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# IMPROVING STUDENT SUCCESS FOR GLOBAL MAJORITY AND LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS STUDENTS THROUGH ADDITIONAL SYNCHRONOUS SUPPORT AND INFORMATION EMBEDDED ON A DISTANCE LEARNING ACCESS MODULE

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## **Abstract**

Arts and Humanities colleagues at the Open University wanted to explore whether we could have an impact on the retention and progression of our students by embedding Employability and Careers information specifically for the Arts and Humanities early in the module, when students were completing their 'Learning Plan' (linked to the first assessment point). Recognising that GM and low SES students also have greater risks attached to completing their course of study, we organised for these students to have access to a 'Personal Learning Advisor' (PLA), offering coach-mentor support. These additional support and information initiatives were embedded on the two presentations of Y031 that ran during the 20/21 academic year. Our mixed methods study analysed quantitative data to assess the impact on retention and progression; and qualitative data, captured through survey and student interview, to give us a richer picture of individual student experiences, including their motivations to study and any barriers they experienced. We saw improvements to retention during 20/21, and synchronous Employability webinars have now been embedded as standard across the Access programme.

## **Keywords:**

Access; Arts and Humanities; Asynchronous webinars; coach-mentor; Employability and Careers; Global Majority; Low socio-economic; retention and progression; Student Success.

## **Project activities during 20/21**

Colleagues working in the School of Arts and Humanities (A&H) and for Access at the Open University are aware that we recruit and retain fewer Global Majority (GM) and low Socio-Economic Status (low SES) students to our modules than on comparable entry-level modules in other Schools and Faculties at the Open University (i.e. Social Sciences and STEM). Scholarship suggests that 'aspirations of parents and families and the expectations about the economic gain from going to university are significantly higher amongst individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds' (Connor et al., 2004); and that low SES students are more often driven by economic necessity (Reay et al, 2005, p. 161; Stuart 2006, p. 175). It may also be that the reputation of A&H study as not being 'open' to students from all communities is established at an earlier age, both at home and in school. Focussing on the experience of our students on the OU's Arts and Languages Access module (Y031) over both presentations in the 2020/21 academic year, we wanted to assess whether we could have an impact on the retention and progression of our students by embedding Employability and Careers information, specifically for the Arts and Humanities, early in the module. Students on Y031 already have access to two separate asynchronous Careers forums, run by colleagues in the OU's Careers and Employability Service (CES). The first of these takes place during the first of the 'Options weeks' on Y031 at week 11 of the 30 week module, at which point students have completed two of the four Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) on which they are assessed; the second asynchronous forum takes place in week 24, when students have a study week set aside for considering their future study and career pathways. This 'Moving On' week comes just before students begin their work towards the final assessment task on the module. While the Careers and Employability Service is available to students throughout the year, in practice the CES for distance-learning students does not have the same visibility throughout the student journey as in campus-based higher education. We wanted to see if an earlier live event would increase student awareness of the CES. We organised for two Careers and Employability Consultants to provide a 1 hour webinar, specifically in relation to the opportunities afforded by studying A&H degrees. The webinar was timed to take place during week 2, when students were preparing their 'Learning Plan' for the year, a reflection on their study goals, submitted as part of their first Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA01) submission in week 5. Students are expected and encouraged to reflect throughout the module on their Learning Plan, culminating in a 'Learning Review' in the final TMA. Students on Y031 have very little interaction with online learning in the first of the three study blocks that comprise the module; Block 1 uses hard-copy materials almost exclusively, while Block 2 and Block 3 study materials are provided online only. It is striking, therefore, that the first webinar, which ran at the start of the 20J presentation of Y031 in October 2020, saw 79 students attending from a total cohort of 271 at that point (29%), with the 'empty-room' recording watched 100+ times. Attendance at the

February-start presentation ('21B') was smaller, at 20%, but still well-attended for that point in the presentation (with 50+ viewings of the recording). It should be noted that the online webinar, like other online learning delivery on Y031, was not compulsory, so the attendance figures were very encouraging, and demonstrated a real willingness among students to engage with thinking about careers and employability from an early stage of their Access study journey.

