

**The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module.**

Key words: Drop-in tutorial, online, student participation, assessment support, Q&A tutorial

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Submission date: 27<sup>th</sup> April 2022

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

Open University standard online tutorials are generally tutor-led with the tutor setting the agenda and content to be covered. Although they include both presentation and activities, some students are reluctant to actively participate. Butler *et al.* (2018) suggested that students would benefit from more variety of tutorial types within module tuition strategies. This project investigated the inclusion of online student-led drop-in tutorials to support assessment on U116 (Environment: journeys through a changing world). The aims were to gauge the value to students of this style of tutorial, to understand their behaviour during the sessions and to assess their overall experience. The project also investigated the tutor experience of facilitating the tutorials.

Eight online drop-in tutorials were incorporated into the module tuition strategy for the 20J presentation, with careful wording of tutorial descriptions to make it clear to students that they were expected to ask questions to aid their understanding of assessment requirements. Evidence of student experience was collected via two student surveys, confidence polls at the end of each tutorial and one student-led focus group. Other data used included attendance data and student achievement on the module. Tutor perspectives were gathered from reflective logs completed after each event.

The main findings were that 23% of the 20J cohort attended at least one drop-in tutorial. The students surveyed indicated that they were a valuable addition to the tuition strategy. The majority arrived at the start of each session and stayed until the end, rather than 'dropping in and out'. Most reported that listening to questions from other students was useful, even if they had no question of their own to ask. Reasons for attending or not were sought in the surveys and the focus group. Student preference for their own tutor facilitating the drop-ins was also investigated. Tutor experience indicated some initial scepticism but by the end of the project the majority felt that the combination of standard and drop-in tutorials was valuable. Their reflections fed into the development of a tutor top tips document for running drop-in tutorials.

The overall findings of the project were that students value this style of tutorial. Those who attended reported increased confidence in subsequently completing assignments. There were also some indications that attendees gained higher TMA scores. Given the success of the project, drop-in tutorials have been incorporated into the module tuition strategy for future U116 presentations. The approach has also been adopted by three other module teams within the School of Engineering and Innovation.

## 2.0 Aims and scope of the project

Standard Open University tutorials are tutor-led, as tutors decide the structure and content in advance and online tutorials frequently consist of PowerPoint slides interspersed with activities such as quizzes. However, it is often difficult to encourage students to participate in online activities, leading to a didactic, presentation-led approach, rather than one which is facilitative and student-led. Thus, although students still value standard tutorials (Butler *et al.*, 2018), the online environment can create barriers for some students to actively

participate in their learning. Butler *et al.* (2018) found that students are also choosing to consume online tutorials in different ways, such as reviewing recordings, and proposed that more variety in tutorial types, taking account of different needs, may increase engagement. One way to increase the variety of tutorials is to include drop-in sessions. Hence, this project assessed the place for drop-in tutorials supporting assessment on U116, *Environment: journeys through a changing world*, the School of Engineering and Innovation's level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. These provided students the opportunity to ask questions about TMAs on U116, and included no formal presentation. Drop-in tutorials were in addition to standard tutorials in the existing module tuition strategy.

The overall aim was to assess whether drop-in tutorials supporting assessment on U116 were valued by students and therefore an effective use of tuition hours. This included investigating students' use and experience of drop-in tutorials. As well as this, the tutor experience was considered, as there is more inherent uncertainty in drop-in tutorials compared to standard tutorials. Therefore, from this a final aim was to produce a guide for tutors running drop-in tutorials.

### **3.0 Activities and overall approach**

The project implemented, and evaluated, a change to the U116 tuition strategy by including drop-in tutorials to support assessment for the 20J presentation. In the revised tuition strategy, the event name and student and tutor descriptions for the drop-in tutorials were carefully worded. This was to set student and tutor expectations that the tutorials were not presentation-based and students were expected to come with questions. Care was also taken not to imply that direct answers to TMA questions would be given. The name for each tutorial was in the form: *TMAxx: Drop-in with your questions* (see Appendix B). To provide an opportunity to ask questions when students may have considered the TMA questions, and to avoid discouraging attendance at standard tutorials, the drop-in tutorials were scheduled within 10 days of TMA cut-off dates.

Twelve U116 tutors, two tutors per cluster, were recruited to run the drop-in tutorials. U116 has seven TMAs and, except for TMA01, there was one drop-in tutorial per cluster for each TMA. For TMA01, there were two drop-in tutorials per cluster. The tutors also produced a reflective log after each tutorial based on prompt questions (see Appendix C). In addition, they were encouraged to note other thoughts about the experience. The tutors also ran a change in confidence poll at the end of each tutorial.

Students were surveyed twice. The first survey (see Appendix D) was sent to approximately half the students on U116 in late November 2020, including all students who had attended a drop-in tutorial. For students who had not attended a drop-in tutorial the purpose was to establish what their reason for this was. The second survey was conducted in late May 2021, just after the end of the module. Only students who had attended at least one drop-in tutorial were invited to respond. Unfortunately, although 285 students were in this category, only 130 were available to be surveyed at the time. This limited the number of

responses received and to a certain extent the validity of the results from the second survey.

Originally focus groups were planned December and May. However, the first focus group was delayed until April 2021, largely due to the workload pressures for the project team and the second was cancelled as no students accepted the invitation to participate. It should also be noted that only three students responded to the invitation for the first focus group and thus although the results were still valuable, they were a very limited view of student experience of the drop-in tutorials. To encourage students participating in the focus groups to be open with their experiences of the drop-in tutorials, two non-U116 students were recruited to lead them. This also provided a more student-focussed approach to the discussions. It was important that the student facilitators should have experience of communicating with students and a good knowledge of The OU, so recruitment was limited to students actively involved in OUSA. Both student facilitators were given a set of questions and prompts for the focus groups (Appendix E).

## 4.0 Main Findings

### 4.1 Overview of survey responses

Of the 600 students invited to respond to the first survey, 105 students completed it (17% response rate). Although, the response rate for the second survey was higher, at 19%, this was only 25 students. All these students had attended at least one drop-in tutorial.

**Table 4.1 Characteristics of U116 20J whole cohort, first survey respondents and second survey respondents.**

Group	U116 20J	First survey	Second survey
Female	56%	67.7%	76.0%
Male	44%	32.3%	24.0%
24 and under	25%	14.5%	16%
25 – 34	36%	21.0%	20%
35 - 44	19%	22.6%	16%
45-54	11%	8.1%	12%
55 and over	8%	33.9%	36%
Disability	23%	9.7%	0
White	91%	93.5%	100%
Black	2%	1.6%	0
Mixed	2%	1.6%	0
Refused	2%	3.2%	0

New	67%	82.3%	68%
Continuing	33%	17.7%	32%

Table 4.1 shows there was a higher proportion of female students and students aged 55 and over who responded to both surveys, than in the U116 20J cohort. For the first survey there was also a higher proportion of new students responding, than in the 20J cohort. Students who declared a disability were also not representative of the overall cohort. However, analysis of the survey results for these different groups showed the findings were generally no different to those for all respondents.

