Open & Inclusive SIG- Student Voice Event Summary Report

As part of the Open and Inclusive Special Interest Group, the team coordinated and delivered the first online student voice event on the 20th January2021. The event was intended to give students the opportunity to speak freely and openly about different topics, as put forward by both staff and students, and stimulate discussion around current and emerging issues regarding accessibility at the OU.

The event was attended by over 40 participants which included staff and students from different disciplines and areas within the OU. The event included three interactive workshops where students and staff were able to share their own experiences, discussing challenges they face and areas of concern as well as positive experiences.

The three workshops focussed on the following areas of interest:

- How COVID-19 impacted learning experiences
- Accessibility and disability
- Student engagement and student voice

There was a great atmosphere throughout the sessions, and it proved to be an invaluable event for both staff and students to engage with one another on pertinent topics.

How COVID-19 Impacted Learning Experiences

Many students explained the difficulties they experienced during the pandemic including trying to fit in study and looking after their family. Students in the group described that they were shielding and that had a huge impact on their wellbeing, missing interaction with staff and students on a face to face basis.   A big sticking point for students was both the cancellation of EMA's and the protocol for standardisation of marks. Some felt this may have had a negative impact on their results and felt frustrated with this decision by the OU. Students explained that they had been told to defer as a go to option when asking for support, which for some was less than satisfying and not the response they were hoping for.

Students discussed the nature of the ever-changing environment and, although it was frustrating at times, applauded the OU for its management of the situation in terms of communication. The online support pages were described as extremely useful and easily navigable. Overall, students expressed great satisfaction in student support including support put in place by the Student's Association, Tutor Support and the Ethics Committee.

Going forward the support that students would like to see put in place to help manage the implications the pandemic may have on their studies are:

- having contingency plans in place including back up exams in place for cancelled EMA's
- Putting in place a panel of experts to agree on standardisation on marks in the future, for example on a case by case basis such as an assessment board type scenario.

Students expressed the need for the OU to continue with its clear and timely information on changes to study and assessment and for lines of communication to remain open. Students asked for tutors to be more proactive with the communication about extensions and further support with specific study skills, particularly students new to the OU.

Accessibility and Disability

With an initial focus on what disabilities and impacts students think the OU needs to be considering when designing modules, students were thinking about several contexts and agreed the OU need a panel of students. It was discussed further that the Curriculum Design Student Panel enables module teams to seek students' views on the design of module elements and both students and staff agreed that more of this would be useful.

An interesting point was raised about module forums and collaborative activities, promoting students to work collaboratively. Some students explained that even though it is not compulsory it is often stated that it *is* very beneficial to participate, and some students may feel as though they are missing out, as not everyone feels confident in participating in group activities. These activities often exist because talking to others about concepts that you're learning and/or working with in a group can be beneficial to learning and, to quote one participant, "It can be beneficial to learning, yes, but it can also be detrimental to mental health, confidence and ability."

Some students expressed that the OU appear to forget neurodiversity, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other learning difficulties, as well as undiagnosed conditions and those with less visible implications, for example; organisation and mental health issues. Further discussion included the idea to differentiate between the label, to specific needs and what the student's real needs are instead of why "we are put in the same groups". Students expressed the idea of "informed choice" and inclusion of information beforehand about the content and its accessibility, for example; "This module has a lot of reading."

Students continue to express their disappointment with alternate format delays. One student stated, "I think the biggest thing the OU needs to do is to get the resources for disabled students out in time for the modules to start." As a result, attendees suggested embedding more accessibility within module design, such as; Text to Speech and Read to Write software, which would eliminate some students' need for alternate formats. Staff responded to students explaining their need for a creative solution to these delays with alternate formats and agreed it was a systems issue that needs further thought, but reassured students that improvements were on their way.

Some discussion touched on the need for further induction workshops on Adobe Connect to support students that are new to distance learning, some highlighting that the grey on grey in Adobe Connect is not accessible to students.

Further discussion on areas of the OU study that are not accessible to students included the need for tutorials to be accessible and that closed captioning on Adobe connect is essential. Other areas highlighted by students as not being accessible included:

- disability disclosure
- adjustments, RA processes
- sudden changes
- organisation

Turning the focus to the sort of support students would like to see the OU offering included further support with the impact a new diagnosis can have on a student, further mental health support and supporting students with differing needs to have the confidence to ask for the help they need.

Some students expressed their concern with residential schools not being at the OU and running into problems with costs, day to day to care needs, charges to attend residential schools. Meaning students must sort it out for themselves. Students expressed that this is an opportunity for change and to facilitate students to attend residential school.

Student Engagement and Student Voice

When answering the question on *how can the OU work in partnership with students in the future?*, the resounding response was that the interaction needs to be genuine and meaningful. Some students feel that there is a miscommunication between OU and OUSA, when they have the same goal. With this happening it becomes frustrating and students feel discouraged to engage.

Students commended the OU on presenting several consulting opportunities to students, where they had an opportunity to express their opinions, but where things appeared to be going wrong from a student's perspective was that the feedback loop wasn't getting closed. Students felt they would like more follow up and explanation when their ideas have been put forward, but also understood that not all suggestions can be taken forward.

The suggestion was made that engagement with module teams and at higher levels within the OU may potentially help make positive improvements.

Students expressed the need for more regular meetings such as this student voice event, suggesting a quarterly timescale with the addition of local school level events.

Summary and Next Steps

The event was rounded up with the attendees expressing how useful the event was and how inclusive the online approach was, with further suggestions on making it even more inclusive which will be explored for future events. The event was extremely successful with some insightful and enriching discussions amongst staff and students.   One student explained "the reasons I'm here - although the OU has a proud tradition of welcoming disabled students with all sorts of impairments - we are all very, very different people with different needs. The core of people with severe or profound physical impairments, some housebound or close to housebound, who study with the OU because it has been historically literally physically impossible for us to access equal opportunities in brick universities... are often a bit under-represented in things because of course it's also harder to go to stuff and participate and be heard!"

To conclude the event, the team would like to express their deepest gratitude to those that attended the meeting and for their valuable contributions. As a result from the event it is clear that it is of paramount importance moving forward to nurture this community and develop further opportunities for such engagement, perhaps looking for links between nations and engaging the community with specific interests with the aim of continuing the discussions.