Colleagues are also aware that we are losing a higher proportion of GM and low SES students during the course of the year, reflecting a similar pattern in the wider sector: despite an increase in the overall number of GM students participating in HE (from 30% in 2003 to 35.5% in 2008: Crawford & Greaves, 2015), Henderson et al show that GM First-in-Family students are 4% more likely to drop out than their White FiF peers. Recognising that low SES students also have greater risks attached to completing their course of study (Archer et al, 2003; Christie et al, 2004), we organised for students on Y031 21B to have access to a 'Personal Learning Advisor' (PLA), offering coach-mentor support. (NB This was an OU initiative that launched in January 2021, and was therefore not available for 20J students). The PLA pilot scheme, like the CES webinar, was partly designed to give distance-learning students an equivalent access to proactive student support that campus-based universities can provide. Black, Asian, minority ethnic, and/or low SES students on Y031 21B (February 2021), were offered one-to-one coaching and support from a coach-mentor Personal Learning Adviser (PLA). Students had to request this service themselves: the response rate was very good on this project, with a 61% take-up rate (87 students eligible, 53 took up the support). Just 7 of the 81 students who responded to our survey (see below) had been approached regarding the PLA service, with 6 of those students taking up the offer of support. Interestingly, half of these students were under 25; a further two were aged 26-35, and one student aged 36-45; three students 'consider themselves disabled' with two 'prefer[ing] not to say'. This indicates that younger students in GM and/or low SES categories are more likely to make use of the kind of pastoral support offered by the PLA service.

### *Research tools and methodology*

We collected quantitative data concerning assignment submission and student progression to address whether additional synchronous support and advice impacted positively on student success. We wanted to build on earlier scholarship pertaining to the impact that student motivation and subject choice might have, to better understand what kinds of additional support might benefit particular groups of students. We therefore approached the combined cohort from Y031 20J and 21B to collect qualitative data in the form of a survey (81 responses, so a 17% response rate) and via seven one-to-one interviews with student volunteers from the GM and low SES student groups.<sup>1</sup> Based on the project's conceptual framework we defined the categories by which the qualitative data could be identified and coded, linking to themes and issues relevant to the research question, concerning students' experiences of A&H study (historic and current); their motivations for study; and any barriers to study they had experienced.

One limitation of our study is the difficulty of assessing with statistical accuracy the experiences of GM and low SES students, given how few there are on the module. For instance, of the respondents to the survey just two students declare their ethnicity as black, Asian or ethnic minority (2.5%) and thirteen (16%) are identified as low SES. With just 9% of the total cohort of 481 students identified as GM, and 16% as low SES, when we have just a 10% response rate from within those groups to the request for volunteers for the interviews we are necessarily working with small numbers. However, data collected via the interviews, detailing individual students' experiences, adds depth to the broader statistics collected via our survey.

## **Findings**

### *Perceptions of A&H study*

We wanted to reflect on why students might not consider A&H a viable option for post-16 study. 48% of respondents to our project's survey agreed that 'When I was in school/college and thinking about my future I didn't consider studying Arts and Humanities subjects, as a means to a career'; 19% 'enjoyed studying Arts and Humanities subjects at school/college, but went on to further study in a different subject area'. Two interviewees within the GM cohort suggested that A&H subjects are not promoted at school level: Student 2 confirmed that when she was at school the other kids in her classes were not interested in these subjects, and therefore 'it was so hard to learn anything'; she was also not offered or able to access careers advice. A similar context is suggested by a student from the low SES grouping: 'most people around me just sort of go into care work. I've never really thought about

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<sup>1</sup> Student Identifiers within this report: Student 1 (female, low-SES); Student 2 (female, GM); Student 3 (female, GM); Student 4 (female, GM); Student 5 (male, low SES); Student 6 (female, low SES); Student 7 (male, GM).

why that is, but it's just sort of the route that everyone goes to around here' (Student 6). Strikingly, in talking about how supportive her family and friends have been of her decision to study toward an A&H degree at the OU, Student 2 said that 'they can see, from the outside in, they can see me': her choice to study a subject she is passionate about, to lead to a career that 'suit[s] me better', is defined in terms of developing her true self. This is a powerful call to ensure that we are presenting students from all communities with the information and guidance they need to make informed decisions about their study options; and to ensure that information highlights how studying A&H offers routes into a variety of vocations.

One of the students interviewed was not aware which subjects were covered by the term 'Arts and Humanities'; two other interviewees indicated that individuals outside the OU confuse A&H with 'Art' as a subject: 'they don't really know what it entails... they have a picture in their head of me drawing and painting' (Student 3). Student 1 reflected on the reputation that A&H has within her immediate environment: 'people on sort of estates like this think of arts and humanities as more sort of the pomp-y side of education... more an upper class maybe career degree'. She felt that if 'more was made to show the different careers you can do... showing more as jobs for the lower class for want of a better term... it seems a little bit less out of their reach'. In order to reach out into these communities, attention needs to be paid to how we present our courses, being specific as to which subjects fall under the banner of 'A&H', and foregrounding information about the variety of careers available to A&H graduates.

