

## Sub Theme: Inspiring Innovations

### Increasing Learner Engagement in an ODL Environment: The OUM experience

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#### Abstract

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is an open and distance learning institution which has been in operation for about two decades. OUM traditionally offers its programs in blended mode which puts emphasis on self-managed learning, face-to-face, and online learning. OUM had already begun to offer some of its programmes fully online. However, the emergence of Covid-19 Pandemic pushed OUM to make the move to offer all of its programmes fully online. The movement control order in March of 2020 came when OUM was well into the January semester and approaching the end of the semester. Face-to-face classes scheduled at all OUM's thirty-five learning centres around the country came to a halt. All higher education institutions were ordered to shut down. Quick actions had to be taken to minimise the disruption in teaching and learning. OUM had only one choice, to continue with classes online and have the final exams online. It has been two years since, and OUM has moved forward with the transition to fully online and continues to offer all its programmes fully online. OUM continues to strive to provide quality education and positive online learning experiences to the learners. This called for several initiatives and enhancements in e-learning which include the use of e-lessons, online interactive activities, online tutorials, online grade book, online group discussions, online exams, along with an enhanced question bank, online grading system and proctoring system. This paper focuses on the implementation, challenges and use of one of the initiatives: the introduction and use of online class participation (OCP) via group discussions, with the intent to increase student engagement with their peers. Improving and increasing learner engagement in all three areas as proposed by the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000)) may contribute towards providing learners with a rewarding learning experience and may help student retention. Currently at OUM, although there are efforts in place to allow for learner engagement with the content and tutors, there is a lack of peer interaction taking place online in OUM's learning management system, myInspire. The initial observations and results of a learner survey on OCP show positive response overall to OCP.

**Keywords:** Open and Distance Learning, Peer Interaction, Online Social Presence, Online Learning, Innovative Pedagogy, New Norms

#### Introduction

With the emergence of the Covid-19 Pandemic, educational institutions in Malaysia and all over the world have been forced to make the transition to online, by either offering courses semi or fully online. In March of 2020, the Malaysian government announced the Movement Control Order (MCO), and all higher education institutions had to shut down. For Open University Malaysia (OUM), the MCO came well into the January semester and final exams were just around the corner. OUM did not have much choice, but to continue with the classes online and prepare for online examinations. OUM is an open and distance learning institution and has long since practised blended learning. Blended learning puts an emphasis on self-managed learning supported with face-to-face and online learning. Since its early days, OUM has run its courses using its learning management system (LMS). The LMS has evolved and it is now called myInspire. myInspire has become the teaching and learning platform and supports the online learning component of the blended mode. For OUM, having to move to fully online at the call of the MCO was not too big of a challenge. Learners were already able to and continued to access their courses and communicate with their tutors online via myInspire using any mobile device. The challenge at that moment

was to be able to have online final examinations. In addition, there was a need to enhance online learning for the following semesters. Several initiatives and enhancements in e-learning were put in place, which initially included the use of weekly e-lessons, online tutorials, and online exams. Then came a few others such as the use of online class participation activity, online interactive activities, online grade book, along with an enhanced question bank, online grading system and proctoring system. This paper will focus on the use of online class participation activity, known at OUM as OCP. This paper discusses the implementation of Online Class Participation (OCP) activity as a component of the course assignment along with its challenges; as well as the perceptions of the learners on the activity, and the initial observations of the first semester of its use.

## From Blended Learning to Fully Online

Since its early days OUM has offered all its programs in blended mode. Figure 1a and Figure 1b show OUM's model of blended mode of learning. Blended learning at OUM puts an emphasis on self-managed learning, which is supported by face-to-face instruction and online learning. Face-to-face tutorials were held bi-weekly at all of OUM's learning centres which are scattered throughout the country. With face-to-face in class tutorials, learners get to interact and communicate with their tutors as well as with their fellow course mates.

