



Freshers Fortnight 21J Review

1. Introduction and Key Findings

1.1 The Open University Students Association Freshers Fortnight is held twice a year, in September – October and in January – February. Freshers Fortnight is an opportunity for both new and continuing Open University (OU) students to engage with fellow students, take part in events and activities, and learn about the Association.

1.2 This report will look at the Freshers Fortnight activities that have taken place so far from 20 September – 28 September at the time of writing (hereafter 21J), organised by the Association's Student Community Team. The full evaluation report of Freshers Fortnight 21J (20 September – 3 October 2021) and Freshers Fortnight 22B will be released in Spring 2022; including various feedback, engagement metrics and recommendations. The key objectives set for Freshers Fortnight are:

- Provide a welcoming and friendly atmosphere for both new and continuing students; with a focus on social opportunities to connect with fellow students, informative sessions from student representatives, Association and OU staff, and wellbeing
- Provide an opportunity for students to learn more about the Association, their student representatives and opportunities available to them
- Encourage further involvement from students with the Association beyond Freshers Fortnight

1.3 Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Freshers Fortnight, which is usually a mixture of online and face-to-face events, was held entirely online.

1.4 As Freshers Fortnight 21J did not involve pre-registering for events, it is difficult to determine the exact number of students who have engaged with the events and activities so far. However, as of 28 September 2021, 4,507 people had signed up to the Freshers 2021-2022 mailing list, which is already an increase of 155% from the 1,765 students who signed up to the Freshers mailing list for both Freshers Fortnight 20J and 21B. The Feedback Survey for Freshers Fortnight 21J (for attendees) is due to be live before the end of the fortnight, and a Feedback Survey for Hosts will also be used in the full evaluation report due Spring 2022. Other engagement metrics will also be taken into account for the full report.

1.5 So far Freshers Fortnight 21J has had a fantastic level of engagement from students, which can be seen so far in terms of attendee numbers and communications, which will be outlined below. Security measures and guidance for hosts and staff support has also been increased for this Freshers Fortnight, which so far seems to have been effective.

2. Freshers Fortnight 21J Programme and attendees so far

2.1 There is an extensive programme of 47 online events and sessions for OU students to take part in during Freshers Fortnight 21J. The sessions ranged from:

- Faculty chats
- Area chats
- Social events (*Saturday Morning Coffee and Chat, Bingo, Friday Night Quiz, Speed Friending*, regional online meet-ups and more)
- Informative sessions from students (*Welcome session, Meet your student reps, Study Tips, Societies and Clubs Fair* and more)
- OU sessions (*Careers, Library*)
- Societies and Clubs sessions (Chess Club, Space Society, Christian Union, Neurodiversity Club and more)
- Wellbeing themed sessions (*Mindapples, Looking after your mental wellbeing, Support available to you as an OU student*)

2.2 Attendee numbers are being collected for many of our sessions, by staff or student representatives who were present. Note that attendee numbers used are the highest number reached in the session, as attendee numbers fluctuated throughout sessions. The attendee numbers will be analysed in the Spring 2022 report once all feedback has been collected. However, so far popular sessions include *Welcome to the OU Students Association and Freshers Fortnight* with 180 attendees, *Societies and Clubs Fair* with 125 attendees, *Bingo* with 80 attendees, *Mindapples: Feed your Mind Webinar* with 76 attendees, *Study Tips* with 75 attendees and *Q&A with experienced OU students* with 65 attendees.

3. Freshers Fortnight 21J Communications

3.1 Information about Freshers Fortnight 21J was communicated through various platforms to raise awareness – CAMEL mailings, social media, The Hoot, StudentHome, the Association monthly newsletter, oustudents.com, the Freshers mailing list, *OU and You* newsletter and through faculty contacts to tutors (the latter two being new methods for Freshers Fortnight 21J).

3.2 CAMEL mailings: The first CAMEL mailing, sent on 17 September, was sent to 128,014 students (29,958 new students and 98,056 returning students). The second CAMEL mailing, sent on 24 September, was sent to 129,932 students (30,925 new students and 99,007 returning students).

