Student submission to the QAA review of The Open University

Introduction

This student submission was prepared by the Open University Students’ Association (OUSA) on behalf of the students of the Open University.

To support this, a project group was formed which included elected student members of OUSA’s Central Executive Committee (CEC) and members of OUSA staff. The group consisted of:

- Ruth Tudor, President
- Josh Brumpton, Vice President Education Policy
- Nicola Simpson, Student Association Representative for Northern Ireland
- Michail Kasoutas, Student Association Representative for Southern Europe
- Rob Avann, General Manager
- Helen Janes, Education Policy Officer
- Pooja Sinha, Research and Information Officer

In order to properly inform this submission a research project was conducted. This involved a survey being sent to over 700 OU students who are on OUSA’s engaged students list. We received 150 responses. While we acknowledge that this is likely not a true representative sample, the number of responses and the diversity of the group from which they are drawn allows us to have a reasonable degree of confidence in the results.

Additionally the university’s Self Evaluation Document (SED) and the comments and queries made by student representatives who have seen it have proved to be useful in directing this document.

The final version of this document was approved by the OUSA CEC on <insert date>

About OUSA

The Open University Students’ Association (OUSA) is a student union as defined by the Education Act 1994 and a registered charity since 2011. It was formed in accordance with the Charter which established the university and as later described by Ordinance to that charter.

All registered students of the OU are automatically members of OUSA unless they have opted out of such membership.
OUSA’s Board of Trustees is comprised of 8 OU students and 2 external members. The Central Executive Committee includes 8 Association Officers with specific remits and 11 Representatives of Nations and Regions as well as the student member of OU Council - all CEC members are students. All of these positions are democratically elected.

OUSA acts as the single recognised source of student representation within the university. The Association has places for student members on the majority of Academic Governance committees. Where there are vacancies we are looking at opportunities to work more closely with the university to promote this role. However, we believe that the selective appointment process for these representatives allows us to ensure that we have people with the necessary skills in these positions.

The association employs 21 members of full time staff in our office on campus. All other positions - including elected officers - are currently voluntary positions filled by students from across the UK and Europe.

To support our work and strengthen our understanding of students’ opinions and concerns, the association conducts research projects seeking opinions from students.

We have a very active presence on social media which continues to grow - this allows for the building of a community among distance learning students and can also allow for the gauging of student opinion and a tool for concerns to be raised. A similar purpose is served by our student forums hosted on the university’s website which include both social and study based discussions.

Our online shop offers a wide range of OU branded merchandise as well as copies of past exam papers to students. A limited range of products is also available as part of OUSA’s presence at Residential Schools and Degree Ceremonies.

The Open University Students Educational Trust (OUSET) is a charity operated by OUSA to provide financial aid towards the costs of study.

**OUSA and the OU**

The association has an extensive relationship with the university, involving regular meetings between OU staff and members of the OUSA CEC and student representation on a wide range of university committees.
and projects. In recent years OUSA has been increasingly included in these groups which has been a very welcome change.

Usually this allows for appropriate opportunities to raise any queries or concerns from the student perspective. However, the extent to which these views are then taken into account within relevant decision making processes can vary.

A jointly owned OU and OUSA Relationship Agreement was introduced in 2013 which defines the role of the students’ association and the expectations of the relationship between the two organisations.

OUSA is increasingly involved with the recruitment and selection of senior members of university staff. Input was sought on the job description for the Director of the OU in Scotland and the OUSA President is a member of the recruitment panels for both this role and one of the Pro Vice Chancellor positions. While there was not a student member on the selection panel for the recent appointment of the Vice Chancellor, several students were given the opportunity to meet candidates and provide feedback.

Additionally there is increasing involvement of students in significant university projects. Though this does represent a significant increase in time commitment for our limited number of volunteers - often including extensive travel - this increased student engagement is something that we generally welcome and represents a positive development.

