The Postcard Project

eSTEeM Final Report

Authors: Elouise Huxor and Theodora Philcox

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Executive Summary

Post pandemic, student retention on the Level One design module *Design Thinking: Creativity for the 21st Century* was notably lower than on other comparable Level 1 modules in the School of Engineering and Innovation (E&I). This was particularly concerning with the imminent launch of the new Bachelor of Design (BDes) degree. We, as two of the staff tutors, therefore set out to investigate whether a design-led communication intervention could improve student engagement and retention.

U101 has always faced distinctive challenges. It recruits from a wide range of qualification pathways, and although part of Q61 (the Design and Innovation degree), until October 2024 did not contribute to a dedicated design qualification. This changed in 2024 when U101 became compulsory for the new Bachelor of Design (R63), but historically the module needed to work harder to meet the needs of a diverse cohort who joined for varied, and sometimes extrinsic, reasons. To help address this, we launched a project at the start of the October 22 presentation to improve engagement and retention.

The project introduced a small intervention that ALs could integrate into their teaching practice with minimal time expenditure. This was important, as we did not want to add pressure to ALs but needed their commitment to ensure parity for all students. To test the intervention's effectiveness and scalability, we ran a pilot across 13 tutor groups—one in each region of the four nations. ALs in the pilot sent a weekly digital postcard, via email, to every student in their group.

The postcards contained bite-sized, visually engaging information highlighting key learning points from the week's planner, ensuring students had regular, meaningful contact with their tutor. The pilot enabled us to compare the impact of this intervention with student performance in a control group. To evaluate it, we adopted a mixed-methods approach combining engagement analytics, tutor feedback and a student survey.

All postcards were created by the two staff tutors leading the project to ensure consistency, but it was important that they were sent by the students' own tutor to encourage interaction and strengthen relationships within the group. No new teaching material was included, ensuring that students in the pilot did not gain an academic advantage over their peers. We used OU Analyse to monitor engagement in both the pilot and control groups.

During the pilot, the completion rate increased by 2.4%, which was encouraging given that the pilot covered less than a third of the cohort. This early indication of positive impact led us to extend the project so that all students received the postcards on both the October and February presentations of the module. Completion rates have continued to show a steady year-on-year rise.

Recommendations

Our findings indicate that regular, predictable correspondence from ALs had the greatest impact on strengthening students' sense of belonging. The digital postcards proved an effective vehicle for this communication: their visual format aligned with the design ethos of U101, and their concise weekly prompts offered a friendly, low-pressure way for ALs to stay in contact. We recommend maintaining this pattern of structured weekly tutor communication and

continuing to use visually led postcards to support it. More broadly, these outcomes suggest that small, design-informed interventions that promote regular tutor–student contact can make a meaningful contribution to engagement and may offer a scalable approach for other modules where belonging is a known challenge.

Aims and scope of the project

The main aim of the project was to improve engagement and retention on Module *U101: Design Thinking: Creativity for the 21st Century*, the Level One gateway module for design, following a concerning decline in completion rates. To explore the reasons behind this attrition, we first examined the pinch points in the presentation where the highest number of withdrawals occurred, and reviewed how regularly ALs and students used their tutor group forums. Recognising that a sense of belonging is important to student well-being and motivation, we were particularly interested to find ways to support regular, meaningful contact between students and their tutor. Inspired by Sue Nieland's (2021) research project which involved tutors sending weekly emails to their student groups, we explored whether a similar pattern of correspondence could be adapted to the visual and design-led nature of U101. We were particularly interested in approaches that aligned with the creative identity of the module, recognising that design students often respond well to concise, visually framed prompts that encourage reflection and provide a sense of continuity from week to week.

This approach fitted well with an existing element of the module: the creative use of postcards. Students on U101 receive a 'Welcome Pack' at the start of the module, which includes a set of blank postcards. They are invited to send one back to the module team, anonymously if they wish, expressing three things that they hope to learn by the end of the module. They are then encouraged to

use the remaining physical postcards to engage with friends or family, or leave them in public spaces and observe what messages come back in return.

