Brief for the position of Executive Director, Students & Digital
March 2018
Welcome Letter

Dear Candidate,

The role of Executive Director, Students & Digital at The Open University (OU) has been recently created to deliver and champion an exceptional student experience across the OU, which is digital by design. The OU aims to lead the way in its innovative, ground-breaking student experience and the Executive Director, Students & Digital will ensure the University leads the way globally in its radical approach to ensuring success for all students, wherever they are, whatever their circumstances. This is a pivotal and highly visible senior role which requires the championing of a digital culture and ways of working across the OU as we enter a period of significant organisational change.

As we approach our 50th anniversary, we are challenging ourselves to be as daring as our founders in order to sustain our great mission and reach more students with life-changing learning. The OU has so many of the assets needed: motivated students, committed staff, a spirit of innovation and complete dedication to its mission and this post will be vital in helping us achieve this.

The OU plays a crucial and unique role in the social and economic life of all four nations of the UK by promoting educational opportunity and social justice through high-quality education for all who wish to realise their potential and fulfil their dreams. We are the most significant provider of part-time higher education. Around 40% of the UK’s part-time undergraduates are taught by us each year, and more than 170,000 learners are currently studying with us.

In recent years, the Higher Education landscape has changed significantly: from new funding regimes to disruptive technologies, from new providers to more demanding learners. The OU is well-placed to respond to this more competitive and challenging environment and we have set ourselves an ambitious and transformative strategy for growth, guided by our enduring values of inclusivity, innovation and responsiveness, and remaining true to our founding mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

We very much hope you will consider joining us.

Peter Horrocks
Vice-Chancellor
Role Profile

Position

Executive Director, Students & Digital

Location

The role will be based at the University’s headquarters in Milton Keynes. This includes a purpose built campus of approximately 110 acres with nearly 4,400 staff based here and in national and regional centres across the UK. The campus sits alongside the M1 and A5 and is 30-45 minutes by rail from London Euston.

Reporting

The Executive Director, Students & Digital will report to the Vice-Chancellor, Peter Horrocks and will sit on the Executive.

The Executive Director, Students & Digital will work alongside a peer group that includes the Academic, Strategy & Commercial and Professional Services functions. In addition, the Executive Director, Students & Digital will lead a sizable team that will likely include Data Insight, Research & Development, Customer Experience & Design, Student Support Operations and Virtual Learning Environment. However, this is currently still under development.

Website

www.open.ac.uk
The Organisation

The Open University (OU) is one of the most important post-war innovations in higher education. It is the leading provider of high quality flexible learning underpinned by excellence in research. The OU makes a real difference to people’s lives. People of all ages and backgrounds study with the OU, for all sorts of reasons – to update their skills, gain a qualification, boost their career, change direction, prove themselves, keep mentally active. The OU is open to them all.

Mission

The OU’s mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. The OU promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership, the OU seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open learning.

An outstanding student experience

The OU has become by far the largest university in the UK, offering around 450 modules to more than 170,000 students, and making over 19,000 academic awards last year. It is expanding its activities internationally, and its materials are used by other institutions in many parts of the world. The courses are intended mainly for employed adults seeking undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications, studying part-time, and at a time and place convenient to them.
The OU is the largest university in the UK and the only institution in the National Student Survey which operates across all four UK nations. Overall satisfaction for the University was 86% in 2017, above the sector average, and the OU is in the top three universities for satisfaction with assessment and feedback. Within the UK nations, the OU was ranked fourth in Wales with an overall satisfaction score of 87%, and second in Scotland and Northern Ireland with a rating of 89%. 13 other universities share an overall satisfaction rating of 86% in 2017 alongside the OU, including the University of Nottingham and the University of Leicester.

The OU Student Charter gives further insight into how the OU places its students at the heart of everything it does.

A unique institution

The OU is special because it is unique. Its distance learning approach sets it apart from other universities. At the heart of the OU’s teaching are its faculties, schools and institutes producing high-quality courses underpinned by an internationally excellent research base. The innovative research to emerge from the OU influences policy and enriches lives, and the University secures some £15m external funding annually.

The OU is a ‘national institution’ – it is the only university to receive funding from all four nations of the UK, and it remains resolutely committed to continuing to serve all nations. It has also been in partnership with the BBC for nearly 50 years and has moved from late-night lectures in the 1970s to co-producing around
35 prime-time series a year across BBC TV, Radio and Digital channels. Recent projects include: Hospital, Blue Planet, The Met and Child of Our Time on TV and The Bottom Line, Thinking Allowed and All in the Mind on radio. Each year the series prompt some 780,000 visits to the OU’s free learning website www.open.edu/openlearn to find out more about the topics.

Open access to learning

Most importantly, however, the OU lives up to its name. It is the only university where no qualifications are required for entry to its undergraduate courses. It is a world leader in open access, supported open learning and open educational resources (OER). For example, 10m people discover its free resources each year. To date, these resources have generated 72m downloads of courses and audio files on iTunes U, 50m visitors to its free learning resources and courses on OpenLearn that was launched in 2006, and 37m video views on its YouTube Edu channel launched in 2007.

