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Authors

Dr Sharon Slade, Open University
Ms Fenella Galpin, Open University

Address for correspondence

Dr Sharon Slade, Open University Business
School, Foxcombe Hall, Boars Hill, Oxford,
OX1 5HR, s.slade@open.ac.uk

Ms Fenella Galpin, Open University Business
School, Foxcombe Hall, Boars Hill, Oxford,
OX1 5HR, f.a.v.galpin@open.ac.uk

Effective Recruitment and Selection of Online Tutors

Abstract

This paper describes the Open University Business School's experiences in developing an approach to the recruitment of tutors working on globally-available courses that are supported through an online environment. The approach recognises that, as well as a standard set of facilitation and academic skills, additional competences are required for effective online student support. These include proficiency in working with basic technical tools with access to appropriate ICT, as well as an understanding of the constraints and benefits of online communication, the use of appropriate language and an appreciation of cultural differences.

A background to the tutor-student support model is set out and a summary given of the current traditional approach to tutor recruitment, whereby applicants are invited to a venue for interview and to demonstrate other largely face-to-face tutoring skills.

The continuing advancement of ICT and an improved understanding of managing effective online learning has led to an evolution of OU Business School course delivery, allowing students to successfully participate in many of our courses without geographic constraints. This in turn required a revised approach to tutor recruitment which tested for newer competences which the standard approach omitted to address.

As part of this approach, the paper discusses a set of activities designed to establish applicants' understanding of the differences needed to transfer effective facilitation of student learning into effective online learning. Detailed examples are given of some of the activities used, as well as an indication of the expected responses. The recruitment method is adapted to suit the needs of each course, as required, and has evolved as a result of experience and application to a wide range of different courses and requirements. The approach has now been recommended as standard for recruitment of tutors to online courses across the wider Open University.

Background

The OU Business School has been offering distance learning business and management courses to students in the UK and Europe since the 1980s. Students typically receive course materials in hard copy and are supported through their studies by a course tutor who will work with groups of between 12 and 20 students. In addition to the materials, tutors facilitate the students' learning and understanding through a variety of approaches, for example, at regular tutorials or day schools which are reasonably local to both tutor and students, via assignment marking, interaction and discussion with the tutor and other students via an online group forum area, as well as personal email and phone contact, where needed.

Since 2000, the OU Business School has offered a number of its core courses with online only support, that is, students will not meet their tutors, but will communicate largely through the online tutor group forum, as well as the other one-to-one channels mentioned above. Further, in 2006, the School made its provision of online only courses almost entirely global.

Traditional recruitment of tutors

As is the norm, business and management tutors have traditionally been selected on the basis of their academic credentials and recent relevant work experience. In the OU Business School,

standard recruitment processes begin with publication of vacancies giving details of the posts on offer (including relevant geography), the job description and a detailed person specification. Once the application deadline has been reached, there follows a shortlisting process during which candidates' applications are reviewed against the person specification to establish whether the minimum requirements have been sufficiently addressed. The final list of candidates for interview is determined as a result of the shortlisting outcome and, often, the location of the candidate as there may be a need to recruit tutors in particular geographic areas.

During recruitment, we seek evidence that candidates have the required experience and knowledge to support a group of diverse students during the course. This is done by inviting candidates to an interview lasting an hour or so, and setting a number of different activities which aim to reflect the range of traditional academic and pastoral support activities normally undertaken by a tutor, including:

- asking the candidate questions covering their professional experiences, and academic knowledge at a level and scope appropriate to the course
- establishing their probable response to typical student issues (which may not be academic)
- carrying out a sample tutorial exercise
- marking a typical student assignment, providing a score and feedback indicative of the type and style that would be offered to the student.

In this way, the interviewers (usually 2 members of academic staff linked to the course) assess the ability of the applicant to facilitate student understanding of the course content, as well as their ability to provide appropriate pastoral support. All candidates are assessed and scored against the same pre-defined criteria. It is an important (although not sufficient) requirement that applicants have strong face-to-face facilitation skills and that they are based in a geographic area likely to match with future student registrations. Clearly geography is a relevant factor in both conducting the recruitment exercise and in matching potential appointable candidates to future student groups.

