Job Description – Head of Returns, University Secretary’s Office, Ref – 16515

Reports to: Director, University Secretary’s Office
Location: Milton Keynes
Grade 9: £52,560 - £59,515

About the role

The Head of Returns leads the University team responsible for key institutional returns and surveys and gives leadership to the Open University (OU) in the development of best practice in making quantitative statutory returns, working closely with the Returns systems team in the Chief Information Officer’s (CIO) Portfolio. Returns and surveys for which responsibility currently falls within the remit of the Returns Team include the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student, Staff, Aggregate Offshore, Provider Profile and Unistats returns, and student number returns made to the four UK funding agencies and the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

The Head of Returns negotiates with HESA and the funding agencies on matters relating to the collection, specification and use of data from returns, including influencing specifications for the returns, to ensure that the University’s published data reflects the University’s true position. The Head of Returns has an influential role in advising staff across the University on how the requirements of HESA and the funding agencies impact on data collection systems, data quality and policies and procedures for student administration and curriculum development.

The Head of Returns provides analysis and reports based on HE sector and OU data for internal planning and decision making, and analysis, advice and guidance to University managers on student numbers for use externally in presenting the University’s position relative to published data on the higher education sector.

The Head of Returns ensures that statutory reporting requirements are taken into account in the university’s strategic data and technical initiatives, e.g. currently the University’s Core Systems Replacement programme and Enterprise Data Hub.

Key responsibilities

Statutory returns

- Develop and maintain a schedule of returns and surveys and manage their preparation and submission.
- Develop processes and methods of working for the preparation of returns which deliver returns to external deadlines, meet internal and external standards for the presentation of data and of internal and external audits. The process covers reviewing requirements, identifying data sources, planning and scheduling the development of the return, specifying the method of preparation, managing data quality issues, sign-off, submission and the response to verification and feedback.
- Ensure that all returns meet the stated requirements to agreed quality standards, including the accuracy and completeness of data.
- Review and approve the Returns Team’s outputs, assuring the University Secretary and his office that they meet the requirements and highlighting any funding or other implications for University plans.
- Influence the practice of external agencies and negotiate appropriate arrangements for reporting the University’s activities in relation to their requirements, to ensure that appropriate decisions are made in interpreting requirements in the presentation of OU metrics.
• Contribute expert knowledge to the preparation of returns based on an understanding of the University’s business, the processes and systems that generate and manage data and the agreed means by which the University’s data is presented in order to meet sector norms.
• Work with OU’s nation offices, Finance, Government & External Affairs and others to develop and maintain an understanding of grant funding arrangements and to enable regular monitoring of performance against funding objectives.
• Keep under review the systems and data available for making returns and advise operational data owners of requirements for new data or changes to data collection procedures and on whether data meets the quality standards required for making returns.
• Manage the process of internal and external audits of the returns made by the team and develop and maintain systems consistent with the recommendations of external and internal auditors.
• Work closely with the Returns Systems Team in the CIO Portfolio and relevant others on the design of systems used to extract, transform, analyse and format data used in returns and for internal analysis.

Advice and Guidance
• Provide advice and guidance to staff across the University on the implications for business planning and operational management of the requirements for returning student and related data and on the fundability of students, qualifications and modules.
• Advise staff on the use of OU data in relation to statutory data, published information on the higher education sector and on the OU in comparison to the sector.
• Undertake analysis and prepare reports for use by OU staff, drawing on OU and sector data ensuring consistency with data returned and used in official publications.
• Ensure the accuracy and completeness of data provided for internal analysis.

Management
• Lead the Returns Team so that it provides a high quality, customer-facing service for the University.
• Manage the resources of the Returns Team, including annual leave arrangements to meet the returns schedule.
• Act in agreed circumstance on behalf of senior members of the University Secretary’s Office (USO).
• Contribute to the work of the University Secretary’s Office as a whole.

Skills and experience

Essential:
• Educated to degree level or possess an equivalent qualification and evidence of a qualification demonstrating significant mathematical ability or proven experience.
• Proven analytical, planning and problem-solving skills.
• Experience of the manipulation, analysis and presentation of large volumes of numeric data, including experience of proprietary software used in managing and analysing large datasets.
• A broad general understanding of the UK higher education sector and the methods of funding students in its constituent nations.
• Proven ability to lead, manage and develop staff including coaching and mentoring.
• Track record of managing staff and projects to deliver outputs to high standards to meet fixed immovable deadlines.
• Confident and experienced in negotiating with and influencing internal and external customers at all levels.

• Ability to assimilate and interpret complex external requirements for information in the context of the business of the Open University
• Excellent communication, negotiating and influencing skills including the ability to interpret and explain complex technical information to a non-technical audience to inform effective decision making
• Ability to develop and manage key internal and external stakeholder relationships effectively
• Planned and structured: highly organised with first class planning abilities, structured in thinking, and written and spoken communications
• Excellent IT skills including Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint
• Innovative, self-reliant and dedicated approach to duties
• Able to work well under pressure, prioritise your workload and that of your team, and manage demanding deadlines
• Confident in dealing with ambiguity and scoping work with keen attention to detail
• Committed to on-going learning and personal development
• Demonstrates a strong commitment to the principles and practice of equality and diversity

Desirable:
• Knowledge of statutory returns in the UK higher education sector.
• A management qualification.