Bridging the gap

Abstract

Graduate entrants to traditional law degree programmes can be unintentionally disadvantaged by their being granted exemption from Level 4 modules. Many lack the law-specific knowledge and skills that they would have gained from their first-year studies, making it more difficult for them to achieve mastery of higher-level modules. This factor poses inevitable risks to their retention and progression. The Open University Law School sought to bridge this gap for its graduate entrants by providing optional online "catch-up" materials, including 12 sessions of knowledge-based learning. Each session was followed by a brief Moodle poll so that we could ascertain that session's fitness for purpose, and which students had studied it. The sessions were highly rated by respondents, and most had been studied in the target time of around 15 minutes. Studying the sessions was statistically associated with academic success. This finding does not prove that the sessions contribute towards students' attaining higher grades, but it is encouraging. Only a small percentage of students studied any sessions, and most of those did not study all of them. Since the sessions met their intended purpose for those who studied them, the Law School has now decided on a range of initiatives designed to increase the number of LLB students who study most of them.

Introduction

This paper discusses the creation and evaluation of a set of optional online learning materials for graduate entrants to the LLB degree programme at The Open University (OU).

The first section describes a specific problem faced by graduate entrants, before outlining the solution that we adopted, and our methods for evaluating the success of that solution. A discussion of relevant learning design principles, including a summary of the results of a literature search, is followed by a brief explanation of how those principles were applied in the design of the materials. Outlines of the study's quantitative methods and data handling techniques precede a longer section presenting the findings of the brief online questionnaire that revealed students' generally positive opinions of the materials. This is followed by statistical analyses that explore the relationship between learners' study of the materials and the results of their first OU law modules. There is a correlation – but not necessarily causation – between a high level of engagement with the materials and academic success. The conclusion summarises the statistical findings, before outlining the steps that will be taken to try and encourage a much larger number of students to study more of the materials, in the hope of improving their chances of progression.

The materials apply established principles – technological accessibility, clear focus, simple structure, brevity, predominantly active learning, and challenging self-assessment questions – to the novel context of a "catch-up" resource. Our evaluation shows that, although they were created for a relatively small cohort of learners, the materials have the potential to be useful to a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate students. This paper is therefore another testament to both the effectiveness of active learning and the importance of good learning design.

Context and research questions

Most higher education providers recognise the prior learning of students who can provide evidence of having successfully studied at another institution. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, students receive transferable credits which exempt them from studying one or more modules of a qualification. When the prior learning is a completed degree, the OU permits students to join any degree programme at Level 5, omitting what would be the first year of study in a three- or four-year undergraduate degree programme at a conventional institution.

This practice acknowledges that graduates have transferable generic study skills up to Level 6, but it can significantly disadvantage students in traditionally structured law degrees. This is because law-specific skills – and the basic understanding of systems, principles and practices that would be gained from studying Level 4 modules – are essential for mastery of modules at Levels 5 and 6. This paper describes a project undertaken by the OU Law School to bridge this gap in knowledge and skills for its graduate entrants.

In October 2014, the Law School launched its new online Bachelor of Laws (LLB) programme with two 60-credit Level 1 modules: *An introduction to law* (W101) and *Law: concepts and perspectives* (W102).[1] For October 2015, the School created two 60-credit Level 2 modules: *Contract law and tort law* (W202) and *Public law and criminal law* (W203). At this point, the new LLB became available to graduate entrants, who would begin their studies with one or both of these Level 2 modules.

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[1] The OU refers to its modules as being at Levels 1, 2 and 3, corresponding respectively to QCF Levels 4, 5 and 6.

W202 and W203 had been designed to build on the skills and knowledge that students would have acquired during their studies of W101 and W102, so we needed to provide additional resources for use by those graduate entrants who had no law-specific skills or knowledge ("the target students"). We decided to place a range of materials, covering skills and knowledge separately, on an internal website that is accessible to all LLB students throughout their studies.

The skills materials were directly extracted from the Level 1 modules, modified only by the removal of cross-references to other units in those modules. The topics covered included "reading and understanding legislation", "answering problem questions" and "planning and carrying out a search using legal databases". This part of the website also included links to the OU's generic "Skills for OU study", which cover topics such as essay-writing and exam preparation. The skills materials are not discussed further in this paper because there is no way of obtaining information about which students used them.

Extensive literature searches yielded nothing of direct relevance to the creation of the knowledge-based materials: there was no evidence that any higher education institution had previously attempted to design or provide any subject-specific "catch-up" materials for graduate entrants. The purpose of our materials was, however, similar to that of the "courselets" developed by Stanford University, which covered a small number of concepts that were applicable to a range of science and engineering modules; these could "be accessed by students who need to acquire or review particular concepts or skills, who are interested in the cross-curricular applications of these, or who want to extend their learning for whatever reason".[2] Stanford had placed these materials online, and they were described as an example

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[2] K. Swan, "A constructivist model for thinking about learning online", in J. Bourne and J.C. Moore (eds), *Elements of Quality Online Education: Engaging Communities* (Needham MA, Sloan Consortium, 2005) 13–30 at 21, 20.

of "well-structured, knowledge-centred materials and activities", reinforcing our view that, as all the modules in the LLB are taught predominantly online, we should use Moodle as the delivery method for our materials.

The Level 1 modules comprised 1,200 notional hours of learning, so it was necessary to identify the most important concepts and concentrate exclusively on those when creating materials for approximately 200 minutes of study. The brevity of the materials would, so far as we could ascertain, be unprecedented, and we would draw on the OU's expertise in active online learning to ensure that we made optimal use of the short time available to the students.

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Working from these rather sparse principles, I designed and wrote 12 self-contained "sessions" of online learning in essential Level 1 topics. Their principal aim was to enable the target students to study their Level 2 modules more effectively, thereby increasing the students' chances of progression.

Each session was followed by a brief Moodle poll so that we could ascertain that session's fitness for purpose, and which students had studied it. The results of the polls were collated with the 2015/16 module results for W202 and W203, which enabled us to investigate whether the target students' study of the sessions was associated with improved Level 2 module results.

Learning design and literature review

The learning design process involved overcoming a number of challenges. The most significant of these was that no time was allocated within W202 or W203 for studying the sessions, so they had to be optional. In an effort to maximise the number of students who worked through the sessions, they were kept very brief: the aim was an average of 15–17½ minutes per session.

The target students had no prior subject knowledge, so the sessions were written in the simplest language possible, and all legal terms were fully explained. The content of each session consisted exclusively of the key points of the relevant topic as taught in the Level 1 modules, and these points were carefully selected and summarised.

