Comprehensive Guide to the OUSA
Forum Service

INDEX PAGES

<TO BE COMPLETED AFTER FINAL VERSION APPROVED>
Open University Students’ Association Forums

“AT A GLANCE”

This is a brief guide summarising the OU Students’ Association forum service. More detailed information if you require it can be found in the Comprehensive Guide to the Association’s Forum service.

1. Student Association community forums are open to all those with access to the University’s online learning systems regardless of their membership status with the Association. This includes present and past students as well as University central staff and Associate Lecturers (tutors).
2. There are also closed forums for Association business which can only be accessed by specified groups of students.
3. These forums are moderated by students and ultimately controlled by the Association’s student representatives with support from the permanent office staff.
4. The Association’s forums are not part of the OU’s official academic provision. But many students who use them find that support from their fellow students makes their OU experience more fulfilling.
5. With the exception of the President and Deputy President all students involved in providing the service are unpaid volunteers.
6. All users of our forums are required to abide by the University’s Student Computing Code of Conduct and online communications systems guidelines which can be found at http://www.open.ac.uk/computingguide/codes/guidelines.html
7. Unless otherwise stated all references to ‘the rules’ are references to the details found within these University documents.
8. All our forums have a Spirit of Forum and those contributing to any particular forum are expected to contribute in line with its rules. Failure to do so may result in posts being removed and
persistent failure to observe the Spirit of Forum may be referred for further action
9. We have a Complaints Procedure and a Disciplinary Procedure which are set out in full in the Comprehensive Guide to the Service

Our commitment to those who use our service:-

We aim to:-
- treat all users of our service fairly and give clear information about your rights to challenge our decisions
- be impartial in dealing with complaints or considering disciplinary action
- follow the procedure for dealing with complaints

We will not tolerate users of our services:-
- who refuse to operate within the rules
- who abuse other contributors
- who abuse Moderators, staff or elected representatives for carrying out their responsibilities within our procedures
- whose behaviour potentially disrupts the service

… and finally

If you wish to challenge any aspect as to how a forum is managed please contact the forum moderators in the first instance or refer the matter to the Forum Controller
OU STUDENTS ASSOCIATION   PUBLIC FORUMS  
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE SERVICE

SECTION A - THE BASIS OF OUR SERVICE

1: Rules and Guidelines for Association Forums
   a) The Students Association runs a range of forums within the OU’s online learning environment. These include study-related forums, general interest and discussion forums, and forums for those wanting a little frivolity and fun. They provide for study support and a social area for students to meet and help build a viable student community.
   b) In order to continue to run these forums, we need to show the University we can run them efficiently without having any bad effect on the University or using too many of their resources. The Association is responsible to the University for ensuring these responsibilities are fulfilled. The President is responsible to Association members for safeguarding the provision of this service.
   c) The Students Association forums are run independently by students, for students. Everyone who can access the OU’s online learning environment (current and past students and
OU staff) are welcome to use our forums, but all the moderators are or have been students.¹

d) The Association requires all users of our forums to participate in line with the rules and guidelines laid down for each forum. In particular, all users need to respect and cooperate with our Moderators, the Association staff acting as Controller of the forums, and the Controller’s Advisory Panel (CAP).

e) Participants in the Association’s online public forums should be aware that they are open to students under the age of 18, who are able to access them with parental guidance / approval. This should be borne in mind when reading and replying to posts.

f) Participants should be aware that under the Security Act 2015, the Open University has a statutory duty to pay ‘due regard’ to the possibility that vulnerable students could be drawn into terrorism. The Student Association Forums on the University’s VLE fall under this jurisdiction and therefore it is incumbent on the Students Association to report for further investigation, any pertinent activities that might include ‘hate ideas’ or discussions around ‘violent intent. Posts of this nature are likely to breach our general guidelines and it is sufficient for a moderator to deal with

¹ While moderators must be students at the time of appointment any moderator who still has access to the Association forums after completing their studies is welcome to continue for as long as they can access the forums.
them on these grounds. Further action if needed will be taken by the Office staff who have undergone the relevant training.

2: Management of the Service

a) A combination of appointed and elected students take the main responsibility for running our forums. Our appointed student moderators (mods) have the primary responsibility for the day to day management of our forums. Moderators will be listed in the relevant Spirit of Forum and can be contacted via the relevant forum suite ‘contact your moderator’ forum.

b) Moderators are supported by a team from the Association Office in the form of the Forum Controller.

c) Beyond Forum Controller there is a team appointed as the Controller’s Advisory Panel (CAP). Any matter that needs to be determined about the provision of this service and which has not been covered in this guide will be determined by CAP on the authority of the Association’s President. No member of CAP should be contacted privately to discuss any matter which is under consideration by the panel. Any correspondence for CAP should be addressed to the Forum Controller’s mailbox ousa-controller@open.ac.uk

d) Current CAP members will be listed in an appendix to these guidelines.