## 4.2 Drop-in tutorial attendance

The attendance data for both standard and drop-in tutorials (see Table 4.2) indicates that attendances at drop-ins were about a quarter of the attendances at standard tutorials. However, the average attendance at the drop-in sessions was higher. The lower overall attendance at drop-in sessions might be expected as there were multiple opportunities to attend standard tutorials, compared to one drop-in session (or two for TMA01).

**Table 4.2 Overall tutorial attendance U116 20J**

	Number of student attendances	Average number of students per tutorial
Standard tutorial	3236	12
Drop-in tutorial	783	16

Data from tutorial attendance registers indicated that 285 individual students attended a drop-in tutorial. On day 14 of the module, there were 1238 students registered. So, 23% of U116 students attended at least one drop-in tutorial. Table 4.3 shows the number of drop-in tutorials attended by individual students. Each student had the opportunity to attend up to eight drop-in tutorials. However, it would be rare for students to attend eight drop-in tutorials, as this would involve attending both sessions for TMA01.

**Table 4.3 Number of drop-in tutorials attended by students**

No of drop-ins attended	No of students
1	109
2	55
3	34

4	25
5	16
6	23
7	20
8	3

Attendances may have been higher if there were more opportunities to attend drop-in tutorials for each TMA. However, the data is still encouraging as students were choosing to take advantage of this different type of tutorial.

### 4.3 Awareness before joining that the tutorial would not be a standard tutorial

One concern about drop-in tutorials was whether students would be aware of the purpose of them and thus come prepared to ask questions. As described in Section 3, to try to mitigate this, the tuition strategy was carefully worded to set student expectations. Of course, between booking a tutorial and attending, students may not remember the nature of the event. Nonetheless, the results from both surveys did show that most students felt they understood the type of tutorial they were attending, as shown in Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4 Awareness that the tutorial was not presentation based, tutor-led.**

Response	First survey No. of students	First survey Percentage of students	Second survey No. of students	Second survey Percentage of students
Yes	42	67.7%	19	76%
No	10	16.1%	2	8%
Not sure	10	16.1%	4	16%

After the first drop-in tutorials tutors reported that a small proportion of students were not aware of the tutorial format. One tutor commented:

***'It felt like it took a while to get going, students were asking where the presentation was or whether they could access a recording, so there were a few reiterations about me not having prepared content but being available to address any questions or concerns they had about the module or TMA.'***

However, there were no subsequent similar reports from tutors, suggesting that students quickly came to understand the purpose of such tutorials, as these two tutor comments indicate:

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

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

This suggests that early in the presentation students may not come prepared with questions. Consequently, tutors suggested emailing students before drop-in tutorials to remind them of the format.

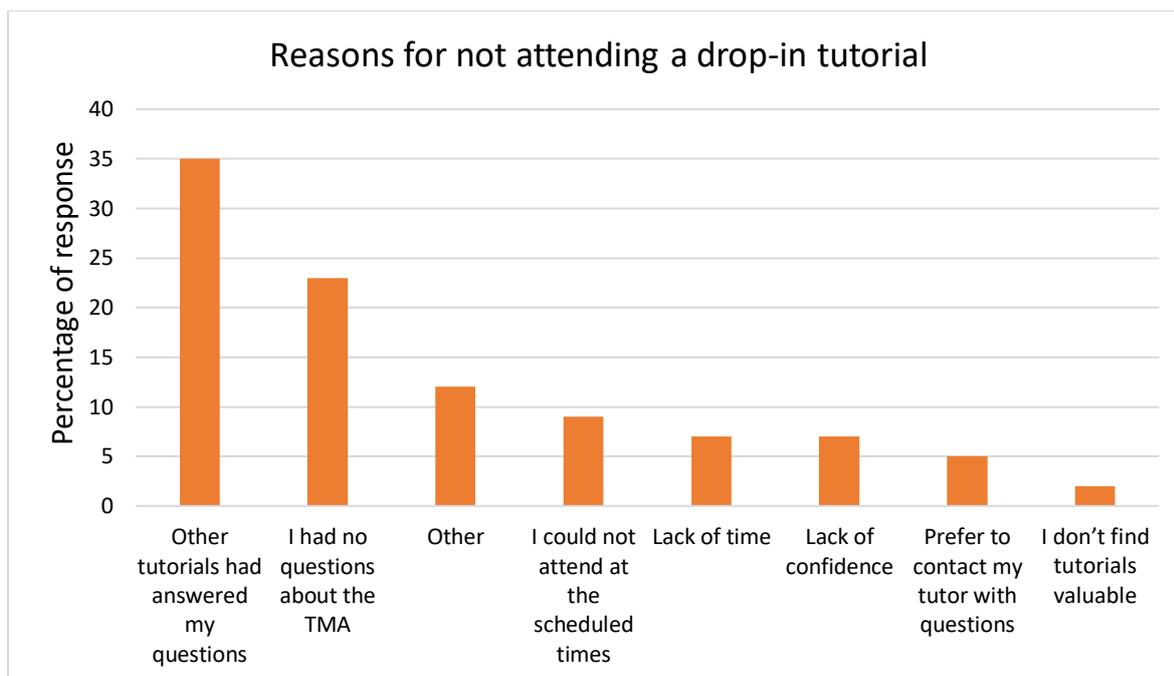
#### **4.4 Reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey only)**

Students who had not attended a drop-in tutorial were asked to select the main reason for this, including a free-text option for ‘other’ reasons. The results are shown in Table 4.5 and Figure 4.1.

***Table 4.5 Student reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey only)***

Reason	No. of students	Percentage of students
Other tutorials had answered my questions	15	34.9%
I had no questions about the TMA	10	23.3%
Other	5	11.6%
I could not attend at the scheduled times	4	9.3%
Lack of time	3	7.0%
Lack of confidence	3	7.0%
Prefer to contact my tutor with questions	2	4.7%
I don’t find tutorials valuable	1	2.3%
Didn’t understand the purpose of a drop-in	0	0

***Figure 4.1 Reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial***



As Table 4.5 and Figure 4.1 show, the most popular reason for not attending a drop-in tutorial was that other tutorials had provided answers for students' questions (34.9%), followed by students not having any questions about the TMA (23.3%). As the drop-in tutorials were within the 10 days of the TMA cut-off date, after most standard tutorials covering a TMA, it is understandable that many students felt they had no further questions. However, there is evidence from the focus group that students appreciate this timing for drop-in tutorials. They all stated a preference to have their TMAs nearly completed before attending a drop-in and felt it was beneficial to have thought through the TMAs.

There was concern that the format of drop-in tutorials may be a barrier to attendance for less confident students. However, although, 82.3% of the students who responded to the first survey were new, only 7% of students did not attend due to lack of confidence. It was encouraging that only a small proportion of students lacked confidence. However, it still shows students may miss the benefits of tutorials because they lack confidence. What is not known, is whether this lack of confidence relates only to drop-in tutorials, where students are expected to ask questions, or more generally to attending tutorials. However, for these students, it shows the importance of the availability of individual support of their own tutors.

