QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET SERIES: INTRODUCTION

About the Fact Sheets

Quality and Standards in the Open University comprises a series of fact sheets that provide a guide to the structural and procedural arrangements which support quality assurance, and academic standards, in the Open University. It provides a summary of the framework, as a reference manual for staff, and an introduction to the University for those who wish to understand it through its quality assurance arrangements.

The aim has always been to embed quality assurance into organisational structures, staff roles and process design, but there is scope for variation in practice between different units, and continual change and development. For that reason these fact sheets serve only as a starting point but further reading suggestions are included for those who would like to explore particular aspects. Some web links require authority to access the University’s intranet.

The fact sheets have been prepared by the University’s Quality Office, in co-operation with relevant staff or departments to ensure accuracy and currency of information. They will be reviewed periodically and amended where appropriate to reflect major changes. The latest date of publication appears on each fact sheet.

About The Open University

The Open University (OU) is distinctive among UK universities in that it teaches entirely at a distance through its method of Supported Open Learning. It has no academic prerequisites for admission to its undergraduate provision (with the exception of a small number of modules in professional programmes such as Nursing and Social Work), and its students enter the University with a wide range of study goals and previous educational and general experience. There are entry requirements for study at taught postgraduate level and research degrees.

The Open University is a very large institution with 38% of all part-time undergraduate higher education students in the UK. In 2014/15 173,889 students studied with the OU including 35,479 on programmes in the many institutions accredited by the University on validated programmes. Most courses are available throughout Europe and some worldwide and many more are available through our partnerships and accredited institutions. There are 8,353 overseas students directly studying with the OU and 800,000 teachers who have benefited from OU’s TESSA project1.

There is no typical OU student. People of all ages and backgrounds undertake study for all sorts of reasons including to update their skills, get a qualification, to boost their career or change career direction. The average age of new undergraduate level students in 2014/15 was 29 years and, of those who declared an ‘ethnic origin’, 8% identified themselves as Asian or Black. In line with the OU’s mission and its policy of ‘open entry’ for the majority of undergraduate provision, 53% of these new undergraduate students had entry qualifications of one A level or less. The OU is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities, more than 21,000 people with disabilities studied in 2014/15.

Students mainly study part-time in their own homes or other similar location. 76% of OU students work full or part-time during their studies, and many are applying their learning in the workplace on

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1 Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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a daily basis throughout their studies. 86% of FTSE 100 companies have sponsored staff on OU courses.

The University’s headquarters are located at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire. Most of the University’s full-time academic, administrative and clerical staff are based in Milton Keynes, but each of the University’s regional centres in England and 3 national centres in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has a complement of academic, administrative, advisory and clerical staff. The University employs over 5,000 Associate Lecturers\(^2\) across the UK and Continental and Western Europe, broadly reflecting the distribution of students.

In Milton Keynes qualifications and modules are planned, and module materials are created, produced and distributed using mass production and delivery systems. Administrative activities which do not need to be local to the student, including planning and policy development and the co-ordination of large operations e.g. examinations and fee collection, are also based at Walton Hall.

The University has four faculties, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS); Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS); Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); Faculty of Business and Law (FBL). Each Faculty has an Executive Dean as senior officer. The Institute of Educational Technology (IET) also undertakes institutional research which provides collegial support in educational research, development and presentation to the University. Most Faculty members are based at Walton Hall, but each academic unit has a cadre of Regional Managers or Staff Tutors based at regional and national centres that provide an important link between module design, development and delivery.

Individual interactions and relationships with students are managed through the central, regional and Academic Services. The first point of contact for students is usually their Associate Lecturer, who are appointed, developed and supported by academic unit and Academic Services staff.

Outside the United Kingdom, the University has an Enquiry and Advice Centre in the Republic of Ireland, and co-ordinators that provide a local point of contact in ten European countries.

The University offers:

- Foundation degrees
- a general BA or BSc degree (with or without Honours) and a range of Honours degrees in named subjects
- a range of undergraduate certificates
- postgraduate certificates, diplomas and taught degrees
- an Access programme of preparatory/return-to-study modules
- single modules (i.e. up to 60 credit points)
- research degrees
- validated qualifications at approved institutions (through OU Validation Services located in the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum Partnerships).

**The Quality Office**

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\(^2\) tutors who have part-time module-related contracts and are often employed in other educational institutions
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