**Progress on previous recommendations**

**Recommendation 1 - Continue to review the academic governance structure, focusing particularly on the efficiency and transparency of intermediate committee layers.**

The university carried out a review of academic governance which reported to the Senate in April 2014 and the recommendations from that review are being implemented for the next committee year (2015-16).

The main change resulting from this will be the reduction in number of committees through combining the responsibilities of those which currently exist, delegating more decisions to management and devolving business to lower levels of governance.

The operational details and the effectiveness of the new system will remain uncertain until it has been implemented and there are still concerns that this change will result in reduced scrutiny and accountability within
the formal structures as decisions will be made elsewhere and simply confirmed by committees. If that is the case it could result in a significantly decreased level of student engagement in the making of those decisions.

The alternative, if the majority of business does still come through committees, would be a noticeable increase in the volume and breadth of work to be undertaken by each of the student volunteers who sit on these committees. It is a situation that will need close monitoring.

The timing of decisions around these changes (final approval given in June 2015) has resulted in difficulties for the Students’ Association as we did not have confirmation of which committees would exist or the number of student places on them until after the close of recruitment for representatives for the 2015-17 term.

Possible changes to faculty and programme level structures are still being discussed within the university and will almost certainly require significant revision due to other proposed changes in the university.

**Recommendation 2 - Enable student representatives to see external examiners’ reports in full**

External Examiner reports are generally included as part of the formal paperwork for programme committees. As such the student representative who is a member of that committee should have access to these. However, as arrangements for electronic storage of programme committee papers are inconsistent and are often in places which cannot be accessed by student representatives, this may be only available in hard copy. That does not allow for representatives on other committees (including the relevant faculty committee) to view the documents.

Summaries of issues raised in the reports and university responses are sent to other committees - and all student representatives have access to those - but that is not the same as reading the full reports.

Full copies of all reports are now being sent to OUSA’s office for reference which does represent an improvement on the previous position.

The university has implemented a system whereby any student may request a copy of a specific external examiner report, however that mechanism is not as well advertised as it possibly could be and does not explain the relevance of the reports. We have been informed that when the university transitions to external examiner reports being for clusters
of modules these reports will be available directly from the website - this would be a very positive step.

**Recommendation 3 - Consistently analyse in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and use it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement.**

The university regularly collects and stores large amounts of information and this is only increasing over time. Much of this information is analysed, however there is comparatively little evidence of it being used effectively to inform the business or academic decisions taken within the university.

Examples of this include the student opinion and satisfaction data gathered on a general level through the National Student Survey (NSS) and on specific modules through the Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) survey. There is extensive analysis conducted from the results of these surveys and they are usually discussed in relevant meetings, but this is often as a reflection on how positive/negative the outcomes are rather than in the context of improvement and development for the future.

**Recommendation 4 - Adopt a more comprehensive approach to informing students about actions taken in response to their feedback.**

The university has conducted a full review and restructuring around its student consultative processes (new model implemented early 2014) and this has resulted in a greater amount of student feedback and opinion being gathered.

There has been variable practice in terms of the extent to which this feedback has informed and influenced decision making within departments and projects in the university.

Official responses to these consultations are often significantly delayed and tend towards an explanation of the reasons for the university taking the position which it has rather than acknowledgement of potential problems which have been highlighted and detail of changes made to avoid them.

Statistics generated from the SEaM survey, student comments and university responses are often (though not always) published as part of the publicly available descriptions of modules. This information is not readily available.
visible and the thoroughness of university responses to the issues raised is inconsistent.

There is currently no clear mechanism by which students are informed of any action which may be taken as a result of their feedback or comments.

**Recommendation 5 - Be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate university committees, including programme committees.**

Each programme committee now includes a place for a student member to be appointed by the students association.

Access to committee papers is problematic. For programme committees this can be hard copy only (and therefore only available to the student member of that particular committee). The main system used for electronic storage of papers for most other committees is not always reliable but university staff do attempt to correct this where possible.