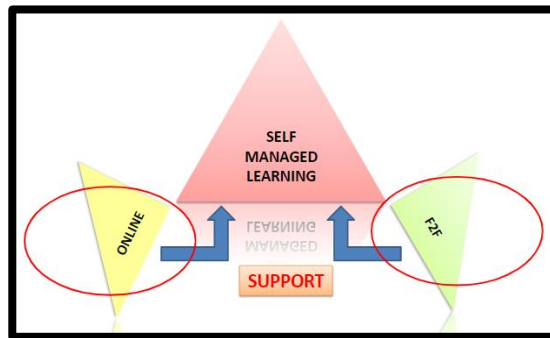


Figure 1a. OUM Blended Mode of Learning.

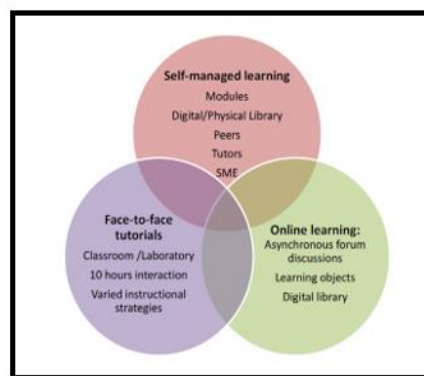


Figure 1b. Support for Blended Learning at OUM

OUM provided online learning support via its learning management system, myVLE, which has over the years evolved to myInspire. In between their face-to-face tutorials, learners can access their course module and resources online, and communicate with their online tutors (e-tutors) in myInspire. When the government imposed the lockdown due to the pandemic, it was towards the end of January Semester 2020. All thirty-five OUM learning centres had to close and the remaining face-to-face tutorials had to be cancelled. For the following semester, OUM made a quick decision to have the face-to-face tutorials online; hence online tutorials (e-tutorials) were scheduled

online in myInspire and conducted using the Google Meet platform. OUM e-tutors met with their group of learners for an hour, bi-weekly, for 8 to 15 hours depending on the requirement of the course and programme.

Aside from setting up online tutorials, several initiatives and enhancements in e-learning had to be put in place in order to continue providing learners with a positive learning experience. These include the use of e-lessons, enhanced online interactive activities, online grade book, online group discussions, online exams, along with an enhanced question bank, online grading system and proctoring system.

Over the years, there have been efforts in place to allow for learner engagement with the content (e-modules, videos, interactive content) and tutors (via forum, e-tutorials). However, based on the general observations of the forums online in myInspire, there seems to be a lack of peer interaction and engagement taking place. Learners would come online and post in the forums; however, the communication exchange mostly happens as a one-to-one interaction between learners and their respective e-tutors. Questions are directed to the e-tutors, e-tutors respond, and learners respond back to e-tutors. There is not enough evidence of learner to learner interaction especially in the undergraduate courses. There is a need to find ways to increase learner engagement with their peers.

One of the initiatives proposed for this purpose is the use of online discussions/group discussions as a component of the course assignment. As an ODL institution, OUM serves a community of learners who are working adults. Hence, it has always been a challenge to get learners to participate actively in the forum. In addition, participating in the forum could not be made compulsory. Furthermore, the suggestion to provide points for participating in the forum without any direction lends itself to problems in evaluating and assessing learner postings. OCP was meant to provide some structure and direction in forum discussions between the learners while encouraging them to be active participants of the course. By introducing OCP as a component of the assignment, learners' postings and comments will count and can be assessed, and marks can be awarded for participation in the discussions.

### **Online Class Participation (OCP) Activity**

The Online Class Participation (OCP) activity was proposed in the third trimester of 2021 and implemented for the first time in January 2022. OCP was included as a component of the assignment for all undergraduate courses offered in the semester, and would carry 10% of the assignment weightage. Lecturers preparing the assignments were provided with a template that included instructions to be given to the learners and the rubric that will be used to assess OCP. General discussion questions related to the subject were developed for the activity which would lend themselves to open discussions and not requiring specific right or wrong answers.

