The C E C is asked to:-

i) note this report

ii) receive the accompanying presentation.

iii) note that the appendix to this paper has not been published and will retain its strictly private and confidential status unless the C E C expressly determines otherwise

1. Background

1.1. The National Student Survey (N S S) is an annual survey sent out to undergraduate students in their final year of study. It has been commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England since 2005, and targets all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (H E Is) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

1.2. The N S S questionnaire is designed to help respondents rate different aspects of their study experience. These results are published on the Unistats website to help prospective students make their study choices. The N S S results are also used to guide H E I’s in improving their student experience.

1.3. The N S S includes a question on satisfaction with the students’ union or association. This report summarises the findings from the N S S in 2015, both for the Open University Students Association (OUSA) and the wider results for the OU.
2. Executive Summary

2.1. This report presents results from the National Student Survey conducted in 2015. In 2015, 62% of OU respondents agreed with the statement ‘I am satisfied with the Students’ Union (Association or Guild) at my institution’. This is a decline of 2% from the 2014 NSS results. The report discusses responses to the students’ association question in terms of the response rate, and analyses demographic trends in terms of our members’ awareness of, and fit with, OUSA.

2.2. Members’ fit with OUSA remains high at 94%, and most demographic groups show a fit of between 92% and 96%. Awareness also shows some positive trends, especially for ‘Male’ and ‘H E’ students. Free text comments are included to offer better insight into how OUSA can identify areas for improvement.

2.3. The overall satisfaction with the OU has fallen from previous years to 90% in 2015. The report also considers wider results for the Open University in terms of student ratings of key Core and Bank categories.

2.4. For Core categories, the OU remains ahead of the sector in terms of ‘Assessment and Feedback’ and ‘Organisation and Management’, but falls for ‘Learning Resources’ and ‘Personal Development’. For Bank categories, the OU has fallen below the sector average for all categories with the exception of ‘Workload’, and remain significantly behind for the categories of ‘Learning Community’ and ‘Feedback from Students’.

2.5. To explore the reasons for the decline in the NSS ratings of the Core and Bank categories, free text comments from 300 respondents were coded according to the Core categories. Thus, for each Core category, positive and negative comments are balanced by comments offering suggestions for improving the study experience.

3. Satisfaction with OUSA

3.1. In 2015, 62% of OU respondents agreed with the statement ‘I am satisfied with the Students’ Union (Association or Guild) at my institution’. This is a decline of 2% from the 2014 NSS results.

3.2. Meanwhile, the Sector average has increased from 68% in 2014 to 69% in 2015. Thus, the gap between OUSA and the Sector average has increased from 4% in 2014 to 7% in 2015. The present 7% gap between OUSA and the Sector average is the same as in the year 2013.

Response Rate to the Students’ Association Question

3.3. The response rate for the students’ association question has been the lowest in 2015 at 52%, as compared to 54% in 2013 and 57% in 2014. Figure 1
presents the demographic breakdown of the response rates for the students’ association question between 2013 and 2015.

3.4. All demographic groups except ‘Young’ show a decline in response rate from 2014 to 2015. While considering these percentages, however, it should be noted that for some groups, the number of respondents is very low and small changes can appear as high percentages. In the case of students with learning difficulties, for example, the response rate shows a decline of 9% since 2014. However, 28 more students with learning difficulties responded to the students’ association question in 2015 than in 2014.

3.5. Notably, ‘Male’, ‘White’, ‘Ethnicity not known’, ‘No known disability’, ‘H E’ and ‘First degree’ students show a decline of 5% in their response rate in 2015. This is consistent with the 5% overall decline in the response rate for the students’ association question since 2014.

3.6. These response rates need to be considered together with the actual number of students who responded to the students’ association question. Figure 2 presents these numbers for each demographic category between 2013 and 2015. The percentage against each demographic category refers to the proportion that it makes up of the total number of students who answered the NSS survey in 2015 (which is the same as the number of students who answered the students’ association question).
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*Figure 1. Demographic breakdown of response rates for the students’ association question, 2013-2015*
Figure 2. Number of respondents to the students’ association question: 2013-2015. The percentage against each demographic category refers to its proportion within the number of students who answered the NSS survey in 2015 (which is the same as the number of students who answered the students’ association question).
4. OUSA: 2015 results compared with the previous year

4.1. 2015 shows a 2% overall decline in OU students’ agreement with the statement ‘I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution’ from the previous year. Each of the demographic groups show a decline in %agree in 2015 from the previous year, with considerable variations.