3: The Principles of the Forum Service

We aim to:-

- treat all users of our service fairly and give clear information about your rights to challenge our decisions
be impartial in dealing with complaints or considering disciplinary action
follow the procedures for dealing with complaints

We will not tolerate users of our services:

- who refuse to operate within the rules
- who abuse Moderators, staff or elected representatives for carrying out their responsibilities
- who are either intentionally or otherwise disrupting the service

In the day to day management of the forums, our aim is to provide a balance between the rights of the individual and the service to the majority.

From experience we know there are the odd occasions when significant Students Association resources are spent managing a local dispute or disagreement. Although we want to encourage good quality discussion and, where appropriate, robust debate - and we don’t want to censor too heavily or step in unnecessarily – we do have an obligation to ensure that the rules are adhered to and we take this responsibility very seriously.

We also witness the occasional clash of personalities where individuals will never see eye to eye; battle lines are drawn and all reason can go out of the window. We will deal with these instances with common sense and fairness – and we’ll work hard to understand where the problems lie – but in no way can we act as a court of law and any judgements will be made on the balance of probabilities.

Since our forums are managed by volunteer students, with some office hours support from paid staff, inevitably we cannot guarantee 24 hour coverage, and there has been the odd instance where
advantage has been taken of this to cause a problem for moderators within a forum. As you might imagine, any behaviour in this respect would be treated as a serious breach of the rules.

We ask that users of the service understand and accept these principles.
SECTION B  COMPLAINTS AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

< To be reviewed separately as part of a full review of the Association complaints and disciplinary procedures>

SECTION C - FORUM MODERATION

1. Introduction

Without moderators (mods) the Students Association could not provide the suite of social forums currently in existence. The Association appreciates this and thanks those volunteers who give their time to support this service for other students. Mods are responsible for ensuring that our forums comply with the University’s online communication systems guidelines. Although some forums are less active and less controversial than others, all mods need the same basic knowledge and skills to be able to perform the role. Some forums will, however, require more experienced mods due to their nature and would not be suitable for new mods.

2. The role of Moderators

Moderators are unpaid volunteers who give their time freely. They work within a moderating team to ensure the smooth day-to-day running of the Association forums in accordance with the rules.
3. The duties of Moderators

a. To work as part of a team of moderators to ensure a forum runs smoothly. This will require communication within the mod team using a dedicated moderator team forum.
b. To ensure a forum operates in accordance with the rules.
c. To ensure that any message which contravenes the rules is deleted and that the sender of the message is notified of this moderator action at the same time.
d. To ensure messages sent to them via ‘Contact Your Moderator’ are answered in good time.
e. To provide the Forum Controller with any necessary information for complaints to be dealt with in accordance with the guidelines.
f. To assist contributors in understanding the rules pertaining to the service in general, and the individual forum in particular.

4. The Requirements for Becoming a Moderator

a. A mod must be a current member of the Association at the time of their application.
b. A mod must not have anything more than an informal warning currently on record with the Association regarding forum use.
c. A mod must be prepared to undertake training to enable them to carry out their role effectively.
d. Moderator applications from students who are also Associate Lecturers (ALs) will be accepted provided that they perform the role as a student. However, applications from ALs will be carefully scrutinized by CAP and their specific merits and any potential problems considered.
e. A mod must be able to work within a team.
f. A mod must agree to uphold the rules.
g. A mod must be able to understand that different forums require a different approach to moderating, and agree to work with the mod team to find the approach that suits their specific forum the best (as long as it is in accordance with the rules).
h. A mod must be able to communicate effectively, be aware of the etiquette of electronic communication, and understand the differences between being viewed as a contributor and being viewed as a moderator of a forum. If posting as a moderator they must make this absolutely clear.
i. A mod must be prepared to review messages in an unbiased manner and treat all contributors with respect.

5. The Requirement for Forums in Terms of Moderators

a. All forums require a team of mods in order to function effectively. The ideal is a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 6. A forum may operate with fewer mods than this but it will be taken on a case by case basis and reviewed periodically by the Forum Controller.
b. If the Forum Controller deems that a forum is not adequately covered by mods, vacancies will be publicised as per section 6a below. If the forum cannot function effectively until new mods are appointed, the forum will be temporarily made read-only until new appointments are made and a message will be placed in the forum to advise of this action.