Of the students who answered 'other' the responses show that 3.5% of students had difficulties locating the tutorials. The reasons for this are unknown.

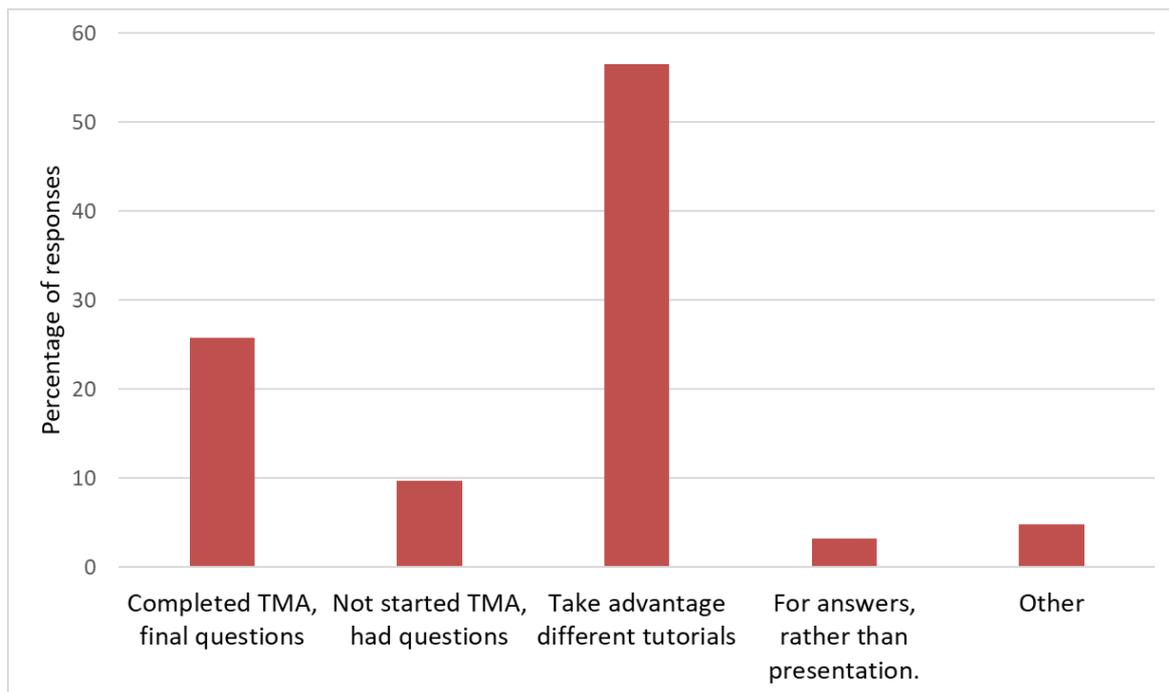
#### 4. 5 Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (both surveys)

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

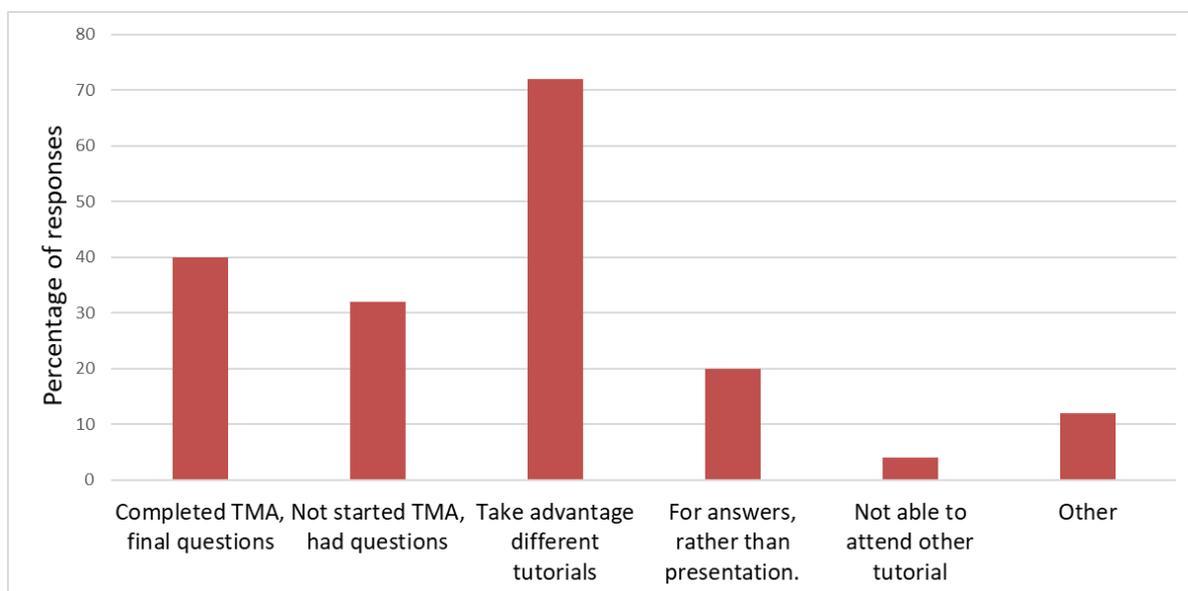
As can be seen in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 the most popular reasons, in descending order, in both surveys to attend a drop-in tutorial were:

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

**Figure 4.2 Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey)**



**Figure 4.3 Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (second survey)**



There was no difference in the order of these reasons across the different age ranges, for new and continuing students or for students with declared disabilities. However, as only 25 students completed the second survey this meant that there were very low numbers in each of the student groups, so this data is less robust than that for the first survey.

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

A small percentage of students chose to attend a drop-in tutorial, rather than a standard one, because they just wanted an answer to a question. The reasons for this are unknown but for time-poor students perhaps they consider this an effective use of their limited time.

As all the drop-in tutorials were designated as ‘not recorded’, students could select ‘wanting to attend a tutorial that was not recorded’ as a reason. No students, on either survey, selected this option. Hence, it appears this was not a factor in their decision to attend drop-in tutorials. However, one student at the focus group suggested submitting questions in advance, and then listening to recordings rather than attending tutorials. This is not something that the project team is pursuing, as it has less benefits than other avenues for asking questions.