4.2. Figure 3 lists the %agree for the students’ association question for each demographic group, calculating the difference between 2014 and 2015. Also listed are the Sector-wide %agree for each demographic group in 2015, which allows us to compare OUSA’s ratings against the Sector average.

4.3. The largest decline of 13% is seen amongst students with a ‘Specific Learning Difficulty’. However, this needs to be considered in terms of the actual number of students answering the question. 157 students agreed overall that they were satisfied with OUSA in 2015, 6 less than in 2014. Similarly, 22 students disagreed overall about their satisfaction with OUSA in 2015, 9 more than in 2014. Hence, while the numbers are relatively small, the percentages they generate appear very high.

4.4. The 9% and 8% decline in ‘Asian’ and ‘Young’ students’ %agree, respectively, should similarly be seen in parallel with the relatively smaller proportion of the overall population that they make up. ‘Asian’ students make up 4% of the population, while ‘Young’ students make up 7% of the population. The same is the case for the ‘Other ethnicity’ and ‘Other undergraduate’ groups, which make up 3% and 4% of the overall population, respectively. Other demographic groups show a decline in %agree in the range of 2% to 4%.

5. OUSA: 2015 results compared with the Sector average

5.1. The number of respondents for other HEIs are not provided in the survey data; in the absence of this information, the Sector average can still offer a good way of comparing ratings for different questions on the NSS.

5.2. Overall, OUSA lags behind the Sector average by 6% in terms of %agree with the students’ association question. The biggest gap between OUSA’s rating and the Sector average is seen for the ‘Not known ethnicity’ demographic, with OUSA lagging by 18%.

5.3. The gaps in student satisfaction offer opportunities for OUSA to consider ways of engaging with specific groups. The 2015 results reveal a gap of -9% between OUSA and the Sector average for ‘Specific learning difficulty’ students, and a gap of -8% for ‘HE’ students. There is a gap of -7% between OUSA and the Sector average for ‘Male’, ‘Female’, ‘Asian’, ‘No known disability’ and ‘First degree’ students. However, ‘Other undergraduate’ students were 1% ahead of the Sector average.
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*Figure 3. %Agree for OUSA and Sector average in 2015 for students’ association question*
6. Awareness and Fit

6.1. The calculations of student members’ awareness and fit with OUSA identify how aware and satisfied our members are across demographic categories. These calculations have been ongoing for the past three years, and are based on the recommendation of the Teesside University Students’ Union.

6.2. Awareness: Awareness is calculated as the proportion of respondents who show awareness of the OUSA by selecting any of the following responses showing a distinct preference – mostly agree, agree, disagree and mostly disagree. The number of respondents selecting ‘neither’ or ‘not applicable’ is not included in this calculation.

6.3. Fit: Fit is calculated for respondents who show both an awareness of the OUSA and agree that they are satisfied. It is calculated as the proportion of respondents who are satisfied from among those who show an awareness of OUSA.

6.4. The awareness and fit calculations for each demographic group fall along the two axes on the scatter plot in Figure 4. The intersection point of the two axes is determined by the respective median figures for the awareness and fit calculations of all demographic groups. Thus, the axes in the scatter plot in Figure 4 cross at 48% awareness and 94% fit. These axes divide the scatter plot into four categories, and it is interesting that many demographic groups have consistently fallen into these specific combinations of awareness and fit.

6.5. SU doing good work, students know: This category represents high awareness and high fit. ‘Young’, ‘Black’, ‘Female’, ‘A-level or equivalent’ and ‘Other qualification on entry’ students fall into this category. Over the years 2013-2015, ‘Young’, ‘Black’ and ‘A-level or equivalent’ students have consistently fallen into this category.

6.6. SU does right things, needs to tell students: This category represents low awareness, but high fit. ‘Mature’ and ‘White’ students fall into this category, which shows a consistent trend over the years 2013-2015.

6.7. SU is well-promoted, but limited relevance: This category represents high awareness, but low fit. ‘Specific learning difficulty’ and ‘Other disability’ students fall into this category, which shows a consistent trend over the years 2013-2015. In 2015, ‘Asian’ students also fell in this category, whereas they had been in the ‘SU doing good work, students know’ category in 2013 and 2014; this reflects a fall in their fit with OUSA.

