The CEC is asked to:-

i) note the Evaluation Report
ii) discuss the issues to consider.

The following report contains a detailed evaluation of the OU Students Association Conference held during 17-19 June in 2016. In summary, the objectives set for Conference 2016 were achieved through careful planning and communication efforts. The Association was successful in building enthusiasm and understanding around the Students Association Elections and the Business elements of Conference, and showcasing its work while highlighting opportunities for students to get involved. The report highlights some key issues to consider, which are repeated below to aid discussion.

1. Consider the need to manage student expectations around when they can expect to hear about the confirmation of their place at Conference; communicate early on that confirmations will be sent out in stages (for instance, between specific dates rather than on a specific date)
2. Explore ways of reducing non-attendance and bring to delegates' attention the costs accrued by the Association for every individual not attending Conference; encourage delegates to inform the Students Association if they are unable to attend so that their place can be allocated to students on the waiting list.
3. Explore ways of promoting the Conference in regions with consistently low attendance in comparison with the number of places allocated.
4. Agree whether candidates standing for election should continue to be offered a delegate place at Conference in recognition of their participation, and whether this should be accommodated within the regional/national allocation of places.
5. Explore the barriers to reading the Business Books once they have been made available online; consider if changes are needed in terms of how the information is presented (such as including an at-a-glance summary of the Business items) and if the books should be posted out to delegates even earlier.
6. Revisit the window of time given to online delegates for voting on Business resolutions and explore the possibility of emailing voting codes a day in advance.
7. Consider options to better align the size of the venue and the popularity of the workshops; explore ways of registering interest for different activities and avoid having to turn delegates away.

8. Review the number and scheduling of workshops and the possibility of offering more sessions for popular workshops.

9. Review the importance of sessions like the Students Association Slot and Question Time, and consider if it might be better to have fewer competing workshops while these are in progress.

10. This year, details of faculty as well as region were included on delegates' name badges. Consider introducing faculty-based gatherings for 2018, and which slots within the programme would lend themselves to such a meet-up.

11. Consider having volunteers 'meet and greet' delegates upon arrival at the Milton Keynes Coachway; ensure bus timetables from the railway and coach stations to the Walton Hall campus are highlighted and sent to delegates in advance; offer support to delegates staying at hotels not covered by the shuttle bus service.

12. Review the gaps in the shuttle bus schedule; identify peak times when the service would be needed and align it with the Conference Programme; confirm shuttle bus timetable with volunteers ahead of the Conference weekend.

13. Explore ways to handle traffic during lunch; ensure catering is more evenly balanced between venues (such as water/tea/coffee in the Jennie Lee Building and the Library during workshops).

14. Improve the timing and format of the support/training offered to Conference volunteers. 57% did not attend the online OU Live training session and 48% could not attend the briefing session on Friday morning (which could be due to time constraints and their travel schedules).

15. Enable volunteers to discuss their timeslots and address issues such as missing workshops and scheduled meal times.

16. Given the low attendance and Business voting figures, it would be timely to reassess whether an ‘online delegate’ status to access certain elements of Conference is required.

17. Review the purpose of the online elements of Conference and explore ways of reducing technical problems (for instance, accessing forums, the live recordings and Periscope).

18. Consider moving the Pledge drive to earlier in the weekend to get more delegates involved.

19. Consider activities that the Students Association could facilitate in order to keep the momentum from Conference 2016 going and raise awareness about volunteering opportunities.

Jessica Smith
Head of Student Community
Open University Students Association
1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents an evaluation of the OU Students Association Conference held during 17-19 June 2016 in Milton Keynes, and assesses the impact of Conference 2016 in the light of the following key objectives:

- Ensure students attending Conference are aware that it is a Students Association event
- Build enthusiasm and understanding around elections ahead of Conference
- Generating understanding of the importance of the Business elements of Conference
- Excite and inspire students to continue their involvement in the Students Association after Conference.

1.2 The Conference weekend was preceded by the Association’s biennial Elections and the newly elected student representatives (forming the Association’s Central Executive Committee) were introduced to the student body on 18 June during the Conference weekend. Preparations for the Conference and Elections were undertaken in parallel during January-June 2016, with the staff team advised by the student-led Conference Steering Committee.

1.3 The Conference weekend was designed to offer a range of workshops and social events, showcasing the Association’s work and ongoing projects and research at the Open University. The Conference had two components, which will be referred to as the Face-to-Face Conference and Online Conference. Delegates are similarly referred to as face-to-face delegates and online delegates.

