QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET 6: STUDENT SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

Organisational Structure

1 The Open University attracts a diverse student body with a wide range of different needs, expectations and demands. Student support and guidance at the University is designed for students with varied range of personal, educational and career development objectives, studying part-time, at a distance, and often combining study with work and family commitments. Structures and procedures for student support, while consistent with a large-scale distance learning institution, are individualised and localised through Student Support Teams (SSTs) made up of Faculty and Academic Services staff. Their SST is the first point of contact for information, advice and guidance. The support team are specialists in supporting the student’s subject area, have access to their student record, and can help throughout their time with the University. For each module students are assigned a tutor for queries about module content, the tutor is also a member of the SST.

2 The Academic Services Unit manages student support and guidance activity in the University.

3 The Director, Academic Services is responsible for the development, delivery and evaluation of services to students and associate lecturers in support of the University’s teaching and widening participation objectives, as well as the retention of students. The Academic Services unit consists of:
   • Four central sub-units based at Walton Hall, Milton Keynes;
   • Three National Centres based in Scotland, Ireland and Wales;
   • Nine English locations which are about to be replaced by 3 larger student support centres in England.

4 Central sub-units: The Academic Services unit is divided into four functional areas as follows:
   • Access, Careers and Teaching Support
   • Assessment, Credits and Qualifications
   • Student Support
   • Office of the Director, Academic Services

5 Policies and Procedures which govern student support and guidance in the OU can be found in Essential Documents. The policies and procedures are informed by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and mappings are prepared which set out how the University adheres to each Chapter of the Quality Code

Recruitment and Admissions

6 Recruitment and admissions procedures are informed by the UK Quality Code Chapter B2 Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education. The admission of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students is managed and undertaken by Student Recruitment which is part of Student Recruitment and Fees.

1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in September 2016. Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff

Last Updated: September 2016
Open entry to undergraduate study means that the University’s recruitment and admissions policy operates on a first come, first served basis. No formal entry qualifications are needed for most undergraduate modules, in line with the University’s commitment to open access. Staff in Student Recruitment and Fees and in Student Support Teams provide students and enquirers with information, advice and guidance about which modules and qualifications might best meet their needs. However, the decision to study a module rests with each student. The number of students on any collaborative scheme is limited, and decisions on admission are made by the teaching institution, not the Open University.

Entrance requirements for taught postgraduate and research study - Students require an honours degree from a UK University or the former Council for National Academic Awards or equivalent. Relevant professional experience may also be taken into account for exceptional entry. Some taught postgraduate provision has a non graduate entry route e.g. students may study for a Masters in Business Administration following successful completion of the Professional Certificate in Management and Diploma in Management. The Research Degrees Team in the Research School co-ordinates the admissions process of postgraduate research students. The selection of successful candidates lies with the academic units, and all admissions are approved on behalf of the Research Degrees Committee.

Promotional materials describing the taught modules and qualifications on offer are made available to enquirers via a range of prospectuses and on the University’s Study at the OU website at and for research on the Research School’s website. Promotional material includes admissions information, credit transfer arrangements etc. Module choice events are held throughout the country and information, support and advice are also available from Student Recruitment and Student Support Teams.

At registration students agree to abide by the University’s Student Regulations and, if they also register for a qualification, by the regulations governing that award. Conditions of registration, regulations, policies and statements sets out the commitment on the part of the student and of the University, as well as the provision for refunds and withdrawal from a module. The Student Regulations define the basis of the registration agreement and apply to all registered students of the University.

Customer Relationship Management (VOICE). VOICE is the University’s Customer Relationship Management system and is the main tool used by staff to manage the University’s relationship with its students, as well as enquirers tutors and partner organisations. VOICE shows a student’s academic record and all previous contact the University has had with them, including phone conversations, emails and requests or queries submitted by the web. This provides staff with a full summary of our relationship with the student, which enables them to efficiently provide students with the support that they need. VOICE also allows speedy transfer of student queries to the appropriate department, providing a ‘one stop shop’ in most cases.

Advice and guidance

Support and guidance services are an integral part of the OU’s system of Supported Open Learning and are designed to help the learner from first enquiry to completion of studies. The main activities include:

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2 Supported Open Learning is an integrated and scalable system of distance learning providing carefully designed, high quality, multiple media teaching materials, together with personalised learning and support.
• initial qualification /module selection
• planning a programme of study
• tuition loan information and financial assistance
• preparation and induction
• learning skills development
• monitoring and reviewing progress
• careers guidance and support
• facilities for students with disabilities

Information, advice and guidance to enquirers and students is provided by frontline and referral staff based in Student Recruitment and Fees or in the Student Support Teams. Associate Lecturers/tutors (part of Student Support Teams) also provide support to students. More complex enquiries (to do with study progress, career planning or disability) are referred to more specialised advisory staff. Information and advice is provided through written materials and online resources; and guidance is usually provided by telephone or email interactions. The Study Support area of StudentHome directs students to appropriate information and resources. To prepare for OU study, students can make use of the Induction website. Skills for Study provides tips, guidance and resources to help students develop their study skills. The Help Centre featured on StudentHome provides a range of information and advice to support students throughout their studies with the University.

