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## Sharing good practice and encouraging community cohesion online: a programme of tutor-led online events for Open University tutors

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**Sharing good practice and encouraging community cohesion  
online: a programme of tutor-led online events for Open  
University tutors**

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## Sharing good practice and encouraging community cohesion online: a programme of tutor-led online events for Open University tutors

This study the extent to which distance learning tutors found that sharing practice through participating in a tutor-led online programme of events helped them to develop as practitioners and hence support students more effectively. The programme of regular online sessions, delivered by tutors for tutors, was introduced as a staff development initiative at the Open University (OU) to (i) provide tutors with opportunities to share good practice with a view to improving their online interactions with their students, and (ii) help nurture a sense of community among tutors, providing a supportive situated learning environment (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which fosters peer support and in which they can share ideas and concerns. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of feedback obtained through surveys demonstrated that the programme has succeeded in providing an opportunity for distance learning tutors to share good practice in a friendly supportive environment, hence relieving some of the isolation they feel. Moreover, it helped to nurture community cohesion. A programme run on similar lines could help strengthen the tutor community and provide valuable opportunities for sharing concerns and good practice in any institution where tutors feel isolated. Examples might include institutions where much tuition is delivered online, where staff are located on different sites or where many staff have insecure contracts and therefore building community spirit among staff is likely to be challenging.

Keywords: situated learning, online staff development, community of practice, peer learning, online community

### Introduction

This studyresearch explored the extent to which distance learning tutors who participated in a tutor-led online programme of events were able to share practice to

1  
2  
3 help them support their students more effectively, and hence develop as practitioners  
4  
5 and integrate into an academic community.  
6  
7

### 8 ***Theoretical framework***

9  
10 Situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) was used for developing a theoretical  
11  
12 framework for this study. This theory suggests that learning takes place through active  
13  
14 and engaged interaction between members of a community of practice in an authentic  
15  
16 context, where members share a common interest and practice, and where legitimate  
17  
18 peripheral participation can lead to integral membership. Coughlan (2013) used  
19  
20 situated learning to design a model for a sustainable online learning community, in  
21  
22 which informal learning was nurtured and a community developed through shared  
23  
24 practices, focusing on the requirements of a specific community outside the Higher  
25  
26 Education sector, in this case trainers in the voluntary sector. Catalano (2015)  
27  
28 undertook a study involving students enrolled on a distance education library research  
29  
30 course, who learnt new ideas within an authentic context similar to that in which they  
31  
32 would actually use them. The results suggested that teaching models based on  
33  
34 principles of situated learning have the potential to transfer effectively to real world  
35  
36 contexts.  
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43 The research presented here was based on use of an education-orientated online  
44  
45 synchronous communication tool or tutorial room as an authentic context for the tutor  
46  
47 community, since this is where participating tutors would normally be doing much of  
48  
49 their teaching. Newcomers learn by immersion in the community and absorbing its  
50  
51 modes of action, as part of the process of becoming a community member - in time  
52  
53 moving towards full participation in the community of practice. This paper uses  
54  
55 components of situated learning theory in considering the challenges of forming a  
56  
57 community of practice in the online teaching environment. Members share  
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1  
2  
3 understandings and develop their practice through peer support, and newcomers become  
4  
5 integral members of the community through synchronous online interaction with  
6  
7 colleagues.  
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9

### 10 11 12 **Literature Review** 13

14 Peer support for learning has long been an area of considerable interest to educational  
15  
16 researchers (Webb, 1989; Kane and Sinka, 2009) to improve student learning and  
17  
18 motivation. Peer support for teachers to aid both their learning and professional  
19  
20 development can also be extremely helpful (Rhodes and Beneicke, 2002; Nicholson *et*  
21  
22 *al*, 2018). Teachers may share resources, lesson plans and assessment practice, and  
23  
24 solve problems together (Westbrook *et al*, 2013), or collaborate with colleagues in a  
25  
26 face-to-face setting to reflect on their practice, share experiences and ideas and develop  
27  
28 professional skills (e.g. Robbins, 1995; Rahman, 2018),  
29  
30  
31  
32

33 There are many published studies involving online distance peer support in non-  
34  
35 teaching contexts such as support for caregivers (eg Diefenbeck *et al*, 2014; Wasilewski  
36  
37 *et al*, 2016) or mental health issues (Deandrea *et al*, 2013). Literature on peer support in  
38  
39 an online context in which distance learning educators have an opportunity to engage in  
40  
41 meaningful practical experiences online is relatively sparse in comparison. Lockyen *et*  
42  
43 *al*, (2002) used asynchronous web-based communication tools to facilitate mentoring  
44  
45 and peer support in teaching practice in an attempt to support collaborative learning in  
46  
47 Australia - but although an asynchronous communication tool allowed time flexibility  
48  
49 and ample time for reflection, they concluded that a synchronous tool with a chat space  
50  
51 would better facilitate interaction. Peer support of teachers can sometimes be perceived  
52  
53 as being used to judge and evaluate session presenters, resulting in those being observed  
54  
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1  
2  
3 feeling apprehensive and anxious (e.g. Lomas and Kinchin, 2006; Swinglehurst *et al*,  
4  
5 2008; Jones and Gallen, 2016).  
6

7  
8 Online discussion forums can provide an informal opportunity for a community  
9  
10 of distance tutors to exchange views despite their geographical isolation. A tutors'  
11  
12 forum was found to reduce isolation for tutors based at dispersed sites at the University  
13  
14 of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, by fostering a welcoming and inclusive  
15  
16 space where tutors could share concerns and discuss issues of mutual interest.  
17  
18 (Beaumont *et al*, 2009). Such forums can provide peer support and play an important  
19  
20 role in community building (Kear, 2010).  
21  
22

23  
24 Nistor *et al* (2015) noted that a sense of community helps to sustain knowledge  
25  
26 sharing among academic professionals, as well as nurturing group cohesion and  
27  
28 relationships between colleagues and helping to improve their scholarly identity and  
29  
30 teaching capabilities. Hadar *et al* (2010) described a professional development  
31  
32 community project for college teachers in which interdisciplinary collaboration, and  
33  
34 skills acquisition to improve teaching and discussion of student learning, led to  
35  
36 development of a mutually supportive teacher community which adapted well to new  
37  
38 ideas.  
39  
40

41  
42 Such social interaction between academic community members does not  
43  
44 necessarily always require common location; it can comprise either face-to-face or  
45  
46 technology-mediated communication, or a mixture of both (Yang *et al*, 2010). Virtual  
47  
48 communities of practice which build on face-to-face workshops have been proposed as  
49  
50 possible teacher/community support mechanisms for computer science teachers in  
51  
52 secondary schools (Morrison *et al*, 2012; Ni *et al*, 2011). Ebenezer *et al* (2003) found  
53  
54 that electronic discussion boards, used for reflective dialogue on science teaching, could  
55  
56 be used effectively for community building among teachers. To nurture an effective  
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1  
2  
3 virtual community of practice, Brown and Duguid (2000) noted that the online space  
4  
5 used needs to have appropriate technology to enable quality participation and  
6  
7 interactivity. More recently, Bond and Lockee (2018) emphasised the lack of  
8  
9 professional development opportunities which focus on the use of technology for  
10  
11 learning to support best practices in teaching and learning. They provided both face-to-  
12  
13 face and virtual opportunities for faculty staff members to interact and share knowledge,  
14  
15 evaluated their perceived benefits of these opportunities, and concluded that in addition  
16  
17 to increased technological capabilities, the ability to interact and learn from other  
18  
19 faculty staff was seen by participants as a major benefit.  
20  
21  
22