The module material also introduces students to the 'Post Secret' initiative and illustrates how postcards can function as a 'cultural probe' within design research. For their first mini-assignment, students design a visual postcard to submit to their tutor, conveying their interests, hopes and fears, accompanied by a brief explanatory comment. This helps to build early rapport and allows ALs to gain insight into their students' aspirations and learning needs. This existing emphasis on visual communication meant that students were already accustomed to engaging with postcard-based tasks, making the transition to a weekly digital postcard feel natural and well grounded in the pedagogic ethos of the module.

In this context, a digital postcard therefore seemed to be a relevant, concise and visually engaging means of providing weekly communication between ALs and their students.

The format enabled us to provide students with bite-sized, visually engaging information that highlighted key learning points from the block materials on the planner for that week. Although the postcards were created by the two project leads to ensure consistency and that all students were receiving the same content, It was important that the cards were sent out by each students' own group tutor. This approach was intended to build stronger relationships, maintain regular correspondence, and open channels of communication within the tutor group.

The project was initially run as a pilot to enable an analysis of the impact of this regular contact. Thirteen groups were selected; one from each region to balance any demographic differences across the four nations. No new module information was included in the postcards to ensure that students in the pilot did not have an academic advantage over those in the control groups. Running the project as a pilot also enabled us to refine the practicalities of the intervention, observe how tutors incorporated the postcards into their weekly routines, and identify early indicators of change before deciding whether it could be scaled to the full cohort.

Student retention on U101 has been lower than other comparable Level 1 modules in E & I. U101's first-time completion rate was 51% in 21J and 58.4% in 20J, considerably lower than the Faculty-level average of 72.4%. In comparison, first-time completion rate for other comparable Level 1 modules in 21J was 76.8% for U116, 70% for T192 and 70.2% for A111.

While the most recent published figures are now several years old, earlier analyses by the IET's KMI team (2016) made clear that student withdrawal carries a substantial financial cost for the University and that even modest improvements in retention can produce meaningful institutional benefits. Although the original financial estimates are now dated, they continue to illustrate the close link between retention and financial sustainability, particularly given the importance of students progressing to Stages 2 and 3 and ultimately completing their qualification. This reinforces the value of small, well-targeted interventions, such as the one explored in this project, that support continuity and reduce avoidable withdrawal.

With this in mind, our aim was to promote more regular interaction between students and their tutor, enabling us to see how students were engaging with the content and delivery of the module, and to address concerns before these resulted in a withdrawal. At the very least, we aimed to evaluate whether this small intervention had an observable impact on student engagement through analysing patterns of engagement of VLE activity and TMA submissions as key indicators.

Activities

Importance of tutor interaction

Through our research, we focussed on ways of using tutor interaction to improve student retention on U101, exploring approaches that would not add significantly to tutors' workload. We were motivated by Sue Nieland's project (2021) which used regular tutor-led email correspondence (with content designed by the members of the module team) to engage learners. The outcomes in that project were promising, with students in the test groups exhibiting increased engagement with the module and improved retention. An eSTEeM study carried out by Linda Robson et al (2015) similarly highlighted that students valued email communications sent by their own tutors above communication from others.

We had also undertaken an earlier informal investigation into the use of tutor group forums and the impact of tutor interaction within them. Although we recognised that cohorts can vary considerably year to year, where tutors were proactive in communicating with their students in their group forum, students appeared more confident in contributing their own comments and questions, thereby building more of a group dynamic. These findings informed the development of this study and reinforced the importance of placing tutor interaction within a discipline-related design context.

Design and Development of the postcards

The two staff tutors each designed 15–16 postcards, creating a complete set of 31 cards that mapped the block materials week by week in a visual format that reflected the design ethos of the module.

Each card was deliberately designed in a different style to avoid them becoming 'wallpaper' and being overlooked. The variations in layout, balance of text and image, and overall composition also encouraged students to consider these elements in their own work, prompting them to think more closely about how they presented their ideas visually.