In order that students might derive maximum benefit from such short sessions, I used the classifications of learning activity identified in the Pedagogy Profile associated with the JISC-sponsored OU Learning Design Initiative.[3] Around two-thirds of the time spent on each session was intended to be active learning, which is widely recognised as being more effective than passive learning.[4] This meant that there were approximately five minutes per session for assimilative activities.

As no colleagues were aware of any evidence-based data about students' preferences regarding the presentation of materials for assimilative learning, and I had no time to research this question before drafting the materials, I provided a mixture. Six of the sessions included a tightly-scripted question-and-answer podcast of about 700 words, and six included about 400 written words. Each session's assimilative activity was followed by a Moodle quiz that involved interactive activities or finding (by re-visiting the assimilative material) and handling information. The Moodle poll included a question about whether students preferred audio or written assimilative material, so as to inform future learning design.

It was important to maximise the number of students who studied the sessions, and the extent to which they fully engaged with them. In one meta-analysis of 93 studies, "enriching" and

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[3] S. Cross, R. Galley, A. Brasher and M. Weller, *Final Project Report of the OULDI-JISC Project: Practice, Challenge and Change in Curriculum Design Process, Communities, Visualisation and Practice* (Milton Keynes, The Open University, 2012).

[4] S. Clarke, *Active Learning through Formative Assessment* (London, Hodder Education, 2008), 11.

"challenging" materials were found to increase students' engagement in higher education.[5] Much of the interactive material therefore consisted of hypothetical problem scenarios; these challenged students to think about the law that they had learned, and to use their reasoning and logic when applying that law to life-like situations.

We recognised that students might use the sessions as revision aids, so it was important that they were suitable for this purpose. Materials that have a strong focus on essential knowledge and a clear structure, and that do not include unnecessary details, have been found to constitute a more effective source for fact-learning than do full-length texts.[6] The sessions' brevity necessitated their consisting almost exclusively of key points, and it was hoped that this would make them an effective aid to revision.

We wanted study of the sessions to improve students' module results, and this seemed likely to be achieved by the sessions' ratio of assimilative to interactive content; materials with a high reliance on assimilative content are negatively associated with learning performance.[7] It was not possible directly to assess students' understanding of the sessions, but one way of investigating whether the sessions appeared to have met their primary purpose would be to correlate the number of sessions that the target students had studied with their module results for W202 and W203.

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[5] N. Zepke and L. Leach, "Improving student engagement Ten proposals for action" (2010) 11(3) *Active Learning in Higher Education* 167–177.

[6] L.M. Reder and J.R. Anderson, "A Comparison of Texts and Their Summaries: Memorial Consequences" (1980) 19 *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* 121–134.

[7] B. Rienties, L. Toetenel and A. Bryan, "'Scaling up' learning design: impact of learning design activities on LMS behavior and performance", in *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Learning Analytics Knowledge, Poughkeepsie, New York, USA, 16–20 March 2015* (New York, ACM, 2015) 315–319.

It is widely acknowledged that students' use of self-regulated learning strategies, such as proactively seeking and mastering essential information, is closely linked with higher levels of academic attainment.[8] Accessing and studying any session required students to be proactive, and the completion of the activities in each session was designed to ensure some mastery of the material that it contained. This led to the hypotheses that there would be a positive correlation between the number of sessions that the target students had studied and their module results, and that the students who had studied most sessions would obtain the best mean and median module results.

Design of the sessions

The titles of the sessions, and the order in which they were presented to students, were as follows:

(1) What is law?

(2) Classifying the law

(3) The UK constitution

(4) UK statutes

(5) UK secondary legislation

(6) Statutory interpretation

(7) The civil and criminal courts

(8) Common law

(9) European Union law

(10) Human rights

(11) When sources of law conflict

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[8] B.J. Zimmerman, "Self-Regulated Learning and Academic Achievement: An Overview" (1990) 25(1) *Educational Psychologist* 3–17, at p.14.

(12) Devolution.

In order to avoid alarming the target students by selectively emailing them to suggest that they needed to do additional preliminary work, we mentioned the materials early in the W202 and W203 Module Guides, as follows:

> The law undergraduate qualifications website includes some resources that will be especially useful if you have not studied law at Level 1, and which may also be useful reminders if you have studied W101 or W102.
>
> In the "Subject and faculty" section of the law undergraduate qualifications website we have provided 12 sessions of learning under the heading "Fundamentals of law". These materials consist of six five-minute podcasts and six short pieces of text, each followed by some interactive questions so that you can check your understanding of what you have read. Your W20*[x]* materials will suggest that you work through one or more sessions if their content is an essential prerequisite to an activity or TMA[9]. If you are new to the study of law – and if time permits – you may wish to work through all the sessions in order to give yourself a good grounding in basic subject knowledge. We estimate that this would take you around 3–3½ hours.

The module websites for, and early units in, W202 and W203 included session-specific prompts such that, by the end of Unit 4 in each module, the target students had been prompted to study every session.

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[9] "TMA" denotes "tutor-marked assignment", which is the main form of summative assessment on the Level 2 modules.

The Moodle poll

Each session of learning was followed by a Moodle poll consisting of five simple multiple-choice questions. One question had five options; the other four had three options. The questions asked:

- how long the session had taken the student;

- how useful the student had found the session;

- whether the student preferred podcasts or written materials;

- whether the student had previously studied academic law; and

- the student's main reason for working through the session.

The poll, whose content is reproduced in the Appendix, was identical on all the sessions because we were interested in this information relating to every student who studied any session, and we anticipated that many students would not study more than one or two sessions.

The remainder of this paper describes the poll responses provided by students between September 2015 and July 2016, covering the whole of the first presentations of W202 and W203, the second presentation of W102, and the whole of one, and half of another, presentation of W101. No students from any other modules had access to the sessions, as we did not launch our Level 3 LLB modules until October 2016.

Collating, cleaning and analysing the data

The responses to each of the 12 Moodle polls were exported to IBM SPSS Statistics 21. A code number for each session was immediately added to each row of data.

Unnecessary information – including respondents' names, which had been recorded automatically within Moodle – was removed. Numeric student identifiers were retained so that it was possible to ascertain which respondent had supplied which row(s) of data, and to

match the poll data with individual students' module results. Level 2 module results for all

students were merged with the poll responses. The merged dataset was filtered to remove the

entries for students who had withdrawn, postponed or not started W202 or W203, and for

students who had studied no sessions.

All responses inserted by the software developer and me during the development phase were

deleted.