23  
24 In Higher Education (HE), challenges for staff development and training not  
25  
26 only arise because of geographical isolation in distance learning environments, but also  
27  
28 because many HE institutions are undergoing significant structural and procedural  
29  
30 changes, including restructuring, more use of short-term contracts, external scrutiny and  
31  
32 accountability, and major reductions in funding. This, together with the tendency for  
33  
34 staff training in times of change to focus on 'imparting information' rather than on  
35  
36 developing and sharing good teaching practice, can result in teachers feeling isolated  
37  
38 and demoralised (Kinman and Wray, 2016). Reports of stress at work in HE institutions  
39  
40 are on the increase (Darabi *et al*, 2017), with the most significant source of stress  
41  
42 reported to be insecure employment (Tytherleigh *et al*, 2005, Fontinha *et al*, 2016).  
43  
44 Gourlay (2011) noted that new HE lecturers from practice-based rather than academic  
45  
46 backgrounds often felt particularly poorly integrated as part of an academic community,  
47  
48 and experienced confusion regarding their roles. Thus, nurturing community cohesion  
49  
50 for HE lecturers on non-standard contracts is acknowledged to be challenging,  
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60 community cohesion here being interpreted as the recognition of belonging to a

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3 community, a feeling of connectedness with that community and a willingness and  
4  
5 desire to participate in activities that promote it (Rovai, 2002).  
6  
7

8           Much teaching at HE Level is now delivered online or by distance learning.  
9  
10 Staff providing student support may never meet their students face-to-face. It has long  
11  
12 been acknowledged that distance learning students can feel isolated, both  
13  
14 geographically because of their physical distance from other learners, and also  
15  
16 psychologically, feeling alone and distant (Salmon, 2002, pp149-153); therefore,  
17  
18 fostering a sense of belonging among a student community can help to enhance learning  
19  
20 (Rovai, 2002; Beaumont *et al*, 2009). Similar feelings of isolation can be experienced  
21  
22 by distance learning tutors, especially when so many HE Institutions employ academic  
23  
24 staff on non-standard or hourly paid contracts. Staff on such contracts may be excluded  
25  
26 from appropriate academic development programmes, and consequently feel  
27  
28 undervalued and marginalised (Anderson, 2007), particularly when geographically  
29  
30 dispersed (Tait, 2002).  
31  
32  
33  
34

35           Staff who are part-time and time-constrained need access to informal learning,  
36  
37 peer interaction, networking and community building and situated learning  
38  
39 opportunities both in dual mode institutions and distance institutions such as the Open  
40  
41 University (OU). This is challenging when increasing numbers of part-time teaching  
42  
43 staff are based at a distance and rarely visit the institution which is employing them.  
44  
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### 49 ***Open University Context***

51 The OU has always relied on part-time tutors (Associate Lecturers or ALs) on fixed-  
52  
53 term contracts to support its students. Staff development workshops provide regular  
54  
55 opportunities for OU tutors to engage with each other; however, Tait (2002) suggested  
56  
57 that part-time tutors would benefit from engaging in more practice-focussed  
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2  
3 conversations that would foster connections between tutors and enhance the coherence  
4  
5 of student learning.  
6

7  
8         Although OU tutors are geographically dispersed and rarely meet, they have  
9  
10 access to numerous asynchronous online forums where they can discuss specific  
11  
12 teaching tasks or issues of a more general nature; such forums help support the informal  
13  
14 development of distance tutors who rarely meet face-to-face (Cornelius and Macdonald,  
15  
16 2008). They also provide an opportunity to experience something of the sense of being  
17  
18 an online student; this can be of huge value to staff who are inexperienced in the online  
19  
20 environment (Macdonald and Campbell, 2010). Hence online forums can to some extent  
21  
22 alleviate the sense of isolation and provide reassurance by providing a safe, supportive  
23  
24 environment in which to try new techniques and tools and build confidence in using  
25  
26 them.  
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29  
30         Like teaching staff at many HE institutions, part-time OU tutors are likely to be  
31  
32 time-constrained, and only willing to focus on professional development which is  
33  
34 directly relevant to their own working practices. Keeping up with technological  
35  
36 developments can require a significant time investment for tutors, and this is an  
37  
38 additional challenge for those working in isolation. For staff to be willing to participate  
39  
40 in training in such developments it needs to be both engaging and of practical use.  
41  
42 Tutor engagement with online professional development modules designed to help staff  
43  
44 understand how to use online tools to support their OU students was analysed by  
45  
46 Macdonald and Pontiatowska (2011). They established that non-formal and social  
47  
48 learning play an important role in the effectiveness of professional development  
49  
50 initiatives, so the impact of a staff development workshop can depend on who else  
51  
52 attends and who the participants subsequently talk to. Nurturing the community of the  
53  
54 participating tutors therefore aids effectiveness.  
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3 The feelings of isolation that many OU tutors experience, together with their  
4  
5 desire to feel part of an academic community and a strong belief that social elements of  
6  
7 online learning communities are central to successful online communication, led to the  
8  
9 piloting of *SocialLearn* as a platform for OU tutor interaction. The platform allowed  
10  
11 users to share information and engage on both a social and professional level, and thus  
12  
13 included social, cognitive and teaching elements. McCall *et al*, (2014) explored its use  
14  
15 for continuous professional development and creation of an academic community for  
16  
17 OU tutors and found that there was a strong desire for some kind of community which  
18  
19 could strengthen and enhance professional, social and learning opportunities. However,  
20  
21 *SocialLearn* was not dynamic or quick enough to be viable for time-constrained users;  
22  
23 additional barriers included concerns about the use of social media in general, and  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28 technical issues.  
29

30  
31 Projects involving OU tutors from both languages and from maths, computing  
32  
33 and technology, in which participants undertook peer observations and discussions in a  
34  
35 non-judgemental way without line-manager intervention, were found to provide  
36  
37 opportunities for open discussion and sharing practice in a supportive online teaching  
38  
39 environment (Harper and Nicolson 2013, Nicolson and Harper, 2014). These resulted in  
40  
41 increased tutor confidence and willingness to experiment in online tutorials, and an  
42  
43 increased appreciation by tutors of how they fitted into the wider OU teaching  
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46  
47  
48 community.  
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50  
51 Through trialling one-day themed online events incorporating a mixture of web-  
52  
53 based content, synchronous sessions and follow-up discussions, Campbell (2014, 2016)  
54  
55 established that online professional development can be very successful when it  
56  
57 includes the opportunity to reflect together with a community of peers; this helps to  
58  
59 build confidence and inspire new ideas for teaching practice. Peer interaction,  
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1  
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3 community building and situated learning can occur easily when staff meet regularly in  
4 the workplace (Milligan *et al*, 2014); to create these opportunities in an online  
5 environment is more of a challenge.  
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9

