and with the average score for the examinable component (TMA07). A direct comparison of the performance of students attending drop-in tutorials versus non-attendees was not undertaken.

The OU Human Research Ethics Committee viewed the project as low-risk, conforming to their conditions for exemption from formal review (HREC/3693).

Results

Survey responses overview

Of the 600 students invited to respond to the first survey, 105 students completed it (17% response rate). Eighty-six of the 105 were new to OU study. No differences in responses between new and continuing students were observed. Sixty-two students had attended at least one drop-in at this point in the module whereas 43 had not. Only students who attended at least one drop-in were invited to complete the second survey. The response rate was 19% (25 out of 130 students invited).

Focus group responses

Only three students volunteered to attend the focus group and thus, although the results were valuable, the low attendance meant this provided a limited view of student experience.

Drop-in tutorial attendance

The attendance data for both standard and drop-in tutorials (see [Table 1](#)) indicates that student attendances at drop-ins were about a quarter of those for standard tutorials. However, the average number of students attending each drop-in session was higher than that for the standard tutorials, i.e. 16 versus 12. Attendance at individual drop-ins ranged from five to 37.

Data from tutorial attendance registers show that 285 individual students attended a drop-in tutorial. On day fourteen of the module, there were 1,238 students registered. So, 23% of the students attended at least one drop-in tutorial. [Table 2](#) shows the number of drop-in tutorials attended by individual students.

Awareness that the tutorial would not be a standard tutorial

In both surveys, students were asked if they were aware that the drop-in tutorials would not be tutor-led ([Table 3](#)).

Table 1. Overall tutorial attendance U116 20/21.

	Number of student attendances	Average number of students per tutorial
Standard tutorial	3,236	12
Drop-in tutorial	783	16

Table 2. Number of drop-in tutorials attended.

Number of drop-ins attended	Number of students
1	109
2	55
3	34
4	25
5	16
6	23
7	20
8	3

Table 3. Awareness that the tutorial was not presentation-based, tutor-led.

Student response	First survey		Second survey	
	No. of students	Percentage of students	No. of students	Percentage of students
Yes	42	68	19	76
No	10	16	2	8
Not sure	10	16	4	16

Tutors also reported that students quickly came to understand the purpose of such tutorials, as these two tutor comments indicate:

I'm pleased to say that they did seem to come along knowing it was there to deal with their questions or uncertainties, not a tutor-led teaching session.

Students seemed well prepared to ask questions about things that concerned them.

Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (both surveys)

In the first survey, students who reported attending a drop-in tutorial were asked to select one reason for attending and were also given the option to select 'other' and provide a free-text response. For the second survey students could select any number of reasons for attending. This recognised that at the end of the module students may have attended more than one drop-in session and thus could have various reasons for attending.

As can be seen in [Figures 1 and 2](#) the most popular reasons, in descending order, in both surveys were:

- (1) To take advantage of the different tutorials available.
- (2) Had completed the TMA but had some final questions.
- (3) Had not started the TMA and had some questions.

