QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The content and links in this fact sheet are correct as of the date of last update shown. A full review of the factsheet series is planned in 2021.

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 a 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) within wider Recruitment and Support Centres (SRSCs), made up of Faculty and Academic Services staff. The 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. The Academic Services unit is divided into six functional areas as follows:

- AL Support, Careers and Widening Access
- Assessment, Credit and Qualifications
- Student Support
- Student Recruitment and Fees
- Office of the Director, Academic Services
- OU Validation Partnerships & Student Policy and Casework

3 Policies and Procedures which govern student support and guidance in the OU can be found in Student Policies and Regulations.

Recruitment and Admissions

4 The admission of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students is managed and undertaken by Student Recruitment which is part of Student Recruitment and Fees.

5 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

1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in April 2020.
Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
might best meet their needs. However, the decision to study a module rests with each student.

6 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. Under the portfolio of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research, Enterprise and Scholarship), the Research Degrees Team 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.

7 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 website and for research on the Research Degrees 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.

8 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.

9 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.

**Advice and guidance**

10 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. Activities include: enquirer information, 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.

11 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 as well as telephone, email interaction and web-chat facilities; and guidance is usually provided by telephone or email.

12 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. **Study Skills** 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**

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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.
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: Disability Support provides details about these services and how students can request them.

The Equality Scheme 2018-2022 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.

The Disability Support Team (DST) provides 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 Advisor subsequently contacts the students to discuss their individual support requirements and agree a ‘profile’ record, which is made available to those who provide support i.e. tutors. Requests for alternative format study materials and auxiliary aids and services are routed directly to the appropriate team within Widening Access and Success Services (WASS). Student Support Teams (SSTs) handle requests for certain examination and assessment adjustments for example, alternative or modified assignments.

WASS coordinates services and support for disabled students. Working with external service providers, funding bodies, faculties and units WASS profiles students and provides a wide range of support options, including alternatively formatted materials, specialist equipment, non-medical help, and practical assistance for residential schools.

Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs) are government grants that help to pay for extra equipment and support that eligible students may need as a direct result of their disability, on-going health condition, sensory impairment, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty. This activity is managed by the Student Loan Company (Student Finance England) and national funding bodies.

Other areas of the OU providing specialised support for disabled students include Student Support Teams working in conjunction with Examinations and Assessment to make special arrangements for examinations such as requirements for extra time and rest breaks, home examination and alternative format examination papers.

Careers education, information, advice and guidance

Careers and Employability Services aims to empower OU students to realise their career and life ambitions by building student confidence to articulate their capabilities and skills, helping them to carve out their career journey and navigate the job market, and connecting them to new opportunities.

Although the majority of OU students are already in employment during their studies, most of those who declare this say that they are studying with the aim of developing or changing their career. The role of the OU’s Careers and Employability Services is to provide a wide and innovative range of advice and guidance to registered OU students and recent graduates (up to three years after graduation) at all stages of their career, whether career starters, changing their career or developing it. This is significantly different from other higher
education career services whose primary client group are young graduates seeking their first job. Careers and Employability Services also provide a bespoke service to participants of the Disabled Veterans Scheme.

21 Careers and Employability Services work with a constantly growing network of employers to open up new opportunities for students and graduates. Specialist Careers and Employability consultants also liaise with the faculties to embed employability, personal development planning and career confidence as part of the whole student journey.

22 The Enhanced Employability and Career Progression (EECP) programme aims to ensure employability is interwoven in the work of the whole University and throughout the student journey. EECP conducts a number of University-wide initiatives which the Careers and Employability Services works closely on.

23 The Employability Hub for staff provides guidance, resources and data including how to embed employability in the curriculum and student support. A new Employability Strategy 2019/20 – 2024/25, approved by Senate in June 2019, sets out how the University plans to address its aim to achieve positive personal and career development outcomes for students.

24 The OU’s Careers education, information, advice and guidance is informed by the Code of Practice of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the AGCAS equal opportunities policy, the OU’s equality opportunity policy and UK Quality Code. The University meets the matrix standard which is the national quality standards for any organisation that delivers information, advice and/or guidance on learning and work.

25 Careers and Employability Services: Statement of Service outlines Careers services available to registered students and recent graduates. These comprise:

- Information and advice on all aspects of career planning, including where to look for jobs, advice on applications, CVs and interviews, downloadable resources and links to further information.
- Forums and webinars for help from qualified Careers and Employability Consultants and support from employers and other students and ex-students.
- Careers guidance a dedicated advice and guidance service or individual careers consultation for help with queries about starting, changing or developing your career.
- Links with employers who partner with Careers and Employability Services to create a wide range of opportunities for OU students.
- OpportunityHub - an online platform for connecting OU students with employers and advertising opportunities, available free of charge to all registered OU students and three years after qualifying.
- OU Online TalentConnect careers fairs allow a wide range of employers to connect with OU students and alumni via virtual employer booths.

26 Careers education, information, advice and guidance is delivered through several platforms including the Careers and Employability Services website housed in the Help Centre in StudentHome, the Careers and Employability webinars and forums workspace, OpportunityHub and support tailored to specific subjects on the ‘Succeed’ tabs of the Study Home page. Student-facing specialised Employability Advisors and professionally qualified Careers and Employability Consultants are organised in faculty-aligned teams and work closely with the Student Recruitment and Support Centres to provide student support, both on a one-to-many and one-to-one basis. One-to-many support (i.e. webinars and forums) are delivered respectively via the same system (Adobe Connect) as academic subject tutorials and on the Webinars and forums workspace. One-to-one support if offered primarily by
email, telephone and Skype, but there are also occasional opportunities for face-to-face contact, for example at graduation ceremonies.

27 Personal Development Planning (PDP) is a process by which students can set goals, develop their skills and review progress. 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. The University is working to build on its existing requirement for PDP content and assessment within all introductory core level 1 modules. To support students in using PDP from an employability perspective resources are accessible from the Careers and Employability Services website. Resources on PDP for staff are provided in the Employability Hub.

Postgraduate Research Students

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

29 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 for research degree study.

30 Policy, regulatory and procedural matters governing research degrees and higher doctorates is informed by the UK 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.

Student Complaints and Appeals

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

32 The Student Casework & Policy Co-ordination team advises on, records, co-ordinates and monitors formal complaints and appeals. Details of the University’s complaints and appeals procedures are contained in Student Policies and Regulations.

33 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.

34 The complaints process - There are three stages: reporting concerns to the University; making a formal complaint; requesting a review. Timelines apply to all these processes.
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.

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.

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.

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.