Online tutors were briefed to create group discussion areas in the forum for OCP to take place. The task would require the learners to join a discussion group of their choice and participate in the group discussion with their group members; i.e. peers. The learners are expected to participate and show proof of their participation in the group discussions, by submitting snapshots of their best five postings along with their assignment. The postings are then assessed when the assignments are graded, using a given rubric. OUM has long practised online assessment and used a centralised grading system online, hence all assignments are submitted online and graded by appointed online graders (e-graders). The e-graders may or may not be the online tutor for the course. This is due to the large class sizes and an e-tutor may be providing support to an average of 100 learners per slot. Every full-time academic is required to be an e-tutor for at least 4 courses/slots each semester. As an e-grader it would be a challenge to access the forum discussion areas to check on learners' postings during the assignment grading exercise. Therefore, it was more practical to have the learners take snapshots of their postings and include them in the assignment to show proof of their participation in the group discussions. The e-graders could then assess the postings based on the rubric given. Prior to the beginning of the semester, all online tutors and e-graders were required to attend training to understand OCP, how to manage and run OCP in their courses, and how to assess OCP.

The OCP activity runs for a limited time period and follows the timeline for the assignment that is due for the course. Being a component of the assignment, the activity is still not considered compulsory, but remains as a requirement for a complete assignment. Learners may choose not to participate in the forum discussions, but will lose the opportunity to participate and the 10% allocated for the assignment.

## **Research Objective**

Since OCP is newly implemented and in the first semester of its use, the objective of the study is two-fold: 1) to investigate the perceptions of learners towards OCP; and 2) to suggest ways to improve learner-to-learner engagement through initial observations of OCP.

The study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What are the overall general perceptions of learners towards OCP as a component of the course assignment? 2) What can be done to improve OCP and learner-to-learner engagement at OUM?

## **Literature Review**

The blended mode of learning at OUM is based on the Community of Inquiry model (COI). The COI framework by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) stresses that learning occurs when there is interaction between three elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Learning takes place when the students interact with the content, the instructor, and their peers. Improving and increasing learner engagement in all three areas may contribute towards providing learners with a rewarding online learning experience and help with retention.

Social presence puts an emphasis on learner-to-learner engagement. There have been several definitions of social presence by different researchers. Applying the definition by Garrison, et, al (2001) to the online learning environment, social presence refers to the ability of individuals in a community, i.e. online learners, to project themselves or interact with others socially and emotionally.

Nasir (2020) investigated social presence and student satisfaction levels towards online discussions. The results of the study showed there was a significantly positive correlation between social presence and student satisfaction. Richardson and Swan (2019) explored the role of social presence in online learning environments. One of the areas examined was the relationship among students' perception of social presence with their perceived learning. The study found that there was a positive correlation between overall students' perception of social presence with their perceived learning. A study done by Lee (2014) looked into the relationship between higher order thinking skills, cognitive density, and social presence in online learning and reported that social presence was positively related to the quality of cognitive presence. In another study on key factors that influence student's learning and their higher order thinking skills, results showed peer interaction as one of the factors that had a direct impact on students' higher order thinking skills (Lu, et al, 2021). Robb and Sutton (2014) looked into the importance of social presence and motivation in distance learning. Although the emphasis was on being socially connected with the course instructor, it still highlights the importance of social presence in online and distance learning.

The research and studies on social presence seem to suggest the importance of social presence in the online environment. Related studies point out different ways of creating social presence in the online learning environment. Aragon (2003) highlighted the goal for creating social presence in the classroom, which is to create a sense of ease among participants and a positive learning environment. Several strategies for creating social presence in the online environment were highlighted in three areas: course design (by course designers), delivery and management (by instructors), and participation (participants/learners). By participating, there is emphasis on learner engagement, and this could be with the instructor, with the content, or between and among learners, i.e. peer interaction. Greyling and Wentzel (2007) illustrated the use of design strategies and teaching strategies (by facilitators) to create social presence in large classes, aligned with those suggested by Aragon (2003). And the result showed increased academic and social participation from the learners. In their study, Hariri Asl and Marandi (2019) used peer assessment and student-driven negotiation of meaning as a way to create social presence in the online classroom. Chemosit and Rugutt (2020) pointed out peer interaction as one of the important variables in

predicting student's assessment of quality of teaching and learning. Wilson (2021) did a similar approach of including discussion components in the assignment to increase peer interaction and peer learning with biochemistry students online and overall the learners rated discussion assignments positively.