1.4 After Conference 2016, feedback on the weekend was invited through three different channels: end-of-conference surveys sent to both face-to-face and online delegates, staff feedback and observations from the Conference Steering Committee. This report only considers feedback about areas that the Association can influence or change regarding communication efforts, the facilitation of events and delegates’ satisfaction with different aspects of the weekend.

1.5 With the four key Conference Objectives to guide the evaluation, recommendations are included for improving delegates’ experience for Conference 2018. Where relevant, the report will also identify how the issues highlighted in the Conference 2014 Evaluation were addressed during Conference 2016 to deliver an engaging experience for delegates.
2. Conference Planning: Communications and Registration

Communications

2.1 The strapline for Conference 2016 was “Your community... Your voice... Your Conference...”. The Association’s communications efforts were aimed at raising awareness and enthusiasm around Conference 2016 and Elections 2016. Different channels were used to provide better information and widen the reach of communications, such as regular email updates, social media promotion and features in OU Students Magazine. These communications highlighted the stages of the Elections process and preparations for the Conference, and aimed to give delegates a good idea of what to expect from Conference so that they could engage effectively during the weekend.

2.2 Email communication with face-to-face delegates, for example, highlighted the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and the opportunity to volunteer during the Conference weekend, advised delegates regarding accommodation and claiming expenses, and encouraged participation in the Elections. These emails were well received with a high ‘open’ rate (82.9% to 86.7%). Recipients also clicked through to different resources, the most popular of which were the Conference Programme and Conference FAQs.

2.3 Effective use of social media helped promote participation; the Conference hashtag #OUstudents16 was used 1500 times and #voteOUstudents was hugely successful in encouraging hundreds of students to cast their vote. The online Conference YouTube video stream was watched by 349 unique viewers on Saturday 18 June and by 243 unique viewers on Sunday 19 June. The spring 2016 issue of the Students Magazine focused on the upcoming Conference, while the summer 2016 issue introduced the newly elected CEC team.

2.4 On Friday 8 April, Conference 2016 was formally announced and the promotion for Conference and Elections were launched on different communication platforms. Chart 1 shows the communication channels through which face-to-face and online delegates had heard about Conference. In both cases, the most popular channels were ‘emails from the Students Association’ (80.11% of face-to-face delegates and 83.87% of online delegates) and the ‘Students Association website’ (34.09% of face-to-face delegates and 19.35% of online delegates). Interestingly, ‘word of mouth’ was selected by 24.43% of face-to-face delegates and 16.13% of online delegates, pointing to the buzz generated through the Association’s communication efforts, and the importance of the student community.

2.5 In terms of satisfaction with the ‘frequency of communications in the lead-up to Conference’, 61.36% of face-to-face delegates were ‘very satisfied’ and 30.68% were ‘satisfied’. The figures for online delegates are lower, with 51.61% selecting ‘very satisfied’ and 24.19% selecting ‘satisfied’.
Chart 1. Of those responding to the face-to-face end-of-conference survey, 80.11% indicated they had heard about Conference 2016 through ‘emails from the Students Association’, followed by 34.09% through the Students Association website. Interestingly, 24.43% of F2F delegates responded that they had heard about the Conference through ‘word of mouth’. The OU Students Magazine (15.91%) and the Students Association’s Facebook page (15.34%) were other channels where many F2F delegates had heard about Conference, while fewer chose the Association’s Twitter page (6.25%) and other social media (3.41%).

Similar trends can be seen in the responses from online delegates to the end-of-conference survey. 83.87% indicated they had heard about Conference 2016 through ‘emails from the Students Association’ and 19.35% indicated that they had become aware of the event through the Students Association website. 16.13% had heard about the Conference through ‘word of mouth’, 9.68% each through the OU Students Magazine and the Association’s Facebook page, 3.23% through the Association’s Twitter page and 1.61% through other social media.
2.6 Registration for a place at Conference opened on Friday 15 May, and closed on Friday 13th May for the face-to-face event and Friday 10th June for the online event. The links for registration were emailed a day in advance to the “Interested Students” list on Thursday 14th April. In response to the recommendation from Evaluation 2014 to ‘explore alternative conference registration systems, and ways to streamline the staged process’, in 2016 the registration process employed the Open University’s Form Publishing System. Furthermore, the allocation of places via the regional and national Assemblies was discontinued for Conference 2016, thus streamlining the registration process.

2.7 Applications were processed on a first come first served basis, and eligibility criteria and regional allocations were checked by the staff team. Once delegate places had been confirmed, calls were also made to discuss additional needs with delegates. The registration process seems to have worked well in 2016, with high levels of student satisfaction. 72.16% of face-to-face delegates were ‘very satisfied’ and 22.16% ‘satisfied’ with the registration process, with 64.52% of online delegates ‘very satisfied’ and 22.58% ‘satisfied’.