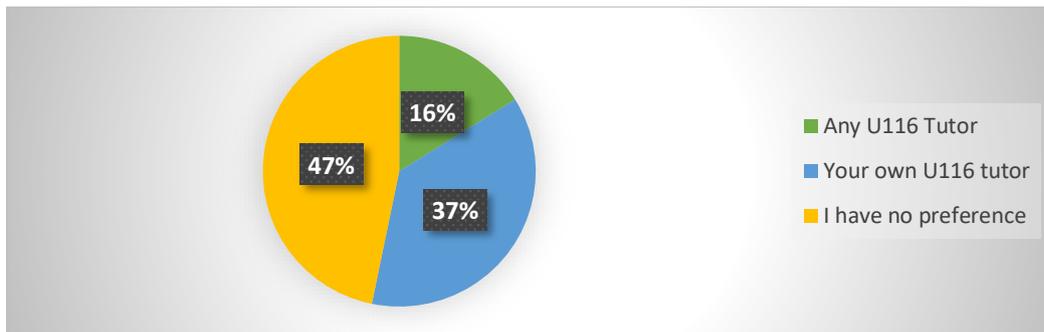
#### 4.6 Preference for who ran the drop-in tutorials

As only 12 tutors ran drop-in tutorials, for most students their own tutor was not running the drop-in tutorials. Hence, students were asked if they had a preference for who ran the tutorials.

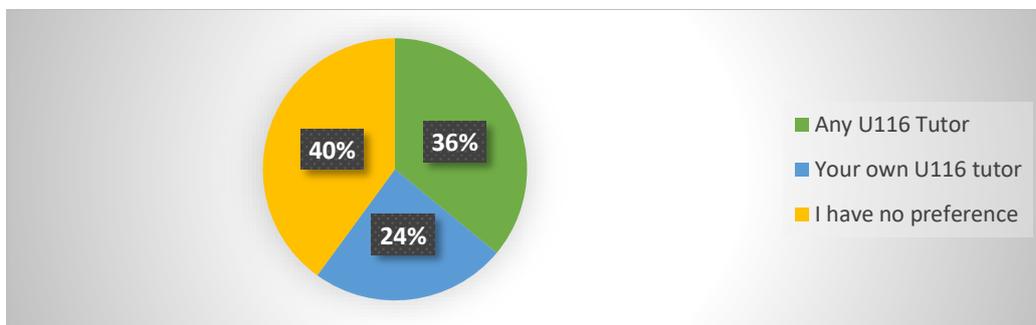
**Table 4.6 Preference for who ran the drop-in tutorials**

Response	First survey		Second survey	
	No. of students	Percentage of students	No. of students	Percentage of students
Own U116 tutor	23	37.1%	6	24.0%
I have no preference	29	46.8%	10	40.0%
Any U116 tutor	10	16.1%	9	36.0%

**Figure 4.4a Student tutor preference (first survey)**



**Figure 4.4b Student tutor preference (second survey)**



The results, shown in Table 4.6 and Figures 4.4a and 4.4b, indicate that most students (62.9% and 76%) did not prefer their own tutor to run the drop-in tutorials. Two students who attended the focus group also had no preference, although one would prefer the same tutor each time. This may correspond with the anecdotal evidence on U116 that some students seem to select tutorials that are most convenient to them in terms of date and time, rather than whether their own tutor is delivering it.

A lower percentage of students reported a preference for their own tutor in the second survey. This could indicate that as students progressed with their studies, they are more willing to attend tutorials not held by their own tutor. However, due to the relatively small sample size this result may not be any more significant than for the first survey.

There was also no significant difference between the preference reported by continuing and new students or male and female students, compared to all students.

#### **4.7 Help with and confidence in completing assignments**

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

- gaining confidence with work they had completed
- being able to clarify questions
- hearing questions from other students about points they had not considered

- being reassured that other students had similar questions
- gaining a different perspective

There were a few students who reported that the tutorials had not helped them, as shown in Table 4.7. Of these three students, one had already completed the TMA, another reported connection issues so they were not able to ask their question and the final student appeared to have entered the tutorial room at a time when a drop-in tutorial was not timetabled and found an empty room.

**Table 4.7 Whether drop-in tutorials helped students to complete assignments**

Response	First survey		Second survey	
	No. of students	Percentage of students	No. of students	Percentage of students
Yes	47	75.8%	21	84.0%
No	3	4.8%	0	0
Not sure	12	19.4%	4	16.0%

When asked whether attending drop-in tutorials had affected their confidence in completing the assignments, 94% and 96% (first and second survey) of the students indicated an increased confidence. Only 5 students reported no change in confidence, and no students reported a decrease in confidence.

Anonymous confidence polls were also held at the end of drop-in tutorials. The aggregated results from these are presented in Table 4.8, showing that 94% of students indicated an increase in confidence, corroborating the survey results. Students who attended the focus group also reported increased confidence.

**Table 4.8 Results of confidence poll at the end of drop-in tutorials**

Response	No. of students	Percentage of students
Much more confident	282	56.2%
A little more confident	190	37.8%
No change	26	5.2%

Less confident	4	0.8%
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#### 4.8 Student behaviour during drop-in tutorials

Students' understanding of the purpose and format of tutorials could impact on their behaviour in tutorials. This may be a particular issue in drop-in tutorials where sessions are more student-led. As well as asking tutors running the drop-in tutorials to reflect on how students behaved in the drop-in tutorials, the students were also asked about this in the surveys.

A significant finding was that most students arrived at the start of the drop-in tutorials and stayed until the end, even after having their question answered. One tutor reported:

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

This was also reported by the students in the surveys, as shown in Table 4.8. This means that most of the students were not using the tutorials as 'drop-in' sessions in quite the way intended by the project team but adapting the idea for their own purposes.

**Table 4.9 Student behaviour at drop-in tutorials (multiple responses accepted)**

Student response	First survey		Second survey	
	Number of students	Percentage of students	Number of students	Percentage of students
Remained in the room after asking question	37	59.7%	20	80.0%
Asked a question then left the room	1	1.6%	1	4.0%
No question but attended to listen	18	29.0%	13	52.0%
Had a question but was not confident enough to ask it	4	6.5%	5	20.0%
Not ask question as someone else had asked it	14	22.6%	5	20.0%
Had a question but there was not enough time to ask it	3	3.8%	2	8.0%

As tutors reported that most students attended the whole tutorial, it might be expected that the responses from the students when asked if they remained in the room would be closer to 100%. However, the wording of the other statements, for example 'No question but attended to listen', did not include 'remaining in the room'. So, these students may have remained in the room but were not able to indicate it. This may help to explain the apparent anomaly in the data in Table 4.8, particularly as 29.0% of students in the first survey and 52.0% of students in the second survey reported attending the tutorial but having no question. It can also be difficult to keep track of students in a busy tutorial so fewer students may have remained in the room than tutors reported.

The relatively high percentage of students who came to a drop-in tutorial with no question could partly explain the few cases where tutors reported that there was initially a lack of questions. Strategies tutors used in this situation are covered in Section 4.9.

However, there is clear evidence that students found listening to other answers helpful, with no students in the survey selecting 'unhelpful' and many students commenting that other students' questions covered points they had not considered. Students attending the focus group also reported staying for the whole tutorial to ensure they did not miss anything useful. There was just one student who stated they found the tutorials ***'a bit of a waste of time because I was listening to questions that did not concern me'***. Despite this, the student still reported finding the drop-in tutorials helpful.