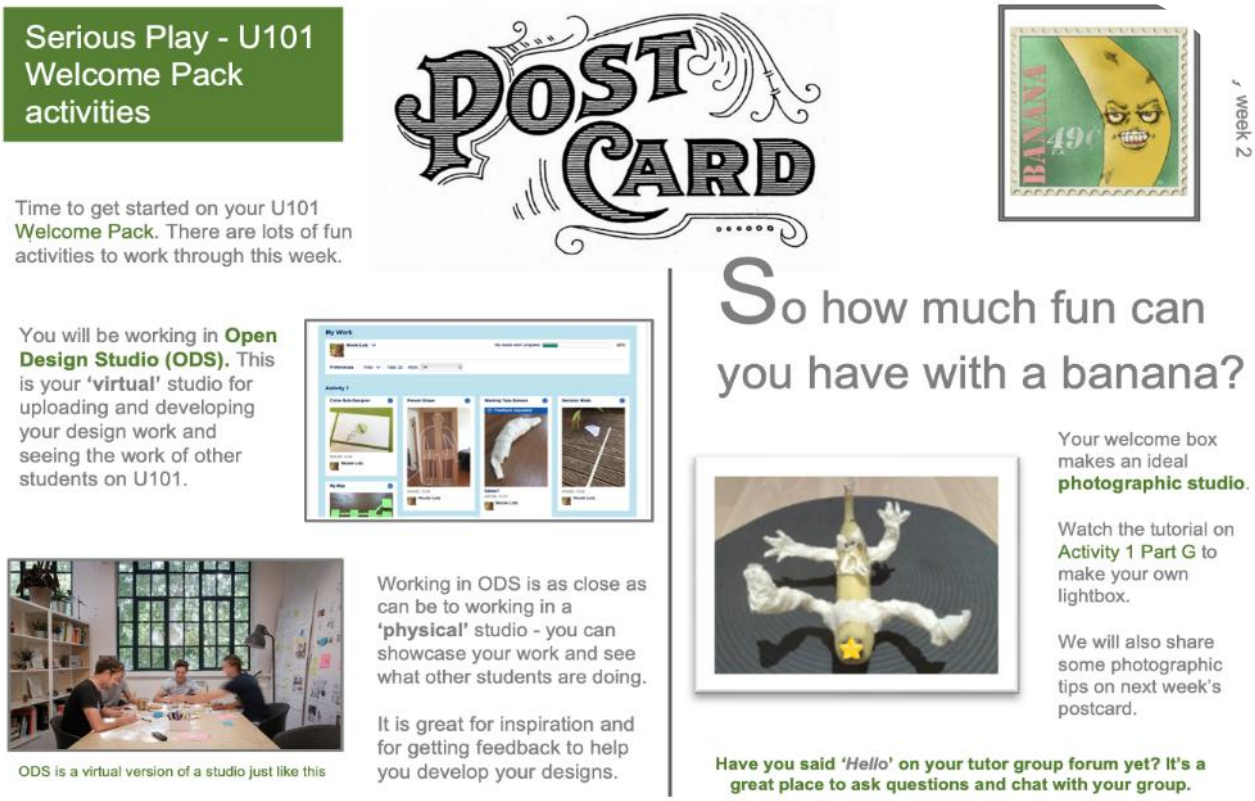

Fig.1 Postcard Study Week 2

Fig.2 Postcard Study Week 19

In developing the postcards, we considered how their visual design could act as a pedagogic tool in its own right. U101 places strong emphasis on visual literacy, and we wanted each postcard to model clear hierarchy, composition and tone, offering implicit guidance that students could draw on in their own design work. We reviewed the block materials carefully to ensure the postcards complemented rather than duplicated teaching content, and we experimented with different visual formats to identify what would be most engaging in a distance-learning context.

Implementation and data collection

Thirteen ALs were selected (one per region to balance any demographic differences), to send out the postcards to their tutor group at the start of each

week. In some cases the tutors had two tutor groups and were therefore able to make direct comparisons between the levels of contact generated. The staff tutors mailed out the cards on the same day each week as a prompt for the tutors to remember to send them. ALs were reminded to send the cards out BCC to comply with GDPR; to send the image in the body of the email to avoid the need for any additional 'click', and were encouraged to add a personal, friendly message to build rapport with their group. They were also asked to remove any students who had withdrawn from their mailing list.