## **Method**

In order to look into the learners' perception of OCP as a component of the course assignment and find out how favourable the learners were towards OCP, we used a quantitative approach, and collected data using a questionnaire. The data gathered from the quick survey will provide information on the learners' perceptions of OCP.

### **Sampling procedures and participants**

The target population for this study were learners from three different faculties: Faculty of Business and Management, Faculty of Technology and Sciences, and Faculty of Education and Social Sciences. A total of 318 responses were received from randomly selected courses. The total falls slightly short of the needed sample size. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size for large population of 7000 is 364. This study used a purposive sampling method to select the targeted respondents which are the learners from courses with OCP activity included as a component of the course assignment.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire used for the survey allowed learners to give their ratings, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, on whether they felt OCP gave them more opportunities to communicate with their course mates, exchange knowledge with their course mates and broaden their knowledge, and motivate them to go online and participate in the forum. In addition, they would also rate whether they felt the activity was helpful and useful, and if they were given sufficient time to participate in the group discussions. Items in the questionnaire were given in two languages, English and Bahasa, which is the national language of Malaysia.

For the data collection, out of the 7540 online surveys distributed, only 4.2% of learners responded to the survey. The low response is attributed to the fact that the survey was distributed at the beginning of the final exams week and the limited time for data collection.

## **Findings**

Out of the 318 responses received, 81.13% were from undergraduate learners and 18.86% were from postgraduate learners enrolled in the master's degree courses. The learners who responded were learners enrolled in courses from different programs under the three different faculties.

### **Results from Survey**

There were 10 items on the survey as shown in Table 1. Learners were allowed to rate from strongly agree to strongly disagree on each of the items presented.

#### **Table 1**

*List of Items Used in Survey*

Item	Statement
1	The activity encouraged me to communicate with my course mates (peers).
2	The activity helped me learn from my peers.
3	This activity allowed sharing of knowledge with my peers.
4	The activity was relevant to my learning
5	The activity helped broaden my knowledge.
6	The activity helped improve my written communication skills.
7	The activity motivated me to participate in online forum discussions.
8	I enjoyed participating in the online group discussions.
9	The duration of the activity was sufficient.
10	The marks allocated for the activity were appropriate

Table 2 below shows the overall percentages on ratings for all ten items. On the average, 69.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed to all ten items, 18.84% disagree or strongly disagreed and 11.67% were neutral.

**Table 2**

*Percentage Ratings for Survey Items*

Item#	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Neutral
1	69.66	18.58	11.78
2	67.8	18.26	13.93
3	71.5	17.02	11.45
4	72.44	18.26	8.97
5	71.5	18.8	9.6
6	69.34	17.02	13.62
7	68.73	19.81	11.14
8	65.3	21.67	13
9	67.49	19.8	12.69
10	70.27	19.19	10.52

Further breakdown of the results showed that 70.9% of the undergraduate respondents strongly agree/agree that the activity encouraged them to communicate with their course mates, 17.0% rated otherwise and the rest were neutral. On whether they found the activity helped them learn from their peers, 70.2% rated strongly agree/agree; while 16.3% rated disagree/strongly disagree and 13.4% rated neutral. 73.7% strongly agree/agree that the activity allowed for sharing of knowledge with their peers; 15.6% disagree/strongly disagree and 10.6% were neutral. 77.3% of the respondents strongly agree/agree OCP was relevant to their learning; while 6.3% were neutral and 16.3% disagree/strongly disagree. 73.7% agree/strongly agree that the activity helped broaden their knowledge, whilst 17% rated disagree/strongly disagree and the rest were neutral. 72.3% agree/strongly agree that the activity helped improve their written communication skills. Meanwhile about 15.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. On whether they felt the activity motivated them to participate in online forum discussions, 70.2% agreed/strongly agreed, while 17.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. 69.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed participating in the online group discussions. 19.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed on that matter and 11.3% were neutral. In terms of the duration of the activity and appropriate marks allocated for the activity, 73.0% and 74.4% agreed or strongly agreed, respectively. 17.0% disagreed/strongly disagreed that the duration was sufficient, and 14.8% rated the same for appropriate marks allocation.