3.3 Freshers mailing list: As of 28 September 2021, 4,507 people had signed up to the Freshers 2021-2022 mailing list, which is already an increase of 155% from the 1,765 students who signed up to the Freshers mailing list for both Freshers Fortnight 20J and 21B. More evaluation of the engagement in the mailing list will follow in the full report in Spring 2022.

3.4 oustudents.com, Freshers microsite, social media, The Hoot, OU and You newsletter, faculties: The engagement on or as a result of these platforms/methods will be assessed in the full report in Spring 2022.

4. Activities at Freshers Fortnight 21J

4.1 Throughout Freshers Fortnight 21J there are eight competitions and prize draws. The competitions and prize draws are taking place on various platforms including social media, during sessions, and via email or on online form. These competitions and prize draws are: *Passport Bingo Prize Draw, Study Goal Prize Draw, Students in Wales Drop-In and Chat - Quiz, Friday Night Quiz, Young at Heart Quiz, Bingo, Evaluation survey* and a Writing Competition. Evaluation of the competitions and prize draws will be assessed in the full report in Spring 2022.

5. Online Freshers Fortnight

5.1 Online platforms: Most sessions were held on Microsoft Teams, with some sessions held on Adobe Connect and some Societies and Clubs choosing to use platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Lichess. There have been some small glitches with Microsoft Teams throughout the Fortnight, including some participants unable to see the chat box icon for example. Hosts were prepared to give guidance on small technical issues such as this; with exiting the meeting and returning, changing device, or changing from browser to app (or vice versa) sometimes solving the issue. Some participants were also confused by how to attend sessions on Microsoft Teams, attempting to sign in with their OU login rather than joining, as advised, as a 'Guest' – which caused issues with attending sessions. This was explained in the Freshers FAQs, but could potentially be made more obvious e.g. on the programme pages. These issues will be assessed in more detail in the full report, along with any additional feedback collected in the Feedback Surveys.

5.2 Safety and security: This Freshers Fortnight there was an aim to improve the safety and security of events. Firstly, all event links were hidden on a forum to ensure only OU students could access them. So far, this has seemed a good solution as attendees just need to take one extra step of signing in with their OU login details, and attendee numbers have remained at similar levels to Freshers Fortnight 20J, indicating that the extra step does not seem to have caused a significant reduction in people attending. Secondly, all student hosts, OU and Association staff and staff support were given guidance documents on hosting and/or supporting events, and student hosts and staff support were offered a guidance session. Thirdly, all hosts were asked to have a co-host present. Finally, all hosts running events on Microsoft Teams were asked to set up a lobby and presenter permissions for co-hosts so that they could easily control the lobby, mute/remove people, and end the session for all attendees. So far, there have been no behavioural issues that the Community Team is aware of, and whether these measures have improved the attendee and host experience will be assessed in the full report.

5.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: The project team refreshed the Equality Impact Assessment and considered the needs of students with protected characteristics in the planning and preparation for Freshers events. Training and guidance, including an updated [Code of Conduct](#), was issued to all hosts to share with participants. Our representative groups were invited to host individual sessions and the first EDI focussed “[Student Insights](#)” event was met with a positive response and had 35 attendees.

5.4 Overall, holding Freshers Fortnight 21J online has been a success so far. Inevitably using online platforms can lead to technical issues, but this was mitigated with training for hosts and FAQs on the Freshers site for attendees.

6. Impact beyond Freshers Fortnight

6.1 Newsletter: One area where the impact of Freshers Fortnight can already be seen is in new subscribers to the monthly Association newsletter. Between 1 September - 28 September the monthly newsletter has had 773 new subscribers, which is already 44% higher than the 535 new subscribers achieved for both September and October 2020. This could in part be attributed to the Study Goal Prize Draw requiring entrants to sign up to the monthly Association newsletter as one of the requirements to be entered into the prize draw.

6.2 The full impact beyond Freshers Fortnight 21J will be assessed in the full report in Spring 2022.

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