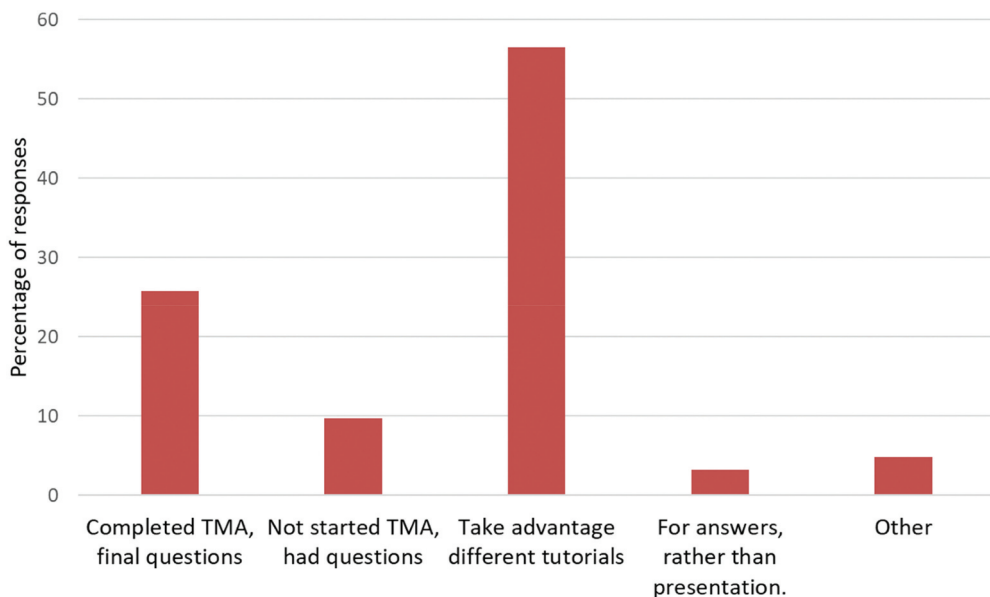


Figure 1. Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey).

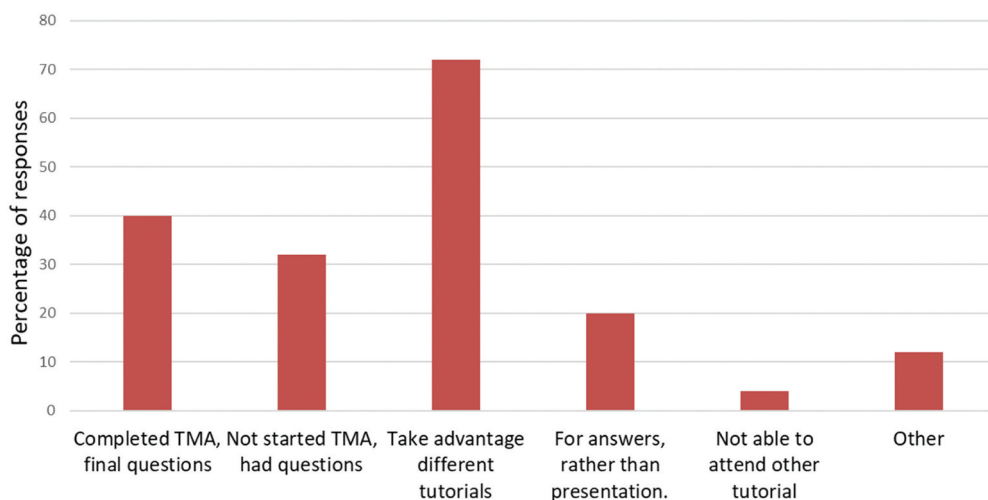


Figure 2. Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (second survey).

Reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey only)

Students who had not attended a drop-in tutorial were asked to select the main reason for this, including a free-text option for 'other' reasons. The most common reason (35% of responses) was that other (standard) tutorials had answered students' questions, followed by 'I had no questions about the TMA' (23% of responses). Only 7% indicated that their reason for non-attendance was due to lack of confidence. The results are shown in [Figure 3](#).

Help with and confidence in completing TMAs (both surveys)

Most students reported that the drop-in tutorials helped them to complete the TMAs. When asked to explain why, students mentioned:

- gaining confidence with work they had completed;
- being able to clarify questions;
- hearing questions from other students about points they had not considered;
- being reassured that other students had similar questions;
- gaining a different perspective.

There were three students who reported that the tutorials had not helped them, as shown in [Table 4](#). One had already completed the TMA, another reported connection issues so they were not able to ask their question and the final student appeared to have entered the online tutorial room when a drop-in tutorial was not in progress.

When asked whether attending drop-in tutorials had affected their confidence in completing the assignments, 94% and 96% (first and second survey respectively) indicated increased confidence. Only five students reported no change in confidence, and no students reported a decrease.