2.8 Of face-to-face delegates, 85.8% found the ‘information about registering for Conference’ ‘very useful’ and 10.8% found it ‘fairly useful’. These figures were similar for online delegates, with 80.33% having found the information ‘very useful’ and 9.84% having found it ‘fairly useful’.

Issues to consider

- Consider the need to manage student expectations around when they can expect to hear about the confirmation of their place at Conference; communicate early on that confirmations will be sent out in stages (for instance, between specific dates rather than on a specific date).
3. During the weekend: Attendance, Conference Business and the Weekend Programme

Attendance

3.1 295 face-to-face delegates and 119 online delegates attended Conference 2016. For the face-to-face Conference, places for candidates standing for election were accommodated within the regional and national allocations. Separate to the regional and national allocations, Conference 2016 was also attended by the Central Executive Committee (CEC) members, the Disabled Students Group (DSG) and Societies’ members, and the Association’s Honorary Life Members (HLMs).

Chart 2. A comparison of the attendance of face-to-face delegates at Conference 2016 against the places allocated for each Region/Nation.
Chart 3. A comparison of the proportion of face-to-face delegates who attended Conference 2014 and Conference 2016 from each region.
3.2. In terms of regional and national groupings, the biggest gaps between place allocations and actual attendance (10 or more places having been left unfilled) were seen for the regions of London, South, East of England, Scotland and South East (Chart 2). While overall attendance is still low, the South and Scotland regions have shown improvement in the overall proportion of delegates attending Conference between 2014 and 2016 (Chart 3). Compared to Conference 2014, attendance for Conference 2016 fell for London, Yorkshire and South East (while Southern Europe shows a decline, the number of allotted places are so few, at 8 places, that minor shifts appear as large proportions).

3.3. A further breakdown of attendance along demographic variables shows a fairly consistent trend across gender and age, with an increase for those in the under-25 and 36-45 age groups (Chart 4). The overall proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups showed a decline in 2016, compared to a significant rise in the overall proportion of attendees categorised as White. The most noticeable changes are in the proportions of disabled and non-disabled attendees, with the 2016 figures almost reversed from Conference 2014.

3.4. Overall, 107 delegates informed the Association that they were unable to attend Conference, thus enabling their places to be allocated to students on the waiting list. However, 56 delegates did not advise the Association of their plans, some due to medical and family emergencies.

**Interactions during Face-to-face and Online Conference**

3.5 The format of the face-to-face and Online Conference are very different, which impacts on the way face-to-face and online delegates engage with other students during Conference. Trends across comparable measures are very different in each case. Overall, face-to-face delegates indicated more interaction with their fellow students, both during the Conference weekend and in their plans for staying in touch after Conference.

3.6 Chart 5 overleaf shows key motivations for attending Conference 2016, where ‘Meeting/chatting with other OU students’ was chosen by an overwhelming number of face-to-face delegates (94%), in sharp contrast to online delegates (25%). Over the Conference weekend, 84% of face-to-face delegates met with other students, as compared to 39% of online delegates who chatted with other students. Furthermore, 76% of face-to-face delegates made plans to keep in touch with other students and 55% pledged to get more students involved with the Association, as opposed to 16% and 21% of online delegates, respectively (Chart 6).
Chart 5. A few trends for face-to-face and online delegates were very similar, such as ‘learning more about the Students Association’ and ‘voting on the business resolutions’, with wider gaps for ‘meeting newly elected student representatives/hearing about the Elections results’ and ‘exploring ways to get involved with the Students Association’. The sharpest contrast remains for ‘meeting/chatting with other OU students’ (94% for face-to-face delegates and 25% for online delegates), which could be attributed to the virtual set-up that directs focus to different aspects of the Conference.
Chart 6. Trends across comparable measures for face-to-face and online delegates in terms of their interaction with fellow students during the Conference weekend.

Issues to consider

➢ Explore ways of reducing non-attendance and bring to delegates’ attention the costs accrued by the Association for every individual not attending Conference; encourage delegates to inform the Students Association if they are unable to attend so that their place can be allocated to students on the waiting list.

➢ Explore ways of promoting the Conference in regions with consistently low attendance in comparison with the number of places allocated.