6.8. SU is isolated from students: This category represents low awareness and low fit. ‘Male’, ‘HE’ and ‘Not known ethnicity’ students fall into this category, which has been a consistent trend over the years 2013-2015.
Figure 4. Scatter plot of Awareness and Fit for 2015

- **SU Doing Good Work, Students Know:** Young students, Black students, Female students, A-level or equivalent, Other (qual on entry) students

- **SU is Well Promoted but Limited Relevance:** Specific learning difficulty students, Other disability students, Asian students.

- **SU does Right Things, needs to Tell Students:** Mature students, White students

- **Low Awareness**

- **Low Fit**

- **High Fit**
6.9. It is worth noting that the axes of awareness and fit have shifted over the years, and therefore the four categories mentioned above are relative rather than fixed. While the median figures for fit have remained relatively stable (94% in 2013, 95% in 2014 and 94% in 2015), the median figure for awareness has increased over the years (40% in 2013, 49% in 2014 and 48% in 2015). Therefore, even while some groups may have shown a positive trend, the shifting axes place them in the same category as the previous years. The ‘Male’ demographic, for example, has shown increasing awareness over the years (39% in 2013, 44% in 2014 and 46% in 2015). This is also true of the ‘HE’ demographic, which shows an increase in awareness from 2013 (36% in 2013, 42% in 2014 and 42% in 2015).

7. Demographic Trends: Awareness and Fit

7.1. Figure 5 presents trends for awareness of OUUSA within the demographic groups over the years 2013 to 2015. There are both positive and negative trends for awareness levels.

7.2. On the one hand, ‘Young’, ‘Specific learning difficulty’ and ‘Other undergraduate’ students show a decline of 3% in 2015 from the previous year, while ‘Asian’ and ‘Not known ethnicity’ students show a decline of 1%. On the other hand, ‘Male’ students show a rise of 2%, while ‘Other ethnicity’ students show a rise of 3% in 2015 from the previous year. ‘Black’ and ‘First degree’ students show a 1% rise in awareness between 2014 and 2015. The awareness level of all other demographic groups has remained consistent between 2014 and 2015.

7.3. Figure 6 presents trends for fit with OUUSA within the demographic groups over the years 2013 to 2015. The fit of most demographic groups with OUUSA shows a slight decline in 2015 from the previous year. Overall, there is a 1% dip in OU students’ fit with the OUSA, at 94% in 2015.

7.4. ‘Mature’, ‘Male’, ‘White’, ‘No known disability’, ‘Other disability’, ‘HE’, ‘First degree’ and ‘Other undergraduate’ students show a 1% decline in their fit with OUUSA. Even so, their fit percentages are in the range of 92% to 96%. ‘Asian’ and ‘A-level’ students show a 2% decline in their fit with OUUSA, while ‘Young’ students show a 3% decline in their fit. The biggest drops can be seen for ‘Other ethnicity’ students at 6% and ‘Specific learning difficulty’ students at 5%. A 2% rise in fit is seen for ‘Not know ethnicity’ students, while the fit has remained the same for ‘Female’ and ‘Black’ students between 2014 and 2015.
Figure 5. Awareness trends for demographic groups, 2013-2015
Figure 6. Fit trends for demographic groups, 2013-2015
8. Comments about OUSA

The selection of student comments below highlight both the positive experiences that students have had with OUSA, and areas where OUSA can improve on its engagement.

Positive Comments

“The student association has also helped provide opportunities for meeting students & personal development.”

“Talking to other students both at a philosophy residential school and the OU students association conference, gave me additional information that was not available in the prospectus. For example, I found that some students study subjects at Level Three which they haven't previous experience in (I tried to study subjects at level three that I had had experience in at Level Two). Had I known this, it might have affected my choice of modules and I might have been able to study more breadth of subjects (I like breadth). So, communication with other students is important, particularly for someone like me who is not on Facebook.”

Negative Comments

“I find it difficult having a different tutor of very different style and intensity for each module. I have no idea what the aim of the OU student association is. Very few activities at regional courses.”

“The OUSA publicly condemning academics'/tutors' union activity (Why would one union criticise another? What kind of front does this present of the OU as a whole?).”

