NEW STUDENT SURVEY 2015

The C E C is asked to:-

i) note the findings in this report.

1. Background

1.1 The Institute of Educational Technology (I E T) undertake an annual survey with new students (previously known as the Early Qualification Experience survey). The survey is sent to a sample of students who are four months into their study and have had the opportunity to settle in and are in a position to review their initial OU study experience. For the past two years, the survey has incorporated two questions relating to the OU Students Association (OUSA). The purpose of this report is to summarise the results from these questions in the 2015 survey.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 79% of new students surveyed had heard of the OU Students Association, though only a fifth appeared to have an understanding about OUSA.

2.2 The website remains the most popular communication method, with social media channels increasing in popularity from 2014.

2.3 OUSA’s online Fresher’s event was the fifth most popular communication channel, providing a baseline of 9% from which to monitor the impact of future initiatives.

2.4 The student electronic magazine/newsletters appear to be the most effective method for improving understanding of OUSA.
2.5 Scotland boasts the highest levels of awareness and understanding, whilst those within the North and North West are lowest and declining. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the activity of student representatives in these regions may well have a part to play in the levels of awareness reported.

2.6 Awareness and understanding appeared to be lowest for younger student groups. Continuing efforts on social media channels may continue to help improving awareness in this demographic group.

2.7 Awareness of OUSA is poorest for those students in the Health & Social Care academic unit. It may be useful to explore alternative ways to engage students, such as a Societies related to their discipline/vocation.

2.8 It is recommended that these questions are retained in the next New Student Survey to allow further monitoring and understanding of OUSA awareness. This may offer the potential to review the impact of:
   2.8.1 OU locations analysis and associated changes.
   2.8.2 Possible future OUSA initiatives such as events targeted at the under 25 years age group, or the introduction of a Society for Health and Social Care.

3. Findings

The 2015 New Student Survey was sent to a sample of 9270 students, taken from the population of all undergraduate students, who started their first module in 14J and who were registered for an Honours or a Foundation degree under the new qualification framework. The sample included students who were starting their studies with an Access module. 1379 responses were received, representing a response rate of 14.9%.

3.1 Awareness of OUSA
Students were asked if they had heard of the OU Students Association; **79% respondents were aware of OUSA.** However, over two thirds of these did not seem to have a good understanding about what OUSA was about (see Figure 1). The overall figure is higher than 2014 (76%), although it is important to note that the question and response options have altered from the previous year, which might have affected the results.

3.2 OUSA awareness by Region
Awareness was highest for students in Scotland (95%) and Wales (75%), both having seen notable increases from the previous year of 13% and 10% respectively (see Figure 2). It is possible that this is a reflection of the role of the National Officers in these locations, which

---

1 In 2014, the question wording was ‘Are you aware that the OU has a student association called OUSA?’ with the response options ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. In 2015, the question wording was altered to ‘Have you heard of the Open University Students Association?’ and the response options expanded to ‘No, I haven’t heard of it; Yes, and I am familiar with what it is; Yes, and I vaguely know what it is; Yes, but I am not sure what it is’.
might contribute to enhancing OUSA awareness. Awareness was lowest and had shown the greatest decline from 2014 for students in the North West (69% down 10%), and South (72% down 8%) Regions. Anecdotally, it is possible that the level of activity within these Regions is less, which might contribute to poorer awareness.

Figure 1: Awareness of OUSA (2015)

Figure 2: Awareness of OUSA by Region (2014 to 2015)
As Figure 3 demonstrates, the proportion of students who stated that they were familiar with what OUSA is, was also highest for those based in Scotland (28%) and Wales (25%). Those students based in the North (13%) and Yorkshire (13%) regions were least familiar.