100% of respondents to the interviews (and 84% to the survey) felt that more should be done to promote the employability possibilities of an A&H degree. Two low SES interviewees acknowledged that before they looked into OU study they were not aware that an A&H degree could be used to get into teaching; students both at interview and in the survey expressed surprise at the variety of careers open to A&H graduates, such as teaching, working in the creative arts, museums, galleries etc.. The OU CES already helps registered OU students identify the career possibilities of an A&H degree, via extensive information on subject-specific pages on their website; the CES works with individual modules across the OU, through lively embedded forum events on undergraduate Level 1 modules, and a recent expansion of CES provision to Level 2 and 3 modules; plus pre-existing live events hosted by CES (e.g. an A&H Q&A series involving alumni, academics, employers and professionals, giving their real world experiences of career paths, advice, insights and sector awareness). Our project explored the potential for embedding synchronous CES events within individual modules, and linking this to assessment, in order to encourage participation. Offering a recorded version of such events, retained permanently on the module website, gives students the opportunity to revisit the webinar throughout the module, for example when they start to consider their next steps. This could encourage progression through to further study at Level 1.

### *Study motivations*

57% of the students responding to our survey claimed that their motivation at enrolment was study for 'personal development' and this had not subsequently changed. 34% of that group registered that they were picking up study following retirement, and wanted to study something 'unconnected' to their past career or employment in general. This idea of a negative pressure associated with mention of careers and employability is echoed in another student's comment that Access is about being 'introduced to learning again' and we should avoid pushing the idea of careers 'too early'. However, free-text comments in the survey, from students who register as studying for 'personal development', paints a more nuanced picture: three students in the 'personal development' grouping explained that their motivation to study was to make good on an earlier lost opportunity: 'I regret not getting my degree when I left College, then work & life got in my way & I am able to fit studying into my lifestyle now' (female, 46-55). Although there may be no specific career goal in mind, it would be helpful to consider these students as distinct from the post-retirement, 'leisure learner' cohort, as there is potential for this personal interest to develop a previously unfulfilled life/career aspiration. This group of prospective students may also respond favourably to promotion of degree-level study as a means to unlocking their personal and career potential, building on their passion for these subjects.

At interview, all GM students noted that the lockdown prompted their decision to research and ultimately sign-up for study with the OU ('it changed our perspective of life'); in a couple of cases this corresponds with a loss of paid employment, but it also tallies with the significant number of interviewees (across both groupings) who mentioned that OU study presents them with the opportunity to follow a new path: Student 3 notes how she wants to 'venture out into something a bit more exciting, something different'. Similar cases are recorded in the survey. Clearly lockdown had an impact on student behaviour, and the OU's online, distance-learning model provided students

with a starting point for their pursuit of these study goals. Through our incorporation of additional synchronous support and guidance activities, to a previously largely asynchronous teaching model on Y031, we have effectively enhanced the learning experience for students.

Overall, there was a significant percentage of students surveyed who felt that 'a degree in the Arts and Humanities can open the door to a better paid job' (21%). Across both presentations there was a higher percentage of low SES students noting they are studying for either 'career development' or 'both career and personal development' (i.e. 46% of respondents in the lowest two deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, compared with 37% of the total respondents): this bears out scholarship suggesting that low SES students are more likely to be motivated by career goals. 84% of students surveyed (and 100% of those interviewed) responded that more information relating to the range of careers open to A&H graduates would be useful for prospective students. If we want to attract a more diverse range of students, Arts and Humanities could usefully look to boost messaging around careers and employability via marketing and outreach.

Interestingly, of the six students in the lowest two deciles of IMD, studying solely for 'personal development', three note that studying Y031 could 'potentially' improve their chances for a career change in future. So even where students have registered that they are studying for personal development only, they are subsequently discovering that career development and/or change of career are some of the potential benefits of studying at Access level; and this is surely enhanced by the provision of targeted awareness-raising activities, such as our live webinar.