As the pilot progressed, we refined several elements of the initial plan. For example, we introduced more explicit weekly reminders to tutors after noticing variation in the timing of postcard delivery. These small adjustments helped ensure consistency across the pilot groups and enabled us to gather more reliable comparative data for the later stages of analysis.

Data collection points were established at key moments in the presentation (post TMA submissions) using OU Analyse and PowerBI to compare levels of engagement between students in the pilot groups with those in the control groups, including attendance at tutorials and especially the module-wide tutorials that were advertised on the postcards. A 2020 paper on predictive learning analytics by C Herodotou et al, supported this approach. Analysis of tutorial attendance indicated a higher proportion of students from the pilot group were attending the module-wide tutorials.

Our analysis took a descriptive approach, using OU Analyse and PowerBI to review general patterns of activity in both the pilot and control groups. These tools enabled us to look at engagement around key points in the presentation, such as after TMA deadlines, and to see whether any early differences were beginning to appear. Our intention was not to carry out detailed statistical analysis, but to build a grounded picture of the trends that were emerging.

At the midpoint of the pilot, 171 students across the pilot groups were invited by their tutors to complete an anonymous survey. Consistent with institutional ethical guidance, tutor-administered evaluation undertaken as part of routine teaching practice did not require separate ethical approval. We received 33 responses (19%).

- 91% of students reported that they read the postcards each week
- 76% reported that the postcards encouraged them to contact their tutor

These responses, although from a relatively small sample, offered useful early indications of how the postcards were being received. The accompanying qualitative comments also gave us a clearer sense of why students found them helpful. Some described feeling ‘noticed’ or ‘supported’ when they received the postcards, while others said they acted as a simple weekly reminder to check the planner or return to earlier activities. Taken together, these insights added valuable context to the engagement data and suggested that the postcards played both a practical and encouraging role for students.

Alongside the student survey, tutors were also sent a questionnaire shortly after the mid-point of the module. This asked four brief questions and included space

for free comments. Tutors were invited to reflect on how long it took to manage the postcards, whether they had observed any changes in student engagement, how the intervention affected their relationship with their students, and any feedback they had received. We also invited them to a focus group meeting at the end of the pilot phase to discuss their experiences in more depth.

As with any pilot of this nature, the study had limitations. Engagement is influenced by many external factors, and we were cautious not to attribute changes solely to the postcards. Variation in tutor practice, student workload and life circumstances inevitably played a role. Taken together, these early findings gave us enough confidence to continue the postcards beyond the pilot phase and explore their impact across subsequent presentations.

Findings

Student Outcomes

The results from the pilot project were notable. In 2022, the completion rate increased by 2.4%, indicating a positive impact given that the pilot covered only 29% of the module cohort. In contrast the 23B presentation, which did not include the postcards, experienced a 3.9% decline.

The following year (October 23) when all groups received the postcards, the completion rate increased by 2.1%. More substantially, when the postcards were introduced for 24B, the completion rate increased by 10.6% Retention to FLP also increased by 9.1% in the October 24 presentation to the highest level in the module's history.

Taken together, these trends suggest more than a single-presentation fluctuation. The pattern seen across 23J, 24B and 24J indicates a consistent, positive trajectory that aligns with the introduction of the postcards rather than broader cohort-specific characteristics. While we remain cautious about causal claims, especially given the external factors affecting open-entry students, the timing and consistency of the improvement give a reasonable basis for interpreting the postcards as a contributing factor. This interpretation is further supported by AL observations, engagement analytics, and recurrent student comments describing the postcards as reassuring, motivating, or simply a helpful weekly reminder to stay on track.

There was also a significant correlation between students receiving the postcards and attending tutorials, supported by the advertisement of the

module-wide events on the cards. These tutorials developed a regular group of students in attendance whose conversations in the 'chat' demonstrated a good sense of connection and peer support.