Support for disabled students

The University undertakes a wide range of activity to support accessible learning. Good accessibility practices and the needs of disabled students in academic provision are considered under the umbrella of Securing Greater Accessibility (SeGA) whose aim is to ensure the needs of disabled students are considered at the initial module design stage. This work complements the wide range of activities in Academic Services that support individual disabled students. The OU website and Help Centre for students: Services for Disabled Students provides details about these services and how students can request them.

The Equality Scheme 2016-2020 sets out how the University is committed to developing an inclusive community. Through the equality objectives and equality action plan the aim is to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to promote and advance equality of opportunity and to promote and foster good relations between people. The equality scheme incorporates the following characteristics and circumstances: age, care and dependency, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, political opinion, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Student Support Teams (SSTs): provide advice, guidance and educational support to disabled students. Students who declare a disability, specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia), long term health condition or mental health disability are directed to online resources to identify their support needs and request services by completing a Disability Support Form. An Adviser subsequently contacts the students to discuss their individual support requirements and agree a ‘profile’ record, which is subsequently made available to tutors and support staff, making them aware of any services and adjustments required. Requests for alternative format study materials and auxiliary aids and services are routed
Directly to Disabled Student Services. SSTs handle requests for certain examination and assessment adjustments for example, alternative or modified assignments.

**Disabled Student Support (DSS)** coordinates services and support for disabled students. Working with external service providers, funding bodies, faculties and units DSS provides a wide range of support options, including alternatively formatted materials, specialist equipment, non-medical help, and practical assistance for residential schools. There are three teams within DSS, all based at the OU’s head office in Milton Keynes:

- **The Open University Access Centre** is a service available to all UK higher education students, not just Open University students. As a member of the National Network of Assessment Centres (NNAC) it carries out assistive technology training for students and staff and educational / study needs assessments for disabled students, mostly those eligible for Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs). In addition to the main Access Centre in Milton Keynes, there are five Outreach Centres (Leicester, London, Manchester, Nottingham, and Northern Ireland) and an Access Bus (providing the ability for remote / flexible assessments nationwide and use promotionally at external events).

- **Alternative Formats**: provides a wide range of module materials in alternative formats such as large print, spiral bound books (for easier handling), transcripts of audio material and DAISY talking books (made within the Audio Recording Centre (ARC) supported by a team of around 200 volunteer readers). We currently offer over 125 Open University modules in DAISY Talking Book format and cater for around 5,000 disabled students. The ARC also makes audio recordings of examination papers individually on request from the Examinations Office.

- **Auxiliary Aids and Services**: administers equipment loans for students not eligible for a Disabled Students’ Allowance, communication support for D/deaf and hard of hearing students, support for students needing help at residential school or at tutorials due to a disability or additional requirement and other non-medical helper support

**Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs)**: are government grants to help students pay the extra study support costs they have as a result of a proven disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty. The Open University Access Centre processes applications from OU students domiciled in Northern Ireland and supports continuing students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Until recently, when the bulk of DSA-related work was transferred to the relevant agencies of the Student Loan Company, the OU DSA Office dealt with applications from all Open University students. The University’s DSA Office is due to close in 2017 when the residual work will also transfer to the Student Loan Company. DSAs in Scotland are administered by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) in liaison with The Open University in Scotland and this is not expected to change.

**Other areas of the OU providing specialised support for disabled students**:

- **Location-based staff** in conjunction with Examinations and Assessment make special arrangements for examinations such as requirements for extra time and rest breaks, home examination and alternative format examination papers.
• A Disability Advisor DSA liaises with the relevant agencies of the Student Loan Company (Student Finance England and Student Finance Wales) and other funding bodies for students with DSAs administered by these funding bodies.

Career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG)

Although the majority of OU students are already in employment during their studies, over 60% say that they are studying with the aim of developing or changing their career. Consequently the role of the OU Careers Advisory Service has been to support students at all stages of their career; significantly different to that of other higher education Career Services whose primary client group are young graduates seeking their first job. A key aim of the OU Careers Advisory Service is to provide access to appropriate careers education, information and guidance for prospective students, current students and recent graduates, in order to assist them towards the successful transition to employment change or development, or further study.

The Open University’s CEIAG policy is approved by the Education Committee. The Employability Policy approved by the Senate in June 2011 (S/2011/3/08) covers how the Open University aims to support students to develop their employability via the curriculum using an approach of orientation, skills development and articulation. An Employability toolkit for staff provides guidance and resources around the principles and how to embed employability in the curriculum and student support.

The OU Careers Network includes regional and national careers advisory staff, Careers and Employability Advisers based in Milton Keynes and the Careers Service Development and Leadership Team, led by the Head of the Careers Service. The CEIAG policy is informed by the Code of Practice of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the AGCAS equal opportunities policy, the Open University’s equal opportunities policy and appropriate developments in the external and internal context.