To avoid skewing the overall responses to Questions 3, 4 and 5, only one response to each of

these questions was retained for each respondent, and the others were given the null value of

999. Two respondents had given different answers to one or more of these questions; in each

case, the response that they had given most frequently was taken as their most reliable

response. Individual responses to Questions 1, 4 and 5 were used to analyse correlations with

the stated usefulness of each session.

In the 23 instances where a respondent had completed more than one poll for the same

session, the respondent's first set of responses was retained.

After the data were cleaned, there were responses for 1,013 sessions of study, contributed by

240 respondents.

When necessary, various subsets of the Moodle poll data were copied from SPSS into

Microsoft Excel 2013, so that tasks such as counting and investigator-instigated calculations

could be conducted.

Results and discussion

Question 1: Please indicate the total time that it took you to work through this session
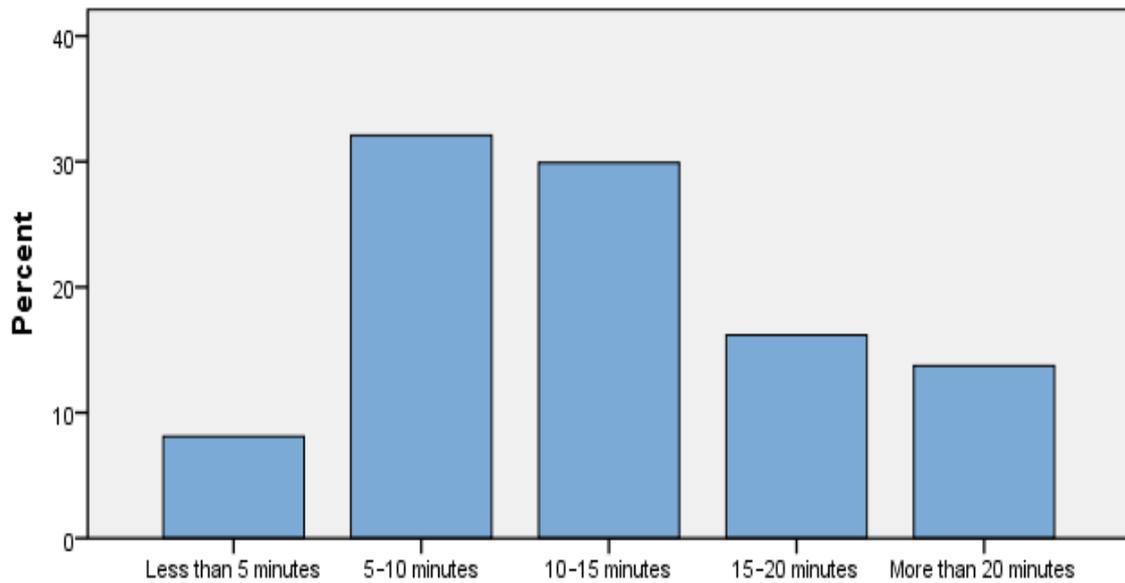

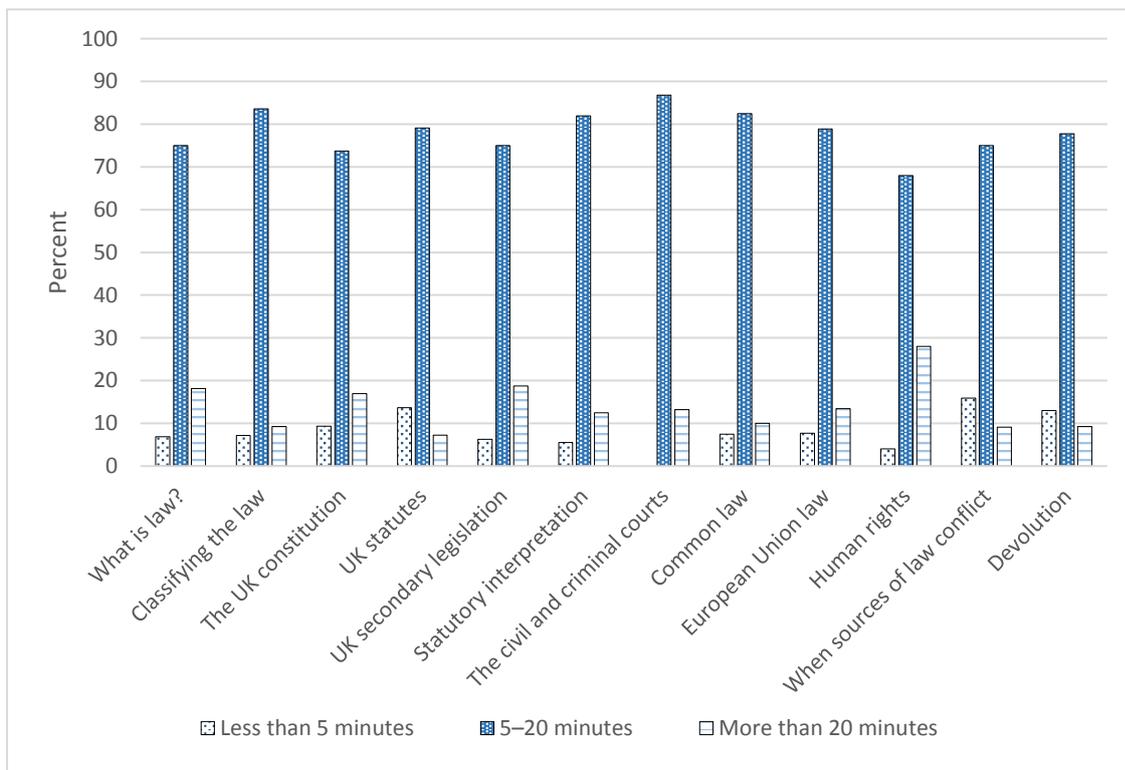Figure 1. Time taken to complete sessions (all sessions)

Figure 2. Time taken to complete each session

Figure 1 shows that 78.1% of all the sessions were completed in between 5 and 20 minutes, indicating that, in a significant majority of cases, respondents had spent no more than the estimated maximum time on a session. Figure 2, in which the dark middle bar combines responses for the three short time spans that we hoped the sessions would take, shows that at least 75% of participants took between 5 and 20 minutes to complete all the sessions except "The UK constitution" (73.7%) and "Human rights" (68.0%). 28% of participants took more than 20 minutes to complete "Human rights", making it the only session for which more than 20% of respondents took this amount of time.