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

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

This peer-to-peer support and friendly atmosphere was also noted by the students attending the focus group.

Another key finding, reported by tutors, was that most students used the chat box to ask their questions. This perhaps is not a surprising result as many tutors experience this in their standard tutorials. However, this caused an issue in some tutorials with managing the flow of questions. Although, tutors found strategies to deal with this (see Section 4.9) and only two students reported this being a problem as they found the unstructured free-flow of questions confusing (see Section 4.10).

Even though most students used the chat box to ask their questions, Table 4.9 shows that a few students still lacked the confidence to ask the question they had. However, all but one of these students indicated that the tutorial had been helpful to them. The other stated that the questions asked were not relevant to them. It was still encouraging that relatively few

students who attended a drop-in tutorial did not feel confident enough to ask their questions.

As might be expected some students reported that they did not have to ask their question because other students had already done so. However, this had the added benefit for some that it was reassuring to know that other students also had the same questions. This was reported by tutors and students and as one student commented:

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

Unfortunately, there were cases when a few students were not able to ask their question due to lack of time in the tutorial (4.8% and 8%). Again, it was encouraging that this was relatively few students and it was also reassuring to know that these students still had other avenues to ask these questions, such as direct contact with their tutor. However, if this did become a more significant problem the length of the drop-in tutorials could be reviewed.

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

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

#### **4.9 The tutor perspective – reflective log**

Overall, tutors felt that having a combination of standard tutorials and drop-in tutorials was valuable because it offered variety to students and increased active engagement. Two tutors commented:

***'I think they are a useful addition and attract a wide selection of students from the cluster.'***

***'I confess I was a little doubtful at the outset... But it seems the lack of any formal tutor presentation changes the way students approach the tutorial – a switch from relatively passive consumption to much more active co-production.'***

Almost all tutors reported that they enjoyed running the drop-in sessions, with some tutors commenting that the tutorial format meant they felt more certain they were delivering what the students required. For example:

***'It gives a much more direct sense that you have provided what students needed.'***

While other tutors said they particularly enjoyed the opportunity the drop-ins provided to engage with students without a structured agenda:

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

***'I rather enjoyed it. It was nice to be able to go with the flow and segue into whatever the students were interested in.'***

Tutors also reflected on general management of the tutorials, particularly how to handle the questions being asked.

During the drop-ins most students asked questions using the chat box, and as a result it was possible for multiple questions to be asked simultaneously resulting in a queue of questions. The feedback from tutors on the rate at which questions were asked was mixed. Some tutors reported that questions came in at a manageable pace, while other tutors reported occasions when lots of questions came in at once. For example:

***'At one point the questions were coming so quickly (in the chat box) that I lost track of which ones I had responded to.'***

During the early drop-in sessions, some tutors found this stressful. However, as the tutors gained more experience of running drop-ins they developed strategies for managing the queue of questions. For example:

***'I made a general comment that I would deal with each of the TMA questions in turn, and found I occasionally had to scroll up to ensure I hadn't missed any questions.'***

Considering the feedback from tutors about the possibility of having a queue of questions, advice was provided in the guidance document (Appendix F) to consider inviting questions about one TMA question at a time and to ask students to re-ask their question if it had been missed.

ALs also found it helpful to present the TMA questions on slides during the tutorial so these could be referred to during the discussion. One tutor commented:

***'.. incredibly handy to have on slides so all students can see what the questioner and tutor are talking about.'***

As a result, the Module Team have agreed to produce TMA slides for each presentation for use by tutors at drop-in tutorials.

Conversely, some tutors reported that at times there was a lack of questions, and it was necessary to prompt students to get the questions flowing. Tutors had different approaches to this but one common approach was to read through the TMA questions. As one tutor noted:

***'Students were initially very quiet and hesitant in coming forward with questions, though once I provided some structure student questions began to flow naturally (I simply read through each of the TMA questions and asked them how they felt...)'***

Another approach for generating questions was to ask students about areas tutors knew students commonly found challenging. For example:

***'No-one asked about the calculation at all until I prompted them by asking if they felt ok about it - after that there was a forest of question about every aspect of it!'***

As a result of tutor experiences of periods of silence, the following advice was offered in the tutor guidance document:

- There may be ‘long silences’ but try not to fill them straightaway to leave space for the students to ask their questions.
- However, in case students are not forthcoming with questions, have some prompts ready related to key areas of TMA questions that students commonly have queries about.

Some tutors also found it helpful to have additional material prepared or specific webpages open on their computer, to help answer questions. Consequently, advice was offered in the guidance document to have multiple tabs of the module pages open, ready to screen share during the tutorial, and if there are likely to be questions relating to maths and calculations, to prepare some slides with examples.

A small number of tutors reported having concerns around not giving too much away when responding to students’ questions about the TMA.

***‘It’s very difficult not to give away ‘the’ answer for questions, more so than in a face-to-face session I feel, perhaps because there is a ‘silent majority’ from whom you’re not getting feedback as to whether they’ve understood the initial, less prescriptive explanation.’***

However, this can be a feature of any online tutorial, where feedback from students is not always forthcoming.

It was recognised that for some tutors, the unpredictable nature of the drop-in sessions will be something they have less experience with and may initially find stressful. One tutor did report this and commented:

***‘Preliminary feelings before the tutorial - stressful due to feeling that I need to be more than just a tutor providing a normal tutorial where I deliver and get students to do activities. Answering questions for a full hour is stressful as you do not know what you are going to get. Stressful to revise in depth course materials. Stressful worrying about the manageability of large numbers. Afterwards - yes it was stressful but it went pretty well.’***

However, by their third tutorial they were reporting feeling less stress. It is clear that generally as tutors gained experience of running the sessions, they become less stressful.

In summary, most tutors found the drop-in sessions enjoyable and felt they were valuable to students. There were some instances of tutors experiencing challenges due to the unpredictable nature of the sessions, but as their experience grew, they were able to respond to the challenges. It is hoped that the guidance document produced from the tutors’ experience on this project will support tutors new to running drop-ins, helping them to prepare for and manage stressful aspects of the session, such as the queue of questions.

#### **4.10 The student perspective: overall appreciation of drop-in tutorials**

Table 4.10 shows that the vast majority of students would attend drop-in tutorials in future, recommend them to other students, and found them a very helpful or helpful addition to the standard tutorials. Students at the focus group would also recommend drop-in tutorials to other students but although they all stayed for the complete hour, would also remind students this was not necessary.

**Table 4.10 Overall appreciation of drop-in tutorials**

Student reporting	First survey		Second survey	
	Number of students	Percentage of students	Number of students	Percentage of students
Drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutorials very helpful or helpful	56	90.3%	22	88.0%
Very likely or likely to attend drop-in tutorials in the future	56	90.3%	21	84.0%
Very likely or likely to recommend drop-in tutorials to other students	55	88.7%	20	80.0%

Students at the focus group went further and stated that drop-in tutorials should be available on every module.