The more detailed feedback gained via the interviews suggests one reason why so few students select 'career only' as their motivation to study on the survey (just two students, so 2.5% of the total cohort). Over half of the interviewees register how important it is to study a subject that interests them. The focus on studying something they are passionate about, over perhaps what might be considered more directly vocational courses, is a particular driver: 'there might be lots of jobs in IT and science and law but if you have no passion for them, would you love them when you got there?' (Student 2.) This presents a challenge to studies concluding that students from particular backgrounds are necessarily drawn to 'vocational' courses. The A&H Access and Level 1 modules at the OU are interdisciplinary in nature (with Y031 covering English Literature; English Language; History; Art History), encouraging a focus on the transferability of skills, whilst opening students' eyes to subjects they may not have previously considered studying. A&H might build on this to encourage students to enrol to study a subject they enjoy, in order to attain a degree that opens doors to multiple vocations. Evidence from our project suggests that this message would land particularly well with students in the GM and low SES cohorts, as well as the considerably larger cohort of 'second-chancers' registering on Y031.

#### *Barriers to student success (1): Access to student communities*

Scholarship has documented the important role that student communities can play in terms of helping individuals develop studentship skills, as well as having a positive impact on the retention of students, by counteracting feelings of isolation. Such feelings are more likely to occur in a distance-learning environment than at a campus-based university. Stuart concludes that 'a sense of belonging and a source of academic and emotional support' (2006, p. 162) can make the most difference in terms of student success, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds. At the Open University (and particularly over the years of non-face-to-face provision, since March 2020, due to the pandemic), development of these student communities has been a particular challenge. This is reflected in feedback from interviewees, who felt they missed opportunities to meet and interact with other students and their tutor; three of the four students from the GM cohort mentioned this at interview). Evidence from the interviews suggests that asynchronous forums are not providing students with adequate access to student communities; they are increasingly turning to alternatives such as Facebook student groups, which have their own challenges and limitations. We should consider how to encourage and promote student communities at a distance; and we need to reflect on the importance students place on being able to see as well as hear each other. The importance of this cannot be underestimated: Christie et al (2004) found [friendship] to be a significant factor affecting non-completion of courses of study: 'non-continuers reported more difficulties in meeting new people, getting involved in student activities and were more likely to perceive the environment as alienating' (p 625). Embedding opportunities for students to participate in video-chat with tutor and peers could enhance the support we can provide and enable construction of student communities at a distance.

#### *Barriers to student success (2): Student support issues*

Respondents to the survey noted the range of personal challenges and obstacles they faced. Of those students who experienced difficulties, only 41% contacted their tutor or Student Support Team (SST) for support. Of the 59% who did

not seek advice/ support: 74% were 'able to work through the problem and catch up without help'; 11% 'Didn't realise I could ask for support from my tutor for this'; 26% were 'embarrassed to ask'. The latter figure suggests that existing routes (i.e. via their tutor or referral through the SST) are not appropriate for all support needs. Beck (1992) notes that students from non-traditional backgrounds, who do not have the same resources as middle class students to draw on, often rely more heavily on personal determination to succeed; Stuart notes too that personal determination was a significant factor for the working class respondents to her project, but reflects that there is 'almost a kind of rigidity about their responses, which may shatter' (p. 172). This acknowledges both a likely causal factor for the high percentage of students not requesting support, and also offers a potential reason for higher levels of withdrawal amongst particular groups of students when that personal determination shatters, and they do not feel they have access to the support and advice they need.

Two of the interviewees in the low SES grouping experienced health issues that presented barriers to successful study. However, there is evidence in both the interviews and survey of the positive impact of the additional support provided by PLAs: 'you've just been amazing as a university because you've got multiple forms of support... maybe stuff you wouldn't want to bring up with one person, you can talk to the other person' (Student 5). In the survey we find some powerful case studies. The case study in Figure 1 records that this individual found the support he needed despite a reluctance to approach his own tutor. Access to a PLA helped him through a bad patch and encouraged him to keep going. This is evidence for the impact of this additional support in terms of improving retention and progression for vulnerable students.

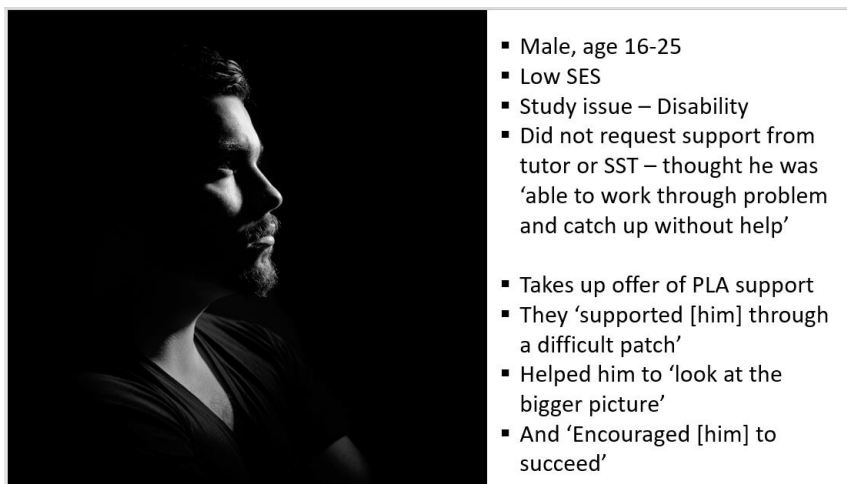


Figure 1: Case study of male student receiving PLA support (21B)