10 This paper builds on the lessons learned from these previous initiatives. The  
11 staff development programme on which it is based was called 'ByALs-ForALs' because  
12 it is designed and delivered by OU tutors (Associate Lecturers or ALs) for OU tutors.  
13 At the OU, many tutorials take place using synchronous conferencing facilities, which  
14 allow tutors and students to communicate by audio and share whiteboards and  
15 documents. The tutors work from home; ~~they have access to asynchronous discussion~~  
16 ~~forums with others on the same module, and~~ but opportunities to meet other tutors online  
17 in real time are limited (Atkins, 2008; Harper and Nicolson, 2013). The monthly  
18 online sessions were started in February 2015 as an initiative in the Science Faculty to  
19 address issues of isolation and to improve morale, as well as providing an opportunity  
20 for tutors to share ideas and good practice. Chickering and Gamson (1989) identified  
21 principles of good practice in undergraduate education which are generic and form the  
22 basis of the definition of good practice used here: practice which provides a good  
23 learning experience for students. It is naïve to assume that these principles can be  
24 transposed unproblematically to online teaching (Ritter and Lemke, 2000), but with  
25 increasing online delivery of tutorials, the ability to work effectively in an online  
26 environment is more crucial than ever.  
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49 Science tutors at the OU have traditionally had a strong sense of community  
50 because of the large number of interdisciplinary modules in the science curriculum.  
51 Hence the science tutors considered in this paper can be thought of as a community of  
52 practice (Wenger, 1999) since they are informally bound together by what they do -  
53 supporting science students at the OU - and what they have learned through doing it.  
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3 They have similar experiences through which they can share their collective  
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5 competence and learn from each other. The community includes members from  
6  
7 different science disciplines, but all share an interest in supporting their students  
8  
9 effectively. For a community to be effective, members of that community need to build  
10  
11 relationships with each other and interact in joint discussions; the ByALs-ForALs  
12  
13 programme offered a shared online space to enable them to do so. By contributing and  
14  
15 participating in a learning space identical to that used for tutorials with their own  
16  
17 students, tutors could exchange ideas about how they might improve their support for  
18  
19 students, discuss concerns, and help each other to become more effective practitioners.  
20  
21 They could share experiences, stories, use of different strategies and ways of addressing  
22  
23 recurring problems, and this helped them to develop and maintain shared knowledge -  
24  
25 as outlined by Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) - nurturing a sense of community  
26  
27 among the tutors. It not only provides an example of situated learning (Lave and  
28  
29 Wenger, 1991) because they are communicating using the same technology that they  
30  
31 use for teaching, but also of peer learning in an online networking community (Crisp,  
32  
33 2007; MacDonald and Campbell, 2010; Kear, 2011). It is an example of a community-  
34  
35 building approach to helping teachers to manage and lead change, rather than merely  
36  
37 responding to it (Popovic and Plank, 2016).  
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### *About the programme*

47  
48 This paper is about the programme called ByALs-ForALs which was set up and  
49  
50 organised by the authors, all of whom have AL contracts and are therefore members of  
51  
52 the science AL community. In phase 1 of the programme all tutors in the Science  
53  
54 Faculty (approximately 500) were invited to submit proposals to present an online  
55  
56 session based on one of three broad categories: Basic Skills; Learning & Teaching  
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3 Pedagogy; and Research & Scholarship. The twelve sessions accepted - scheduled  
4 monthly between February 2015 and June 2016 but with a break over the summer - used  
5 an education-orientated online synchronous communication tool or tutorial room,  
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7  
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9  
10 sometimes referred to as a virtual classroom. This was a version of the Blackboard  
11  
12 Collaborate software system renamed 'OU Live' and was identical to the system they  
13  
14 were using to teach students. It had facilities for recording the sessions so tutors unable  
15  
16 to attend the live session could watch later if they wished. All sessions were recorded  
17  
18 except the informal drop-in session (Table 1).  
19  
20

21  
22 [Table 1 near here]  
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24

25 The OU underwent a major change in Faculty structure in August 2016. The  
26  
27 Science Faculty merged with the Faculty of Maths, Computing and Technology to  
28  
29 become the larger STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) Faculty. The  
30  
31 ByALs-ForALs programme was therefore extended to include the entire cohort of  
32  
33 STEM tutors. This brought additional challenges to the delivery of staff development  
34  
35 initiatives, because tutors from different parts of the University were familiar with  
36  
37 different blends of online and face-to-face tuition and different models for online  
38  
39 delivery of modules. The invitation to submit proposals for sessions and the invitation  
40  
41 to attend them was extended to all STEM ALs (approximately 1500) and ten sessions  
42  
43 took place between October 2016 and July 2017; this is referred to here as phase 2.  
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47

48 [Table 2 near here]  
49

50 The programme is ongoing, and at the time of writing, a further ~~25~~ sessions  
51  
52 have taken place between July 2017 and December 2019. In this phase of the  
53  
54 programme (phase 3), ~~but data from these sessions (phase 3) is not included here.~~Phase  
55  
56 3 of the programme in which sessions are delivered using the Adobe Connect software.  
57  
58 has been running from October 2017 to July 2019. As before, a call for submissions  
59  
60

was circulated to STEM tutors, and analysis of the feedback and participation data from phase 3 is underway but is not included here.

## Methods

### *Context of the programme*

Each proposal submitted to the ByALs-ForALs programme included a brief description of how the session would be structured, what it would cover, and what opportunities would be included for active participation and discussion. All twelve of the suggested proposals in phase 1 were accepted, some after negotiation with the proposer to ensure there would be plenty of opportunities for discussion. The content of the programme (Table 1) was therefore largely dictated by the tutors themselves. Presenters were each given a one-day consultancy fee for preparing and delivering their presentation. All sessions were scheduled for one-hour duration during a mid-week evening, and were advertised by email and on an internal website to which all science tutors have access. A brief description of the plan for each session was provided and tutors indicated their intention to attend by adding their name to a wiki accessed via the website.

In phase 2 all proposals which were received were accepted into the programme, some after amendments, as before (Table 2). They included one from a tutor who tutored both in science and elsewhere in STEM, a further six from science tutors and three from tutors who had previously been part of the Faculty of Maths, Computing and Technology. The higher number of sessions presented by science tutors than from those elsewhere in STEM, (despite science tutors comprising only about one third of the STEM tutor cohort), was probably the result of being more familiar with the programme, and therefore more willing to submit proposals.

1  
2  
3 In both phases, tutors were informed about the programme by email,  
4  
5 with a reminder a week before each session. Tutors attending each session were  
6  
7 identified from the recordings and attendance was added to each tutor's staff  
8  
9 development record to ensure that their participation could be acknowledged by their  
10  
11 line manager.  
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### 17 ***Data collection and analysis***

18  
19 The study adopted a mixed methods approach, with analysis of both quantitative and  
20  
21 qualitative data. Tutors indicating their intention to attend each session, numbers who  
22  
23 attended and estimated numbers who downloaded the recording were counted. A  
24  
25 feedback survey, based on one regularly used by the authors to gather feedback after  
26  
27 staff development events, was sent to attendees a few days after each event, and  
28  
29 included both quantitative (close-ended questions using three-point Likert scales) and  
30  
31 qualitative (free text) questions. Textual analysis of the qualitative survey data, focusing  
32  
33 on comments which were about the programme as a whole rather than the topic of a  
34  
35 particular session, was carried out using NVivo™ Version 11 (QSR International Pty.  
36  
37 Ltd., [www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com)). In March 2016, the first nine presenters were asked  
38  
39 about their experience of being a presenter in the programme, and regular attendees  
40  
41 (those tutors who had attended at least three of the first nine sessions) were asked for  
42  
43 feedback on the programme. Copies of all three surveys are given in Appendix 1.  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48

49 The number of attendees who responded to the first survey varied from 3 to 28  
50  
51 for different sessions in phase 1 with most having between 5 and 15 respondents. The  
52  
53 total number of responses was 115, and the overall response rate was approximately  
54  
55 41% (Table 3). In addition 6 of the first 9 presenters (67%) and 7 of the 13 identified  
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57  
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1  
2  
3 regular attendees (54%) responded to the second and third surveys respectively. All  
4  
5 respondents were sent a personal email to thank them for their comments.  
6  
7

8 [Table 3 near here]  
9

10 Some of the recommendations from attendees in phase 1 were incorporated into  
11 the planning of phase 2, in particular the scheduling of daytime as well as evening  
12 sessions and asking presenters to allow adequate discussion time. Hence the data  
13 obtained was used to inform practice as the programme proceeded into phase 2, through  
14 an action research cycle (Stringer, 2008; McNiff, 2013).  
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21 In phase 2, the number of survey respondents varied from 4 to 15 for the  
22 different sessions; the total number of responses was 82 and the overall response rate  
23 was 27% (Table 3).  
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26  
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29

