OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (C E C)
3 – 5 July 2015

STUDENT COMMUNITY TOOL

The C E C is asked to:-

i) **note:** the progress on the Student Community Tool Project

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**Background**

This project has emerged from the on-going feedback given by the C E C on the limitations of the Moodle-based student forums. A call for the University’s support in implementing new social media tools capable of supporting a vibrant student community was included in the President’s Annual Report to Council in November 2014.

In response, Keith Zimmerman, Director Students, and Belinda Tynan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) were charged by Council to initiate a project to scope out a business case for a new social media tool. In December 2014, OUSA were invited to a consultation session to create a vision statement for the project. This was attended by Ruth Tudor (President), Nik Morris (Deputy President), Nicola Simpson (S A R Northern Ireland), Rob Avann (General Manager), Wendy Burrell (Head of Engagement & Support) and David McCann (Head of Communications & Technology).

Since this consultation various colleagues from Learning & Teaching Solutions (L T S) and I T have helped OUSA define the project, focusing on how a new community tool would be used. A full project proposal has been developed, which is due to be presented to the University’s I T Change Board in July 2015.

**Purpose of Community Tool**

The project aims to provide a tool or suite of tools that can support the creation of an engaged community. It will be the central platform for students to interact with each other and make connections.

This project will deliver the ability for:
- OU students to access a usable and accessible online ‘walled garden’.
- OUSA and selected OU students to manage and moderate this online area.
- Community administrators to create, manage and moderate public and private groups.
- Selected OU students to act as moderators.
- OU students to engage in synchronous and asynchronous messaging with other students.
- OU students to engage in community conversations.
- OU students to link existing social media elements to their OU community presence.
- OU students to be able to search for community connections.
- OU students to manage their privacy on the tool.
- Community content to be consumed across all devices.
- The provision of community analytics.
- OUSA to brand the tool.

Community Tool Objectives

The desired objectives of the Community Tool are:

- To develop and sustain a vibrant, active and engaged student community that mirrors the sort of community that exists on campus based institutions.
- To help students feel part of that community as something distinct and tangible.
- To ensure that the sense of OU student community is embedded as part of a student’s expectations when studying with the Open University.
- To promote that community as part of the social life of OU students, encouraging peer to peer support and friendships that act as a resource for students to call on when they encounter challenging times in their OU student experience.
- To establish communication networks, allowing students to find likeminded individuals for interaction and ideas exchange, thus enhancing their study experience.
- To promote opportunities for students to be involved in activities and volunteering experiences organised by their Students Association.
- To facilitate student engagement with their University and enhance opportunities for student consultation, feedback and representation, allowing students to feel they are actively participating in the development of their University.
- In the long term this tool may give OUSA the option to decommission existing OUSA forums, if we supported this move.
Next Steps

We are hopeful that the IT Change Board will approve the project proposal following its presentation on 6 July 2015. Following this, the user requirements detailed by the project team will be used by IT to develop a ‘Level 1 design document’ which will form part of the costed business case. The aim is to present the business case to the IT Change Board in September for final sign-off to implement the solution.

As part of the project, we have worked closely with colleagues in LTS to produce the full set of user requirements and these have been used as the criteria for assessment of possible solution products by the IT architecture team.

Yammer is being put forward as the recommended solution as other alternatives such as extending the Moodle Forums, Facebook Groups for Schools, First Class, Telescope, Ning and a bespoke development, have been discounted due to their prohibitive costs or lack of compatibility with OU infrastructure.

The President, supported by the rest of the OUSA representatives involved in the project, has negotiated inclusion in the proposal of a condition that we would want to test and trial Yammer to see if it does indeed meet our requirements with an appropriate evaluation and exit strategy in place should it not prove successful. If this condition is upheld by the IT Change Board, it is understood that a Project Manager from IT will be allocated to work with us on scoping this trial period and evaluative criteria.

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