Changing student and tutor profile

Most OU Business School courses now contain some element of online working, requiring tutors to have a level of familiarity and competence with particular ICT-related systems or ways of working. Since 2000, the introduction of online-only versions of many courses has led to an increasing growth in demand for courses presented in this way, to the extent that students opting to work in virtual groups make up an average of a quarter of the total cohort on many courses. These students may be based almost anywhere in the world, using traditional hard copy course materials to study, and interacting with their tutor and other students largely through online forums. Assignment work marked by their tutor is also submitted electronically via a link from their course website.

Tutors working with such students will necessarily have a different skill set to that of the more traditional tutor, with a greater focus on ICT competences, as well as having a particular understanding of the differences between online and face-to-face support, and the practical online facilitation skills to match this understanding. As the Open University continues to adopt a wider range of e-learning tools to support students, it becomes more crucial that tutors have

existing abilities, or the potential and desire to develop those abilities, in working with and supporting the learning of students across a variety of virtual learning environment (VLE) tools.

Clearly, it is not reasonable, nor possible, to assess applicants against a complete range of possible online situations, so the focus on amending the approach to recruitment of online-only global tutors has been to establish the following additional competences:

- Online technical and communication skills;
- Experience of assessing, marking and/or tutoring work online;
- Excellent online facilitation skills;
- A passion for teaching and supporting students online;
- An interest and enthusiasm for international tutoring, including an understanding of, and sensitivity to, cultural differences; and, preferably,
- Experience of working in an international context, or experience of working in an environment where English is not the first language.

Given the nature of the delivery and support of these courses, real geography becomes less of an issue for the tutor and student (although there are subsidiary issues, such as exam delivery and support for students with additional requirements, which must be considered by other support areas). Having said that, we are however looking for tutors with experience of working internationally across cultures, and thus an interest in virtual geography.

Working in small teams across different cultures and time zones is an increasing reality in the work place for our students and so becomes relevant for our tutors in their tutoring role with us. As a result, we are offering tutors an opportunity to work with the OU Business School anywhere in the world where employment legislation is compatible with our contracts.

Review of recruitment approach for online-only tutors

The recognition that tutors working to support students in an online environment should possess additional competences has led to a thorough review of recruitment. As part of the process, we now seek tutors with a deeper understanding of the differences between traditional ‘classroom’ facilitation and online facilitation, and some experience of working to support others online (or an ability to demonstrate the potential to work in this way).

It was agreed that the recruitment process should be adapted to test the skills needed, as an explicit part of the process itself. Applicants are again shortlisted for the required competences and experience against the advertised person and role specifications. Once a shortlist has been established, recruitment activities are e-mailed to candidates with instructions for their completion online with a deadline for return. In this way, a small measure of basic competence in working online may be established as the activities are sent, worked on and returned electronically. In addition, electronic receipt supports both effective maintenance of records and quality assurance issues, that is, comparisons between submissions are consistent and more readily available, and decision-making regarding eventual appointments more transparent.

Student support issues

Although pastoral support is a key part of our tutoring role, many traditional recruitment processes fail to address this aspect explicitly. In a standard interview process, candidates may be asked to discuss how they might handle one or two hypothetical situations, for example, managing a disruptive student in a tutorial situation. Although such examples are indicative of the applicants' approach, they are not necessarily representative or comprehensive.

As part of this revised process, applicants are asked to provide responses to a wider range of student scenarios offering a broader appreciation of the approach that they might take to resolving the issues, as well as an indication of the tone and style of their postings. Some of the situations are based upon standard tutor-led tasks, for example, asking for a welcome message that might be posted into the tutor group forum at course start, whilst others require a response to a dummy student message. Typical messages may include:

Pete: 'Hellooooo???? I'm starting to feel like I'm the only person in here'

Sally: 'When are we going to get our assignments back? They should have been returned 2 days ago.....'

Rachel: 'Work and home pressures are starting to build up and I'm not sure that I'll be able to carry on with the course. The online work is another pressure for me, so I'm thinking of stopping'

These responses provide an insight into whether the applicant can relate to the students' circumstances, can provide an indication of an appropriate course of action (although allowance is obviously made for applicants who would be unfamiliar with institutional practice) and can demonstrate empathy with the students through an online medium. We are looking particularly at the tone and style that an applicant projects online.

Understanding of online tuition and support

In a similar way, candidates are asked to explore issues around the different approach to tuition and student support needed when tutor and student are not able to meet in a face-to-face setting. The lack of immediate communication inherent in asynchronous conferencing means that tutors need an awareness of and ability to apply techniques which encourage participation and facilitate the development of understanding and learning.