➢ Agree whether candidates standing for election should continue to be offered a delegate place at Conference in recognition of their participation, and whether this should be accommodated within the regional/national allocation of places.
Weekend Programme

Objective 1: Ensure students attending Conference are aware that it is a Students Association event

3.7 A key objective for the Association this year was to raise awareness of the Students Association’s work and ensure that delegates were aware that organising the biennial Conference is an Association initiative. This objective was achieved through a blend of showcasing the Association’s achievements during the previous term (2014-2016) and highlighting opportunities for delegates to get involved. The Conference Programme was also designed with the recommendation from Evaluation 2014 ‘consider incorporating more activities about the different aspects of OU Students Association over the conference weekend with direct recruitment/sign-up opportunities’ in mind.

3.8 The OU Students Association Celebration was part of the Business Agenda this year, and offered snapshots of the Association’s achievements on many parallel fronts. The Students Association Slot was scheduled for Saturday afternoon and was focused on affiliated Societies, the Disabled Students Group (DSG), graduation ceremonies, community groups and the OU Students Educational Trust (OUSET). ‘Amplifying the Student Voice’ workshop followed on Sunday morning, detailing the routes students could take to become part of the Association’s growing pool of student representatives. The Pledge Drive was a great success and work is currently underway to offer support to willing volunteers in organising events locally, as discussed in the ‘After Conference: Taking our work forward’ section below.

3.9 Delegates’ feedback to Conference 2016 has been very positive overall, and the following sections discuss different aspects of the weekend.

“IT was inspiring, fun and really interesting. It helped to feel more connected to the wider OU community.”

“I had an amazing time at Conference and met wonderful people. It was well organised and we were so well looked after by all the volunteers and staff who were always at hand to answer any questions or help. The debates and sessions were really interesting and we had opportunities to get involved and speak, if we wanted to express views. I strongly recommend the experience to any students who would like to make new friends and learn more about our beloved OU and the wonderful Students Association.”

Conference Business

Objective 3: Generating understanding of the importance of the Business elements of Conference

3.10 The biennial Conference offers an opportunity for the Association to directly engage students in its decision-making processes; this is achieved through the Business element of Conference. A key objective this year was to underscore the importance of delegates’ participation in Conference Business. Conference Business was scheduled for Saturday morning, which enabled all business resolutions to be presented within the morning slot. All voting was quorate, as no other activities had been scheduled during
Business hours. Voting was handled by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) and used handheld devices for the face-to-face voting. Thus, the Evaluation 2014 recommendation to ’explore opportunities to plan the logistics of voting as far in advance as possible, and to avoid switching between voting methods where possible’ was implemented in 2016.

3.11 The Business Resolutions included the CEC and BoT reports from the outgoing CEC and Trustee members about activities and projects undertaken during the 2014-2016 term; accepting the Association’s Bye-laws, the appointment of external auditors and affiliations with other institutions. Delegates also voted on the principle of payment for the President and Deputy President of the Students Association. A summary of the student consultation on the subject was provided for Conference delegates, and voting on the day was preceded by discussion and debate. All of the Business resolutions were accepted, and Appendix 1 provides the breakdown of results.

3.12 Feedback to the end-of-conference surveys suggests that many delegates did not feel well-informed about Conference Business. Delegates commented that receiving the Business Books during registration on Friday, with the evening already packed with campus tours and the delegate reception, did not give them time to read the books. While 75.29% of face-to-face delegates found the ‘information about general Business and report’ to be ‘very useful’ and 16.67% to be ‘fairly useful’, 8.05% felt that they had not been offered sufficient information regarding the General Business and Reports. 48.39% of online delegates found the information to be ‘very useful’ and 37.1% found it ‘fairly useful’, but 9.68% felt that they had ‘not received enough information’ about the General Business and Reports.

“I really enjoyed my time at the Conference…My only criticism is that it would have been useful to have the business information packs (that were given to onsite attendees on registration) mailed out to us before Conference to allow time for better engagement with the material. There is so much socially to get involved whilst attending, I found little time for this material.”

“We were asked to vote on whether the President and his Deputy should be paid a salary. We had no time to read the literature presented at the conference hence I had to abstain in almost all voting sessions.”

3.13 However, online versions of the Business Books had been made available before the Conference weekend and email communications had advised delegates to familiarise themselves with the material ahead of the weekend. Emails had also included links to the consultation forum so that delegates could read the discussions around the subject of introducing payment for the President and Deputy President. The number of ‘abstain’ choices during voting were relatively few, so delegates appear to have had some certainty about how they wanted to vote:
**Business Resolution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Resolution</th>
<th>% F2F delegates abstaining</th>
<th>% Online delegates abstaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report from the CEC</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report from the BoT</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the Bye-laws</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment of external auditors</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting affiliations</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle of payment to President and Deputy President</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues to consider**

- Explore the barriers to reading the Business Books once they have been made available online; consider if changes are needed in terms of how the information is presented (such as including an at-a-glance summary of the Business items) and if the books should be posted out to delegates even earlier.
- Revisit the window of time given to online delegates for voting on Business resolutions and explore the possibility of emailing voting codes a day in advance.