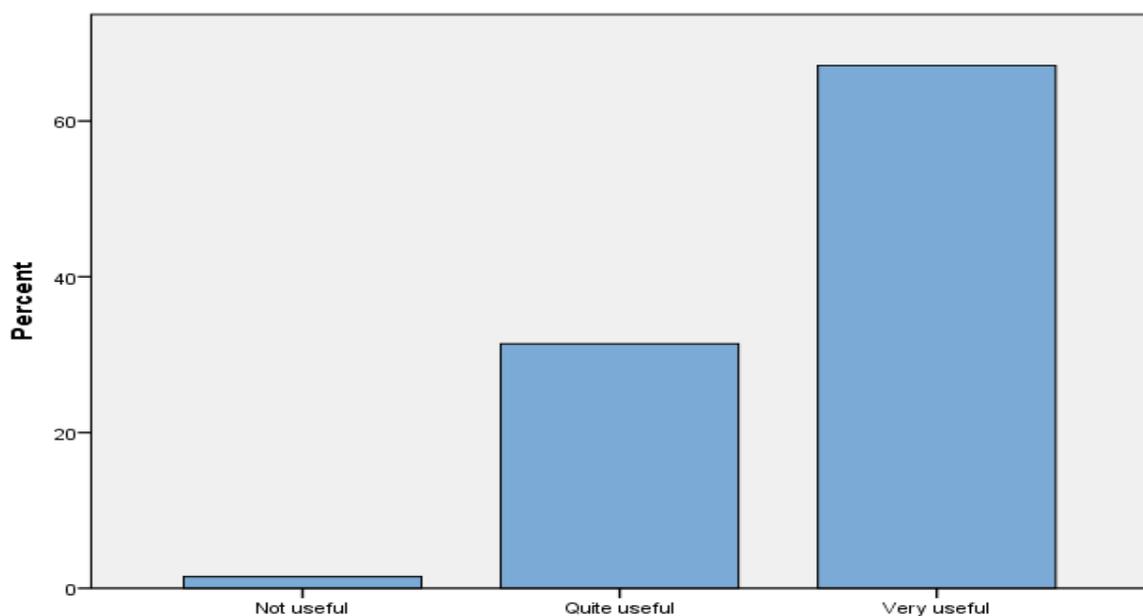*Question 2: Please indicate how useful you found the content of this session*

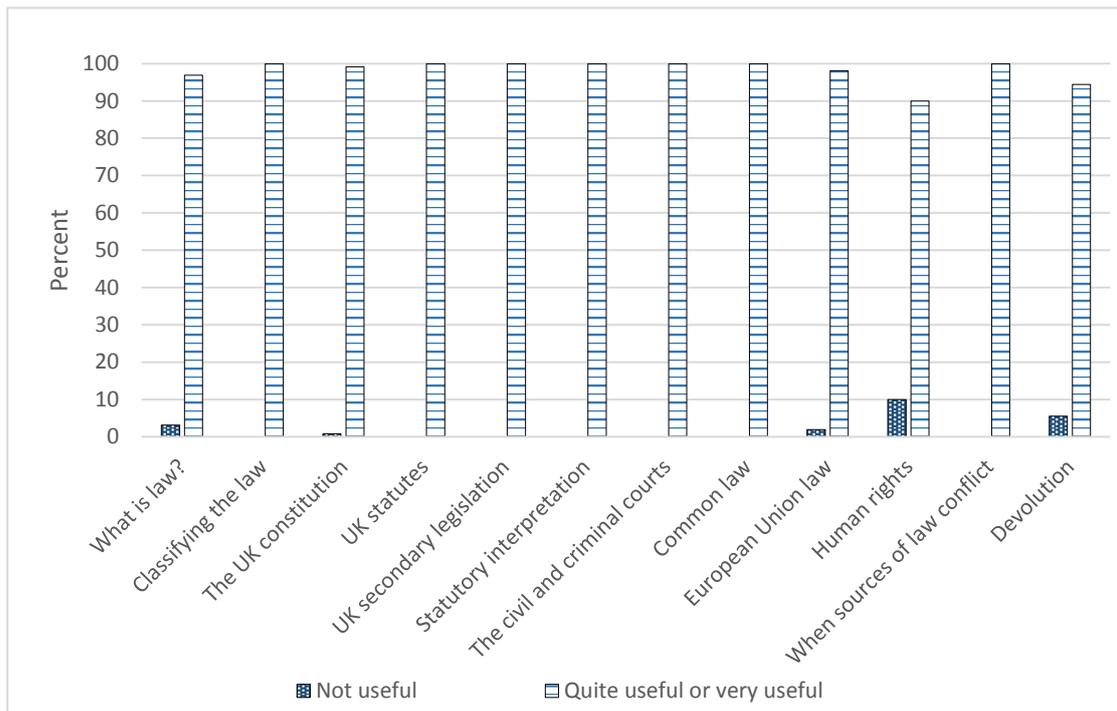Figure 3. Usefulness of sessions (all sessions)

Figure 4. Usefulness of each session

Figure 3 shows that 98.5% of all the sessions were regarded as "quite useful" or "very useful". From Figure 4, which combines the "Quite useful" and "Very useful" for each individual session, it is apparent that at least 96.9% of participants regarded every session except "Human rights" (90.0%) and "Devolution" (94.4%) as useful.

As "Human rights" took, on average, the longest time to study, and was regarded as the least useful session, it seemed that it needed some revision.