Online support

As part of this exercise, applicants are asked to submit their responses to a number of mock scenarios, for example:

Two days after the start of the scheduled online tutorial, students are yet to participate - what would you do next - provide examples.

One student never replies to any messages, but always reads them all - what are your thoughts on this? Please provide examples of any messages that you might send.

The second example above relates to the classic dilemma of managing 'lurkers', and can trigger an interesting breadth of responses which provide some insight into applicants' attitudes to tutoring and their expectations of students' involvement. Many responses look for reasons to explain *why* the student does not post, including technical problems, an unwillingness to post a response into a public forum, not realising there is an expectation to contribute, using reading as

the sole study technique rather than completing activities, or a lack of time/poor time management.

Others take a view that it is a positive sign that the student is reading the messages, as this is evidence that the student is interested and is participating in a manner that suits them. Some go further to suggest that there is a great deal of learning to be had from simply observing, although most do propose either some sort of intervention to ensure that all is well or would post an inducement (for example, an offer to discuss a forthcoming assignment) to tempt students to engage online.

Clearly, there is no standard or correct response, but the exercise affords a perspective, albeit subjective, into the applicants' approaches and attitudes to active and passive learning.

Understanding of online facilitation

As well as asking for responses to simulated postings, the approach explores the applicants' understanding of some of the more practical issues of tutoring online, for example by asking for views on the main priorities and key activities for tutors supporting a forum. As before, the question is not seeking a single model answer, but looking for a range of creative techniques which might create and sustain interest from students, as well as satisfy the main academic requirements of the role. Typical suggestions include:

- Create a supportive atmosphere by posting a welcome message
- Ask students to post an initial message to the forum
- Provide the opportunity for students to undertake exercises and activities which link course theory to their own experience
- Provide tips and ideas to aid students with assignments
- Provide generic feedback on assignments to facilitate peer learning
- Respond regularly to contributions (without always answering directly) and encouraging students to do so
- Logging in regularly in order to pick up on issues quickly.

In addition, applicants are asked to discuss the range of problems and/or issues which might be faced by both tutors supporting a forum and students collaborating with others in a forum. Once more, there is no correct or complete response, but most candidates with an awareness of the realities of working online will note some or all of the following:

For tutors:

- Setting clear ground rules
- Creating activities that add value rather than becoming an additional chore
- Keeping time schedules for activities
- Setting out a clear structure to facilitate collaboration
- Clarity of messages to avoid misinterpretation
- Making timely interventions

- Summarising perspectives and weaving messages together
- Making explicit teaching points to focus attention
- Correcting inaccurate course information posted on the forum
- Managing dominant students who might discourage others from posting
- Supporting students not able to apply material to their own work situation
- Ensuring that all students feel that their contributions are valued
- Managing and moderating the interactions so that all participants can participate (this might include removing messages which include inappropriate language and dialogue)
- Managing flaming
- Encouraging participants who have not contributed
- Supporting and motivating participants who contribute significant postings to continue to do so without inhibiting others
- Ensuring that students have the space to develop their own ideas without too much tutor intervention

Applicants' perspectives of potential issues for students include:

- Concern over lack of support from the forum facilitator
- Getting behind in the forum and feeling unable to join in or catch up on the material
- Feeling intimidated by more confident students
- Concerns about appearing foolish
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Questioning whether the time spent is worth the benefit gained
- Disappointment or irritation with other students, for example,
 - failure of others to make any contributions
 - failure of others to respond to direct contact
 - failure of others to meet agreed deadlines
 - poor quality of contributions by some students
- Inertia in terms of beginning a collaborative discussion
- Lack of understanding or experience of basic collaboration skills requiring initial tutor support
- Time constraints
- A reluctance to share learning
- Technology constraints or fear

Demonstration of facilitation skills

Another activity which can offer further insight into the candidate's practical skills is to include a number of example student postings around one or two themes and ask for a summary of the key points which the tutor might then post to the group forum, as well as instances of specific tutor intervention or action triggered by any of the postings.

As candidates are undertaking these activities over a set period – which mirrors the ways in which they would engage with their students online – rather than in a real time intensive interview, there is an opportunity for them to reflect and think carefully about the content of their postings. Over time, we have found the suggested approaches to be well rounded and considered, representing a rich resource for future peer support and staff development.