**Workshops**

3.14 These sessions were very popular and generated a lot of interest and discussions, but they also present logistical considerations for the future. In some cases, places for popular sessions could not meet demand, and unfortunately some delegates could not be accommodated due to the capacity of the venue. This was especially the case with the Harvard Referencing and Creative Writing workshops. Delegates also suggested increasing the gaps between sessions:

- “I was upset that I could not attend the workshops of choice. I admittedly arrived 5 minutes late for one and the room was full. I could not choose another as they had all started. I hope for 2018 that we go back to a ticket system at registration for workshops.”
- “more time to get between lectures and activities”
- “the timings of the workshops need to also be looked at, as some workshops overrun not leaving enough time to get to the next workshop.”
3.15 Of face-to-face delegates, 59.43% were ‘very satisfied’ and 30.29% ‘satisfied’ with the ‘facilitation of workshops and activities’. The recommendation from Evaluation 2014, ‘explore ways to effectively manage student attendance on popular conference activities where available places are limited to ensure fair access for all’, is still valid for planning for Conference 2018.

### Issues to consider

- Consider options to better align the size of the venue and the popularity of the workshops; explore ways of registering interest for different activities and avoid having to turn delegates away.
- Review the number and scheduling of workshops and the possibility of offering more sessions for popular workshops.

### Balance of Business and Social activities

3.16 The Conference programme packs a variety of activities and events; however, individual preferences for the optimal balance of business and social activities vary widely, as suggested by the comments below:

“A well organised events, with great support, and well balanced mix of informative, participative and social activities.”

“Too little organised from a social perspective. One small bar irregularly open. Should have been a big marquee on the green with bar, food, entertainment, music etc. Just nothing to do really. Strangers don’t socialise or bond by attending lectures. Should have been more like a party or a mini festival.”

“Can we have some serious debates on topical issues (and maybe controversial) so that student opinion can be gauged and used to inform policy making. Who cares whether pets make good study buddies, but I do care about level of fees, tutor support, online delivery, etc.”

3.17 Overall, face-to-face delegates were more satisfied with the balance of business and social activities than online delegates. 65.34% of face-to-face delegates chose ‘very satisfied’ and 19.89% chose ‘satisfied’, compared to 26.23% of online delegates choosing ‘very satisfied’ and 40.98% choosing ‘satisfied’.

### Issues to consider

- Review the importance of sessions like the Students Association Slot and Question Time, and consider if it might be better to have fewer competing workshops while these are in progress.
- This year, details of faculty as well as region were included on delegates’ name badges. Consider introducing faculty-based gatherings for 2018, and which slots within the programme would lend themselves to such a meet-up.
Accommodation, Catering and Transport

3.18 In 2016, Association staff were present at each of the accommodation venues in response to the recommendation made in Evaluation 2014 to ‘explore ways to improve information about the shuttle bus provision, and consider having staff/helpers at each accommodation venue to welcome students and address any issues’. Staff feedback suggests that this worked well in 2016 and could be usefully continued for future Conferences.

3.19 Delegate feedback to the end-of-conference surveys indicate that having a regular shuttle bus service from the Walton Hall campus to the hotels was appreciated. 76.88% of face-to-face delegates found prior information about ‘getting to and from the Walton Hall campus’ to be ‘very useful’ and 19.65% found it ‘fairly useful’; during the weekend, 67.05% were ‘very satisfied’ with the Conference transport (shuttle buses) and 16.76% were ‘satisfied’.

“Not all students travelled by train/car and so there were problems in students getting from the coachway to Kents Hill/Campus? The Hilton. This also applied after Conference when they had to get taxi’s to the coachway. Maybe this can be looked at for 2018.”

“This was a fantastic conference. The only criticisms I have is the queues for lunch on Sunday were too long and fast-track option to collect a hot lunch for people departing would be useful.”

3.20 Volunteers had welcomed delegates upon arrival in Milton Keynes at the station ‘meet and greets’, and comments suggest that having volunteers at the coachway could also be considered for the future. The staff team were further assisted by Conference Helpers, who were employed for the weekend. The majority of face-to-face delegates were ‘very satisfied’ (84.66%) and ‘satisfied’ (8.52%) with the ‘assistance offered by the Students Association staff and Conference Helpers’.