### 30 *Ethical considerations*

31  
32 Feedback from attendees at individual sessions was anonymised before being  
33 sent to presenters. Quantitative responses show pooled results from all sessions in each  
34 phase (Figures 3 and 4) rather than for each individual session, so that any sessions with  
35 particularly poor feedback could not be identified. Comments from individual  
36 respondents are quoted with the permission of those who submitted them.  
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44 All sessions took place in an online room on a secure Open University server,  
45 which cannot be accessed by OU students. In phase 1, the room was on a Science  
46 Faculty website which could only be accessed by Science tutors and their managers. In  
47 phase 2, the room was on a dedicated website, which could be accessed by OU tutors  
48 from STEM and their managers but not those from other Faculties.  
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## Results and Evaluation

A higher percentage of science tutors (approximately 20%) attended one or more of the sessions in phase 1 than the 10% of STEM tutors who attended during phase 2 (Table 3). As was the case for presenters, attendees in phase 2 included a disproportionately high number of science tutors even though the programme was offered to all STEM tutors (Table 3 footnote). The higher percentage of attendees from Science (17%) than from the rest of STEM (8%) was probably partly because tutors from the rest of STEM were less familiar with the programme and may have been more likely to ignore the invitations to attend than those from Science, and partly because science tutors were more familiar with attending online staff development events since the Science Faculty has been running annual online briefings for tutors since early 2014.

The number of tutors who indicated their intention to attend each session was generally similar to the number who attended. (Figures 1 and 2). The informal drop-in session in phase 1 was poorly attended, possibly because it was arranged at short notice. In general, numbers attending ranged from 12 to 54 in phase 1 and from 27 to 44 in phase 2. One session in phase 2 had an exceptionally high attendance with 81 tutors present. This was the session on 'Adobe Connect to deliver STEM tutorials', which was scheduled just as tutors were informed of a change from using one online room provider (Blackboard) to another (Adobe Connect), so came at a time when there was apprehension about the new software and tutors were anxious to find out more about it.

In addition, some tutors downloaded the recordings of sessions, particularly the first two sessions in phase 1, which had 39 and 43 downloads respectively, and the first session in phase 2 which had 57 downloads. The fact that they were downloaded by

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3 many tutors indicates a certain level of interest but does not necessarily mean that all the  
4  
5 tutors actually watched them.  
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7 [Figure 1 near here]

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9 [Figure 2 near here]

### 10 11 12 13 14 ***Quantitative analysis of feedback***

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16 All respondents to the attendee surveys answered all the Likert-style survey questions.

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18 The results, summed for all sessions, are shown in Figures 3 and 4. A clear majority  
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20 found the sessions useful (95% and 86% in the phase 1 and phase 2 respectively) and  
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22 enjoyable (94% and 96%). The sessions rated as most enjoyable were also reported as  
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24 being the most useful and had the highest ratings for meeting expectations. The  
25  
26 breakdown of feedback by session is not presented here, but the two sessions in phase 1  
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28 receiving the highest feedback ratings by attendees were those on ‘Managing student  
29  
30 expectations’ and ‘Supporting and motivating science students’. These were sessions  
31  
32 for which the presenters had given a particularly detailed and accurate description of  
33  
34 what they intended to cover and adhered to it. Other sessions reported to be particularly  
35  
36 useful and enjoyable included ‘Managing online group projects’ and ‘Making  
37  
38 reasonable adjustments for science students with additional requirements’. In phase 2,  
39  
40 the session which received the highest feedback ratings was the one on ‘Individual  
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42 student support sessions’. Most respondents reported that the sessions met or surpassed  
43  
44 their expectations (87% and 82% in phase 1 and phase 2 respectively), and that they  
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46 were likely to participate in further sessions in the programme (97% in both phases).  
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53 [Figure 3 near here]

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55 [Figure 4 near here]

### *Qualitative analysis of feedback comments*

The free text comments in the feedback responses were coded and then grouped into themes using NVivo. Comments indicating that the respondent valued the opportunity to share practice, enhance skills, or pick up ideas or tips from others were grouped under the theme 'Sharing'. Comments indicating that participation had helped the respondent to feel part of a community were grouped under the theme 'Community'. Comments stating that respondents felt stimulated, inspired, enriched or empowered were grouped under the theme 'Empowering'. Comments which referred to providing clarification, feeling reassured, building confidence, feeling encouraged or instilling renewed enthusiasm were grouped under the theme 'Reassuring'. Thus the main themes to emerge were **Sharing, Community, Empowering, and Reassuring**. (Figure 5). All respondents in both phases had valued the opportunity the session had provided to **share** practice/enhance skills and/or pick up ideas or tips from other tutors (Figure 5). Comments included 'One hour invested; many hours saved in the future', and this was representative of many of the comments. In phase 1, about one third of respondents also reported that participation had helped them to identify as part of a **community**. There were far fewer such comments in the feedback from phase 2, although one tutor reported 'It was very nice to have the opportunity to hear other ALs experiences and feel more part of a community' and another commented on the 'Very inclusive atmosphere'. Other themes identified from comments in both phases included feeling **empowered** and/or **reassured** after having participated in particular sessions. Typical comments included 'It was really reassuring to see that my practice was in keeping with that of other ALs. We work in isolation so much of the time – it's very useful to find out how everyone else approaches things'.

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3 Several respondents made a point of **thanking** the presenter and/or organisers of  
4 the programme and expressed a strong desire that it continue. There were also some  
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7 **negative comments**, particularly in phase 2; these related either to poor internet  
8 connectivity or sound quality, to a feeling that the content of the session did not closely  
9  
10 match its description, or dissatisfaction with the way breakout room activities had been  
11  
12 organised. Many of the responses from attendees after individual sessions related to  
13  
14 comments about that particular session, but there were several generic comments  
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16 relating to experiencing using an online room from the learner perspective, such as  
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18 ‘realised how disorientating it can be when the tutor moves you back and forward in  
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20 breakout rooms’.

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26 The responses to the surveys sent to presenters and regular attendees in phase 1  
27 confirmed that the opportunity to share ideas/enhance skills/pick up tips had been very  
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29 much appreciated. They also confirmed that the rare opportunity the sessions provided  
30  
31 to meet colleagues in a friendly supportive atmosphere/social space in real time had  
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33 been invaluable, and that this had helped to reduce the feeling of isolation. One regular  
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35 attendee who had recently been appointed when the programme started reported ‘the  
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37 programme is helping me to feel part of the community. Until recently, I hadn't met a  
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39 single soul from the OU (I was recruited online for an online course) and so the chance  
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41 to find out the thoughts of other ALs was invaluable.’ Other comments related to the  
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43 importance of allowing sufficient discussion time, being able to see in advance who had  
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45 signed up for each session/ seeing familiar names each time, ensuring session aims were  
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47 shared in advance/session descriptions were accurate and breakout room activities  
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49 managed effectively. All presenters reported it had been a positive and enjoyable  
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51 experience, which helped them to feel part of a supportive network. One regular  
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53 attendee in phase 2 reported that ‘it was really useful as a new tutor for picking tips on  
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3 distance and online tutoring and hearing opinions of tutors in other disciplines' and that  
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5 it helped her realise that 'others also have low numbers (of students attending tutorials,  
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7 so) it's not personal'. Another was grateful to have information on a particular topic  
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9 delivered, rather than having a discussion style session.  
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14 Some of the negative comments related to individual sessions for which the  
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16 description of what the session would cover had been misleading or where respondents  
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18 had not read it. This was particularly evident following the session in phase 2 on  
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20 'Developing techniques for online tutorials' where the presenter had assumed more  
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22 prior knowledge than had been made clear in the description. ~~It was unfortunate that an~~  
23  
24 ~~announcement about a change of online tutorial provider used by the Open University~~  
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26 ~~had been made after the publication of the session description; the presenter assumed~~  
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28 ~~that the attendees would all be aware of this change but not all were.~~ The feedback on  
29  
30 this particular session indicated that it fell short of expectations and was not particularly  
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32 useful or enjoyable. In contrast sessions for which the outline and description were  
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34 accurate - such as the session on 'Motivating learners with video' - were particularly  
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36 well received.  
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42 Of the 16 regular attendees who were identified from phase 1 only one  
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44 continued to participate regularly in phase 2 sessions. One was new in 2015 and  
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46 particularly grateful for the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others at that  
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48 time, and another retired in 2016. By the time phase 2 was underway in the autumn of  
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50 2016 circumstances had changed for these particular tutors, but there were others who  
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52 were new or feeling isolated, and the programme started at an opportune time for them.  
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54 At least one tutor was newly appointed at the start of each phase and became a regular  
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56 attendee.  
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## Discussion