Early analysis of tutorial attendance showed that, once the first two universally advertised events had passed, students in the pilot group tended to attend module-wide tutorials at a higher proportion than those in the control group. Although attendance patterns varied week by week, this provided an early indication that the postcards were supporting stronger engagement with live teaching.

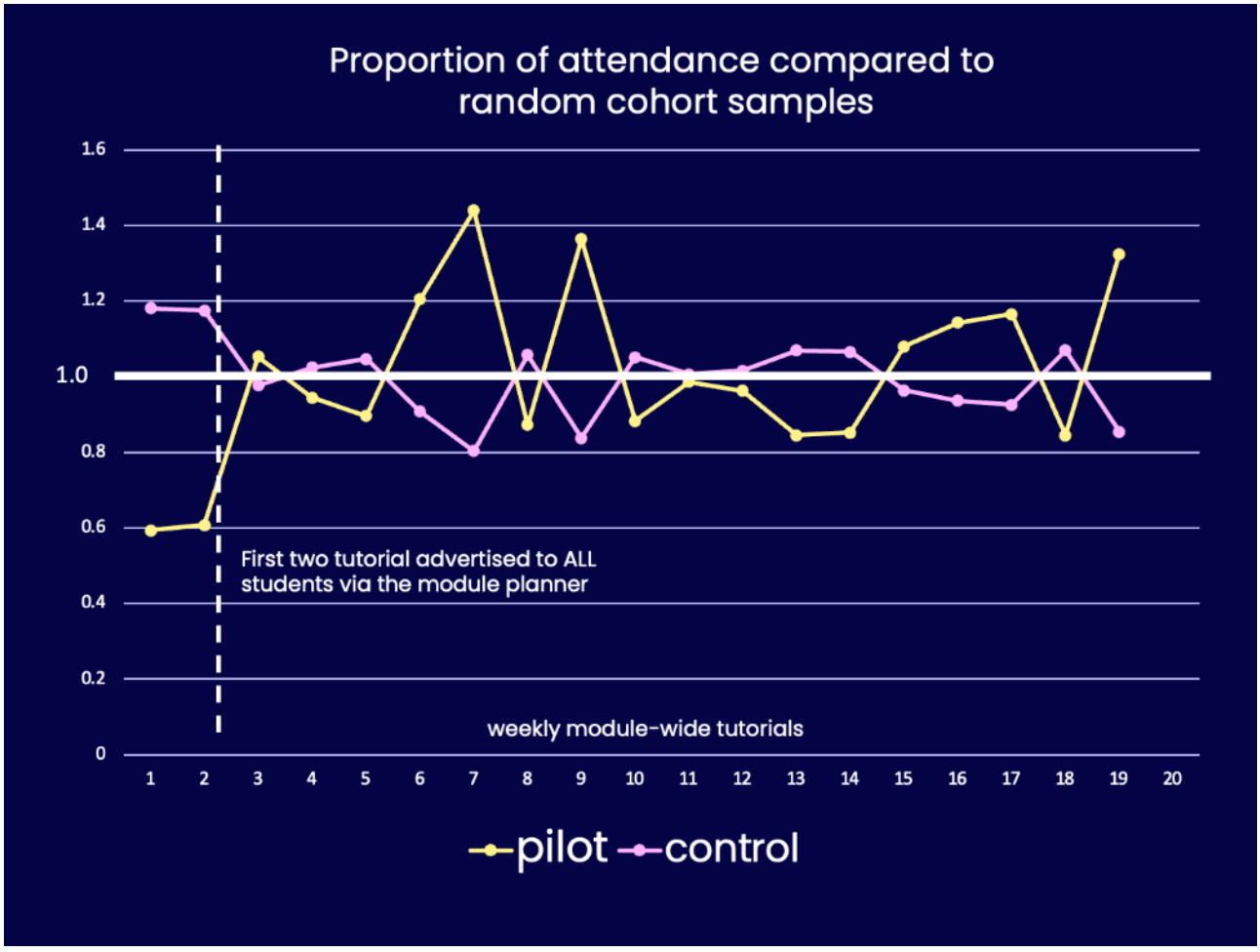

Fig. 3 Tutorial attendance

One finding was the extent to which the postcards appeared to support students' sense of connection to the module. Several survey respondents described feeling "less alone" or "more supported," and tutors noted that some students who had previously been quiet began replying to the weekly emails with brief questions or comments. Although small in scale, this kind of early contact suggested that the postcards may have encouraged students to reach out a little sooner than they otherwise might. This sits comfortably with wider research on belonging, which highlights the value of regular, steady communication in helping students stay engaged.