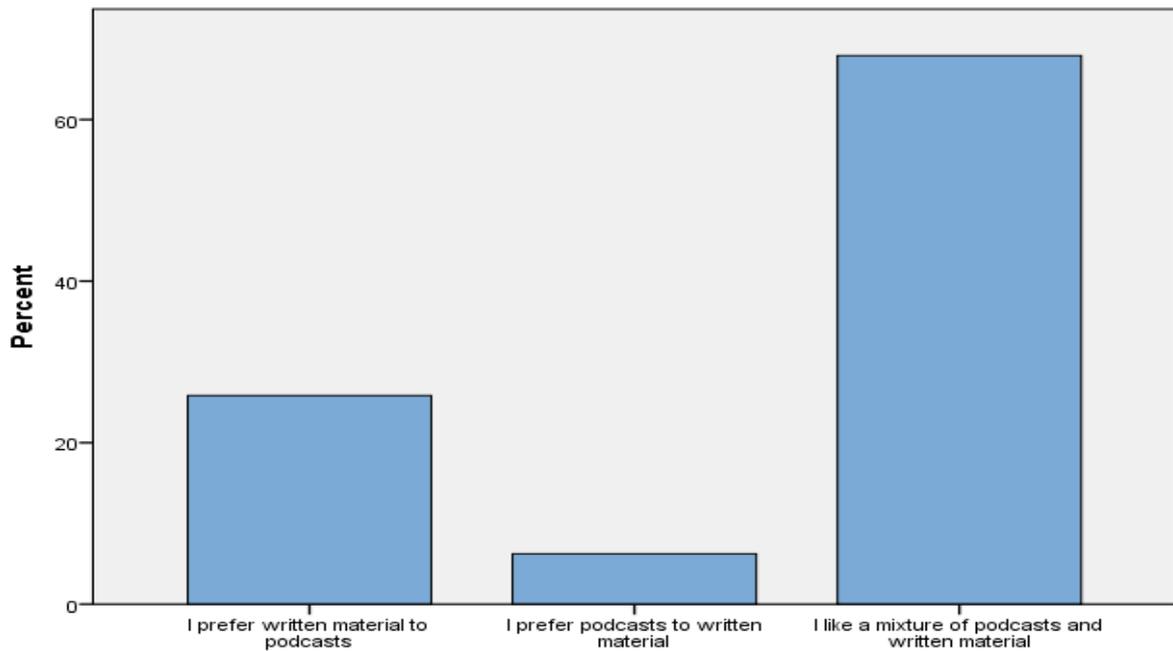*Question 3: Please indicate your opinion of the format of this session*
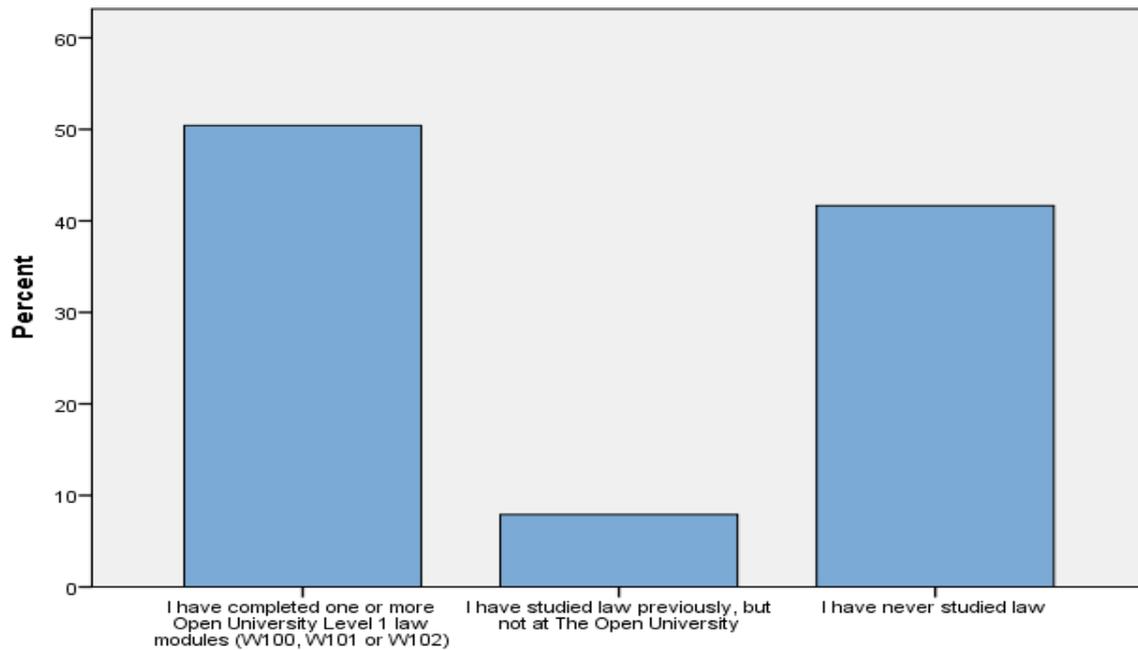

Figure 5. Preferred format for presentation of materials

Figure 5 shows that 67.9% of respondents prefer teaching material to be presented in a mix of printed and audio formats. Of those who expressed a preference for one format over another, 80% preferred printed material.

Question 4: Please indicate which of the following best describes your situation

Note: W100 was the only Level 1 module in the OU's previous LLB programme, which was run in association with the University of Law, and is now in teach-out

Figure 6. Respondents' prior learning in law

Figure 6 shows that 58.3% of respondents had previously studied law, either at the OU or elsewhere, indicating that more students used for revision than for the acquisition of new knowledge.

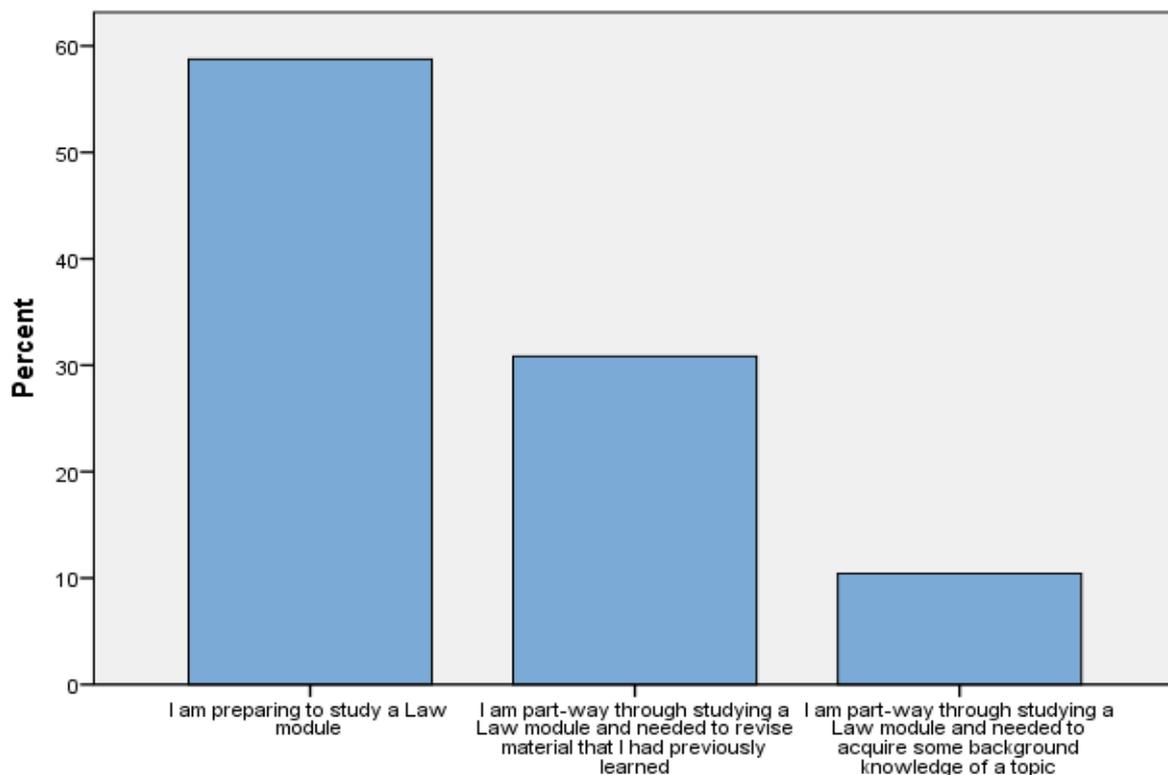*Question 5: Please indicate your reason for working through this session*

Figure 7. Respondents' main reason for studying the session

Figure 7 shows that 59% of respondents studied the sessions as part of their preparation for

study, as recommended in the W202 and W203 Module Guides, on the weekly study

planners, and in the units. 75% of the respondents who studied the sessions after their

modules had begun used the sessions for revision, rather than for the acquisition of new

knowledge. This indicates that most students who had no prior learning in law had followed

the advice to study the sessions before their Level 2 modules began.