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

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

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

***‘Useful as the free structure was refreshing’***

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

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

Two students commented:

***'It was like a bonus session'***

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

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

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

A few less positive comments related to the organisation of the tutorials. Two students noted:

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

***'A little chaotic, though not the tutors fault, but trying to respond to lots of typed questions is difficult'***

Some of these frustrations may be resolved if tips from the 'U116 Drop-in tutorials to support assessment: Guidance for ALs.' document (Appendix F) are employed or by considering the length and number of the drop-in tutorials or the cluster sizes.

#### **4.11 Conclusion and recommendations**

Overall online drop-in tutorials to support assessment were valued by students and tutors. The students reported an increase in confidence in completing TMAs, valuing hearing other students' questions, appreciating the less structured nature of the tutorials and peer support. Although, there were some initial challenges for tutors in managing the flow, or lack, of questions, tutors found strategies to cope with this. Many tutors also reported finding the less formal nature of the drop-in tutorials enjoyable and one commented on the more active participation of students than in standard tutorials. There is also evidence that attendance at drop-in tutorials might improve performance of students on the module. There is some anecdotal evidence from other modules that both timing and lack of clear purpose for drop-in tutorials may result in low attendance. The project did not gather evidence on this but the good attendance at these drop-in tutorials, with a clear purpose, may support this.

The overall recommendations from the project are therefore to:

1. Provide tutors with guidance for managing drop-in tutorials.
2. Consider the incorporation of drop-in tutorials to support assessment into module tuition strategies.

3. Ensure the purpose of any drop-in tutorial is clear to students and tutors in the tuition strategy.

Questions that could be investigated further:

1. What level of lack of awareness of tutorials is there amongst students?
2. Did students attend these drop-in tutorials because the purpose was clear or that purpose was assessment support?
3. Why do students attend drop-in tutorials with questions when they have other means of asking questions (other tutorials, contacting tutor directly, forums, social media)?
4. What potential is there for students to find value in drop-ins with different purposes?
5. How easy is it to run drop-in tutorials for subjects involving specialist notation?
6. How successful is this type of tutorial in Level 2 and Level 3 modules, where the students are more experienced?
7. What are the main student motivations in selecting which tutorials to book?

## 5.0 Impact

Students who attended drop-in tutorials achieved around 3 percentage points higher on both the average U116 overall module score, and average score for the examinable component (TMA07), compared to the average scores for the whole U116 20J cohort. This could be evidence indicating a positive impact on student performance of attending drop-in tutorials. However, this cannot be stated with any certainty as for various reasons these students may be more engaged with their studies, and hence more likely to achieve higher scores even without attending drop-in tutorials.

As a result of the overall positive responses from the students and tutors to the drop-in tutorials, these were incorporated into the U116 tuition strategy from 21J. All tutors were provided with a copy of the drop-in tutorial guidance document and a summary of the results. To date there have been no issues reported with the sessions.

The project and very early results were introduced at the *Second eSTeEM Student Conference: Engaging students as partners in Scholarship* and to tutors attending the tutor Staff Development online event in November 2020. In June 2021, interim project findings were presented in posters at the OU's *eSTeEM Fringe Conference* and the *Horizons in STEM Higher Education Conference*. As well as this, the results were shared at the STEM Level 1 Chair's meeting in May 2021, with E&I Staff Tutor colleagues in February 2022 and the U116 module team. In February 2022 a presentation was given on the project at the *OU's STEM Teaching Conference*.

Online drop-in tutorials to support assessment have also been included in the tuition strategies for two other E&I modules (T220 and T317) and there are plans to introduce them

in U101 from 22J. The tutor best practice guide will also be shared with the relevant module team chairs.

### List of deliverables

Drop-in tutorials to support assessment: Guidance for ALs

### Tables and Figures

Table 4.1: Characteristics of U116 20J whole cohort, first survey respondents and second survey respondents.

Table 4.2: Overall tutorial attendance U116 20J

Table 4.3: Number of drop-in tutorials attended by students

Table 4.4: Awareness that the tutorial was not presentation based, tutor-led.

Table 4.5: Student reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey only)

Table 4.6: Preference for who ran the drop-in tutorials

Table 4.7: Whether drop-in tutorials helped students to complete assignments

Table 4.8: Results of confidence poll at the end of drop-in tutorials

Table 4.9: Student behaviour at drop-in tutorials (multiple responses accepted)

Table 4.10: Overall appreciation of drop-in tutorials

Figure 4.1: Reasons for not attending a drop-in tutorial

Figure 4.2: Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (first survey)

Figure 4.3: Reasons for attending a drop-in tutorial (second survey)

Figure 4.4a: Student tutor preference (first survey)

Figure 4.4b: Student tutor preference (second survey)

### References

Butler, D., Cook, L., Hayley-Mirnar V., Halliwell, C. and MacBrayne, L. (2018) Achieving student centred facilitation in online synchronous tutorials (2018) Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/sites/www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/files/files/2018-10-D-Butler-et-al-Final-report-web-version.pdf>. Accessed February 2020.

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTEEeM Final Report.

## University approval processes

If your project required specific approval from university committees, please provide the appropriate information below. This is a necessary requirement for future publication of outputs from your project.

- *SRPP/SSPP – Approval from the Student Research Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number 2020/084*
- *Ethical review – Confirmation was received from HREC that the project was low-risk and therefore did not require a formal ethical review. Reference number HREC/3693/Townsend*
- *Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration number SA28-04-036*

## Appendices

Appendix A: Project metrics

Appendix B: Excerpt from U116 20J tuition strategy

Appendix C: Tutor reflections prompt questions

Appendix D: Student survey instruments

Appendix E: Student focus group prompts

Appendix F: Drop-in tutorials to support assessment: Guidance for ALs

### **Appendix A: Project metrics**

<b>Project staff</b>	
Number of academic, academic-related staff who contributed to the project	Maria Townsend, Emma Champion, Wendy Berndt
Number of days spent working on the project for all staff involved, including the project lead(s)	48 days
Number of tutors and number of days contribution to the project	12 tutors – 1.5 days each. Total 18 days

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

Number of students involved as co-researchers/co-collaborators on the project and any student incentives provided	Two students as facilitators of student focus group.
<b>Student survey data (if applicable)</b>	
Number of students surveyed	First survey: 600 Second survey: 105
Number of student respondents	First survey: 105 Second survey: 25
<b>Student interview data (if applicable)</b>	
Number of students interviewed	NA
<b>Student focus group data (if applicable)</b>	
Number of students involved either as interviewers or interviewees	Student interviewers: 2 Student interviewees: 3
<b>AL survey data (if applicable)</b>	
Number of tutors surveyed	NA
Number of tutor respondents	NA
<b>AL interview data (if applicable)</b>	
Number of tutors interviewed	NA
<b>AL focus group data</b>	
Number of tutors involved either as interviewers or interviewees	NA

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

## Appendix B - Excerpt from U116 20J tuition strategy

Element title	Student event description	Tutor event description	Student event purpose	Tutor event purpose
TMA01: Drop-in with your questions.	This is a less formal online tutorial for you to ask questions to aid your understanding of the requirements of TMA01. It will not be recorded.	This is a less formal drop-in online session about the requirements of TMA01 where students lead the direction of the discussion. It should not be recorded.	This tutorial is an opportunity to raise your queries about TMA01. The tutor will not give a formal presentation.	The purpose is to complement the existing more formal introductory tutorial with less formal student-led session. Students should be encouraged to raise any queries that they have in relation to TMA01. You should be prepared to respond to questions from the students rather than giving a presentation using prepared content. The session should not be recorded.