The OU Careers Advisory Service Statement of Service, available from the Essential Documents OU website, outlines the career advisory services available to both prospective and currently registered students and graduates. The services offered comprise of:

• information (in print and on the internet);
• advice and careers guidance;
• online forums and webinar sessions mediated by careers staff and sometimes including employers;
• links with employers.

The delivery of careers information, advice and guidance is via Academic Services in Regional and National Centres, at Milton Keynes and through the Careers Advisory Service website. Support for students is organised by Student Support Teams based in the locations and each of these is linked to a professionally qualified Careers Adviser. Services are delivered primarily by email, telephone and forums but opportunities also exist for face to face contact. The Careers Advisory Service website outlines the process of planning a career. It includes an overview of the career planning process, links to professional organisations and also recruitment sources. The site also includes detailed information about the link between OU modules and qualifications and careers, and a link to Graduate Prospects which is the main UK HE careers site.
Personal Development Planning (PDP) is a process by which students can set goals, develop their skills and review progress. The university is working to ensure that there is some PDP content and assessment within all introductory core level 1 modules to introduce students to using PDP processes to help them with their studies. PDP can be particularly useful for students studying for career reasons as it provides a framework around which to identify next steps in planning their career and also incorporating reviews of the skills they develop through study into this process. Work is happening within faculties to ensure that employability skills developed during study are made explicit so that students can effectively articulate their experience to future and current employers. To support students in using PDP from an employability perspective resources are accessible to from Careers Advisory Service website – About You. Resources on PDP for staff are provided in a PDP Toolkit.

Postgraduate Research Student Supervision and Training

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Academic Strategy) is supported by the Research Committee and Research Degrees Committee for all policy, regulatory, and procedural matters relating to research degrees and higher doctorates.

Postgraduate research provision offered by the University comprises four research degrees – MRes (full-time only), EdD (part-time only), MPhil and PhD. There are also two categories of restricted degrees awarded on the basis of published work – PhD by published work and higher doctorates (DLitt and DSc). Postgraduate research degree provision is offered by all academic units in the University. In addition, some OU research degree provision is delivered by other organisations such as institutions of further or higher education without research degree awarding powers, industrial, commercial, professional or research organisations referred to as affiliated research centres. The University approves and monitors the research degree provision at these organisations and registers students there for research degree study.

Policy, regulatory and procedural matters governing research degrees and higher doctorates is informed by the QAA’s Quality Code, and there is a continuous and on-going process of review and enhancement in response to both external drivers and any specific difficulties encountered.

The University’s Research School operates as a federation of the various sectors of the University’s research community.

Student complaints and Appeals

The University has established processes and procedures to enable its students to make a complaint or to appeal against a decision.

Student Casework & Policy Co-ordination team advises on, records, co-ordinates and monitors formal complaints and appeals. Both activities come under the Academic Policy and Governance Office. The complaints and appeals policies and procedures conform to the UK Quality Code Chapter on Academic Appeals and Student Complaints. Details of the University’s complaints and appeals procedures are contained in ‘Essential Documents’.

Definition of complaint – a complaint is defined as ‘an oral or written expression of dissatisfaction concerning the provision of a programme of study or related academic or administrative service, which is not an appeal against a decision’. Concerns about the provision of a service or facility or the failure to provide a service or facility, where the standard of the service or facility has fallen below the standard that might reasonably be
expected or where there is a reasonable expectation that the service or facility would be provided would be covered by the Complaints Procedure

33 The complaints process - There are three stages. A complaint is first directed to the area responsible for providing the service. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of stage 1, a formal complaint can be directed to the Student Casework Office who if they accept the complaint will pass it to a senior authority to investigate and a Decision letter is issued. A complainant may invoke the Review Stage of the Student Complaints procedure if they do not consider the University having dealt with their complaint in a reasonable manner. Timelines apply to all these processes.

34 Definition of an Academic appeal - The University defines an academic appeal as ‘a request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with making decisions on admission, assessment, student progression and awards.’ Decisions about entry requirements, reasonable adjustments for teaching and assessment for students with disabilities, progression rules, academic misconduct, assignment marks, module results, thesis submission and the award and classification of qualifications would be covered by the Academic Appeals Procedure.

35 Definition of an Administrative appeal – The University defines an administrative appeal as ‘a request for a review of a decision taken by an individual or body charged with making decisions about any aspect of a student’s access to learning or learning experience with the University which is not an academic decision. Decisions about registration processes, fee liability, financial support, exceptional arrangements and reasonable adjustment which are not academic in nature are covered by the Administrative Appeals Procedure.

36 The appeals process – This comprises three stages: querying a decision a student think is wrong; making a formal appeal; requesting a review. Timelines apply to all these processes.

37 The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) – operates an independent student complaints scheme and all higher education institutions in England and Wales are required to comply with the scheme’s rules. Where the OIA accept a complaint for investigation, they will send the student’s complaint form to the Student Casework Office. They will ask for the University’s representations on the complaint, and will usually also ask specific and detailed questions, in order that they may make an informed adjudication. These are dealt with by the Senior Manager, Student Casework and the Case Manager on the Vice-Chancellor’s Delegate’s behalf.