Increased use of SharePoint by committees, projects and working groups is creating difficulties as students generally cannot access this.

The scheduling of meetings does not always take into account that student members are likely to be unavailable or have difficulty attending meetings while exams are taking place or at short notice.

Where there have been mid-year vacancies, the university has been supportive - and, in some areas, proactive - in assisting with targeted recruitment efforts.

The students association runs annual training weekends for representatives on university committees and university staff have always been willing to attend sessions as part of these events when invited. This arrangement has received generally positive feedback from the students attending.

**Recommendation 6 - Advance the implementation of current proposals to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels.**

Changes have been made to the regulations and frameworks of qualifications which increase restrictions on the modules which students may
take within a given qualification and reduce flexibility in terms of the order in which they study those modules. This has generally not been welcomed by students but is likely to assist the university in meeting its targets for progression and completion.

**Academic Matters**

The challenge presented by assessment generally increases as a module progresses and most students appear to be aware of later assignments being more difficult than those at the beginning. The progression between the different levels can be less clear with level 1 noticeably lower than later modules but levels 2 and 3 being less distinct from each other.

There are now arrangements in place to allow any student to request a copy of an External Examiner report from the university. A better explanation of these reports and why they would be of interest would probably result in increased use of this system. With the coming change towards qualification level reports (as opposed to the current module based ones) we are informed that they will in future be readily available from the website - this will represent a further improvement.

It is quite common for students not to understand exactly what constitutes plagiarism and it is often confused with incorrect referencing. This is not helped by the university’s inconsistent approach to referencing - both on a policy level between modules within a qualification and in the application of those policies by Associate Lecturers.

Generally students are not directly involved in qualification design in a significant way. However, there is some student testing of specific module elements and student feedback on existing curriculum may be taken into account when designing for the future.

OUSA’s representatives on various committees see and can comment on proposals for the creation or modification of qualifications and modules as they come for approval. Proposals for the modification or withdrawal of qualifications are also sent to VP Education Policy for comment.

**Learning, Teaching and Support**

The university is not very successful in promoting opportunities for students to provide feedback on their experiences or in making students aware of their how these views are taken into account. In our survey 41% of respondents indicated they believed they had not had the oppor-
tunity to give any feedback and 31% did not know where to look for OU responses.

The university’s main source of student feedback on specific modules - the Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) survey - is badly designed with unclear and sometimes irrelevant questions. The response rate on many modules is low and it automatically excludes many of those who are least satisfied (students who have dropped out part way through a module) yet it is still cited as a key source of evidence.

The National Student Survey (NSS) is the other main survey carried out to gauge student views. Institutionally much attention is paid to the headline performance (e.g. 2013 - in the top 5 in UK, 2014 - top 10) but the detail of the declining figures in the question by question breakdown is often overlooked and is not used to focus enhancement. At a faculty and programme level there is more effort to understand the implications of the detailed figures - however, due to smaller sample sizes at this level and less than ideal response rates, the qualification specific data is often unreliable to the extent that it is difficult to develop meaningful conclusions to inform planning and improvement.

In relation to the support offered by Associate Lecturers (tutors), comments made by students regularly reflect concern over variability - especially relating to response times, return of assignments and amount of contact - this could in part be addressed by clearer statements of what students can expect in these areas. It should however be highlighted that less than 10% of students indicated they feel unsupported and 12% of free text responses to our survey included the word “excellent” in relation to tutors, which indicates that a significant number are going beyond the standard expectations in their support of students.

The support offered by Student Support Teams (SSTs) is generally rated positively with the exception of response times during busy periods - in that area many students’ expectations simply are not met and as such confidence in this part of the university is damaged. It is also concerning that 26% of survey responses were “not applicable” in relation to their opinion of this central support. With 13% indicating they were unaware of the online Help Centre, SSTs clearly have a key role in the provision of support and advice.