Academic credibility

A great proportion of the activities undertaken as part of this process reflect the emphasis given to online tutoring skills rather than knowledge of the subject area, per se. It is clearly important that tutors have an understanding of the academic content of the course, as well as some experience of applying course ideas to real, in this case, management situations, both for quality control purposes and in order to have credibility with their student groups. Some of the sample student messages referred in section 4.2.1 will include specific subject related questions relevant to the course for which the candidates have applied, for instance:

Sam: *'I'm a bit stuck on what you mean by WACC*. Can you help please?'*

*Note that WACC in this case refers to Weighted Average Cost Of Capital, but could equally be substituted by any course concept or approach, such as force field analysis, hygiene factors and so on.

A tutor might point the student to the relevant course material, or might try to engage other students in an explanation. In this instance, we would expect them to try to establish exactly where the confusion lies – it could be a lack of basic understanding or relate to a specific term or how a concept is used. It is also key to check that the student has understood the explanation.

In a course whereby tuition and support are offered only at a distance, additional proof of experience in this area this can be further assessed by marking an assignment which might be considered representative of a typical submission, and also by setting out the content of a tutorial and explaining how it would be facilitated online. Both approaches are discussed below.

Assignment marking

In order for applicants to undertake this component of the exercise with a consistent understanding of our requirements, all candidates are sent electronically a set of materials which includes:

- an extract from relevant course material,
- an assignment question based on that material,
- some guidance on what the assignment is designed to assess,
- an answer produced by a student
- a guide to the grading of answers.

Applicants are asked to allocate a mark to the sample submission based on the marking guidelines, insert comments into the text of the student's answer regarding specific strengths and areas for improvement, and write a summary paragraph, addressed to the student, of their overall assessment of the student's answer.

In this exercise, candidates are assessed on their ability to award a mark appropriate to the level of the course using the guidance supplied and their own knowledge. More particularly, their feedback to the student is an important source of information about their pedagogic approach to marking. It also provides a further flavour of their usual level of engagement in terms of the quantity and detailed content of their comments, as well as an indication of their academic knowledge of the course and ability to support and encourage further development. In fact, a tutor's ability to make constructive links to the course material whilst giving a sense of positive motivation is perhaps more important than being able to assess the mark accurately. The latter can be developed through staff development and monitoring, whereas it is crucial that a tutor can engage with an individual student through their feedback from the first assignment.

Provision of online tuition

Applicants are also asked to describe a short tutorial activity. Online tutorials typically consist of several separate activities, and are run asynchronously over the course of a week or so, to allow students to participate at times that suit. For the purposes of this activity, applicants may either be asked to either:

- select from a prescribed list a topic relating to the course for which they are applying, and describe how an understanding of the concept could be facilitated in an online conferencing environment. They are given as information the typical amount of elapsed time to be spent by students and the real time period over which it would run; or
- to outline a possible approach, based on the information that tutors would receive for a typical face-to face tutorial session (e.g. key messages for the session and main areas to be covered), which would achieve similar outcomes via an online forum. Candidates would be asked to design a series of appropriate activities and show examples of messages that might be posted to initiate, sustain and conclude one or more of these activities.

The behaviours/knowledge/experience assessed during this activity are also given, which include candidates' facilitation skills, communication ability, academic knowledge and credibility, as well as the extent to which their management experience relates to course criteria. Each of these would be assessed with regard to how the suggested approach would:

- facilitate the group's ability to relate academic/management concepts to actual management practice
- have the potential to draw out their own and participant's practical work experience
- provide opportunities for participants to use concepts to describe/analyse their own experience
- include the flexibility to deal with a range of questions
- be encouraging and participative for all students
- indicate that they are open to questions.

In addition, the proposed approach should demonstrate that both the scope and pace is appropriate, and that the candidate has a good grasp of the relevant course concepts.

Applicants will be asked to explain their proposed approach as part of a following interview and may be asked further questions of clarification.

Interview

The final stage of the process is an interview, normally conducted by telephone, but where this is not possible, by receipt of emailed responses to a series of set questions. Submissions to the preceding activities may remove some candidates from the interview process if, for example, the responses are felt to be unsatisfactory or the available teaching posts are particularly limited. In this case, those recruiting need to be sensitive to the time invested thus far in the procedure in feeding back to unsuccessful candidates.