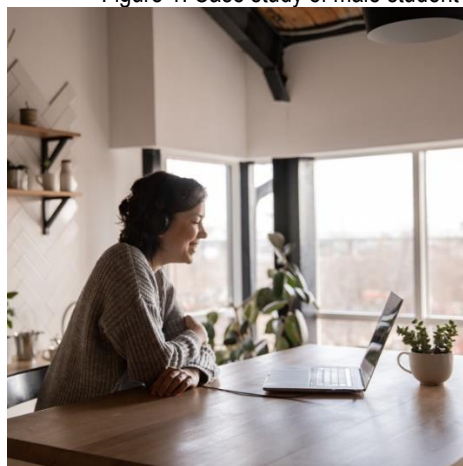


Figure 2: Case study of female student receiving PLA support (21B)

The case study in Figure 2 shows that the PLA helped the student to identify what was important to them as an individual and how that could be applied positively to their academic work. This echoes the importance of study for both bringing out and shaping self-identity. Stuart (2006) concludes that 'enabling widening participation is less about structure, teaching and learning, the curriculum or teachers, but more about intangible things such as

belonging, developing determination, imagination and self-worth' (p. 182). From the qualitative evidence in our project, it seems the PLA service is allowing the OU to reach and potentially retain these students through harnessing these types of 'intangible things'.

## Results and Outcomes

Quantitative data from Y031 20J and 21B shows that these presentations record improved retention and progression of students, compared to previous presentations:

### Y031 TMA submissions 20J

	18J	19J	20J
TMA01 %	92	89	94
TMA02 %	76	82	88
TMA03 %	68	68	78
emTMA04 %	65	63	75

### Y031 TMA submissions 21B

	19B	20B	21B
TMA01 %	87	90	90
TMA02 %	76	75	83
TMA03 %	65	63	70
emTMA04 %	62	59	65

It is important to note that the submission rate of 75% for the emTMA04 on 20J is the highest figure recorded for the final assessment in any presentation of the module, which has been running since 2013. There has been little change to assessment strategy and content that might account for improvements in retention and submission, so the impact of the project is likely to have been a significant contributory factor. Also note the decrease in the gap between TMA01 and TMA02, and TMA02 and TMA03. Such gaps are consistent across all three Access modules, and to some extent inevitable, as the difficulty of assessment tasks increases. However, the increased submission rate for TMA01 in 21J and the decreased gap between TMA01 and TMA02 in 22B may have been a positive unintended consequence of so many students being able to get together and 'meet' at the employability webinar during a period in which students are mainly working with materials in hard copy rather than online, so have fewer opportunities to interact with other students. Analysis of the progression routes of students show these to be broadly in line with previous presentations; however qualitative data, collected via survey and interview, records that the additional information regarding employability and careers was welcomed by students, with evidence that in some cases this had led to some students shifting their study goals from 'personal only' to 'personal and career development'. All interviewees confirmed that studying Y031 has encouraged them to move on to further study.

## Conclusion

Giving individuals the space to develop as students, and allowing them to recognise and build upon their own passions, interests, and identities, needs to be a key element when addressing EDI for our modules, particularly where students are taking their first steps (back) into education. However, it is clear that, as a sector, we face a challenge attracting a more diverse range of students to A&H degree pathways in the first place. More positively, student responses to the CES webinars show an increased awareness of the career possibilities of A&H study. Student feedback collected by CES about the webinars was very positive: 69% of attendees felt clearer regarding their next steps after attending. The survey revealed a further 69% of respondents found the webinar helpful for completing their 'Learning Plan'; 59% agreed it gave them new ideas about possible careers. Recognising the success of the webinars, similar events were rolled out to the other two Access modules for 21B, and are now part of the standard offering for all Access students. Synchronous CES webinars should continue to raise awareness and better inform students when deciding about progression to higher-level study. Attention also needs to be paid to the support framework available to these students, as evidence from this project suggests that a higher level of individualised and longer term support, offered through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous contact (with student preference being a key determinant of the form of that support), can have a significant impact on student success.

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