“The major negative aspect of my student experience has been the students' association. It is bureaucratic, insular, inflexible and does not seem to be genuinely interested in making things better for students! Some examples: Charging for past papers. I appreciate that this goes to a good cause but there are plenty of students like me who are hard up but who don't qualify for any hardship funding. Spending £20+ a year on past papers clearly constitute a hidden course cost and the SA seems oblivious. No campaigning for students to have access to eduroam Wi-Fi at every other university who uses this system lets their students use it too but the SA have made no effort to secure this for us. Elections where you can't ask the candidates questions, not in all elections but there are some for regional assemblies where you are actually prevented from asking the candidates questions. Elections where you need to register every year to get your vote and where most of the actual process takes place at a conference and their dismal voter turnout speaks for itself. I appreciate that many students' associations struggle to engage with their members but it is a special achievement to actually make their students experience worse than if they didn't exist at all!”
9. Wider NSS Results

Overall Satisfaction

The OU’s rating on overall satisfaction fell to 90% in 2015. This has been a worrying trend over a few years now (93% in 2012, 92% in 2013, and 91% in 2014). Figure 7 presents the ratings of overall satisfaction between 2013 and 2015 for each demographic group.

![Overall Satisfaction 2013-2015](image)

*Figure 7. Demographic breakdown of ‘Overall Satisfaction’ ratings, 2013-2015*
10. Wider NSS Results: Core Questions

10.1. The OU’s Strategy and Information office have produced a report on the Core questions (Appendix 1), which is strictly confidential. All of the average scores for the core categories show a decline from the previous year for the Open University (please refer to the OU’s report in Appendix 1, Section 5 on p.6). The most notable declines from 2014 relate to ‘Organisation and Management’ (-3%) and ‘Academic Support’ (-2%).

10.2. The OU remains significantly above the Sector average in relation to ‘Assessment’, leading by 14% in 2015 (Figure 8). The OU ratings also exceed the Sector average for ‘Organisation’ (leading by 4% in 2015) and ‘Overall Satisfaction’ (leading by 4% in 2015), though the gaps have closed considerably since 2013.

10.3. The OU has fallen below the Sector average in relation to ‘Academic Support’, and remains significantly below the Sector average for ‘Learning Resources’ (lagging by 6%) and ‘Personal Development’ (lagging by 11%). Figure 6 offers a comparison of the OU’s ratings in 2015 with that of the Sector average.

10.4. Figure 9 presents the demographic breakdown for changes in %agree for the Core categories between 2014 and 2015. Thus, there was a 3% decline in ‘Young’ students’ satisfaction with the ‘Teaching’ on their course in 2015. As with the satisfaction ratings for OUSA, it is difficult to draw inferences from the numbers themselves, since the groups showing the biggest declines (‘Young’, ‘Other ethnicity’ and ‘Not known ethnicity’) are also the ones that make up the smallest proportion of respondents.

10.5. To explore the reasons for the decline in students’ ratings of the Core categories, free text comments from 300 respondents were coded according to the Core categories. Thus, for each Core category, positive and negative comments are balanced by comments offering suggestions for improving the study experience.
Figure 8. Comparison of the OU’s ratings on Core questions with the Sector average in 2015
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*Figure 9. Demographic breakdown of the changes between 2014-2015 in %agree for Core categories*
11. Teaching

Respondents were appreciative of the times when tutors displayed an understanding of their personal circumstances and/or study motivations and tailored their support accordingly. Negative comments highlighted the variability in tutor support, together with a lack of personal and face-to-face contact with tutors. Suggestions emphasised the need for better pastoral support that could offer continuity and personal interaction for students on a course.

Positive Comments

“My first tutor was particularly fantastic. She understood my mental health well, which was clear due to the fact she managed it well in times of need. She explained everything so clearly that I did extremely well in my assignments. She was very encouraging and I was sad to lose her as a tutor.”

“The enthusiasm of the lecturers and the support from other students especially when I was doubting about continuing the course.”

Negative Comments

“Not convinced that there is a standard required of tutors in relation to what they are required to provide to students. Needs to be a level so that students will know what is and isn’t part of the tutors role. Some simply regurgitate the module text whilst others provide notes, additional questions & PowerPoint presentations to assist with learning.”

“I’m continually dismayed that the vast majority of tutors point out how many other jobs/commitments they have outside of the module. I’m paying for a service. Frankly, I don’t care how much other work they have and I find that every tutor setting out excuses at the very beginning deeply troubling.”