The introduction of telephone contact with the candidates allows the interviewers to gauge how the candidate might handle students' direct queries and concerns. The set questions cover six key areas, namely:

- **Understanding of the online process**, for example, *In what ways has working online changed your thinking?*

Most applicants will consider the lack of visual cues and the subsequent importance of both phrasing and tone in order that misunderstandings can be avoided. Others will cite the difficulties experienced in gauging whether non-contributing students are learning and are sufficiently well supported. Well-rounded responses will include mention of the different pace of online learning and may consider that it is more suited to reflectors, while activists may find it frustrating – as a result, some will recognise that it is important to provide a range of clearly structured activities to enable progress at a pace that suits most students.

On a practical level, we might expect some discussion of issues such as the length and structure of postings and the flexibility offered to both tutor and students in terms of tackling work at a time that suits them best. Hopefully most will also recognise from their experiences that, with appropriate structuring and facilitation, group cohesion is possible in an online setting.

- **Technical skills**, for example, *Have you used online conferencing software?*

A good answer might detail the ways in which the applicant has used online conferencing to support student learning, regardless of whether or not they have used in-house software. They might equally refer to a student experience as well as to a tutor experience (or equally to work experience if the candidate has particular experience of working in virtual teams) as long as the applicant can make it clear how they have engaged in the process. A good candidate might be expected to explain in more detail what the conferencing was used for and to explore some of the advantages or disadvantages. They might also possibly discuss the differences between synchronous and asynchronous conferencing.

- **Online communication skills**, for example, *In what ways can you establish your identity in an online environment with a group of people you may never meet?*

Most candidates will agree that there is a need to develop an online personality which is presented consistently. In formulating this personality, tutors will often reveal a certain

amount of personal information about themselves, for example, discussing their family and work backgrounds, although clearly there is a need to set boundaries. A reasonable level of informality in online exchanges can allow tutors to show a little more of their character than more formal writing, for example, by using emoticons, including links to other sites which they personally find interesting, etc. Postings should ideally be warm and friendly in tone and many use light humour to good effect. Crucially, the tutor should have a frequent presence within the forum in the first week or so of any online only course, responding quickly to first postings and queries from students and developing a sense of trust.

- **Content expertise**, for example, *How do you keep yourself up to date in your subject area?*

Typically, we might expect answers along the lines of reading relevant journals or newspapers, membership of a relevant professional body, recent teaching or personal study, ongoing or recent research, networking with other academics, learning via engagement with students, use of the internet (although there would be a need to clarify this).

- **Personal characteristics**, for example, *Managing the commitment*

Candidates should expect to set aside time to plan and run tutorials and to mark assignments within the agreed timeframe, as well as establishing and agreeing what constitutes reasonable access and response times with the student group. In doing this, candidates should recognise that they will need to plan ahead to account for any known periods of unavailability and discuss how this might be managed.

- **International experience**, for example, *What are the challenges and opportunities that might be present in an online tutorial where students from different cultural or language backgrounds are present?*

Most tutors will recognise that language can be an obvious barrier to clear communication, that English may not be the first language of many students and it will be important for both tutor and other students to avoid use of colloquialisms where possible. In addition, tutors will need to maintain an awareness that unclear messages may result from a poor command of the language rather than a lack of understanding of the concept being discussed.

In working with the whole group, tutors should aim to help students to recognise the differences introduced by culture and language. Further, that there are opportunities in terms of their personal and managerial development in considering different perspectives, reframing of situations, understanding other cultural perspectives and breaking down stereotypes. Working within a mixed cultural group can provide a creative tension which can be very productive.

On a practical level, as well as potentially having a number of different time zones, tutor and students need an awareness of religious or cultural holidays which may mean that some students aren't able to engage temporarily.

Conclusions

The approach detailed in this paper offers a practical solution to the increasing need for tutors who will mostly interact online with their student groups. Submissions are recorded and as such, help ensure that appointment decisions are transparent and consistent.

It is hoped that applicants who successfully complete the activities discussed within this paper go on to become effective online tutors. Of course, staff development and performance monitoring remain important, and there is no guarantee that the recruitment process will produce tutors who will, in practice, cope with the reality of tutoring in an online environment with real students. Furthermore, it may well be the case that motivated and committed 'traditional' tutors are able to develop effective online tutoring skills with appropriately tailored staff development. It is our experience, though, that it is more helpful to begin with a cohort of tutors who have already demonstrated the required competences before appointment to tutor online.

It is hoped then that this approach simulates the range and types of issues for which online tutors need an understanding and level of competence. In looking forward, we continue to consider the impact of increasing engagement with VLE tools and the subsequent impact on required tutor competences and whether we need to recruit to this model in order to future proof all new tutors, regardless of their main mode of student support and teaching.