The OU established FutureLearn, a social learning platform that reaches 190 countries and territories and brings together free online courses from 120 leading international universities and cultural partners, with almost 6m learners. The OU is playing a leading role in the transition to mass higher education by serving an increasingly large and diverse student body. It is also contributing to a widening of educational opportunities by making its programmes, courses and services available throughout the UK and beyond, and it uses distance-teaching methods, new learning technologies and new teaching techniques to serve the broadest cross-section of students. The OU is a vibrant academic community, dedicated to the expansion, refinement and sharing of knowledge and understanding.
Values and culture

In all its work, the OU stays true to a clearly defined set of core values. First, it is inclusive, playing a unique role in society by making higher education open to all and promoting social justice through the development of knowledge and skills. Second, it is innovative, leading the learning revolution, placing innovation at the heart of its teaching and research, continuously seeking new and better ways to inspire and enable learning, and creating world class research and teaching. Third, it is responsive to the needs of individuals, employers and communities, and dedicated to supporting its students’ learning success.

These values are rooted in the organisation’s strong and distinctive culture. The OU is a people-centric organisation and aims to make a significant difference to people’s lives.

The organisation and its people are genuinely motivated by this cause and seek to achieve a positive social impact. It is imperative that candidates demonstrate a similar mentality and have a strong appreciation of a values-driven culture and person-centric approach. Candidates must fit into and contribute to this culture.
The Opportunity

Peter Horrocks joined as Vice-Chancellor in 2015 following a 30-year career at the BBC where he led the organisation’s international news services across radio, television and online. With increasing competition and rapid change in how students learn, he is now leading a significant transformation programme, and has recently unveiled a range of exciting and ambitious plans for the University based on its unique strengths, with the aim to make it more efficient and relevant to students. Services that were previously dispersed across different areas have been aligned into functional areas (see below) and this has led to the creation of a number of new roles, including the Executive Director, Students & Digital.

This role brings key elements of the OU’s business together under a unified leadership with responsibility to redefine the quality and design of the student experience. The role combines sales (B2C acquisition and conversion) with student journey design and support, and it also leverages the use of data analytics to provide students with the best possible experience and to chart their progress and retention.

With its future strategy and plans in place, the OU holds an enviable position in the UK market. It is a highly successful and forward thinking organisation and combines a rich heritage with a high degree of ambition and confidence in its continued growth and future direction. The Executive Director, Students & Digital will play a key part in this – both in the evolution and direction of the University and in the further development of the student experience.

We are seeking to appoint an individual who can work alongside the key stakeholders in the OU and bring a hands-on approach to the development and implementation of the student and digital strategy. The successful candidate will need to be able to demonstrate that they can make a difference to this forward thinking University, working as part of the University Executive, with responsibility for refining and adapting how the OU attracts and retains students in a highly competitive, digitally focused and rapidly changing environment. The Executive Director, Students & Digital must bring a multichannel outlook and perspective and will stand as “the voice of the customer” across all touchpoints. As the overall champion of the student experience, he/she will ensure a fully integrated and joined up customer driven approach.
Four Key Functional Areas

• To champion and continuously improve the student journey and experience
• To deliver an exceptional student experience which is digital by design
• To manage the front end through which the students engage with the OU

Differentiating attributes include student insight, student journey improvement and customer service.

• To assess if and how we can make what the market requires
• To differentiate the OU through its superior open, personalised learning experience, including online
• To develop curriculum and teaching materials and the research that supports it
• To provide continuous learning support to students throughout their course life-cycle

Differentiating attributes include digital learning, open learning, and qualification design and development.

• To identify market opportunities and how we could make the most of them
• To grow and diversify revenue through new products, partnerships and ventures
• To support VCE to set the strategy
• To set the framework, strategic objectives and templates for the overall curriculum and research portfolios

Differentiating attributes include proposition development, commercial, business development and account management.

• To enable the OU to operate efficiently and effectively
• To provide professional and support services to Open University staff across all organisation functions and locations

Differentiating attributes include transformation, change and elements of IT services which support the student/learning experience.
The Role

The Executive Director, Students & Digital will have end-to-end responsibility for developing and delivering an exceptional student experience and, in delivering this, for championing a digital culture and ways of working across the OU. The Students & Digital function manages the services and channels through which students engage with the OU, in order to provide continuous support to students throughout their course lifecycle, and to facilitate the process by which the University is held to account for an exceptional, consistent student experience – from first contact with the University through to graduation and beyond.

The Executive Director, Students & Digital will be responsible for driving student retention, student satisfaction, enhanced student employability and career progression through the creation of innovative and digitally enabled strategies.

Having a developed understanding of the experiential and pedagogical journey for the student he/she will focus on continuously improving the student journey and learning experience, which drive the OU ambition to have a greater number of students qualifying.

In addition to developing a strong and visible team that will build reputation and competence for the function, they will be a change agent and leader with strong stakeholder management, communication and leadership skills, along with commercial acumen, drive and tenacity. Key functional areas include student attraction, student conversion, student journey design, student support, student data, insight and analytics, and all digital channels such as the Virtual Learning Environment, Library Services and Qualifications Online.