Suggestions

“The only thing I feel I lack from the OU is a personal tutor/mentor, it is something I had at traditional uni and the same tutor sees you through the whole course, which could really help with achieving your study goal as you go through the course.”

“I would like to see an email sent to students by their tutor at different points in the course, perhaps at known 'sticky points' not to each student individually but collectively.”
12. Assessment and Feedback

Positive comments detailed instances when students had been able to contact tutors easily and receive detailed feedback on their work. Variability in marking emerged as a primary concern for respondents, with some feeling that the present emphasis on exams and/or EMA do not take into account students’ overall performance on a course. Suggestions stressed on the provision of better information before assignments and exams, and for the marking criteria to be revisited.

Positive Comment

“Tutor is approachable feedback has been in-depth and explanations as to reasons behind marking is good.”

Negative Comment

“The marking system can be a little unfair. You can have good marks throughout a module and then be downgraded on one exam, which a lot of students aren’t happy about.”

Suggestions

“Perhaps more details about the type of question the assignments will contain would help some students make a more informed choice as to whether the course is what they want. My current course uses an end of module assignment so it is not possible to have a look at past exam papers to gauge what may be involved.”

“The only negative is how the final marks of a module are calculated. I feel it is unfair that the lowest mark carries when the essay scores should be added together for one mark and added to the EMA/exam mark and divided by two. This would be a fairer representation of a student’s ability.”
13. Academic Support

The knowledgeability of support staff and their effective guidance in terms of study choices were appreciated. However, respondents commented on the delay in receiving a response from different student support services and the reduction in face-to-face interaction; both of these were also cited as reasons for students feeling isolated. Responses reiterated the need for pastoral support, which they hoped would offer the opportunity for a more personal interaction during their studies.

Positive Comments

“When faced with health issues I have felt that the OU have understood and accommodated them well especially as I have needed extensions on my assignments.”

“When I phoned student support, it's been excellent, they've spent the time discussing things, they've been extremely competent and professional.”

Negative Comments

“Disliked telephone calls telling me I had to wait for someone to get back to me in 10 days.”

“On a personal level, I would have liked more face-to-face tutorials. I think it is because of cost cuts that the OU has cut residential elements to their courses, therefore I am studying a science-based course but did not get to learn in a laboratory like students who go to uni on a campus.”

Suggestion

“Appoint a personal tutor who follows student progress in addition to a module tutor.”

14. Organisation and Management

Responses were generally positive regarding the organisation and management of modules, with some comment raising the issue of changes in courses not being communicated effectively to students. Suggestion stressed on the need for timely information so that students could plan their studies well in advance. Students also indicated that they would like the qualification website to be customised in a way that their progress was visible and details provided for modules that would count towards their qualification.

Positive Comment

“I studied through the Open University and found this to be well-organised, structured courses with a great depth of knowledge/information provided for each course.”
Negative Comment

“Module amendments still being made this late in the year. Lack of choice on future modules as I am a transitional fee student and they have removed/discontinued a lot of modules, I feel like a second rate student due to their actions and lack of options.”

Suggestions

“By showing, on the individual student's homepage/qualification page, the progress made towards their study goal and to clearly show them if they can claim any interim qualification before they reach their ultimate goal i.e., a certificate or diploma, before progressing to a degree. This would help motivation and also be useful when applying for jobs if the study goal had not been reached yet.”

“Tutorials, seminar school dates and exam dates should be communicated several months because the course starts so that students can analyse leave from work & childcare. Summer school parking should be free, food should be better, equipment should be adequate microphones & earphones or speakers.”

15. Learning Resources

There were some very positive remarks from students with a disability regarding the provision of support (such as specialised equipment). However, students with a specific learning difficulty indicated that they need more tailored support that would take into consideration their learning needs. Suggestions included working on an improved alignment and higher visibility of support services on Student Home.

Positive Comment

“I am a disabled student and I have had exceptional support for an assessment and provision of equipment to help me.”

Negative Comment

“Dyslexic students-if you look it up on the OU you are given lots to read which is not what a dyslexic student needs.”

“Audio books that are provided to dyslexic student are of poor quality difficult to understand the voice flow.”

Suggestion

“Improving layout and navigation on Student Home, so it is easier to locate specific information (for example, bringing TMA information together in one easy-to-find place at the moment, we need to click through week numbers to try and identify the relevant section, which is
annoying as there is really no other reason to remember the numbers of weeks).”