The success encouraged the project leads to include the postcards as a permanent feature of both the October and February presentations and this has contributed to an increase in completion rates.

Completion rates (October vs February)

Academic Year	October intake (%)	February intake (%)
2021–22	51.9	45.6
2022–23	54.3	41.6
2023–24	56.5	52.5
2024–25	57.6	

Fig.4 Completion rates

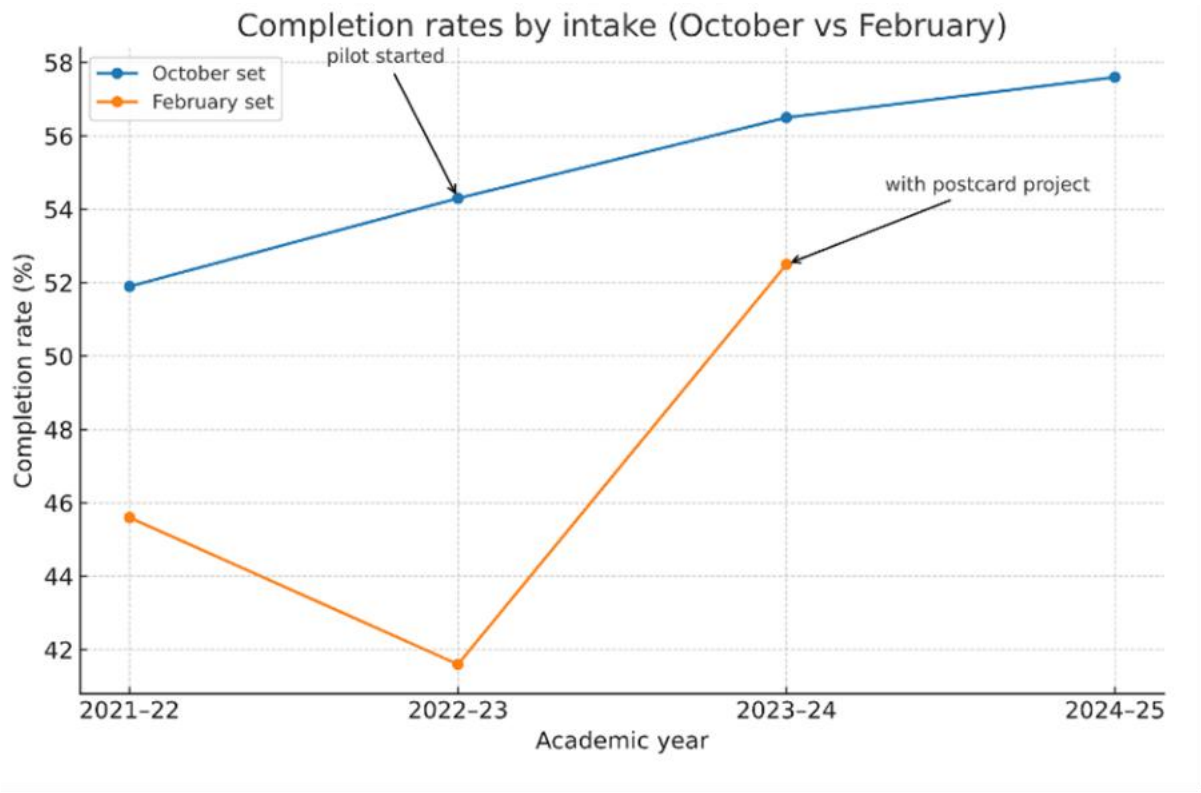

Fig.5 Completion rates visual overview

These findings suggest that the postcard intervention had a sustained and positive influence on both engagement and retention, and that regular, visually led tutor-student communication plays a valuable role in supporting student continuity. They further indicate that this approach may also be scalable to similar entry-level modules, helping to build a sense of belonging and encourage ongoing contact.