Issues to Consider

- Consider having volunteers ‘meet and greet’ delegates upon arrival at the Milton Keynes Coachway; ensure bus timetables from the railway and coach stations to the Walton Hall campus are highlighted and sent to delegates in advance; offer support to delegates staying at hotels not covered by the shuttle bus service.

- Review the gaps in the shuttle bus schedule; identify peak times when the service would be needed and align it with the Conference Programme; confirm shuttle bus timetable with volunteers ahead of the Conference weekend.

- Explore ways to handle traffic during lunch; ensure catering is more evenly balanced between venues (such as water/tea/coffee in the Jennie Lee Building and the Library during workshops).
Conference Volunteers

3.21 In 2016 it was decided that volunteer places would be made available for those delegates who were interested in engaging with other delegates and offering support during the Conference weekend. The volunteering opportunities were varied, from delegates taking on the role of ‘social media champions’, ‘registration attendants’, ‘campus tour guides’ and ‘shuttle bus stewards’, but also doing ‘station meet and greets’, taking photographs during the weekend and helping out at the merchandise stand. Volunteers rated as ‘very helpful’ the ‘initial email highlighting the opportunity to volunteer’ (89%) and ‘further correspondence regarding your allocated role’ (75%). The delegates’ response to having fellow students in the role of Conference Volunteers was very positive, as reflected in their comments.

“As always the highlight is meeting other students and making new friendships and I loved the fact that so many students were involved as volunteers – I think that was a great ice-breaker. It was a brilliant weekend – enjoyable, enlightening and exhausting!! A huge thank you to all the staff whose hard work made it all possible!!”

3.22 Key motivations for volunteering were the desire to “give something back” to the student community, to be “directly involved” with the Conference, to have the opportunity to meet more students and to support the Students Association staff team. Volunteers also found the experience rewarding and shared some highlights. All those responding to the survey said that they would consider volunteering again, and 96% (27 out of 28) would recommend volunteering to other students.

“Being ‘part of the team’. I felt very welcomed by all the OUSA staff and encouraged by this.”

“Seeing slightly anxious students relax and begin to smile.”

“Got #oustudents16 trending at no 2 on Twitter worldwide.”

“Volunteering enables students to feel more involved, gives them a sense of ownership and encourages inclusivity - which is the basis for a successful conference!”

Issues to consider:

- Improve the timing and format of the support/training offered to Conference volunteers. 57% did not attend the online OU Live training session and 48% could not attend the briefing session on Friday morning (which could be due to time constraints and their travel schedules).
- Enable volunteers to discuss their timeslots and address issues such as missing workshops and scheduled meal times.
Online Conference

3.23 The online elements of Conference 2016 were offered with different levels of access. Some events were open access, such as viewing the livestream of events on YouTube and the Periscope sessions, together with the content included as part of the Online Exhibition. However, other items were restricted to those students who had registered as ‘online delegates’, in particular voting on business resolutions, participating in Q&A sessions and accessing the online delegate forums. Goodie bags were also posted to the online delegates.

“I love the atmosphere of the conference. Very accessible to join the OU live conference from YouTube!”

“Interesting and useful, especially like the sense of community that comes from such a shared event.”

3.24 This definition of ‘online delegates’ was set in response to Evaluation 2014’s recommendation to ‘agree clear definitions for ‘online attendees’, which can be easily measured and used to represent attendance generally, and used to calculate voting rates’. However, as shown in previous sections, attendance continues to be low for Online Conference, and is not easy to measure, as delegates dip in and out of the sessions, some preferring to watch the recording either during or after the Conference weekend.

3.25 Feedback also suggests that online delegates faced technical problems that marred their enjoyment of the event. The online ‘delegate’ status, which confers voting rights, was not used fully; some delegates could not vote due to poor internet connectivity and also suggested that receiving the voting codes a day in advance would have facilitated business voting. Other comments highlight the difficulties in replicating the face-to-face event online.

“Really great weekend. Thoroughly enjoyed being able to be a part of the conference, albeit in a virtual manner. The discussions we held on the forum were really engaging, and made it more enjoyable. Only problems were in posting questions to be asked at the conference, we felt that we didn’t have enough time to post these and hence many went unanswered.”

3.26 While 46.77% of online delegates found the information about the Online Delegate Forums ‘very useful’, 29.03% felt that information was ‘fairly useful’ but could have been more detailed. 20.97% of online delegates felt that the information received about the forums had not been sufficient. During the course of the weekend, 38.71% of online delegates very ‘very satisfied’ with accessing the forums and 24.19% were ‘satisfied’. However, the ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’, ‘dissatisfied’ and ‘very dissatisfied’ options were chosen by 11.29% of respondents in each case. Satisfaction levels for ‘navigating the website and forums’ were also low, with 37.1% ‘very satisfied’, 24.19% ‘satisfied’, 11.29% ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’, 16.13% ‘dissatisfied’ and 6.45% ‘very dissatisfied’.