16. Personal development

The responses coded under personal development were mostly positive, remarking on improved personal and professional skills.

Positive Comments

“Learning and developing as a person and academically. Great for self-confidence and hopefully a brighter professional future.”

“I have been very lucky to enrol on my course before the tuition fees were increased the current level of fees would dissuade me from embarking on the course which would have meant that I would not have gained the personal skills and confidence I have now.”

17. Wider NSS Results: Bank Questions

17.1. The Bank questions invite students to rate six key themes: Careers, Course Delivery, Feedback from Students, Workload, Learning Community and Information and Support.

17.2. In comparison with 2014, this year the %agree for the categories of ‘Course Delivery’, ‘Feedback’, ‘Workload’ and ‘Information and Support’ each fell by 3%. Of these, ‘Careers’, ‘Workload’ and ‘Learning community’ have fallen for three consecutive years in OU students’ ratings.

17.3. With the exception of the Bank Category relating to ‘Workload’, the Open University fell below the Sector across all other Bank Categories (Figure 10), most notably for the themes of ‘Learning Community’ (-23%) and ‘Feedback’ (-20%), which remained the poorest performing categories.

17.4. Figure 11 presents the demographic breakdown for changes in %agree for the Bank categories between 2014 and 2015. As with the satisfaction ratings for OUSA, it is difficult to draw inferences from the numbers themselves, since the groups showing the biggest declines (students with a ‘Specific Learning Difficulty’, or students from ‘Other ethnicity’ and ‘Not known ethnicity’) are also the ones that make up the smallest proportion of respondents.

17.5. To explore the reasons for the decline in students’ ratings of the Bank categories, the same 300 free text comments (as for the Core categories) were coded according to the Bank categories. Thus, for each Bank category, positive and negative comments are balanced by comments offering suggestions for improving the study experience.
Figure 10. Comparison of OU ratings on Bank questions with the Sector average in 2015
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*Figure 11. Demographic breakdown of the changes between 2014-2015 in %agree for Bank categories*
18. Careers

Students were appreciative of instances when their career goals were listened to, and when they were advised on ways to make their OU study count towards them. Suggestions included offering more detailed careers advice, preferably in a face-to-face setting, and the providing the opportunity to learn about the experiences of OU alumni.

Positive Comment

“Fantastic career advice from a tutor she took the time to talk to me about my career. Great link to a volunteer weekend from the OU with Bath Uni using lab and field science skills.”

Negative Comments

“The careers section of the website does little to encourage students to study for a master's degree. Personally, I would liked to have learnt more about the MA in English; perhaps the OU can publish some sample course material online which would help students get a better feel for the course.”

Suggestions

“Examples of how past students have used their qualifications to develop their careers.”

“More information about how various modules relate to careers students might want to pursue.”

19. Course Delivery

The move to online/onscreen delivery surfaced again in students’ free text responses. The presentation and quality of print books and the lack of hardcopy/print material were commented on.

Positive Comment

“The course books have been well written, with clear examples, diagrams and self-assessment questions. These are an excellent bonus compared to resources I have been provided with whilst studying at degree level at other conventional universities.”

Negative Comments

“Online delivery of courses is developing but they now do not provide printed copies of much of the course material and neither do they provide it in a format, which can be downloaded (e.g., PDF) so much of it can only be accessed online. I do not have a computer at my place of work. Libraries close after 5-6 p.m. and I do not of my studying late in the evening. I feel threat the OU are now relying too heavily on online delivery and are assuming all the
student have access to the Internet all the time is unfair. Of course, they make this clear at the beginning of the course but technical issues can arise during the course, which they do not seem to plan ahead or have contingencies for.”

**Suggestion**

“Listen to what your students want. Stop using ‘environmentally friendly’ excuses to save costs incurred by sending out materials such as books and CD-ROMs.”

**20. Feedback from Students**

Positive comments highlighted instances when teaching and support staff had listened to students’ needs and offered personal advice and support. A perception of impersonality and lack of tailored support was raised as a concern by respondents, and suggestions laid emphasis on the need for retaining face-to-face contact (especially in the form of summer and residential schools).

**Positive Comments**

“Student Services have always listened to my needs and are very well informed as regards the options open to me on this particular degree path.”