From the group of postgraduate learners, with respect to whether they felt the activity encouraged them to communicate with their peers, 80% rated agree/strongly agree, 16.67% rated disagree/strongly disagree and 3.33% rated neutral. On whether the activity helped them learn from their peers 80% rated agree/strongly agree, 11.67%

rated disagree/strongly disagree and 8.33% were neutral. 83.33% agreed/strongly agreed that OCP allowed sharing of knowledge with their peers, while 10% disagreed/strongly disagreed on the matter and 6.67% were neutral. On relevancy, 80% agreed/strongly agreed that OCP was relevant to their learning and 11.67% disagreed/strongly disagreed, and 8.3% were neutral. 80% agreed/strongly agreed that OCP helped broaden their knowledge, 13.33% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 6.67% were neutral. On whether OCP helped improve written communication skills, 76.67% agreed/strongly agreed, 8.33% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 15% rated neutral. 71.66% agreed/strongly agreed that OCP motivated them to participate in online forum discussions, 6.67% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 15% were neutral. As for whether they enjoyed participating in online group discussions, 76.66% rated agree/strongly agree, 20% rated disagree/strongly disagree and 8.33% were neutral on the matter. 76.66% agreed/strongly agreed that the duration of the activity was sufficient, while 16.67% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 6.66% were neutral. Lastly, on the matter of mark allocation, 80.0% agreed/strongly agreed that the mark allocation for the activity was sufficient, 13.33% disagreed/strongly disagreed, and 6.66% were neutral.

Figure 2a and 2b below show a summary of the percentages based on the responses from both groups on each of the items in the survey.

