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 8: ACCOUNTABILITY TO STAKEHOLDERS ¹

Accountability to Stakeholders

1 Stakeholders for higher education institutions 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 qualifications, 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. 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 developed in consultation with an extensive list of stakeholders; it is jointly owned by the Vice-Chancellor and the President of the Open University Students Association (OUSA) 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 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;

¹ Links to external and internal websites were checked in May 2020.
Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff
• Equality and diversity.

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 and Associate Lecturer representation on its decision-making bodies are as follows.

8 The University’s student consultative structure uses online forums and 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.

9 University Decision-Making Bodies: There is provision for appointed student representation, through their membership of OUSA, and Associate Lecturer representation, on all formal 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.

Funding and Research Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

10 The UK Higher Education Funding Councils (e.g. the Office for Students, the funding councils for 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.

11 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.

12 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.

13 The Funding Councils are legally responsible for ensuring that the quality of education is assessed in the universities and colleges that they fund. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the designated quality body for the Office for Students. It is an independent body, entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in all four nations of the UK.

14 The nations’ Funding Councils contract the QAA to conduct assessments of academic performance of institutions on their behalf. This involves review of overall institutional performance by peer review (the last review of the OU was carried out in 2015). Review reports are published on the QAA’s website.

15 The University has a Quality Assurance and Curriculum Policy Team which supports the University’s Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) in relation to aspects of the role which concern academic quality, including acting as first point of contact with external bodies such as the QAA.

16 The four Funding Councils for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland periodically undertake the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in universities and colleges. The REF is a process of expert review to assess the quality of research in UK higher education.
institutions. The assessment informs the selective distribution of research 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.

**Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies**

17 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. Information on professional accreditation is also available for each qualification published on the Discover Uni website.

18 Some qualifications are approved by regulatory bodies which mean that regulatory requirements inform, for example, the quality assurance arrangements of the provision. These 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).

**Middle States Commission on Higher Education**

19 The University is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. (267-284-5000). MSCHE is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Accreditation was reaffirmed in March 2020 for eight years. As part of the accreditation cycle the University submits annual financial and student achievement data and is required to notify MSCHE of any major change in its activity as outlined in the MSCHE Substantive Change Policy.