## Appendix C – tutor reflections prompt questions

### Themes for tutor reflections on drop-in tutorials to support U116 assessment.

Please take some time after *each* drop-in tutorial to reflect on the experience. To get you started we have provided a list of prompts below.

Part of this project is to produce a best practice guide for running drop-in tutorials. So while there is no need to provide a comment for all the prompts the first in the list, top-tips for other ALs, is particularly useful.

However, please also don't feel constrained by our list of prompts. We would very much welcome any other thoughts on the drop-in tutorials.

There is no specific word count but we aren't expecting your reflections on each drop-in tutorial to be more than 500 words.

***Although, all data collected from the project will be anonymised before analysis, for the purposes of these reflections please do not name individual students.***

Please send Maria (maria.townsend@open.ac.uk) your reflections within seven days of each drop-in tutorial, along with a list of students who attended.

### Prompts

What would be your top-tips for other tutors running drop-in tutorials?

What went well?

What didn't go so well?

How did the students interact with you?

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

What were the main types of questions the students asked? For example, queries about TMA questions, general module or OU questions.

How did you feel about running the drop-in tutorial?

How prepared do you think the students were to ask questions?

What did you learn from running the session?

What, if anything, would you change for other drop-in sessions?

What, if anything, would you take forward from the drop-in experience to more conventional tutorials?

If you had a 'queue' of students waiting to ask questions how did that make you feel or act?

Were there any comments from students that you felt were useful to share with the project team? If so, what were they?

How many students just listened, rather than ask a question?

## **Appendix D – Student survey instruments**

### **First survey**

#### **Question 1**

A drop-in tutorial is one where the purpose is for you to ask questions, rather than a presentation-based, tutor-led tutorial.

Have you attended a U116 drop-in tutorial?

Yes

No

#### **Question 2**

Which of the below most closely matches your reason for not attending a drop-in tutorial?

Lack of time.

I could not attend at the scheduled times.

Lack of confidence.

I don't find tutorials valuable.

I attended other tutorials that answered all my questions.

I didn't understand the purpose of the drop-in tutorials.

I had no questions about the TMA.

I prefer to contact my own tutor with my questions about the TMA

Other

If you selected Other, please give your reason for not attending a U116 drop-in tutorial:

(Free text answer)

#### **Question 2**

Which of the below most closely matches your reason for attending a drop-in tutorial?

I had completed the TMA and had some final questions.

I had not started the TMA and had some questions.

I wanted to take advantage of the different tutorial opportunities available to me.

I had not been able to attend other tutorials for that specific TMA.

I chose to attend a drop-in tutorial rather than a presentation-based tutorial because I just needed to have my question answered.

I wanted to attend a tutorial that was not recorded.

Other

If you selected Other, please give your reason for attending a drop-in tutorial:  
(Free text answer)

### Question 3

Before joining the drop-in tutorial were you aware that it would not be a presentation-based tutor-led tutorial?

Yes

No

Not sure

### Question 4

Who would you prefer to run the drop-in tutorials?

Any U116 tutor.

Your own U116 tutor.

I have no preference.

### Question 5

Did you find that attending a drop-in tutorial helped you to complete your assignment?

Yes

No

Not sure

Please explain why attending a drop-in tutorial helped you to complete your assignment.

(Free text answer)

Please explain why a drop-in tutorial did not help you to complete your assignment.

(Free text answer)

### Question 6

To what extent did attending the drop-in tutorials affect how confident you felt about completing your assignments?

- Much more confident
- A little more confident
- No change in confidence
- Less confident
- Not sure

### Question 7

During the drop-in tutorials did you:

- Ask a question and remain in the room listening to the responses to other students' questions.
- Ask a question and then leave the tutorial.
- Not ask your question because someone else had already asked it.
- Have a question but was unable to ask it due to lack of time in the tutorial.
- Have a question but did not feel confident enough to ask it.
- Not have a question but attended the tutorial to listen to the responses to other students' questions.
- Not sure.

If you remained in the room listening to the responses to other students' questions how helpful did you find this? 4 = Very helpful 1 = Not helpful

	4	3	2	1
Helpfulness of listening to responses to other students' questions.				

### Question 8

How would you describe your experience of attending the drop-in tutorial?  
(Free text answer)

### Question 9

In your view, how useful is it to have drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutor-led tutorials? 4 = Very useful 1 = Not useful

	4	3	2	1
Usefulness of drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutorials.				

### Question 10

How likely are you to attend more drop-in tutorials in the future? 4 = Very likely 1 = Very unlikely

	4	3	2	1
Likelihood of attending more drop-in tutorials.				

### Question 11

How likely is it that you would recommend attending drop-in tutorials to other students? 4 = Very likely 1 = Very unlikely

	4	3	2	1
Likelihood of recommending drop-in tutorials to other students.				

### Second survey

#### Question 1

A drop-in tutorial is one where the purpose is for you to ask questions, rather than a presentation-based, tutor-led tutorial.

How many drop-in tutorials have you attended whilst studying U116?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

#### Question 2

Please select all that apply. What were your reasons for attending the drop-in tutorials?

I had completed the TMA and had some final questions.

I had not started the TMA and had some questions.

I wanted to take advantage of the different tutorial opportunities available to me.

I had not been able to attend other tutorials for that specific TMA.

I chose to attend a drop-in tutorial rather than a presentation-based tutorial because I just needed to have my question answered.

I wanted to attend a tutorial that was not recorded.

Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

(Free text answer)

#### Question 3

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTeEM Final Report.

Before joining the drop-in tutorial were you aware that it would not be a presentation-based tutor-led tutorial?

Yes

No

Not sure

#### **Question 4**

Who would you prefer to run the drop-in tutorials?

Any U116 tutor.

Your own U116 tutor.

I have no preference.

#### **Question 5**

Did you find that attending a drop-in tutorial helped you to complete your assignment?

Yes

No

Not sure

Please explain why attending a drop-in tutorial helped you to complete your assignment.

(Free text answer)

Please explain why a drop-in tutorial did not help you to complete your assignment.

(Free text answer)

#### **Question 6**

To what extent did attending the drop-in tutorials affect how confident you felt about completing your assignments?

Much more confident

A little more confident

No change in confidence

Less confident

Not sure

#### **Question 7**

Please select all that apply. During the drop-in tutorials did you:

Ask a question and remain in the room listening to the responses to other students' questions.