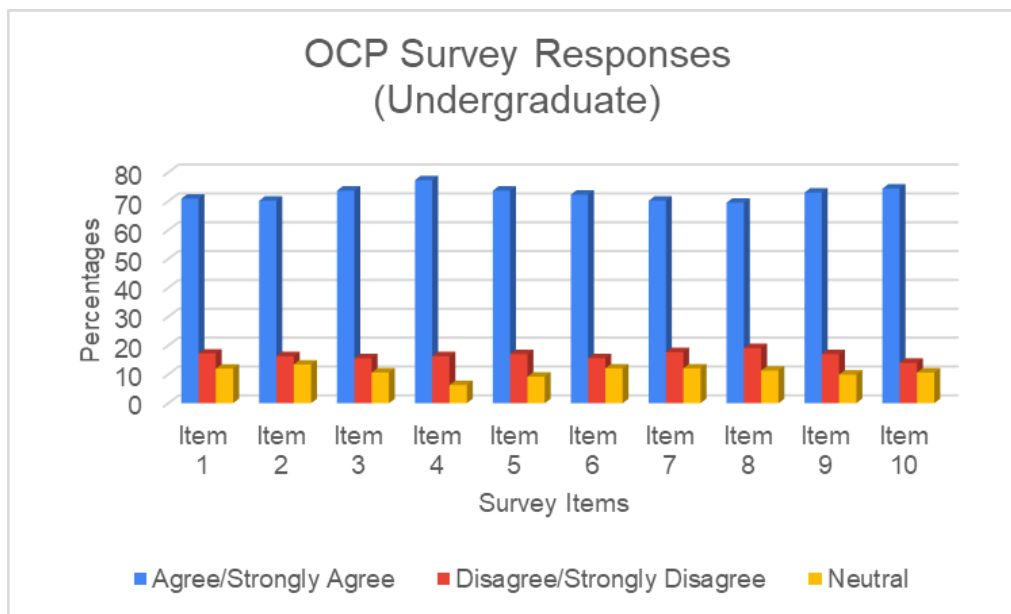


Figure 2a OCP Survey responses from undergraduate learners

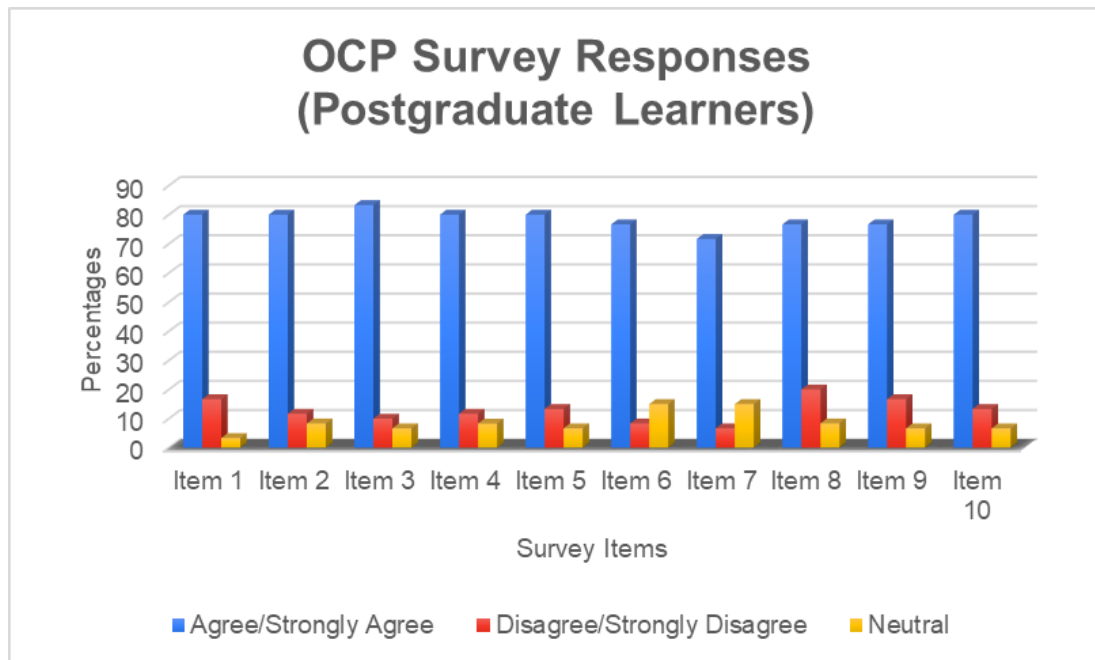


Figure 2b OCP Survey responses from postgraduate learners

### Observations from myInspire

All the courses at OUM can be accessed through its learning management system, myInspire. We wanted to get an idea of learners' online participation with the introduction of OCP as a component of the course assignment. Having myInspire allowed us to look into learners' participation online as myInspire tracks learners' online activities. Based on the reports from myInspire, in general, there were increases in learners' views and in the number of learners' postings for January Semester 2022 as compared to September Semester 2021. A few courses showed a slight decline in the number of views and postings. Table 3a below shows the number of postings for some of the courses and Table 3b shows the number of learner views for the same courses.

**Table 3a**

*Number of Learner Postings (September 2021 and January 2022 Semesters)*

Course Name	Learner Postings	
	Sep-21	Jan-22
Health Psychology	18	964
Statistics for Psychology	194	1,428
Management Accounting	252	992
Financial Accounting	648	4,956
Human Resource Development	145	2,420
Hazard Management	38	1,748
Employment and Industrial Law	332	2,761
Organisation and Business Management	970	2,600



Course Name	Learner Postings	
	Sep-21	Jan-22
Basic Concepts of Information Technology	35,662	40,633
Information Technology and Environment	1,284	8,073
Bahasa Kebangsaan A	249	1,168
Health and Wellness 2	4,702	34,228
Statistics	3,144	1,908
Biostatistics	797	1,466
English for Oral Communication	67,413	99,842
Professional Ethics	1,091	9,015
Research Methodology	24	297
Project Cost Analysis and Appraisal	30	531
Project Management	352	1,612
Instructional Technologies	5,115	8,834

