The CEC is asked to:-

i) **discuss** the paper and proposed recommendation

ii) **agree** the model for Plexus (LGBT+)

1. **Background**

1.1 A number of students have recently progressed plans to form an organisation for LGBT+ students studying with the Open University. As those of you who followed the recent election campaign are aware there is a perceived view that the Association does not appear representative of the LGBT+ community (although Roz Evans, a former President, did list those on recent CECs who were openly LGBT+).

1.2 The students who founded this organisation now called Plexus approached the Association with a view to becoming an affiliated society.

1.3 A draft constitution was submitted and was reviewed by my immediate predecessor as Vice President Administration and myself. We made certain suggestions which were adopted but in one area there was an impasse. Plexus wanted to have a restricted full membership which contravenes the Association’s Bye Laws which call for open membership. The argument put forward by Plexus was that open membership could result in non-LGBT+ students potentially having a large say in how their organisation was run – a compelling argument in my view.

2. **Options**

2.1 Insist on full compliance with the Bye laws. While the easiest option, in my opinion this would be the worst as it would appear that we were actively preventing an LGBT+ organisation affiliating with the Association. We would also lose all of the potential of this vibrant, active and supportive LGBT+ OU student community.
2.2 Use a creative interpretation of the Bye Law 16.12 and be very flexible with the definition of ‘normally’¹. In other words treat this as an extra-normal case. It is superficially attractive but it would make it harder to justify not extending similar conditions to other potential societies who would like a restricted membership.

2.3 Change Bye Law 16.12 to allow Societies to be restrictive. This would be a logical development of option 2.2. However, while 2.2 allows some measure of external control over how restrictive a society could be over its membership this option would allow any society the freedom to be closed so long as it complied with general Association policy. This could result in other potential difficulties if the restrictions conflicted with that policy.

2.4 Consider an alternative approach. Groups can be more discriminating in their membership criteria and this would allow Plexus to operate under its preferred terms. It is the option I recommend to the CEC.

3. Proposed model for Plexus Group

3.1 There is a fair degree of flexibility in how affiliated groups are operated. They can be relatively informal or well structured – an example of the latter is the Disabled Students’ Group (DSG). I propose that we establish Plexus as a group in a similar manner to the DSG and with similar privileges (observer status at CEC meetings, elections run through the Association’s Office, reserved conference delegates and a defined budget). This would also include working with Vice President Equal Opportunities, who would be an ex-officio member of the Plexus Committee. The Plexus organisers are in agreement with this and are willing to work with the Association towards this end.

3.2 This will require some changes to the Bye Laws and thus will be dependent on the agreement of the Board of Trustees as will the matter of a budget for the proposed group should it be established.

3.3 As with the DSG, Plexus will have a closed forum on the VLE for full members – the proposal is that this will be the existing closed LGBT+ forum. The open LGBT+ forum will remain part of the Association’s suite of forums.

3.4 As well as full members – those who define themselves as LGBT+ - Plexus will have an associate membership comprising other students and OU staff who wish to join. They will also offer observer status on their committee to the OU Staff LGBT+ group. These will not have voting rights nor will they be given access to the closed forum.

To my mind this fills the perceived gap which was identified in the recent election campaign regarding LGBT+ representation in the Association.

Peter J Cowan
Vice President Administration

¹ 16.12 Membership of a society must normally be open to all members of the Association