We have shared these findings with a range of internal stakeholders to support broader discussion about retention and student belonging. Interim results were presented to the U101 module team, the wider Design qualification team, and colleagues within the School of Engineering and Innovation. Presentations at the STEM Teaching Conference, eSTEeM Conference and subsequent faculty

scholarship events allowed us to gather external feedback and learn from colleagues undertaking similar work (see Dissemination section). ALs were kept informed throughout the pilot and subsequent presentations, and their feedback played an important role in shaping the ongoing implementation. Collectively, these conversations have helped position the postcards as a recognised and scalable example of practice within the University.

Impact on Associate Lecturers

In addition to the student-focused outcomes, the project also produced unexpected benefits for Associate Lecturers. Just as students can experience isolation in distance learning, ALs can also feel disconnected from their wider teaching team and one another. The postcards created a pattern of weekly communication between us, as staff tutors, and our ALs, and served as a helpful aide-memoire by highlighting what the students were studying each week. What we had not anticipated was the extent to which this regular contact appeared to strengthen ALs' own sense of belonging. Several tutors told us that having a consistent weekly touchpoint made them feel more connected to the module community and to us as staff tutors. This increase in connection also opened up more opportunities for informal conversation about teaching, which may indirectly support student experience in ways that are harder to measure but nevertheless meaningful. Their feedback included the following comments:

- *'It's a lovely and considerate initiative – I look forward to the postcards myself!'*

- *‘Yes. It seems to be working as a nudge, in that students often reply to the email with questions about the work’*
- *‘I like that it has made me send a weekly email out with the postcard where I am more chatty and describe my plans for the weekend - this has had my 'regulars' respond positively’*
- *‘It makes my contact with them current and reminds me too as to what they're focusing on that week, so good for me and them’*

These responses highlight that the postcards not only supported student engagement but also contributed to a stronger sense of connection and communication within the teaching team, reinforcing the value of consistent, low-intensity contact across the module community.

Impact

a) Student experience

Following the success of the pilot, the postcard initiative was extended to all tutor groups from 23J and 24B. To understand early impact, we elicited student feedback mid-way through the pilot via a short survey, and responses were overwhelmingly positive. Students reported feeling more supported, motivated and connected to their tutor:

- *'They have a positive impact. I feel guided in my studies and motivated*
- *'They offer new ideas and guidance"*
- *'It does help me a lot, it gives me more information and understanding about what to do next and what is expected from me to do'*
- *'It makes the module a bit more fun and makes me feel connected to my tutor a bit more. In previous modules I didn't really hear from my tutors at all, so it's nice to get a weekly email'*
- *'They were an initial unexpected delight. They do show and emphasise that the tutor is available and supportive in every way'*

One comment was particularly ummarised the core value of the intervention particularly well:

> …in a weird way, the consistent communication takes away part of the loneliness that comes with distance learning.

b) Teaching Practice

We also sought views on how the postcards could be improved. Students suggested additions such as weekly reading recommendations or motivational quotes.

Students were also honest where the postcards were less welcome.

> *'They make me feel anxious if I'm slightly behind schedule. I would have liked to be able to opt out; they didn't work for me. Nice idea though.'*

In response, ALs are now advised to offer an "opt-out" around week six, once students have experienced the postcards and can make an informed choice.

One student asked for improved mobile usability. Although vertical formatting would compromise the traditional postcard feel, we subsequently tested orientation across devices and found that simple screen rotation resolved most issues; however, we will continue reviewing the format to ensure accessibility. This mitigates some of the concerns raised, although we will continue to review the format to ensure it remains as accessible as possible.

As our students are studying design, we are always keen to involve them in live projects. We are therefore considering inviting students, or the student interns, to design some of the postcards, possibly through a friendly competition. This could further strengthen their sense of belonging, increase ownership of the module, and ensure the postcards reflect the diversity of our student body.