3.27 In response to Evaluation 2014, ‘consider the value of providing more written information about conference within goodie bags for online delegates; ensure online delegates are clear about why their postal address has been requested’, online delegates were sent goodie bags with information about the Association and Conference 2016. However, the feedback to the end-of-
conference survey suggest that a few delegates were disappointed with the contents of the goodie bag; one statement reflected another concern, that of parity of investment on F2F and Online delegates.

“I thought Periscope was particularly useless. I was not aware that using the extremely popular Microsoft Windows was an issue with the use of Periscope. The quality of reporting and filming was poor in what I did see. Because of this, there was very little available for the online delegates. The live streaming on the OU website regularly 'froze', which meant I had to open an account with YouTube to be able to see the business and add comments - which were later removed. Altogether disappointing this time. Oh yes, the delegates pack that arrived in the post - what was the lanyard for? And a teabag? Very poor content considering the amount of money being spent on those who could attend in person at Milton Keynes. Insulting really.”

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4. Elections 2016

**Objective 2: Build enthusiasm and understanding around elections ahead of Conference**

4.1 2016 was a landmark year for the OU Students Association, as we introduced the One Member One Vote policy and opened the Elections to the entire membership of the Association. Changes to the nominations process meant that students were able to nominate themselves, and were not dependent on other students nominating them. Elections 2016 were held for different roles in the Central Executive Committee (including Officers, Faculty Association Representatives, Area Association Representatives, Student Council Member and Student Trustees).

4.2 In response to the recommendation from Evaluation 2014 to ‘establish plans to raise awareness and understanding about the elected positions within OUSA and the processes for electing to these positions in the two years leading up to OUSA Conference 2016’, the Association made available detailed documents regarding its democratic structure, and the number of nominations received show an increased awareness of the availability of roles. ‘Summary role descriptions’ were also provided, highlighting what the role involves, which skills candidates should bring to the role, and what the role could offer them in terms of personal development.

4.3 The Association made a concerted effort to encourage people to stand for the role that was most suited to them, while making the roles easily understandable and accessible for students completely new to the
Association. The number of nominations received (68 candidates) for 28 roles, and the number of voters (4368) in 2016 is testament to how successful the Association has been in promoting the elections and engaging with the student body. While 14 out of 16 roles were uncontested in 2014, only 4 out of 22 roles were uncontested in 2016.

4.4 The elections were scheduled in distinct stages between March and June 2016.

- The Elections Portal went live on 11 March and hosted documents with information for voters and candidates. In response to the recommendation made in Evaluation 2014, ‘clarify the purpose of the Elections pack and review its design and content accordingly’, the Students Association provided information about the different roles, and supporting documents like the ‘OU Students Association Democratic Structure’ and ‘Flow Chart for Remits’ were also hosted on the Elections Portal.

- Nominations opened on Friday 18th March and closed on Friday 15th April. The Association included Elections 2016 Discussion Forums on the OU’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). These suite of forums hosted discussion according to different role categories (Officers, Council Members, Trustees, Area Association Representatives and Faculty Association representatives). The Elections Portal hosted candidates’ manifestoes.

- Hustings were open between Tuesday 19th April and Wednesday 27th April, where students could put questions to the candidates. The live Q&A sessions were replaced by virtual hustings this year. The Elections Portal also facilitated submission of questions under different categories: voters could thus ask questions to all candidates standing for a specific role (e.g. President) and role category (e.g. Officers) as well as posing questions to an individual. Candidates’ responses were posted on the Elections Portal in time for voting opening on 9 May.

- Voting opened on Monday 9th May and closed on Friday 10th June. In response to the recommendation made in Evaluation 2014, ‘review the best mechanisms for promoting the Elections and candidates in the lead up to Conference’, the communication efforts around elections were focused on creating a social media buzz around Elections and encouraging students to vote. The hashtag #voteOUstudents had a big impact, with 1243 votes cast on 6 June 2016 (Vote OU Students Day). A special edition of Students Radio also gave students the opportunity to call in with their questions to candidates for the President and Deputy President posts.

4.5 The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) also produced the Voter Profiling Report for Elections 2016, attached as Appendix 2. The report analyses voter turnout by different demographic variables (such as age, gender, disability and ethnicity) and offers suggestions to encourage more participation in the future. Overall, their findings indicate areas where the representativeness of voters can be further improved, such as amongst students aged 29 and under and students living in Scotland. The ERS report also recommends encouraging
continuing students (as distinguished from new and long-term students) to participate in the Students Association Elections.