“My tutors are understanding and open to listening to ideas and concerns, which helps with my confidence.”

**Negative Comments**

“Indifference, lack of understanding in what student challenges are in terms of academic learning and tutors not listening properly.”

**Suggestions**

“Stop cutting down on print outs. Evaluate your tutors better before you hire them and listen to students’ feedback about them. Keep the summer schools running as this is a very helpful and important experience for students. Don’t stop offering courses for a pathway if the pathway only finishes in 2017. We should be able to finish our degree as it was promised to us when we started. Changing the courses offered halfway through and stopping summer schools is really not very professional.”

“By encouraging your support staff to read and take time to understand what is written in emails, listen to and understand what is said on the phone and then answer appropriately rather than responding to what they think you said at first glance/hearing (whether their understanding is correct or not or just trotting out the party line emails.”

“Please listen to your student’s feedback and act upon them. A few years ago, I was about to give up and thankfully, a very good tutor encouraged me back into study and to progress and believe in myself and my abilities again. A
healthy balance between what the OU wants to achieve and what students expect and need from studying with the institution would certainly be most beneficial to all.”

21. Workload

The issue of assignments clashing with busy times for families (such as Christmas and the summer holidays) was raised by some respondents, and suggestions included students being able to see the percentage of the course that they had completed.

Positive Comment

“Approachable tutors, assignments back in good time, steady workload that has helped me become much more organised.”

Negative Comments

“Some modules have involved quite a few assignments over the summer holidays. This makes it difficult for mature students juggling work, study, childcare and family holidays.”

“Pacing of the course sometimes difficult, with a huge bulge of workload around Christmas time.”

Suggestion

“A planning guide to completing (showing % completed) of your current selected qualification on your Student Homepage and some functionality to model how studying future units at set times will help you to achieve the selected qualification. This would be very useful for balancing workload.”

22. Learning Community

There were very positive responses about the opportunity of meeting other students in a face-to-face setting, and lack of such opportunities drew negative comments. The need for summer and residential schools was emphasised, both for encouraging a sense of belonging to a learning community and for a better learning experience.

Positive Comments

“It’s a very diverse multicultural institution and I enjoy learning from the experiences of the other students.”

“The residential school was absolutely fantastic in every way. I learnt masses, met some wonderful people and had a good time. They had fantastic resources and excellent lectures. This was all referring to the residential school not just the first line.”
Negative Comment

“I am aware that many of the summer schools are being withdrawn from OU which I believe is a great shame. It is one of the rare occasions students have time to spend and work together. I feel that if anything there should be more summer/residential schools for OU.”

Suggestion

“Keep the residential schools. They are an invaluable resource. Being able to connect face-to-face with tutors and fellow students helped consolidate a lot of learning.”

23. Information and Support

Suggestions included the provision of timely and detailed information about any changes to modules, so that students could plan their studies well in advance.

Suggestions

“Tailoring alerts to new or changing modules within your chosen degree path so students can quickly adapt and plan ahead for their next module and route. Many of the modules that I was interested in when I started are now discontinued before I reached the appropriate level.”

“Have advisers who understand the limitations of the course (i.e., cut-off dates, etc.), also that the 15 credit courses are a complete waste of time, as they cannot be matched in other courses to make up 30 or 60 credits. In this instance, this advice as probably cost be my degree, as I will have timed out before being able to complete my last course.”

“Update our student profile with the balance of points needed to complete the course and the range of options available to do this as I find it quite complicate figuring out how many points I still need and what I need to study to achieve this.”

24. Conclusion

Our findings pertaining to OUSA feed into OUSA’s engagement strategy each year. The CEC could also consider ways in which findings from the NS S can be given a voice within the wider OU community.

There is a wealth of data that needs further exploration. The Core and Bank categories, especially those relating to ‘Learning Community’ and ‘Feedback from Students’, are areas where OUSA can contribute to improving students’ study experience with the OU.
At the same time, more needs to be done to collate the ongoing improvements within the OU in response to student feedback via the N S S. The free text responses are an invaluable source for identifying and addressing students' concerns. The OUSA could have an important part to play in ensuring that the Bank categories continue to be included on behalf of the OU for the N S S.

Appendix

‘National Student Survey 2015: summary of results for The Open University at institution level’: confidential report shared by the Open University’s Strategy and Information Office with the OUSA.

Pooja Sinha
Research and Information Officer