Seeing how our postcard format has since been adopted and developed by other modules, we are also considering how they might be used as a vehicle for increasing more diverse representation on our forums and the wider design qualification site, for example, by showcasing the work of designers from the Black, Asian, disabled and LGBTQ+ communities.

ALs were, for the most part, enthusiastic about incorporating the postcards as part of their delivery. From our mid-point tutor survey during the pilot, we received the following comments:

- *'I think it is a good initiative and it sustains a regular channel of communication with students (especially those who don't even read TGF threads/posts)'*
- *'I really like the graphics and think the prompts have been well thought out.'*
- *'I can see the benefits of a more visual prompt aid that all students can quickly see and understand.'*
- *'It's a lovely and considerate initiative – I look forward to the postcards myself!'*

We held a focus group with ALs in October 2024 to gather further feedback once all ALs had a year's experience of sending the postcards. All ALs expressed a willingness to continue using them and felt they had become a postive addition to their teaching practice. Several commented that the postcards had helped them maintain regular, friendly communication with their students and had provided useful prompts in keeping in step with the weekly planner.

c) Strategic Change and Learning Design

Beyond its direct effects on students and tutors, the project also generated wider strategic learning that has shaped ongoing design decisions within the module and beyond. Several module teams have adapted elements of the project and developed them to suit their own curricula. For example, Wallace and Chapman (2024) in the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences have created postcards and other digital assets for their students to create a greater sense of belonging. Similarly Varagnolo, Golrohki et al (2025) have explored the use of postcards to encourage participation maths practice quizzes in Level 1 engineering. These developments demonstrate the scalability and adaptability of the postcard approach, showing how AL-led visual prompts can be shaped to meet the needs of different subject areas while still supporting connection, engagement and a sense of belonging.

d) Recommendations

Based on the findings of this project, we recommend continuing the use of weekly digital postcards as a core part of U101's teaching strategy. The regular, visually led communication from ALs has shown clear benefits for student engagement, belonging and continuity, and we believe this pattern of structured contact should remain embedded across both October and February presentations.

Given the positive outcomes, we also suggest that other entry-level modules consider adapting the approach, tailoring the format to suit their disciplinary context. The transferable nature of the postcards—now demonstrated through

their adoption by other module teams—indicates their potential as a scalable tool for strengthening tutor–student communication across the wider University.

Finally, we recommend further exploration of student co-creation in postcard design, not only to enhance representation and diversify the visual material, but also to build students' sense of ownership and connection to their qualification.

Dissemination

Deliverables

One of the key deliverables from the project is the full set of 31 digital postcards. These now form an established resource on U101 and continue to support weekly communication across all tutor groups. While the postcards are bespoke to the module, they offer a clear illustration of how visually engaging, low-effort communication can be used to build connection and belonging in a distance-learning context. In this sense, they provide a useful reference point for colleagues considering similar approaches or exploring ways to enhance regular contact within their own modules.

The project leaders have disseminated their findings both within the Open University and externally:

- STEM Teaching Conference March 2023
- 12th eSTEeM Conference April 2023
- Horizons in STEM HE Conference July 2023
- E&I Scholarship Sharing December 2023
- INTED March 2024
- Equitable Outcomes November 2024
- RIDE March 2025

Figures and tables

Fig.1 Postcard Study Week 2

Fig.2 Postcard Study Week 19

Fig.3 Tutorial attendance

Fig.4 Completion rates

Fig.5 Completion rates visual overview

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University approval processes

Our approach to ethics was guided by advice from the eSTEeM Director, who clarified that formal approval from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee was not required in this context because Associate Lecturers were collecting feedback from their own tutor groups as part of routine pedagogic practice. Nevertheless, we remained committed to ethical principles of transparency, voluntary participation and data minimisation. The student survey was anonymous, participation was optional, and no personal or sensitive information was collected. Students were informed that their responses would be used solely for the purposes of evaluating the intervention and that they could decline to take part without any consequence for their studies.

Appendix

Appendix A – Postcards 1 -31