A more surprising finding is that the sessions were used by so many students who needed to

revise their knowledge of a topic. The sessions were not specifically signposted in the Level 1

Module Guides, though students were advised, on both the Level 1 modules' websites and by

both Module Guides, to explore the law undergraduate qualifications website. At least some

Level 1 tutors were unaware of the sessions: a tutor made a post in an online forum stating

that a student had asked her about the sessions, which constitute "a series of what appear to be mini iCMAs on various law topics", and said that the student had described them as "great and really interesting".[10] The tutor had been unable to find the sessions, and her post concluded: "Does anyone know what my student is talking about?". Two other tutors replied that they had no knowledge of the sessions, and one tutor said that she was aware of the sessions as "covering the very basics of the English legal system" because she also teaches on W202, but she had not encountered them in relation to her W101 teaching. These comments indicate a need to make Level 1 tutors aware of the sessions so that they can direct students to them whenever appropriate.[11]

Number of sessions studied

Figures 8 and 9 show the results of analyses carried out in Excel to ascertain the numbers of students who had studied the sessions.

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[10] "iCMA" means interactive computer-marked assignment.

[11] Tutors are engaged as part-time Associate Lecturers, with one contract for each module on which they teach. There are more than 100 tutors for *An introduction to law* (W101), and around 20 students in each tutor group. Tutors are home-based, with no responsibilities beyond their own modules, so care needs to be taken to ensure that they are made aware of all developments and materials that are likely to affect their students.
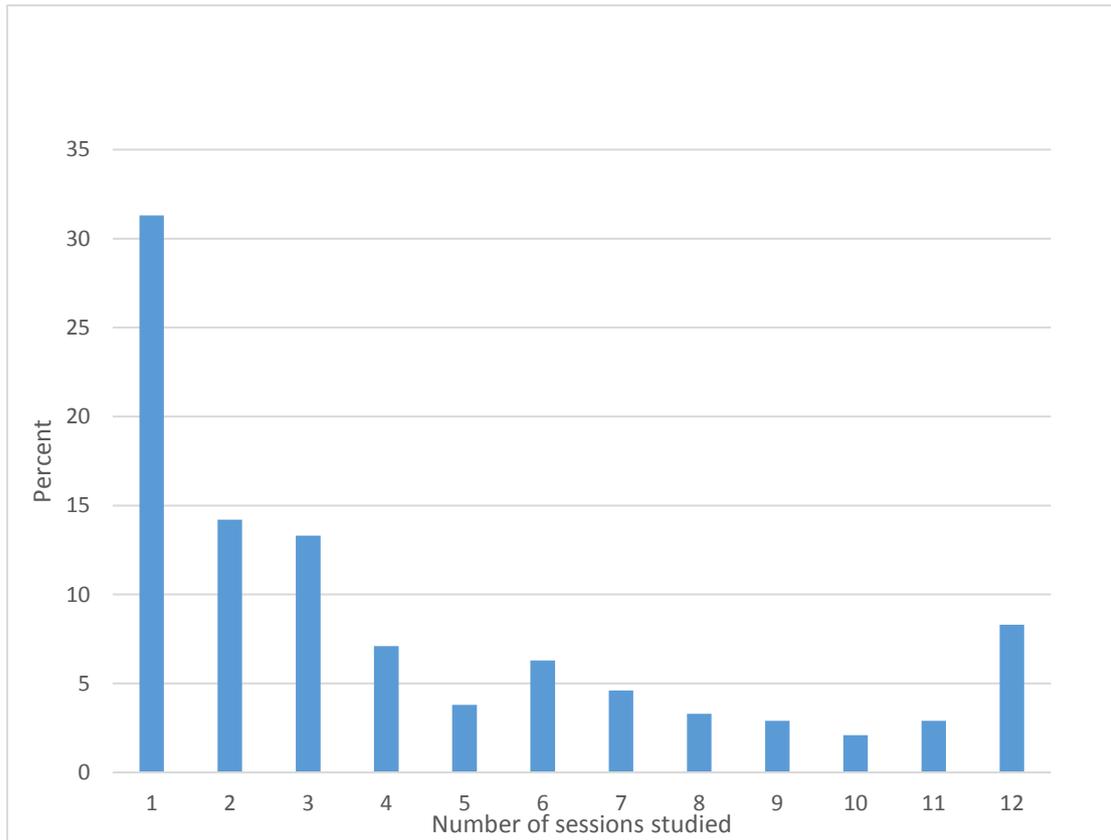
Figure 8. Number of sessions studied by respondents