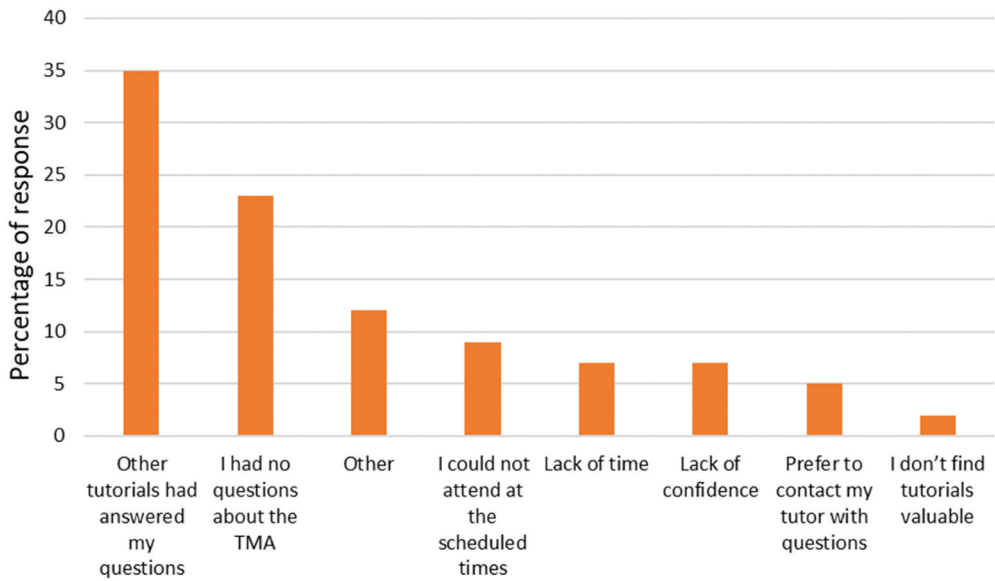


Figure 3. Reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial.

Table 4. Whether drop-in tutorials helped students to complete assignments.

Student response	First survey		Second survey	
	No. of students	Percentage of students	No. of students	Percentage of students
Yes	47	76	21	84
No	3	5	0	0
Not sure	12	19	4	16

Anonymous confidence polls were also held at the end of drop-in tutorials. The aggregated results from these are presented in Table 5, showing that 94% of the students indicated an increase in confidence, corroborating the survey results. Students who attended the focus group also reported increased confidence.

Effect of drop-in attendance on assessment performance

Students who attended drop-in tutorials achieved around three percentage points higher on both the average U116 overall module score, and average score for the examinable component (TMA07), compared to the average scores for the U116 20/21 cohort.

Table 5. Results of the confidence poll at the end of drop-in tutorials.

Student response	No. of students	Percentage of students
Much more confident	282	56
A little more confident	190	38
No change	26	5
Less confident	4	1

Student behaviour during drop-in tutorials

In both surveys, students were asked to indicate how they behaved during the drop-in sessions. The results are summarised in Table 6. As can be seen, students tended to remain in the online room for the whole tutorial after asking their question (rather than dropping in and out). Some students were also attending to listen to other students' questions even if they had no question of their own.

The student perspective: overall appreciation of drop-in tutorials

Table 7 shows that most students would attend drop-in tutorials in future, recommend them to other students, and found them a very helpful or helpful addition to the standard tutorials. Students at the focus group would also recommend drop-in tutorials to other students. These students went further, stating that drop-in tutorials should be available on every module.

In the survey students were also asked to describe their experience of attending drop-in tutorials. Most of the comments were positive, including multiple general comments on confidence, and how informative, reassuring, and helpful the tutorials had been.

Two students commented directly about the format of the drop-in tutorials:

Useful as the free structure was refreshing.

I thought it was useful and liked it being interactive, open and free to drop in/leave whenever.

Two students commented:

It was like a bonus session ...

Drop-in tutorials act as an emergency back-up to the standard tutorials.

One student at the focus group, who did not attend any standard tutorials but had been to every drop-in session, stated:

It is the best hour I spend each month since I have been with the OU.

Table 6. Student behaviour at drop-in tutorials (multiple responses accepted).

Student response	First survey Percentage of students	Second survey Percentage of students
Remained in the room after asking question	60	80
Asked a question then left the room	2	4
No question but attended to listen	29	52
Had a question but was not confident enough to ask it	6	20
Did not ask question as someone else had asked it	23	20
Had a question but there was not enough time to ask it	5	8

Table 7. Overall appreciation of drop-in tutorials.

Student reporting	First survey Percentage of students	Second survey Percentage of students
Drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutorials very helpful or helpful	90	88
Very likely or likely to attend drop-in tutorials in the future	90	84
Very likely or likely to recommend drop-in tutorials to other students	89	80

Two less positive comments related to the organisation of the tutorials:

I did ask one question but it took about 3/4 hour to reach the appropriate stage of the session to pose it which was a tad frustrating. I would probably not attend another drop-in, instead I'd email any questions to my tutor.

A little chaotic, though not the tutor's fault, but trying to respond to lots of typed questions is difficult.