The level of support and flexibility offered by the university to students with disabilities is routinely identified as being a strength - and with over 20,000 students with a declared disability this continues to be a necessary priority.
The university’s new policy on Group Tuition will hopefully begin to address concerns over the lack of flexibility in timing for attending tutorials. An increasing number of tutorials are being held online and there is a feeling among students that this option should be offered in addition to - not instead of - face to face tuition. There is also a need for clarification and consistency relating to whether or not these online tutorials should be recorded for later viewing.

Of the various online tools and resources offered by the university module forums, student forums and the library are, by a considerable margin, identified as the most commonly used. However there is a significant proportion of students not using each resource, potentially indicating a lack of awareness of what is available, difficulty locating things or a frustration with the usability of various parts of the student facing websites - informal comments and feedback indicate a combination of these factors.

As more module materials are moved online - and an increasing number of modules are presented entirely in this format - there is growing concern about the availability of printed material. Many students express a preference for print and OUSA is strongly encouraging the university to offer flexibility in this area where possible so that different learning styles are accounted for. While there is generally the function to print copies of online text, this quickly becomes expensive for students to do at home and the university’s “Print on Demand” service remains limited to a very small number of modules and poorly advertised on those where it is available.

When asked, only 32% of students indicated they saw a link between research at the university and their module content. Much of this may come from a lack of readily available information about the research that is conducted by the OU in many areas of the curriculum.

**Communicating about change**

The main ways in which students are notified of changes within the university include emails, messages on the Student Home page and module websites and information provided on the module and qualification description pages.

It is common, when implementing large changes, for a range of these to be used. However it is also quite common for students to be unaware or unsure about the implications of significant changes such as qualification withdrawal or changes to fees and funding.
Most students are aware of a continual programme of change within the university. Opinion on the extent to which this represents improvement is divided.

**Employability**

Approximately half of respondents to our survey indicated employability was a factor in their decision to study. The majority of these indicated that OU study has improved their employability.

There was concern expressed about the recognition of OU degrees. This is both in relation to professional bodies and in other countries. These concerns are ones that OUSA regularly hears from students and it is an area that the university must continue to improve.

**Student involvement in Quality processes**

OUSA has places for student members on the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the Quality Enhancement Advisory Group.

Student representatives on Programme Committees also allow for input on the quality of provision within the university.

There is a trial currently taking place for student members on Periodic Programme Review panels. This is due to report in the near future and will likely result in a permanent arrangement.

**Public Information**

The enquirer website was replaced last year (2014). Many students have expressed a view that this new version is harder to navigate - for example the inability to use the search facility based on module name or code.

The qualification descriptions on that website have also been modified so that details of the modules which are included at stages 2 and 3 are not readily visible which leads to frustration as well as students and potential students making decisions based on incomplete information.

**Digital Literacy**
The OU is increasingly making use of technology and digital tools as core components of the learning experience and, in that context, this theme is of great relevance and importance.

With that in mind, it is quite concerning that in our survey 42% of those responding indicated they did not feel supported by their tutor in the use of online tools and only 43.57% were aware that digital literacy was embedded in modules.

There appears to be an expectation that students will arrive at the university with the necessary digital literacy or independently develop such skills. And while it is certainly true that a significant number of students are in that position, this is certainly not universal. Given the diversity of backgrounds OU students come from, seeing more resources made available to provide support in this area - and those which are available more prominently placed - would be welcome.

**Conclusions**

Overall satisfaction with the university is quite high, but where concerns do exist they tend to be quite strong and often in key areas.

Support provided by the university is generally of a good quality, but delays in response times and inconsistency are significant issues. The amount of contact time tutors are able to commit is also a factor here.

There is a steadily increasing level of student engagement in university projects and processes, which is regarded by all as a positive step, though the influence of that input is variable.

Communication from the university to students continues to be a major challenge and is in need of significant improvement.

The university is rightly very proud of its development in relation to technology enhanced learning. However, there needs to be caution to ensure that this results in real improvement and does not result in innovation for no reason other than to be innovative.

**Recommendations**

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