The appreciation from the science tutor community during phase 1 of the programme was very encouraging, with all responding regular attendees and presenters indicating that the programme had helped to relieve the feeling of isolation they experienced as distance tutors. All regular attendees and most of the presenters who responded also indicated that the programme provided a welcome opportunity to share concerns and/or online teaching tips in real time with others. The programme had therefore provided good opportunities for learning which were directly transferable to the online teaching environment in which tutors meet their students. ~~Since most of their communication is via asynchronous forums, this was particularly welcome.~~

It was interesting that the sessions which attracted the highest numbers of tutors were those which related to supporting students (e.g. online tutorial tips), rather than to career progression (e.g. HEA recognition) (see Figure 1). The sessions reported to be the most useful and enjoyable also related to supporting students. There was clearly a need to ensure that the description of each session was accurate, to include plenty of informal discussion time, and to publish the programme well in advance.

The feedback indicates that the programme has nurtured an improved mutually supportive feeling within the science tutor community, helping to build a community of practice, as described by Wenger (1999). Through interacting in joint discussions in the shared online space provided, the tutors - who all want to support their students as effectively as possible - became informally bound together. They shared resources, experiences and strategies for addressing recurring problems, hence learning from each other. The shared space was identical to that in which they meet their students, so participation felt authentic and ideas shared there were directly applicable to the tutors' own online teaching environment; thus the programme provided an opportunity for

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2  
3 situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although the online space provided  
4 appropriate technology to enable quality participation and interactivity as well as  
5 opportunities for learning - as outlined as essential by Brown and Duguid (2000) for  
6 nurturing an effective virtual community of practice and seen as being of major  
7 importance by Bond and Lockee (2018) – transferring community building strategies to  
8 an online environment is still challenging. Only about 20% of the total cohort of  
9 science tutors participated, but the programme was particularly valuable for those who  
10 were newly appointed or feeling isolated or vulnerable. It indicated that it is possible to  
11 develop an online community of professionals working collaboratively even though  
12 they rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. This is particularly important now because there  
13 has been an increasing emphasis on online team teaching in HE in recent years (e.g.  
14 Fuller and Bail, 2011).

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31 The aim of phase 2 was to extend the opportunity for tutors to share good  
32 practice to the wider STEM tutor community and to build on the strengths of phase 1.  
33 The main challenge was to maintain and nurture the community cohesion created during  
34 phase 1, now that the programme was open to all 1500 STEM tutors rather than just the  
35 500 science tutors. Additional challenges arose because of cultural differences between  
36 tutors from the ex-Science Faculty and those from the rest of the STEM Faculty,  
37 because the Science Faculty had presented many more modules which were entirely  
38 online and science tutors were already familiar with engaging in regular online staff  
39 development activities. With a much larger tutor community, attendees were less likely  
40 to see familiar names both when signing up to attend and in the online room itself.  
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Most of the feedback was very positive but focussed more on the opportunities to share  
practice and enhance skills, rather than relating to community cohesion.

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3 . One newly appointed regular attendee who reported finding it reassuring to  
4 learn that difficulties she was experiencing (such as low attendance at tutorials) were  
5 not uncommon, has since expanded her OU portfolio of modules and is now highly  
6 competent at supporting her students in the online environment. This example  
7 illustrates how a newcomer may move towards full participation, learning by immersion  
8 in the new community and absorbing its mode of action, becoming a community  
9 member in the process, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991).  
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19 Some respondents noted how distracting it can be for the presenter when  
20 attendees chat on side-issues. Such behaviour, with a high proportion of discussion  
21 messages being off-topic, has often been reported in student online collaborative  
22 discussions (e.g. Hou and Wu, 2011, Lowe *et al*, 2016), so it was particularly interesting  
23 to see that tutors participating in this programme tended to engage in similar behaviour.  
24 Lowe *et al* (2016) also report (principally from online mathematics tutorials) that both  
25 tutors and students found the effectiveness of using breakout rooms to be somewhat  
26 variable, as was reported by respondents here. It was also interesting that one tutor  
27 expressed a preference for presentations which imparted information, rather than  
28 encouraged discussion; this is a preference often expressed by students (Borghini *et al*,  
29 2016; Campbell *et al*, 2019).  
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45 It was perhaps surprising that there was so little overlap between regular  
46 attendees identified from phase 1 and phase 2. Wenger (1999) explains how  
47 communities of practice move through various stages of development, from initial  
48 coalescence to active engagement in developing their practice and later to a stage where  
49 members have dispersed and no longer engage intensely; the community remains alive  
50 and even when it is no longer central people remember it as a significant part of their  
51 identities. In our case, the members of the community are likely to come and go as their  
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3 individual situations change. It is hoped that the programme can continue through any  
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5 future challenges and that by engaging in the regular sessions, attendees will be able to  
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7 support each other by adapting to changing circumstances together, even if the  
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9 participating members of the community change over time.  
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12 Since topics included in the programme are dictated by the tutor community,  
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14 rather than reflecting strategic priorities dictated by the Faculty, the programme helps  
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16 those involved in teaching to manage and lead change, rather than merely responding to  
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18 it. As such it complements other approaches such as grass roots, staff-led, strategic and  
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20 research-based approaches (Popovic and Plank, 2016).  
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23 The sessions were perceived as a friendly, supportive, informal and non-  
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25 threatening way to interact with peers, to exchange ideas and share practice. This may  
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27 have been helped by the minimal line-manager presence at the sessions, as in the  
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29 initiatives reported by Harper and Nicolson (2013) and Nicolson and Harper (2014).  
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31 Moreover each session only lasted one hour, in contrast to online one-day themed  
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33 events (Campbell, 2014), so time-constrained tutors saw them a worthwhile use of their  
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35 time. The sessions were straightforward to join, being accessed in the same way as  
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37 tutors enter an online room to teach their own students, so no additional technical skills  
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39 were required. Moreover, by situating the programme in the same online teaching  
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41 environment that tutors use for their own students, the participation was more authentic  
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43 than the *SocialLearn* staff development initiative reported by McCall *et al* (2014).  
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49 ~~. Phase 3 of the programme in which sessions are delivered using the Adobe~~  
50 ~~Connect software has been running from October 2017 to July 2019. As before, a call~~  
51 ~~for submissions was circulated to STEM tutors, and analysis of the feedback and~~  
52 ~~participation data from phase 3 is underway.~~ Since the STEM tutor community is  
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58 about three times as large as the Science tutor community, the continuing challenge now  
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3 is to nurture the supportive community atmosphere within a much larger Faculty and in  
4 increasingly challenging times. Presenters are encouraged to see the experience of  
5 leading a session as an addition to their teaching portfolio, and it is hoped that as tutors  
6 in the STEM Faculty become more aware of the programme, the wider STEM tutor  
7 community will take advantage of the opportunity it offers to share ideas and good  
8 practice and continue to work towards ways of supporting students more effectively.  
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10 The aim is thus to create change at the individual tutor level which in the long run can  
11 be extrapolated to Faculty level.  
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### 24 ***Limitations***