Figure 8 shows that almost a third of respondents had studied only one session, and almost 59% had studied one, two or three sessions. The fourth most popular number of sessions studied was 12 – over 8% of respondents studied every session – suggesting the existence of a small set of diligent students who wished to gain as much knowledge as they could. It is impossible to be certain of the reasons why almost a third of respondents studied only one session. Responses indicate that the first session was regarded as useful by 96.9% of students, so it seems likely that other factors – possibly including the rapid increase in weekly workload after a module has started – were influential. It is understandable that, if assessed "compulsory" work is taking a lot of time, students will be less inclined to spend time on optional activities to acquire background knowledge that is not directly summatively assessed.
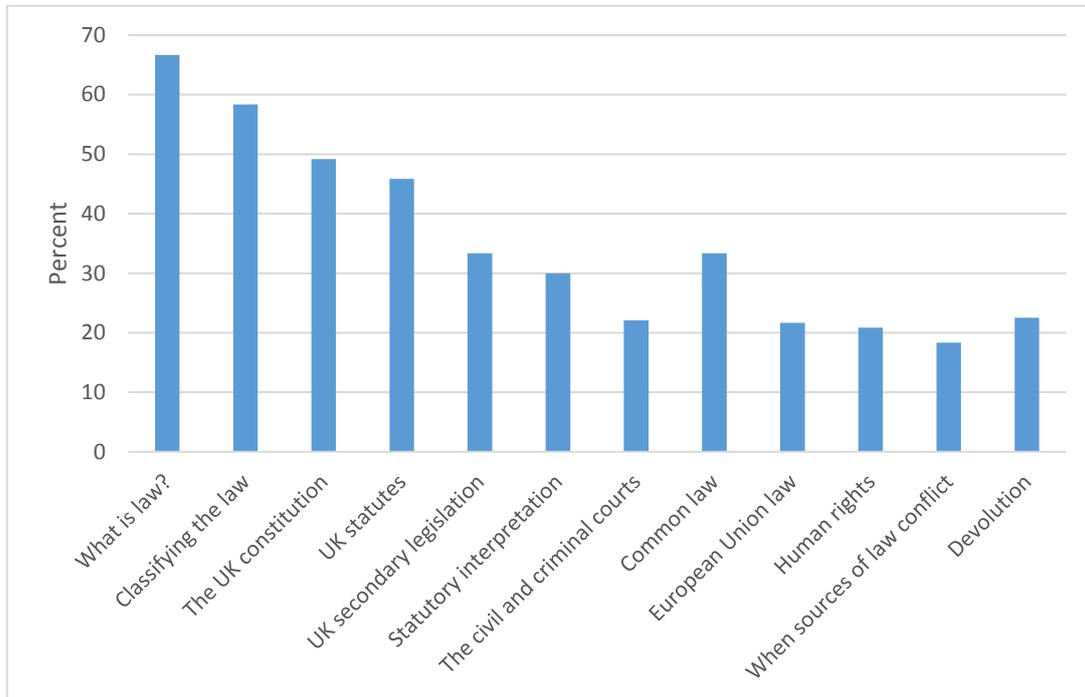
Figure 9. Percentage of respondents who studied each session

In Figure 9, the percentages of respondents who studied each session do not sum to 100 because 68.7% of respondents studied more than one session. The percentages for each session are expressed as a percentage of the 240 students who completed one or more of the Moodle polls; an unknown number of students may have studied one or more of the sessions without completing any Moodle polls.

The order in which the sessions were signposted on the W202 and W203 weekly study planners, and in the units, was broadly similar to the sequence in which they are presented above. Figure 9 shows that there was a general trend for more students to study the earlier sessions, and fewer students to study the later sessions. An exception to this trend was "Common law", which was presented as the eighth session in the list of 12; this session was studied by one-third of respondents, which was more than either "UK secondary legislation" or "Statutory interpretation". "Common law" was signposted in Week 3 of W202 and Week 1

of W203, whereas "Statutory interpretation" was signposted in Weeks 2 and 1 respectively, and "UK secondary legislation" was signposted in Weeks 2 and 4. This suggests that the order in which the sessions were signposted on the Level 2 module websites did not directly affect the number of students who studied each session. It may be that a greater number of the target students studied "Common law" because they realised that the legal system of England and Wales is a common law one, but did not know what the term means.

There is no evidence that the decline in student numbers on the later sessions is disillusionment, since these are rated, in general, as highly as the earlier ones. It seems reasonable to suppose that, as students progressed through W202 and W203, their confidence in dealing with basic legal concepts increased, and – perhaps crucially – the time that they had available to study optional materials decreased.

Factors potentially affecting respondent's opinion of sessions

Pearson correlation analyses were carried out to determine whether there were associations between how useful respondents found the sessions and other factors identified from answers to the Moodle poll.

Table 1. Correlation between respondents' perception of a session's usefulness and other factors

Other factor	r	*p*
Time spent studying the session	0.109	0.01
Whether respondent had previously studied law	0.094	0.01
Respondent's current stage of study	−0.063	0.05

Table 1 shows that there were no significant correlations between how useful respondents found a session and the time they had spent on a session, whether they had previously studied

law, or their current stage of study. This is unsurprising, given that almost all respondents found almost all the sessions useful.

Correlating study of sessions with module results

In order to focus only on the target students' module results, the merged dataset including Level 2 module results was filtered to remove respondents who stated that they had previously studied law. This left 48 students for W202, and 12 students for W203.

The OU's results classification system – in which a lower number indicates a better result – is shown in Table 2. The same table shows the coding used to indicate how many sessions each respondent had studied. These coding systems mean that the hypothesis that studying a higher number of sessions would positively correlate with the target students' success on a module would be accepted if there were a statistically negative correlation between the number of sessions studied and module results.

Table 2. Codings for numbers of sessions studied and module results

Number of sessions studied		Module result		
Number of sessions	Code	OU result	OU code	Probable equivalent grade elsewhere
1–3	1	Distinction	1	1
4–6	2	Pass Grade 2	2	2:1
7–9	3	Pass Grade 3	3	2:2
10–12	4	Pass Grade 4	4	3
		Fail: resit	5	Fail(?)
		Fail: no resit	6	Fail(?)

Pearson correlation analyses were carried out to explore this relationship.

Table 3. Correlation between number of sessions studied and respondents' module results

	W202	W203
Number of respondents with module result and no prior study of law	48	12
p-value (two-tailed significance)	0.001	0.278
Correlation	–0.479	–0.341

For both W202 and W203, Table 3 indicates a moderate correlation between the number of sessions studied by respondents with no prior learning in law and module results. This may mean that the background knowledge provided by the sessions enabled the target students to understand and retain Level 2 material better, but correlation does not prove causation; it may simply be that the students who chose to complete higher numbers of sessions are inherently those who are more able, work harder, or have more time for their studies. Another possible explanation is that the target students who were least confident of their ability chose to study more sessions, and then outperformed their more confident colleagues.

The numbers of students who completed one or more Moodle polls comprised only 8.5% of the 566 students who completed W202, and 6% of the 199 students who completed W203. The p-value shown in the second row of Table 3 takes the small sample sizes, of 48 and 12 respectively – though not the percentages of students that they represent – into account. The

p-values of 0.001 and 0.278 mean that the chances that the correlations are coincidences is 1 in 1,000 for W202, and 1 in 3.6 for W203.

The mean and median results were calculated for students who had completed W202 and had studied various numbers of sessions. Results for the target students, and for respondents who had previously studied some law, are shown in Table 4. As explained above, lower numbers indicate better results.

