QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET 8: ACCOUNTABILITY TO STAKEHOLDERS ¹

Accountability to Stakeholders

1 Most higher education institutions in the UK are publicly funded organisations and as such have accountability responsibilities to stakeholders. Stakeholders include students, graduates, staff, employers, the UK Funding Councils and Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies such as the British Computer Society which recognises specified modules or boards or studies, exempting students in whole or in part from their own educational requirements, and partner institutions.

2 There are a number of ways in which the Open University meets its accountability obligations. For example, it publishes a Student Charter summarising the standards students can expect from it. It also operates a consultative structure and provides for student and Associate Lecturer membership on its decision-making bodies. The University is further required to demonstrate that it attains appropriate standards in areas such as finance and quality as laid down by external agencies such as the Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency.

The Open University Student Charter

3 The University’s Student Charter was approved and launched in 2013. Developed by consultation with an extensive list of stakeholders, it is jointly owned by the Vice-Chancellor and The President of the Open University Students Association (OUS) and is reviewed regularly. The Charter consists of four key statements, each supported by more detailed explanation. The four statements are as follows:

- We treat each other with dignity and respect;
- We aim to inspire and enable learning;
- We share the responsibility for learning;
- We work together to secure the university’s mission – to be open to people, to places, to methods and to ideas – and to promote the University’s values – to be inclusive, innovative and responsive.

4 Although it gives links to Open University and OUSA regulations and policies, the Charter is a declaration of values rather than a rule book. It describes the way in which the members of the University - staff and students - should work together so that everyone can benefit.

5 The University and OUSA have also developed a formal Relationship Agreement, with the following principles:

- Working together to secure the University’s mission;
- Respect and understanding;
- Openness and trust;
- Mutual support and commitment;
- Equality and diversity.

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.
6 The comprehensive Relationship Agreement supports the statements contained within the Student Charter, which explicitly acknowledge the crucial role of OUSA in the life of students and in the governance of the University.

Consultation and Representation
7 The University’s consultative structure and arrangements for student, Associate Lecturer and lay member representation on its decision-making bodies are as follows.

8 The University’s student consultative structure uses online forums and annual face-to-face meetings to consult students on a range of topics relating to the student experience. The agenda for consultations is set by the University in consultation with OUSA. It sits alongside the University governance structure, in which students are represented on University committees. The following are examples of mechanisms for consultation:

- University Students Consultative Forum: an online forum which seeks and considers views of all UK and international undergraduate and postgraduate students on matters affecting their study and student experience.
- OU Postgraduate Research Students Consultative Forum: This online forum seeks and considers the views of postgraduate research students on matters specifically affecting their study and student experience.
- OU student face-to-face meetings: The English regions of the OU and the OU in Wales host annual student gatherings to discuss issues face to face with staff and Associate Lecturer representatives. The OU in Scotland and the OU in Ireland have committee-based consultative processes with two or more meetings a year.
- OU Online International Students Consultative Meeting: an online meeting which seeks and considers the views of international students on matters affecting their studies.

Student membership consists of representatives of OUSA and student volunteers.

9 University Decision-Making Bodies - There is provision of appointed student representation, through their membership of OUSA, and Associate Lecturer representation, on all decision making bodies throughout the University. Students and Associate Lecturers sit on Committees for a specific length of time in order to achieve a rotation of membership.

10 The Open University Council - The University’s governing body – Council –exercises general control over the University’s affairs (subject to the academic powers of Senate) whilst contributing to the strategic vision. Council has a membership comprising of: appointed members (students; academic and non-academic staff); ex officio members (the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Chancellor, the Treasurer and President of OUSA); and external co-opted members (of whom there are 12). External co-opted members are appointed by the Council, not being members of the academic staff or salaried officers of the University.

11 The Council is responsible for the management and administration of the University’s revenue and property and, subject to the powers of Senate, exercises general control over the conduct of affairs of the University. There are a number of Committees which report to the Council on specific matters relating to finance, staffing and estates e.g. Audit Committee, Estates Committee and Finance Committee to assist in the running of its business. These are all chaired by lay members of the Council.

The Funding and Research Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
12 The UK Funding Councils distribute public money for teaching and research on behalf of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is an independent body which provides an integrated quality assurance service for higher education institutions in the UK.
Funding Councils: The UK Higher Education Funding Councils (e.g. the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Wales and Scotland and the Department for Education in Northern Ireland) are responsible for allocating public funds to higher education institutions in the UK to undertake teaching and research. The Open University, because of its UK-wide operation receives funds from all of these bodies. Funding Council grant covers only part of the costs of teaching. Institutions make up the balance by charging tuition fees to students.

The Funding Councils support basic research in institutions, as well as teaching, and to underpin research training. The Research Councils and private sources support strategic and applied work, which grows from this basic research. The Research Councils provide for direct project costs and make a contribution to indirect project costs.

The University’s Finance Division is responsible for the overall running of the finances of the OU under policies approved by Council on the recommendation of the University’s Finance Committee.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): HEFCE is also legally responsible for ensuring that the quality of education is assessed in the universities and colleges it funds. The Funding Council contracts the QAA to conduct assessments of academic performance of institutions on its behalf. This involves review of overall institutional performance by peer review (institutional / collaborative provision audits or reviews of the OU have been carried out in 1992, 1998, 2004, 2009, 2011 and 2015). Review reports are published on the QAA’s website.

The University has a central Quality Office which supports the University’s Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Academic Strategy) in relation to aspects of the role which relate to quality, including acting as first point of contact with external bodies such as the QAA.

Research Excellence Framework: The Funding Councils periodically undertake the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in universities and colleges. The REF is a peer review exercise to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. The assessment informs the selective distribution of funding by the UK higher education funding bodies; provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment; provides benchmarking information and establishes reputational yardsticks. REFs or the previous Research Assessment Exercise, have been held in the UK in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001, 2008 and 2014. The REF is conducted jointly by the four Funding Councils for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies

The University has negotiated a number of agreements with professional bodies by which the latter recognise specified modules or boards of studies, exempting students in whole or in part from their own educational requirements. These include engineering institutions and the British Psychological Society. Details of these agreements are available on the University’s Credit Transfer site. Information on accreditation is also available in the Key Information Set for each qualification published on the Unistats website.

Some boards of studies are accredited by regulatory bodies which mean that their requirements inform, for example, the quality assurance arrangements of the provision. The boards of studies include the degrees in Nursing (regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council) and Social Work (in England the Health and Care Professions Council; in Scotland the Scottish Social Services Care Council; and in Wales the Care Council for Wales).

Employers

Employers and their organizations are not formally represented on any of the University’s decision-making and policy-formulating bodies. However, there are considerable informal
contacts at unit level, through marketing and analyses of student sponsorship. From time to time, employers are surveyed for their attitudes on specific issues. In addition the University’s Careers Advisory Service provides careers and employability information and guidance to students, collaborates with faculties to embed employability and Personal Development Planning in qualification and module design, develops relationships with employers and other external organisations, provides support to colleagues in Student Support Teams in regions and nations and supports decision makers and strategy with knowledge and expertise in careers and employability. The Careers Advisory Service provide:

- a comprehensive website for students and prospective students, providing careers and employability information, advice and guidance;
- careers content for Qualifications Online sites;
- careers related forums and webinars;
- an online vacancy service for students;
- social media platforms to engage with students;
- one-to-one guidance for registered students;
- careers and employability statistics.

Working closely with Student Support Teams the Service provides careers education, information, advice and guidance to students to enable them to make study choices appropriate to their career and personal development goals.