**Table 3b**

*Number of Learner Views (September 2021 and January 2022 Semesters)*

Course Name	Learner Views	
	Sep-21	Jan-22
Health Psychology	1,947	9,862
Statistics for Psychology	10,243	16,032
Management Accounting	8,477	10,874
Financial Accounting	38,942	66,703
Human Resource Development	11,106	26,681
Hazard Management	5,095	16,074
Employment and Industrial Law	16,572	29,405
Organisation and Business Management	32,720	31,800
Basic Concepts of Information Technology	180,188	219,676
Information Technology and Environment	37,751	85,378
Bahasa Kebangsaan A	19,985	20,262

Course Name	Learner Views	
	Sep-21	Jan-22
Health and Wellness 2	146,606	271,564
Statistics	35,887	23,707
Biostatistics	5,953	13,672
English for Oral Communication	256,282	421,093
Professional Ethics	45,667	108,212
Research Methodology	1,116	4,232
Project Cost Analysis and Appraisal	2,899	5,843
Project Management	12,774	20,801
Instructional Technologies	42,342	77,800

## Discussion

The Covid-19 Pandemic has certainly forced changes in how courses are delivered. For OUM, being the leading provider of ODL in the country since its inception, making the switch was not a very big challenge. The challenge was more in enhancing e-learning practices and enriching the online learning environment to ensure that all OUM learners would have positive and rewarding online learning experiences. This in turn will help with learner retention. One of the initiatives in this direction was the introduction of Online Class Participation through online group discussions as a component of the course assignment. This was implemented in January semester 2022. We aimed to find out how comfortable learners were with OCP and whether there was increased activity in the online courses in general and specifically in the forum discussion areas. Additionally, we want to see if there are any areas for improvement to allow for a more meaningful and rewarding learning experience using OCP. The findings show that overall the learners, both undergraduates and postgraduates, rated positively towards OCP, with an average of 72.52% and 77.8% on all items, for both groups respectively. These numbers seem encouraging. The postgraduate learners have always been the more active participants in the online forums hence it is not surprising to see slightly higher percentages on the ratings from this group.

Items 2, 3, 4, and 5 are of particular interest as all these items were directly related to learning. We wanted to know if the learners felt that OCP was relevant and helpful to their learning. The overall averages for these four items were somewhat consistent and encouraging. The overall average on item 8 which relates to whether learners felt they enjoyed OCP is the lowest. The ratings from the undergraduate learners on this item may have contributed this. Over time it has been observed that undergraduate learners are not as active in the online forums in myInspire as the postgraduate learners. And perhaps they do not find online participation as meaningful as the postgraduate learners.

The overall percentage was also low for item 9 which had to do with allocation of time given to OCP. This could have been due to learners not having time to come online, either by choice or other valid reasons, and end up with limited time to participate online and complete the OCP component of the assignment.

OUM learners are used to the online learning environment and are used to accessing their courses online via OUM's LMS myInspire. By logging in to myInspire learners can access the course content, course assignment, weekly e-lessons, videos, recorded e-tutorials, interactive activities, and course forum for asynchronous

communication with their online tutors and course mates. As ODL working adults, many learners access their courses to download the course module and course assignment and participate in the forum area mostly in the folder related to course assignment. Asynchronous forum discussion takes place, but further observations of course forums show the trend seems to be heavily on discussion on course assignment. Additionally, the main exchange in communication happens between the learners and the online tutors, which is more of a one-to-one exchange. Furthermore, online tutors have raised the issue of learners not coming online and participating enough or not responding to tutors' postings. For some online tutors this gave them a sense of having a 'dead class'. It becomes a challenge to online tutors who are appointed and required to meet the minimum requirements for weekly postings in order to get paid. OCP was meant to encourage learners to come online and participate in forum discussions. The requirement to participate in structured online group discussions is new to all OUM learners. OUM serves roughly 20,000 students each semester and it is definitely a challenge to satisfy every single learner. As expected, as soon as the implementation of OCP was announced, there were voices of learners who contended and expressed that the activity would be a burden to all learners.