4.6 The forthcoming Elections Review would need to consider these findings more closely and revisit the actual numbers involved to offer further insights into voter participation. The calculations of votes cast as a proportion of all eligible voters within a particular group is a useful way of considering the representativeness of the electorate; however, such a calculation can suggest a gender imbalance (p.3 of the report, where these proportions are highlighted in red) not reflected in the actual numbers.

4.7 Candidates’ feedback indicated that they had heard about the opportunity to stand for elections through the Students Association website (73%) and emails (65%). Word of mouth was also a popular choice (54%), indicating the buzz around Elections. While candidates were satisfied with the communications around elections, better information needs to be offered in terms of day-to-day requirements of the roles, together with advice and support regarding writing manifestos and campaigning in the future. Other comments received through the end-of-conference surveys (candidate survey, online delegate survey and face-to-face delegate survey) offered feedback around the timing and duration of the Elections, the hustings process and campaigning. These will be explored in detail in the forthcoming Elections Review.
5. After Conference: Taking our work forward

Objective 4: Excite and inspire students to continue their involvement in the Students Association after Conference.

5.1 Conference 2016 was successful in raising delegates’ awareness about the Students Association:

“Attending the conference gave me a greater appreciation of how hard the OUSA works to ensure that we have a quality study experience.”

“It lived up to and exceeded all my expectations...I would recommend it for anyone who is in any way curious about any aspect of OUSA and what aspects of student life they cover!”

5.2 However, one delegate commented on some of the barriers of engaging with the Association and suggested ways in which communication efforts can be targeted.

“The way OUSA works is still a bit cloudy and I must admit that I can’t imagine that many students think that this is an easy association to interact with. I would welcome more clarity in the communication of how the OUSA works and most of all clarity on the ways people can interact at local level, considering that many of us have to juggle the OU with work, family and social life.”

5.3 Conference 2016 had anticipated some of these barriers, and launched the Pledge Drive in response. The Pledge Drive encouraged students to take the initiative to organise events and meet-ups locally, and offered the support of the Association by way of advice and guidance, and online promotion. The pledge drive resulted in 99 pledgers (11 of whom got in contact via email). Students pledged either to stay in touch with fellow OU students in their area via a local Facebook group or through meeting face-to-face.

5.4 Following the pledge drive, 22 clusters of students were identified by separating students in the UK by county and those outside the UK by area. Support packs were sent out to 81 students in time for the August Bank Holiday. These students were those who had pledged to get involved in face-to-face meet-ups. The support packs included various items to help support students meeting up including tips from experienced meet-up organisers. The Association has helped to advertise more than 15 meet-ups taking place in September; 5 of the 14 hosts were original Conference pledgers.

5.5 The Association has also opened up many more opportunities for students who may not have much time to commit, with the newly introduced Learning Experience Reporters role. Candidates who stood for Elections in 2016 also indicated that they would like to be involved with the Association’s activities in the future; the most popular of these (for which respondents chose ‘highly likely’) were ‘giving feedback on your learning experience’ (78%), ‘taking on a volunteering roles with the Students Association’ (74%) and ‘standing for an elected role in the future’ (69%). Candidates were also keen to ‘attend Students Association activities’ locally (63%). 48% of the respondents were ‘highly likely’ and 30% ‘fairly likely’ to ‘get involved in activities in your faculty’.
When it comes to engaging with the student community, every little effort reaps huge benefits for the student; as the following comments show, participating in events like the Students Association Conference can change the way students interact with, and feel part of, the vibrant OU learning community.

“I loved meeting new people. The lack of residential schools for most subjects has made OU study feel a bit isolated. Knowing that there is an opportunity to meet and work with other students is a great thing, and one I am glad to have experienced during my degree this time.”

“Before attending conference I knew very little about OUSA and was considering giving up studying. In the weeks leading up to it I did a little homework and placed some votes. I attended conference (nervously) on my own and had never previously met any OU students. I found the staff, volunteers, students and candidates very welcoming and friendly. Over the weekend I met some lovely people, attended some very interesting workshops and got to understand more of what OUSA entails. After returning home and reviewing my weekend I feel like I have a new perspective on the OU and rather than stop studying I am changing the direction of my study path. Conference was a very positive experience for me and I would be happy to volunteer at events closer to home. Thank you.”

**Issue to consider**

- Consider moving the Pledge drive to earlier in the weekend to get more delegates involved.
- Consider activities that the Students Association could facilitate in order to keep the momentum from Conference 2016 going and raise awareness about volunteering opportunities.

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