As a member of the Vice-Chancellor’s top team, the Executive Director, Students & Digital will also contribute to the overall strategic direction and development of the OU and play a key role in the delivery of its ‘Students First’ strategy.

Main Functional Duties and Responsibilities:

**Student Journey**

- To hold the OU to account for the student experience with accountability for student satisfaction through the lifetime of their learning with the OU
- To provide innovative thought leadership, introducing new approaches, products and services to enhance the student experience and improve student retention
- To promote and champion continuous improvement of student employability and retention across the University, building strong relationships with the Academic function and key aspects of the student learning experience
- To ensure the student experience is placed at the heart of the University’s decision making
- To ensure the use of student-led insight in developing and improving the whole journey through learning and studying with the OU
- To generate and disseminate data-led market insights to support the Academic and Strategy functions
- To inform product and curriculum development and decommissioning process through data-driven student insight

**Student Support**

- To drive sales (i.e. conversion of interest to registration), including registering, induction, etc.
- To ensure support is in place for students at each step of their journey with the OU, ensuring the processes are held in place to enhance student retention and continuing study
- To provide timely, informative student support through the student support contact centres using the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) model
- To deliver high-quality support to students, from handling enquiries to providing specialist support and advice on progression, skills and career advancement
- To provide a pastoral support capability for all students

**Key Interfaces**

- With the Strategy & Development function in the identification and development of new propositions and market opportunities informed by data analytics
- With the Academic function in disseminating student insight to inform the learning design of curriculum and qualifications
- With the Academic function in disseminating key performance indicator information to faculties to continuously improve the student experience
The Person

The ideal candidate will be a highly experienced and intuitive digital services professional who will have an immediate impact and add value through the development and implementation of the digital strategy and as a member of the Executive team. Potential candidates will bring previous experience in developing a leading edge digital, customer-centric, user experience and proven success in a senior level, strategic leadership role. If not already working in HE, they will understand how to transfer their experience and skills into this challenging and exciting sector and develop a real forward-thinking University, that is clearly disrupting the market.

Candidates will demonstrate evidence of delivering tangible results in a best-in-class customer facing environment, ideally with experience in large and complex organisations. They will be committed to delivering an outstanding and consistent digital strategy and will bring a track record of leading and delivering a consistent and ‘high touch’ customer journey. He/she will be particularly skilled in strategy development, consumer insights/analytics and B2C sales and will bring relevant knowledge of engaging ‘customers’ across a number of channels. Candidates will bring a passion for execution and delivery and experience, leading and developing a highly successful function that works collaboratively across an organisation, engaging and coaching others around best practice digital and customer experience.

Candidates will be used to working to high quality standards at pace, both personally and through others. In addition, individuals will have likely gained exposure to other business functions/disciplines and will understand how to work across an organisation, both cross functionally and as part of a successful leadership team. He/she will have a strong track record in building and leading teams, developing and coaching the right skills, as well as the knowledge and behaviours aligned to deliver the overall business objectives.
The successful candidate will need to demonstrate a broad range of experience:

- Leading the design and delivery of a student-focused, customer support strategy
- Leading in digital, customer-centric user experience
- Developing service options to enhance the customer experience and retention of customers
- Experience of transforming services to meet the requirements of future institutional needs and objectives
- Developing services that support and enable open access for students or customers
- Developing customer satisfaction and building year on year improvements
- Delivering a digitally enabled service offer to customers and the provision of real-time performance analytics
- In addition, he/she will bring evidence of commitment to the OU’s mission through professional or personal activities

As an individual, candidates will demonstrate:

- Excellent communication skills and an ability to inspire and lead from the front
- An ability to lead large-scale, successful transformational change in a matrixed environment
- A personal style that fits with the OU’s values, especially its commitment to students with disadvantages
- Strong stakeholder management and relationship skills, able to develop sustainable key relationships for the long term
- Excellent people-centred leadership capability

- Strong commercial acumen
- Drive and tenacity
- The ability to get things done in a sometimes complex environment

Key Performance indicators

- Increase the numbers of new students directly registered on OU modules and qualifications
- Increase student satisfaction (NSS, PTES and PRES)
- Increase the numbers of students achieving or on track to achieve an OU qualification
- Increase the numbers of students achieving positive career outcomes

Candidates must have a strong buy-in, passion and commitment to the OU, its values and long term objectives and must bring tremendous drive and passion to further develop the University. Candidates will be excited about the opportunity to leverage their skills and experience in this sector and by the prospect of being part of an Executive team with a highly ambitious plan for the future.

Commercial and with sound common sense, the Executive Director, Students & Digital will bring a sense of urgency and a “can do” attitude, with the ability to set the digital agenda, manage change and drive transformation.

Remuneration

A comprehensive remuneration package including a competitive base salary, bonus, pension and other benefits will be on offer.
How to Apply

Further information

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Closing date for applications
Thursday 19 April

First stage informal interviews
TBC

Final panel stage interviews
TBC