In designing and implementing OCP, possible challenges to the learners, e-tutors and e-graders were taken into consideration. Firstly, questions to be discussed in the groups should be open, broad and general questions related to the subject matter, and not focus on specific right or wrong answers. This was done to allow for unlimited and open discussions. Course leaders/subject matter experts developing the assignments were briefed on this matter. They were also provided with a template for developing the course assignment that included the OCP component along with the rubric for OCP assessment. Secondly, to not burden the e-tutors with the task of assigning learners to specific groups, they only had to set up the group discussion areas in the forum. Learners can choose whichever group they wish to join and participate in the group discussion. In addition, e-tutors are not expected to respond to or comment on every posting in the group discussions, and should allow learners the freedom to share their knowledge and ideas. The e-tutors can take the role of being moderators, and they should still follow the discussions. Thirdly, assignments are graded online by e-graders who are not necessarily the e-tutors for the course. When assessing online forum discussions, naturally the grader will have to access the forum discussion area to do the assessment. To avoid any problems with e-graders trying to access courses and having to go through forum postings, OCP requires that the learners take on the responsibility of providing the e-graders with their postings. Learners can do this by taking snapshots of at least five of their forum postings with complete time stamp and author's name, and insert them as images in their assignment. As e-graders grade the assignments, they can easily assess the postings based on the rubric provided.

Since this is the first cycle of its use, the e-graders have had the chance to grade assignments that included OCP. A couple of issues have been voiced with regards to the postings submitted. Some learners submitted postings of others instead of their own, and received 0 marks for OCP. The instruction does say to "submit 5 best postings to show proof of your participation in the group discussions". Some learners may have misread the instruction or didn't read the entire sentence in the instruction. For the upcoming semester, the wording will be improved and will read - "Select the best Five (5) of your postings from the forum discussion area set up by your tutor".

The data taken from myInspire on the number of learner views and learner postings shows what we had hoped to see, an increasing trend. Some of the courses that showed a decline in the number of views and postings can be attributed to lower enrolment in January Semester 2022 as compared to September Semester 2021. Although we cannot conclude that all the postings were from the OCP group discussions, seeing the increase in the number of postings in the online forums is encouraging and indicates an increase in learner participation in the online forums. OCP was introduced not only to increase peer-to-peer engagement online, but also to encourage learners to log into myInspire and post in the forums. Online tutors have noted the issue of learners not logging in to myInspire, not reading tutors' postings, not responding to tutor postings, and not participating in the online forums. By having OCP, it was hoped that the learners will be encouraged and motivated to log in into myInspire more often, and participate in the online forums. McKenna et.al (2022) stressed the importance of communities in online learning environments. Learning communities are built through online forum activities. At OUM, myInspire is where the virtual classroom is, hence learners should be encouraged frequent myInspire and participate in online forum activities.

## **Conclusions**

Introducing OCP activity as a component of the course assignment was an initiative done not only to increase and show proof of peer to peer engagement, i.e. social presence, taking place in the course forum discussion areas, but also to help build learning communities in the online learning environment. Additionally, the intention was to get the learners to come online and use the forums and participate online. With the face-to-face component in blended learning mode, group discussions could easily be formed in the physical classroom during the tutorials. We want the learners to experience this online since we no longer have face-to-face sessions. OUM made the switch to online tutorials or e-tutorials. e-Tutorials are one hour sessions where again the communication is mainly between the e-tutor and the group of learners and may not serve as the best platform to have group discussions amongst learners. In addition, e-tutorials are not compulsory hence not all learners will be in attendance. At the moment having OCP as a component of the course assignment seemed to be a practical solution. OCP is at an infant stage of implementation. The results from the quick survey and user analytics from myInspire are encouraging. For this quick study, the sample was relatively small if we take into account the entire learner population at OUM. The investigation into the learners' perception of OCP should be repeated and should include more courses offered during the semester in order to get a better representation of how the learners feel towards the activity. At the other end of the spectrum, it will be interesting to get the point of view of e-tutors on the implementation and use of the activity and how they play their roles to ensure the success of the activity online. Perhaps in the future collaborative learning can be incorporated into OCP along with peer assessment. OUM strives to provide excellent learning environments to its learners. OUM must continuously invest efforts in improvements and enhancements that are learner-centred, and find solutions to promote social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence in the virtual classroom.

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