Ask a question and then leave the tutorial.

Not ask your question because someone else had already asked it.

Have a question but was unable to ask it due to lack of time in the tutorial.

Have a question but did not feel confident enough to ask it.

Not have a question but attended the tutorial to listen to the responses to other students' questions.  
 Not sure.

If you remained in the room listening to the responses to other students' questions how helpful did you find this? 4 = Very helpful 1 = Not helpful

	4	3	2	1
Helpfulness of listening to responses to other students' questions.				

### Question 8

How would you describe your experience of attending the drop-in tutorial?  
 (Free text answer)

### Question 9

In your view, how useful is it to have drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutor-led tutorials? 4 = Very useful 1 = Not useful

	4	3	2	1
Usefulness of drop-in tutorials in addition to presentation-based tutorials.				

### Question 10

How likely are you to attend more drop-in tutorials in the future? 4 = Very likely 1 = Very unlikely

	4	3	2	1
Likelihood of attending more drop-in tutorials.				

### Question 11

How likely is it that you would recommend attending drop-in tutorials to other students? 4 = Very likely 1 = Very unlikely

	4	3	2	1
Likelihood of recommending drop-in tutorials to other students.				

## Appendix E – Student focus group prompts

*Facilitators introduce themselves, explaining they are current students.*

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group. I'm going to ask you about 5 main questions about your experiences of online drop-in tutorials on your Level 1 Environment module, U116. We don't envisage this taking more than about 90 minutes. We are going to record the focus group, so that we can transcribe the responses for our analysis. As back up for the recording one of us will also be taking notes. We might quote some of your responses, but you will not be identified in any publications or feedback to the module team or tutors. Are you all happy for me to record the focus group and begin?

*If yes, thank and proceed. If no, explain more about what you are doing and ask again. If any participant is not happy, then you should ask them politely to leave the focus group.*

Focus group outline:

There are four main areas that we want to ask you all about.

- Your experience of attending drop-in tutorials on U116.
- How you used the drop-in tutorials
- The value you found in the drop-in tutorials
- What you would say to other students about attending tutorials.

### **What was your experience of attending a drop-in tutorial?**

#### **Prompts:**

- How they felt about dropping in to ask a question
- If there were other students there how did you feel asking a question with them 'listening'?
- What the atmosphere was like (i.e. less formal than presentation-led) – did that help with confidence in asking a question?
- Was there any concern the tutor may not necessarily have been their own tutor? If so, why was that?

### **How did you use the drop-in tutorial?**

#### **Prompts:**

- At what point in the tutorial did they drop-in?
- Did they use the microphone or the chat box to ask the question? Why was that?
- What was the purpose of your question – for example, quick question about an almost complete TMA, to clarify a point to get you going, or other more general question.

### **What was the value to you of the drop-in tutorials?**

#### **Prompts:**

- How did their confidence in completing the TMA change, if it did?

- Perhaps it helped with their time management – just spending a few minutes to ask a question.
- How useful was it to hear other student’s questions and the answers?
- If you do see a place for drop-in tutorials as well as tutor-led, presentation type tutorials, why is that?

**Is there anything you would say to a new student about attending tutorials?**

**Prompts:**

- Reasons for attending tutorials
- Preparation for tutorials
- Would you recommend attending tutorials

**Is there anything else you would like to mention about attending drop-in tutorials?**

**Wrap-up for the focus group**

That concludes the focus group. Once we are certain the recording has been successful the back-up notes will be destroyed. During transcription responses will be anonymised, prior to them being analysed by the researchers. Remember that at any point up to aggregation of the data you can ask for your data to be withdrawn.

Thank you for your time and feedback on drop-in tutorials. It will be valuable in determining how the university continues to develop tutorials.

**Appendix F – Drop-in tutorials to support assessment: Guidance for ALs**

After a successful pilot in 20J of drop-in tutorials, to support assessment on U116, these have been incorporated into the U116 tuition strategy as a standard learning event. The tutorials are specifically for students to ask questions related to TMAs and not for presenting teaching material, or associated activities. This difference is communicated to students in the tutorial timetable.

This document contains suggested guidance specific to drop-in tutorials on U116, which was gathered from tutors who took part in the pilot project.

A set of slides containing the TMA questions, question advice and learning outcomes will be provided for use during the tutorials.

The tutorials are timetabled for one hour and as students could drop-in at any time during that hour, it is important to remain in the room for the full hour of the tutorial. However, during the pilot it was found that most students arrived at the start of the tutorial and stayed until the end. Students reported they found it useful to hear other questions and answers given. This means that even if there is a queue of questions in the chat pod, as

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Townsend, M., Champion, E. and Berndt, B. (2022) The value to students of drop-in tutorials to support assessment on a level 1 interdisciplinary environment module. eSTEEeM Final Report.

most students use this to pose their questions, students may still find the wait for their question to be answered useful for them. There may also be some students who do not ask a question and have just come to listen, or had their question answered before asking it.

Please note that these drop-in tutorials should not be recorded.

## Suggested advice and tips from tutors who took part in the pilot

### Preparation for U116 drop-in tutorials

- It can be useful to email students before a drop-in tutorial to remind them of the purpose and format of the tutorial, and how it differs from other tutorials on the module.
- You could also prepare your welcome slide to remind students of the purpose of the tutorial when they enter the Adobe Connect room.
- Being able to refer to the exact wording of TMA questions, question advice and the learning outcomes in the drop-in tutorial is helpful. Slides for each TMA, with these details, will be provided and shared in the 'Tutor shared resources forum' ([U116-TUTORS: Tutor shared resources forums \(open.ac.uk\)](#)).
- As most students ask questions using chat, it can be beneficial to increase the standard size of the chat pod in Adobe Connect.
- If there are likely to be questions relating to maths and calculations, it's helpful to prepare a slide with examples. This is most likely to be relevant to the drop-in tutorials for TMAs 02, 03 and 05 and possibly TMA04 in relation to the water report.

### Tips for during U116 drop-in tutorials

- Be prepared to reiterate the purpose of the tutorial at the start and remind students they are free to leave the tutorial after asking their question.
- There may be a rush of questions at the start which causes a queue of un-answered questions. To manage this situation, you could:  
Invite questions about each TMA question in turn  
Ask students to re-ask questions if you have missed any in the chat
- There may be 'long silences' but try not to fill them straightaway to leave space for the students to ask their questions.
- However, in case students are not forthcoming with questions, have some prompts ready related to key areas of TMA questions that students commonly have queries about.
- Remind students to be specific about which question (or question part) they are asking about.
- Have multiple tabs of module pages open in your internet browser, ready to screen share if you are able to. For example:

The U116 Assessment Guide for referencing  
The Carbon Calculator for TMA02  
The Museum Cabinet for TMA03  
The water investigation activity for TMA04  
The module online essay writing skills for TMA05 and TMA06.

Consider using your video briefly at the start of the tutorial to make the session more personal.