![Figure 3: Awareness of OUSA by Region](image)

### 3.3 OUSA awareness by Age group
Student awareness of OUSA appeared to increase with age; in terms of overall awareness, but also the level of understanding (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Awareness of OUSA by Age Group](image)
3.4 **OUSA awareness by Academic Unit**

Students in the Science (90%) and Arts (87%) academic units reported the highest levels of awareness (see Figure 5). These faculties have been particularly proactive in organising Induction events, and in engaging with OUSA, which may have contributed to improving OUSA awareness amongst their students. Students in the Health and Social Care academic unit (68%) reported the lowest levels of awareness of OUSA. It is possible that this is a reflection of study motivations within the faculty, so that students on vocational course (for example, nurses) perhaps have less opportunity and time to learn about OUSA.

3.5 **OUSA awareness by study motivation**

Those students who were studying for personal development were more likely to be aware of OUSA (see Figure 6). However, it is worth noting that the proportion of those studying for personal development that were familiar with what OUSA is about (23%), was similar to those studying for employment/career (24%). This may suggest that the differences concern basic awareness rather than levels of understanding.

4. **Communication methods**

4.1 For those students who reported awareness of OUSA, the website remained the most common communication method through which they had found out about OUSA (see Figure 7). This was followed by direct email (45%), although this figure had reduced from 48% in 2014. This could potentially indicate the lessening impact of direct email, particularly when competing with other email communications from the OU.

4.2 An additional response option of via the ‘Online Fresher’s event’ was added in 2015, to help evaluate the impact of OUSA’s online Fresher’s project. This was the fifth most popular option selected, representing 9% of responses, providing an encouraging baseline to monitor future engagement.

4.3 In comparison to the 2014 results, there was an increase in students reporting that they had heard about OUSA through online social media including online forums (+5%), Facebook (+5%), online induction events (+4%), and Twitter (+2%).
Figure 5: Awareness of OUSA by Academic Unit

Figure 6: Awareness of OUSA by Study Motivation
4.4 When considering the top five communication channels, it is apparent that two thirds of respondents only reported a single communication channel; most frequently the website or direct email (see Figure 8). Arguably these represent the two primary points of access for students, but it is unclear whether this should be sufficient (particularly in terms of direct email), or whether we would expect them to be directed to other communication methods in order to enhance their understanding. It is also worth noting that this data is based on student recall and perception – it is likely that certain methods such as the Fresher’s events and the Student e-magazine would only be accessed via a direct email with the relevant links, but this is not the element that many students recall.

Figure 7: How did you find out about OUSA? Communication methods (2014 to 2015)
Figure 8: How did you find out about OUSA? Communication methods
4.5 Certain communication methods appeared to be more closely linked with students having a good understanding about OUSA – most notably the Student electronic magazine/newsletter (see Figure 9).

![Figure 9: Level of awareness by Communication method]

4.6 There was some variation in the communication methods reported by different student demographics. Students from the North West region were least likely to report hearing about OUSA through the website or Facebook, whilst Facebook was most popular with students from the North and Scotland. Facebook was also most popular with students aged 35 years and under, whilst the Student electronic magazines and newsletters were most popular with both those students under 25 years and those over 56 years. Although the website was most popular with students from Health & Social Care, the popularity of Direct Mail and Student electronic magazines and newsletters were markedly lower for this group compared to any other academic unit.

5. Further Steps to Consider

5.1 Exploring other sources of data (such as Facebook likes) could help further enhance understanding about the current picture of student engagement across the Regions and Nations.

5.2 Future changes to OU venues resulting from the OU Locations Analysis may influence the level of awareness across the Regions.
5.3 The low numbers of students who have become aware of OUSA through face-to-face events may offer an opportunity for OUSA to fill this gap.

5.4 The current option of ‘Website’ in the questionnaire does not distinguish whether this is the OU website or the OUSA website – OUSA could consider making this distinction in future versions of the survey.

5.5 The current option of ‘online forums’ similarly does not distinguish between those hosted by the OU for modules, and those hosted by OUSA for social purposes – OUSA could consider making this distinction in future versions of the survey.

5.6 OUSA could explore adding the response options of ‘OUS radio’ and ‘OUS podcasts’ to reflect the growing range of our communication methods.

5.7 Developing targeted activities to improve awareness amongst younger students, and utilise future New Student Surveys to monitor the impact of these activities.

Kate Buttery
Research and Information Officer