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26 As in all research studies, there are some limitations to the research methods  
27 used. It is possible that some respondents were tempted to give feedback to please the  
28 lead researcher, who line manages a small number of the participants. However, OU  
29 tutors are regularly asked for feedback from managers after attending staff development  
30 events, to inform future staff development programmes; they generally make it very  
31 clear if they have negative comments to report, so it was decided that bias in terms of  
32 the impact of the researcher on the responses would be minimal. However, it is  
33 acknowledged that the feedback presented and discussed in this paper does only reflect  
34 the feelings of those who responded to the surveys - rather than the STEM Faculty tutor  
35 cohort as a whole - and these people are self-selecting. Future research could perhaps  
36 combine questionnaire survey data with objective data collected by observation or  
37 content analysis. A possible disadvantage of a community-led programme such as this  
38 are that it lacks an overarching strategy and hence may seem disjointed and that it does  
39 not necessarily reflect Institutional priorities. Nevertheless, it does provide valuable  
40 avenues for teaching-related discussions to take place in an authentic setting.  
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### ***Wider Implications***

Programmes run along similar lines could be a valuable addition to staff development in other teaching institutions, particularly any institution which is (i) delivering online tuition, where regular opportunities for staff to meet in an online environment and share ideas on how best to support students online could be welcome, (ii) located on multiple or dispersed sites and where building community cohesion among staff may be challenging, (iii) undergoing any kind of restructuring, which has resulted in bringing together staff who haven't previously worked together, where improving cohesiveness would be beneficial or (iv) employing a large number of hourly paid lecturers who may not be included in ongoing programmes of continuing professional development.

### ***Conclusion***

The two phase programme of synchronous online workshops described here provided a friendly, supportive environment in which distance learning tutors from the Open University could share ideas and concerns about their teaching practice and discuss the best ways to support their students. All survey respondents, regular attendees and most of the presenters who responded indicated that the programme provided a welcome opportunity to share practice or enhance skills and/or share online teaching tips with others. Some of the respondents, and all the responding regular attendees and presenters in phase 1 indicated that the programme fostered a sense of community and/or helped to relieve feelings of isolation which the participating tutors experienced.

The programme has so far had limited reach within the STEM tutor community but for those who participate it provides an opportunity to meet colleagues in real time and to share and discuss ideas and common challenges. It is hoped that as it continues,

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2  
3 it will help participating tutors to build links and feel part of the STEM tutor  
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5 community. Several newly appointed tutors particularly valued the opportunity to  
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7 participate, becoming part of the community as they did so. The experience of  
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9 participating provides opportunities to share and improve practice in an authentic  
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11 setting, and for valuable reflection.  
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15 Such programmes could be a welcome and worthwhile addition to the staff  
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17 development provision in other institutions which have a dispersed workforce or are  
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19 undergoing major institutional change.  
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## Appendix 1

## Survey questions sent to attendees after each session (phase 1 and phase 2)

- Was the session: Very useful/Quite useful/Not particularly useful
- Was the session: Very enjoyable/Quite enjoyable/not enjoyable
- Did the session: Surpass your expectations/Meet your expectations/Fall short of your expectations
- Did you find the duration of the session: Too long/Just right/Not long enough
- Give one positive comment about the workshop:
- State one aspect of the workshop which could have been better (if any):
- What useful tips/information did you pick up from the session (if any):
- How likely are you to come to future sessions in the programme? Highly likely/Quite likely/Not likely
- Do you have any further comments?

## Survey questions sent to presenters (phase 1)

- In your session, what worked well?
- In your session, what didn't work so well?
- Was the feedback from participants in your session helpful, and if so in what way?
- What would you do differently another time?
- Was presenting your session a positive/negative experience for you? Please elaborate.
- Have you any suggested improvements for how we organise and run the programme?

## Survey questions sent to regular attendees (phase 1)

- Is this programme helping you to feel part of a Science/STEM AL Community? If so, please elaborate on how it is helping?
- What have you found most useful about the programme, and why?
- What could we do to improve the programme?
- Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

For Peer Review Only

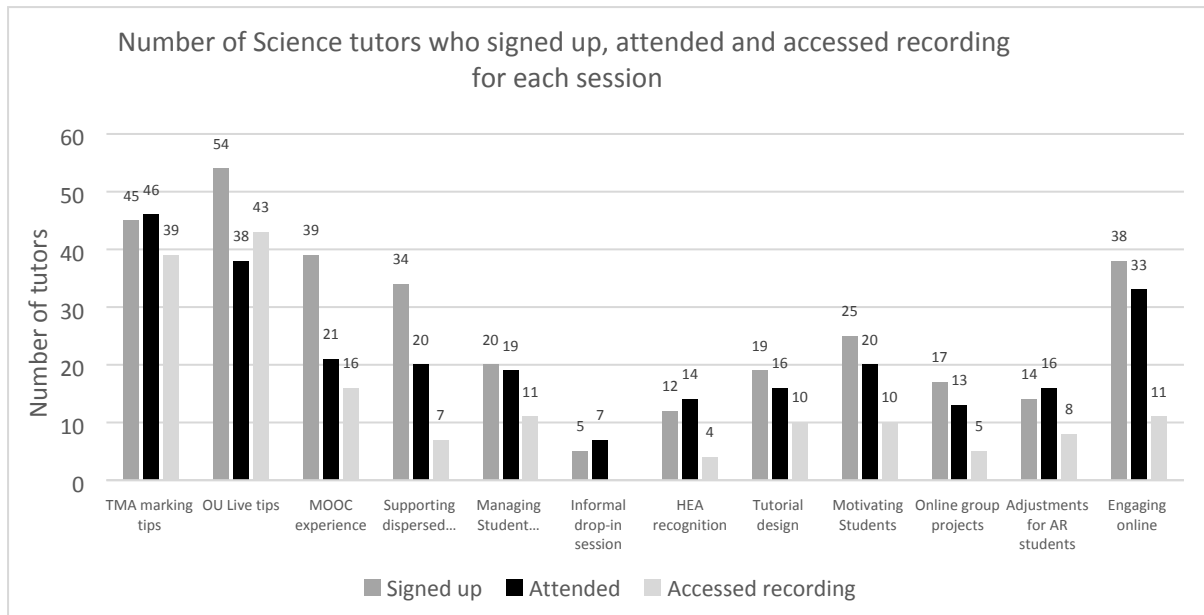


Figure 1. Phase 1: Number of Science tutors who signed up showing intention to attend, actually attended, and accessed the recording for each of the twelve sessions.

	<b>Phase 1 - Science Tutors</b>	<b>Phase 2 - STEM Tutors</b>
Number of sessions	12	10
Dates of sessions	Feb 2015 – Jun 2016	Oct 2016 – Jul 2017
Total tutor cohort invited to attend (approx.)	500	1500
Number of tutors who participated in one or more sessions	104 <sup>1</sup>	159 <sup>2</sup>
Percentage of those invited who participated (approx.)	20%	10% (includes 17% of science tutor cohort, and 8% of tutors from elsewhere in STEM)
Total number of participants, summed for all sessions	263	306
Number of respondents to survey	115	82
Response rate expressed as a percentage of those surveyed	41% <sup>3</sup>	27%

Table 3. Participant and survey respondent data for phases 1 and 2 of the ByALs-ForALs programme.

<sup>1</sup> 64 of these were different tutors from those who had attended a face-to-face staff development event for science tutors held at the Open University campus at Walton Hall in November 2015, indicating that this programme was reaching a different selection of tutors.

<sup>2</sup> 78 of these were science tutors (17% of total science tutor cohort); 6 of these tutored both in science and elsewhere in STEM. 81 were tutors from elsewhere in STEM (approximately 8% of the cohort).