Table 4. Number of sessions studied by respondents, with mean and median results for W202

Number of sessions	No prior study of law			Some prior study of law		
	Number of students	Mean result	Median result	Number of students	Mean result	Median result
1–3	20	3.25	3.0	50	3.40	3.0
4–6	10	2.80	2.5	17	3.24	3.0
7–9	9	2.67	3.0	10	3.00	2.5
10–12	9	1.56	2.0	11	2.36	2.0
	48			**88**		

Table 4 shows that the mean and median module results of respondents who had completed W202 improved as the number of sessions they had studied increased. This applied both to the target students and to those who stated that they had previously studied law, either at the OU or elsewhere. Within each cluster of sessions studied, the target students obtained better results than students who had previously studied law, suggesting that studying the sessions was more beneficial for the target students than for those who used the sessions to refresh their knowledge of topics they had previously learned. For both groups of students, studying 10–12 sessions was associated with significantly better module results. These findings are encouraging but, for the reasons outlined above, they do not prove that studying the sessions improves students' results.

Table 5. Number of sessions studied by respondents, with mean and median results for W203

Number of sessions	No prior study of law			Some prior study of law		
	Number of students	Mean result	Median result	Number of students	Mean result	Median result
1–3	7	3.29	4.0	18	2.83	2.0
4–6	0	—	—	7	3.43	3.0
7–9	4	2.25	2.0	3	3.67	3.0
10–12	1	3.00	3.0	7	3.29	3.0
	12			**35**		

Table 5 shows that there were no target students who had studied 4–6 sessions, and the one target student who had studied 10–12 sessions obtained a Grade 3 pass. The mean and median results for the four target students who had studied 7–9 sessions are significantly better than those for the seven target students who had studied 1–3 sessions, but there is no discernible pattern in the mean or median results of students who had previously studied law. Because the numbers of students who completed W203 are much smaller, these results must be viewed with significantly greater caution than those for W202 (Table 4).

The analysis did not take account of any students who, irrespective of their prior learning, completed W202 or W203, but did not respond to at least one Moodle poll. This study gives no information about the unknown number of students who had never previously studied law, studied none of the sessions and who completed a Level 2 law module, so it reflects the attitudes and performance of an unknown proportion of the target students.

Conclusions

This study confirms that the sessions could be studied within the target time, were useful to the vast majority of respondents, and are appreciated by students because they use a mix of podcast and written presentation methods for their assimilative components. Most respondents who were target students had followed the advice to study the sessions before they began their modules, but a significant number of respondents had used the sessions for revision. There was no indication that the time a respondent took to study a session, or his or

her prior study of law or current stage of study, affected that session's perceived usefulness. The correlation between the number of sessions studied and students' module results suggests – but does not conclusively prove – that the sessions served the purpose for which they were created.

For these reasons, the Law School has decided that the sessions should be retained and annually updated. Figures 2 and 4 suggested that the "Human rights" session would benefit from some revision. The third question in the Moodle quiz is long and detailed; a simpler version will be provided for the next cohort of students. The findings do not indicate that it is necessary to make any significant changes to any other session. The Law School agreed that the collective title for the materials should be changed to *12 Introductory Steps to Law*, which was felt to emphasise their brevity and straightforwardness, and the term "Step" will replace the somewhat prosaic "session".[12]

A more widely applicable conclusion is that materials that are succinct, as non-technical as possible, tightly focused, and predominantly interactive are well-received by students, and may be causally linked with increased academic success, especially among students who have not previously studied a subject. Online presentation enables students to study the materials whenever they wish. Interactivity – which is crucial, because it is in thinking about, and applying, the material that they have just assimilated that students truly learn – cannot, however, be guaranteed on mobile devices.]

It was disappointing that such small percentages of the students on Level 2 modules studied the materials, but we had promoted them principally as a resource for students with no prior learning in law. The Law School has decided that more extensive, and persuasive, promotion of the sessions is now appropriate. For the cohort of students who will begin their studies in

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[12] For clarity, the term "session" will continue to be used in this article.

October 2017, we are briefing tutors on all modules about the sessions' existence, and outlining the sessions' potential use to students at all levels of study.

At Level 1, the sessions will be recommended, at tutors' discretion, to individual students who seem to have missed key points taught by the module materials. We decided against drawing all the students' attention to the sessions, because we do not want the sessions to be used as a substitute for the Level 1 materials. The sessions will also be recommended to all students, at the end of their study of W102, as a useful resource to consolidate their Level 1 learning.

At Level 2, we will use the same methods of promotion as before, but we will amend the wording in an attempt to persuade more students to study more sessions. We will draw students' attention to the very short time needed to study each session, and we will mention that research has shown previous students' study of the sessions to be statistically associated with academic success.

Our two research-focused Level 3 modules are open to OU students who have completed their Level 1 and Level 2 modules in any subject. Students on those modules will be given very similar prompts to those that will be given on the Level 2 modules. For the three Level 3 modules that have other law modules as a prerequisite for enrolment, the promotion of the sessions will focus on their use as a revision resource.

The sessions will also be promoted to LLM students who have not previously studied any law. In this context, they will replace several webpages of written assimilative material, and it is hoped that the sessions' brevity and interactivity will increase these students' awareness of many of the principles of the legal system of England and Wales.

Our hope is that these steps will engender increased awareness of the sessions among law students at all levels of study, and their tutors, and that they will encourage higher numbers of students to study them. At worst, this would consolidate students' knowledge and

understanding of basic topics; at best, it may make a positive contribution towards their retention and progression.

If we could persuade all the target students to study all the sessions, we could significantly alleviate the disadvantage that LLB graduate entrants experience as a direct result of a system that is intended to benefit them, and we would successfully have bridged the gap in their knowledge.

Appendix: The Moodle poll

Your views count!

Please spend a moment giving us your feedback on this session. Your answers will help us to enhance the support that we provide to students in the future.

There are five one-click-answer questions, so we estimate that this will take you one or two minutes.

Please select *one* answer to each question.

1.   Please indicate the total time that it took you to work through this session.

Less than 5 minutes

5–10 minutes

10–15 minutes

15–20 minutes

More than 20 minutes

2.   Please indicate how useful you found the content of this session.

Not useful

Quite useful

Very useful

3.   Please indicate your opinion of the format of this session.

I prefer written material to audios.

I prefer audios to written material.

I like a mix of audios and written material.

4.   Please indicate which of the following best describes your situation.

I have completed one or more Open University Level 1 law modules (W100, W101 or W102).

I have studied law previously, but not at The Open University.

I have never studied law.

5.   Please indicate your reason for working through this session.

I am preparing to study a law module.

I am part-way through studying a law module and needed to revise material that I had previously learned.

I am part-way through studying a law module and needed to acquire some background knowledge of a topic.

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your feedback.