Discussion

By far the most popular reason for attending drop-in sessions was to take advantage of the different tutorials available. A higher percentage of students had already completed their TMAs at the time of drop-in tutorials, than had not completed them. Interestingly, more students indicated they had not completed their TMA in the second survey than in the first. This could be a consequence of TMAs becoming more challenging and/or students increasingly finding less time for study in the latter months of the presentation.

Von Lindeiner-Stráský et al. (2022) have commented that distance learners have always had to study module materials selectively due to the volume of teaching material presented. Similarly, reduced time available for OU study due to busier student lifestyles was highlighted by tutors in Campbell et al. (2019). In the current study, a small percentage of students chose to attend a drop-in tutorial, rather than a standard one, because they simply wanted an answer to a question. Thus, the drop-in tutorials may be fulfilling an important role for some time-poor students who might view them as a more effective use of time than attending standard tutorials.

As [Figure 3](#) shows, the main reason for not attending a drop-in was that other tutorials had provided answers for students' questions (35%), followed by students not having any questions about the TMA (23%). As the drop-in tutorials were within the 10 days prior to the TMA submission date, and after most standard tutorials covering the subject matter, it is understandable that many students felt they had no further questions. However, there is evidence from the focus group that students appreciate this timing for drop-in tutorials. They all stated a preference to have their TMAs nearly completed before attending a drop-in and felt it was beneficial to have thought through their TMA answers in advance.

The lower overall attendance at drop-in sessions compared with standard tutorials might be expected as there were multiple opportunities to attend standard tutorials, compared to one drop-in session per TMA (or two for TMA01). Attendances might have been higher if there had been more opportunities to attend drop-in tutorials for each TMA so this will be reviewed for subsequent presentations of the module. However, the current data is still encouraging as students chose to take advantage of this different style of tutorial.

Although careful consideration was given to the wording in the tutorial timetable to set student expectations that drop-ins were not presentation-based, there was still a concern about whether students would fully appreciate this and come prepared to ask questions. This arose due to anecdotal evidence from other OU modules that both timing and lack of clear objectives for drop-in tutorials resulted in low attendance. It was encouraging therefore that both surveys indicated that most students felt they understood the type of tutorial they were attending, as shown in [Table 3](#). This supports the suggestion that communicating clear purpose is important, as mentioned by Bickle et al. (2021).

The original expectation had been that U116 online drop-in tutorials would be akin to conventional open-door sessions in face-to-face institutions where students visit a lecturer/tutor during a specific time period, ask their question and then leave when it has been answered. However, the tutors running the OU drop-in tutorials reported that most students arrived at the start and stayed until the end, even after having their question answered. One tutor reported:

Although we thought students might not stay for the whole of the time, almost all of them did.

Students also reported this in the surveys, as shown in [Table 6](#), indicating that most students were not dropping in and out but were adapting the idea for their own purposes. In contrast to a face-to-face situation, the more anonymous nature of online tutorials perhaps makes it much easier to remain after asking a question, or even to attend without having a question to ask. It has been suggested elsewhere (Gilbert et al., 2021) that less confident students find online support less intimidating than face-to-face. However, an alternative explanation could be that OU students view all online tutorials (of whatever type) as a normal component of the module and will therefore stay for the whole session.

There was clear evidence that students found listening to other answers helpful, with no students in the survey selecting 'unhelpful' and many students commenting that other students' questions covered points they had not considered. Students attending the focus group also reported staying for the whole tutorial to ensure they did not miss anything useful. There was just one student who stated they found the tutorials:

... a bit of a waste of time because I was listening to questions that did not concern me.

Tutors also reported evidence of students offering peer-to-peer support in the chat-box. For example:

This time – lots of self-help in chat – really friendly bunch – seem to be forming quite a community.

This peer-to-peer support and friendly atmosphere was also noted by the students attending the focus group. Enhanced peer-to-peer learning was also a consequence reported by Bickle et al. (2021).

As tutors reported that most students attended the whole tutorial, it might be expected that the survey responses from the students when asked if they remained in the room would be closer to 100% (see [Table 6](#)). However, the wording of the other statements, for example 'No question but attended to listen', did not include 'remaining in the room'. So, these students may have remained in the room but were not able to indicate it in the survey. This may explain the apparent anomaly in the data in [Table 6](#), particularly as 29% of students in the first survey and 52% of students in the second survey reported attending the tutorial but having no question.