<sup>3</sup> The response rate of 41% excludes the responses following the informal drop-in session for which the feedback was collected slightly differently, and which had 100% response rate.

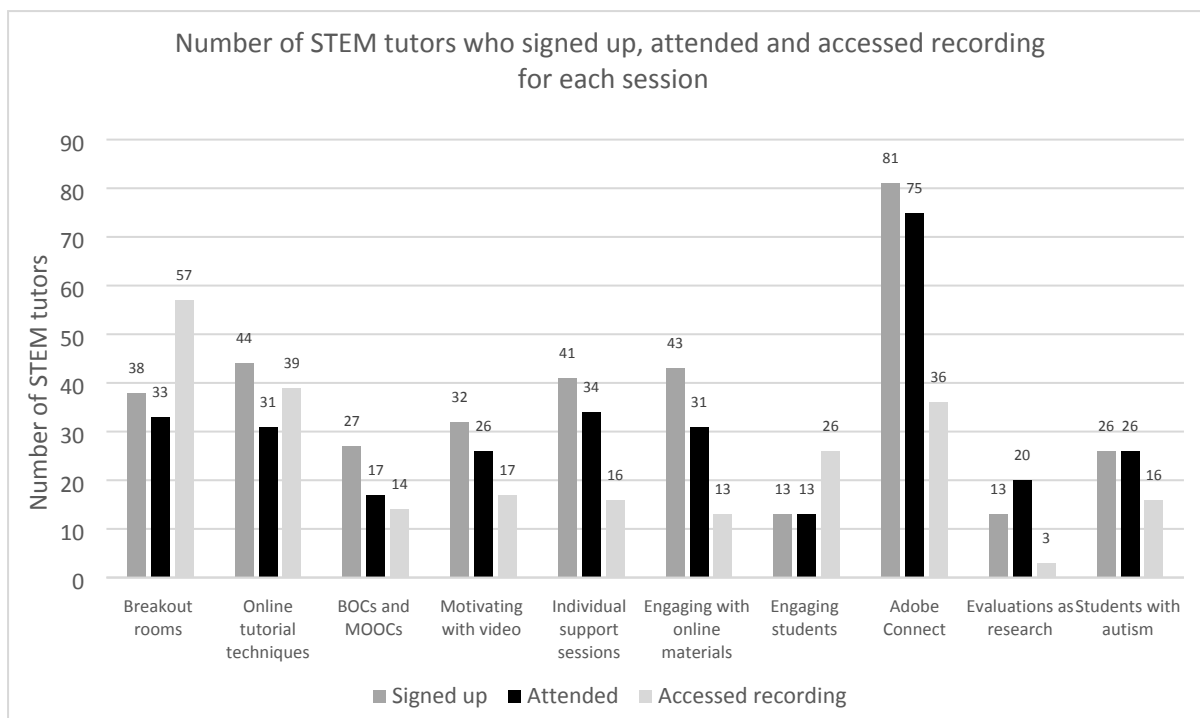


Figure 2. Phase 2: Number of STEM ALs who signed up showing intention to attend, actually attended, and accessed the recording for each of the ten sessions.

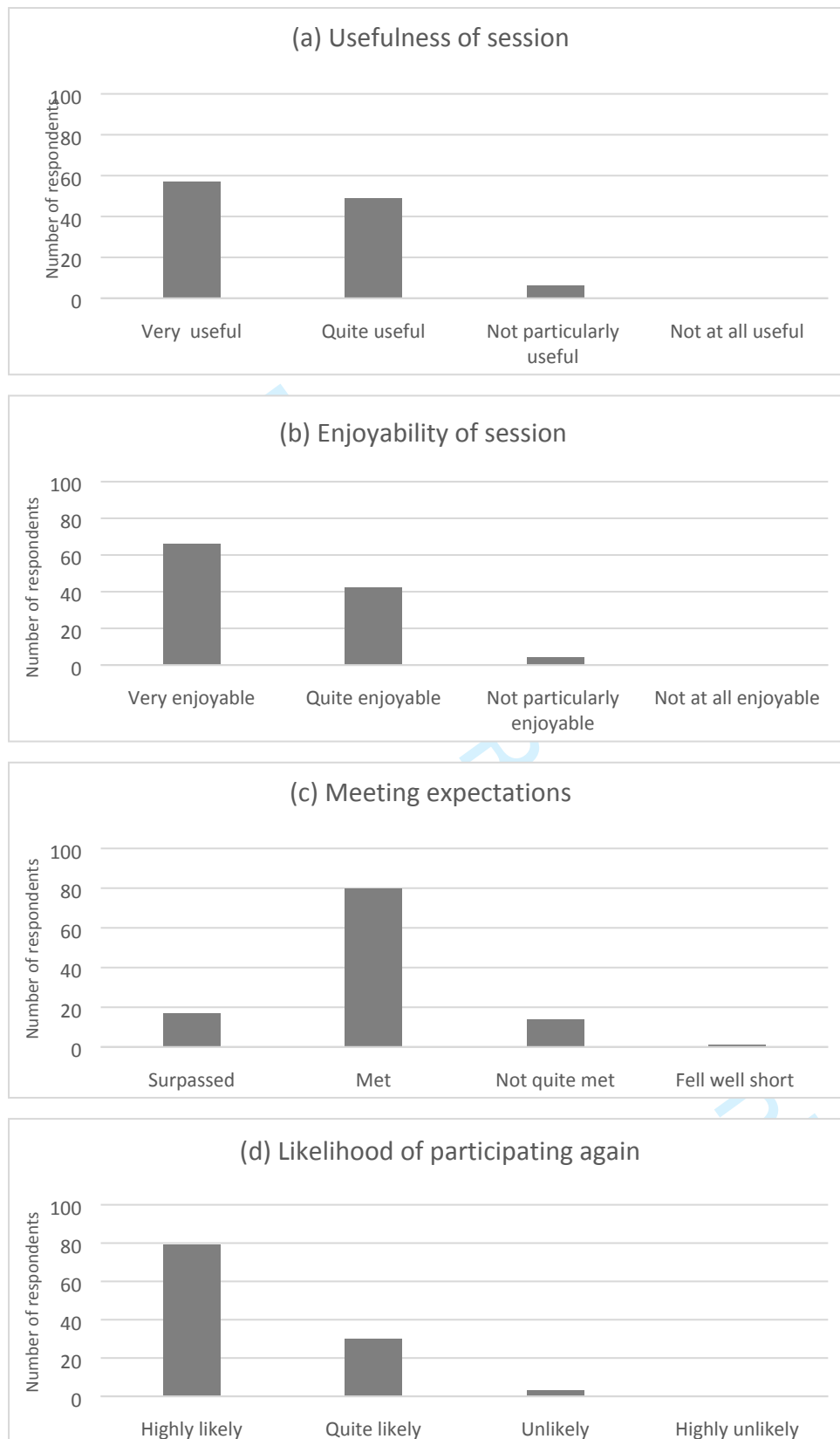


Figure 3. Phase 1: Feedback from Science participants, summed for all sessions: (a) usefulness of session, (b) enjoyability of session, (c) to what extent session met expectations and (d) likelihood of respondent participating in future sessions in the programme.

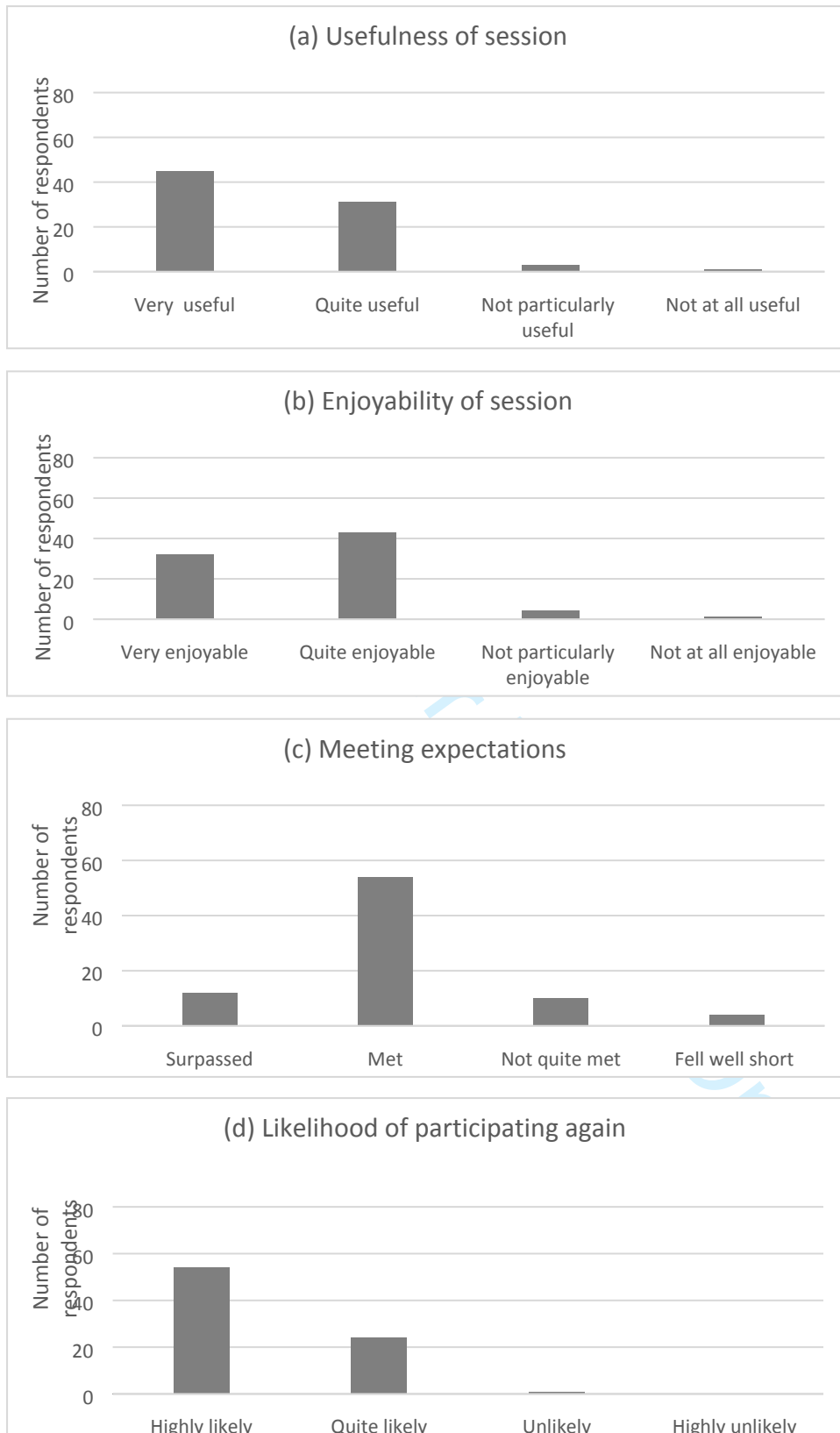


Figure 4. Phase 2: Feedback from STEM tutor participants, summed for all sessions: (a) usefulness of session, (b) enjoyability of session, (c) to what extent session met expectations and (d) likelihood of respondent participating in future sessions in the programme.



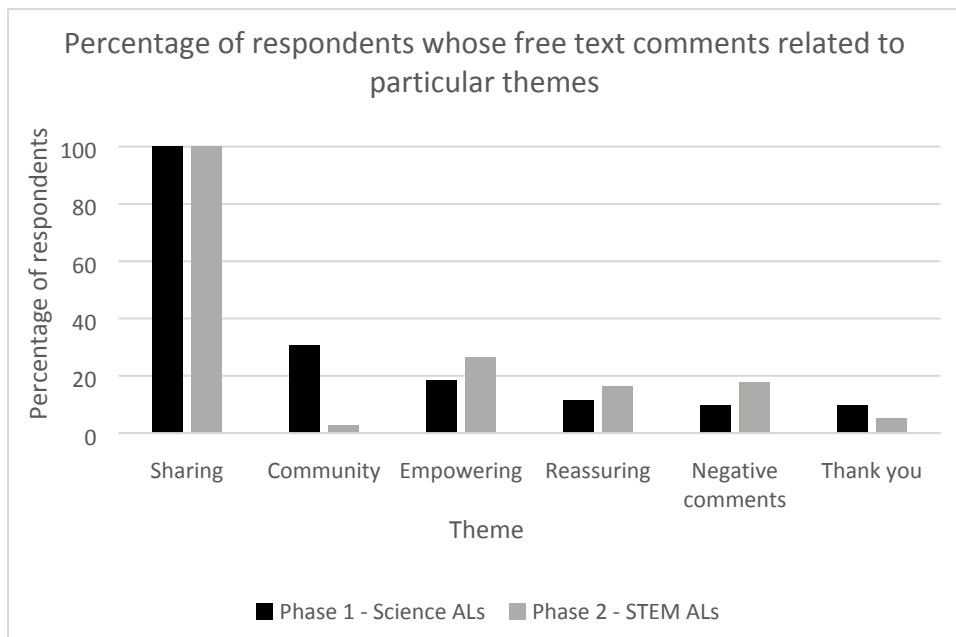


Figure 5: Percentage of respondents phases 1 and 2 whose free text comments related to the following particular themes; **Sharing** (respondent valued opportunity to share practice/enhance skills and/or pick up ideas/tips from others), **Community** (participation had helped respondent to feel part of a community), **Empowering** (led to feeling respondent feeling stimulated, inspired, enriched or empowered), **Reassuring** (provided clarification, helped build confidence, led to respondent, feeling reassured, encouraged or renewed enthusiasm), **Negative comments** (response was not complimentary), and **Thank you** (respondent thanked presenter and/or organisers of the programme)

Title of Session	Date
Sharing best practice in marking Tutor marked assignments (TMAs) in science	Feb 2015
Making online tutorials a positive experience for science students (OU Live tips)	Mar 2015
What could a MOOC and a bit of money do for you as a science tutor?	Apr 2015
Supporting geographically dispersed student groups	May 2015
Managing student expectations – retention and progression of science students	Jun 2015
Informal drop-in session	Oct 2015
HEA recognition via the independent route	Dec 2015
Tutorial design – linking theory with practice	Feb 2016
Supporting and motivating science students – the key role of tutors	Mar 2016
Managing online student group projects in science	Apr 2016
Making reasonable adjustments for science students with additional requirements	May 2016
Helping students engage with online module materials in the Science Faculty	Jun 2016

Table 1. Titles and dates of sessions in phase 1 of the ByALs-ForALs programme for Science tutors which took place before OU University Faculty restructuring.

Title of Session	Date
Getting to grips with breakout rooms	Oct 2016
Developing techniques for online tutorials	Nov 2016
Use of BOCs (badged open courses) and MOOCs (FutureLearn) to support OU students in STEM	Dec 2016
Motivating learners with video	Jan 2017
Individual support sessions – what works well for our STEM students?	Feb 2017
Helping students engage with online module materials in the STEM Faculty	Mar 2017
20 ways to engage your students	Apr 2017
Adobe Connect to deliver STEM tutorials: maximising advantages and avoiding pitfalls	May 2017
The use of evaluations as low cost and valuable ‘research’ activities, particularly in Health Sciences	May 2017
Supporting students with autism on OU modules in the STEM Faculty	July 2017

Table 2. Titles and dates of sessions in phase 2 of the ByALs-ForALs programme for STEM tutors after OU University Faculty restructuring.