In a review of student examination performance in STEM subjects when students were exposed to active learning interventions as opposed to traditional lecturing, Freeman et al. (2014) observed that average examination scores improved by about 6%. In the present investigation, students who attended drop-in tutorials achieved around three percentage points higher on both the average U116 overall module

score, and the average score for the examinable component, compared to the average scores for the whole U116 20/21 cohort. Although this could indicate a positive impact on student performance of attending drop-in tutorials, it cannot be stated with any certainty as such students may be more engaged with their studies, and hence more likely to achieve higher scores even without attending drop-in tutorials. A direct comparison of the performance of students attending drop-in tutorials versus non-attendees was not undertaken. In hindsight, this would have been valuable.

Another key finding, reported by tutors, was that most students preferred to use the chat-box to ask questions, rather than speaking. Many tutors experience similar behaviour in standard tutorials. Nonetheless, [Table 6](#) shows that a few students still lacked the confidence to ask their question (four responses in the first survey and five in the second). Even so, all but one of these nine students indicated that the tutorial had been helpful. The other stated that the questions asked were not relevant to them. Overall, it was encouraging that relatively few students who attended a drop-in tutorial did not feel confident enough to ask their questions.

As might be expected, some students reported that it was not necessary to ask their question because other students had already done so. The reassurance that other students had the same issues was an added benefit:

... built my confidence knowing that other people were experiencing the same problems.

Unfortunately, due to lack of time, there were a few instances where students were not able to ask their question (see [Table 6](#)). Again, it was encouraging that this was a relatively small number and that these students still had other avenues of support such as direct contact with their tutor.

There was concern that the student-led format of drop-in tutorials could be a barrier to attendance for less confident students particularly as Pinchbeck and Heaney (2017) noted that students studying with the OU for the first time ('new' students in this case report) often lack confidence, especially academically. However, although 82% of the students who responded to the first survey were new, only 7% indicated that their reason for not attending was due to lack of confidence. Although encouraging, this result still shows that a few students may be missing the benefits of tutorials. What is not known is whether this lack of confidence relates only to drop-in tutorials, where students are expected to ask questions, or more generally to attending any type of tutorial. For under-confident students, the availability of individual support from their own tutors is particularly important.

In summary, the key findings in relation to student behaviour during an online drop-in tutorial were:

- Most students arrived at the start and remained until the end;
- The majority used the chat-box to ask their questions;
- Some students had no question/s but attended to listen to the answers to other students' questions;
- All students found it helpful to some extent to hear answers to other students' questions.

However, there were a few students who indicated that they prefer standard tutorials, including one student who attended the focus group. This is to be expected, as in any student cohort there will be a variety of learning needs and preferences as reported Butler et al. (2018).

As a result of the overall positive responses from students and tutors, drop-in tutorials were incorporated into the U116 tuition strategy from the 21/22 cohort onwards. A '*U116 Drop-in Tutorials to Support Assessment: Guidance for ALs*' document on how best to facilitate drop-in tutorials was developed using feedback from the tutors who participated in the project. This was sent to all U116 tutors prior to the start of the 21/22 module presentation.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the present investigation demonstrate that while drop-in tutorials are not utilised by all U116 students, they provided very valuable support to a reasonably large proportion of the cohort. The students who attended reported an increase in confidence in completing TMAs, valued hearing other students' questions, appreciated the less structured nature of the tutorials and benefitted from peer support from fellow students. There is also some evidence that attendance at drop-in tutorials might improve performance of students on the module.

The overall recommendations from the project are therefore to:

- (1) Consider the incorporation of drop-in tutorials to support the assessment on other modules.
- (2) Ensure the purpose of any drop-in tutorial is clear to students and tutors in the tuition strategy.
- (3) Provide tutors with guidance for managing drop-in tutorials.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Maria Townsend is a Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in the School of Engineering and Innovation at The Open University whose academic interests encompass a range of different issues related to the environment and sustainability. She is also conducting scholarship associated with ecoanxiety and its impact on distance learners.

Emma Champion is a Lecturer and Staff Tutor in the School of Engineering and Innovation at The Open University. Her main research interests are related to student retention and professional development of academic staff.

Gwendoline Berndt is a retired Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor, formerly in the School of Engineering and Innovation at The Open University. She has extensive experience of STEM teaching and supporting learning in distance education.

ORCID

Maria Townsend  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-2637-8703>

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