6. The Application Process for Becoming a Moderator

a. Applications to become a mod are welcomed at any time
b. Where a new forum is being requested, an advertisement for mods will be placed in the Association’s Forum Requests forum as well as the Mods General Discussion Forum.

c. Should the Forum be approved, any vacancies not filled by this process will be re-advertised in the Mods General Discussion forum. Where an existing forum needs or wants new mods, an advertisement will be placed in the forum concerned and the Mods General Discussion forum.

d. Potential applicants must read these guidelines and the rules. If they are in agreement with the documents, applicants must send a message to the Forum Controller, letting them know that they have read and accepted the details and indicating that they wish to moderate an Association forum specifying if they wish to be considered for a specific forum or are willing to be considered for any vacancies. Checks will be made in accordance with f (below) and, if the application has been accepted, the applicant will be granted the relevant moderator permission if they applied for a specific forum or sent a list of forums in need of additional mods. The applicant then follows the standard procedure in g (below). If the application is refused, the applicant will be notified and reasons will be given.

e. Potential applicants must read these guidelines, the relevant Spirit of Forum if applying for a particular forum and the associated University documents regarding use of University computer systems. If they agree to these, applicants must send a message to the Forum Controller confirming this and stating which, if any, forum they are applying to moderate and give a brief reason for their application (no more than 300 words please!). They must also complete the Association’s forum online training pack.

f. The current mod team of the forum concerned will be notified of an application to join the team in order to give the
opportunity for any reasoned objections to be raised. All applications, and any reasoned objections, will be forwarded to the Controller Advisory Panel (CAP) for consideration. In general, approval will be given when the applicant meets the requirements noted in section 4, but CAP reserves the right to decline any application. All applicants will be notified and reasons will be given to applicants that are unsuccessful. The decision of CAP will be final.

**g.** Applicants who are successful will be given a six month trial period of moderating and assigned a Mentor mod who will support the trainee mod. This will be waived if the applicant is already an Accredited Mod or already undertaking a trial period. At the end of the trial period, co-moderators and Mentor Moderators will be invited to comment on the performance of the applicant as a Mod. CAP will then review the applicant’s moderating conduct over the trial, taking into account these comments where necessary, and, if deemed in accordance with these guidelines, will approve the applicant as an Accredited Moderator.

**h.** If CAP decides at the end of this trial period that the applicant has not fulfilled the requirements for the role of mod, they will advise the applicant and remove mod permissions. CAP has the discretion to offer an applicant a further six month trial period, but they are under no obligation to do so, and any decision of CAP at the end of a trial period is final.

**i.** Moderating an Association forum is not a right, it is a responsibility accompanied by specific permissions. If at any time it is proved that a mod is misusing those permissions or failing in their responsibilities, moderator permissions can be withdrawn. If there is any doubt over a mod’s conduct, CAP reserves the right to temporarily suspend mod permissions pending investigation. It should be noted that this will only occur in cases where evidence is provided that is considered
of a serious enough nature to warrant suspension of permissions. In the case of all other complaints, Mods will continue to moderate as normal whilst an investigation is undertaken.

In considering the possible removal of Moderator status, CAP will follow the process laid down in the Association’s Complaints and Disciplinary Procedures

7. Team of Mentor Moderators

a. There will be a team of Mentor Moderators. The role of this team will be:
   to act as mentors for new mods (see f below);
   to provide ongoing support for moderators if required
   to assist in the moderation of any forum requiring occasional support;
   to provide advice to CAP where necessary

Members of the Association’s Central Executive Committee cannot serve as Mentor Mods.

b. Current Accredited mods who have moderated a forum successfully for over 12 months can apply to become part of the Mentor mods team. Ideally they will have experience of handling various types of forum, settling disputes, and resolving difficult matters.

c. Applicants for the Mentor Mod team should forward a written application to Forum Controller stating how they feel they would be able to fulfil this role effectively, including examples of challenging situations they have dealt with as a mod where necessary (no more than 500 words please).
d. Applications will be forwarded to CAP for their consideration. All applicants will be notified of the success or failure of their application, with reasons being given for failure. The decision of CAP is final.

e. Those accepted as Mentor Mods will be given access to a closed forum, Mentor mods, which will enable them to effectively carry out their role. All moderators will have write-only access to a forum to contact Mentor Mods so that they may contact the team at any point for advice or support.

f. All new mods will be allocated a Mentor Mod to act as their mentor during their trial period. They can contact the Mentor Mod at any time for support, guidance or advice on any moderating matter.

g. Mentor Mods may be called upon by CAP to offer advice. This will occur where CAP feels that Mentor Mods have knowledge or information that will assist in their duties, and will be in the strictest confidence and at the discretion of CAP.

h. Where there are more applicants than positions on the Mentor mods team, CAP will endeavour to select the applicants with the necessary skills, knowledge and personal qualities to support the smooth running of the Association’s suite of forums as a whole.

i. A Mentor Mod must be currently actively moderating at least one forum

8. Initial Support and Information for Moderators (mods)

a. On successful application, all new mods will be sent a message by Forum Controller and asked to confirm that they have read and understood the information in the Guidelines and that they agree to operate within the terms stated. They will also be required to return a signed copy of the
Moderator’s agreement. This confirmation and Mod’s agreement will be kept by Association for the duration of their time as a Mod.
b. On receipt of this agreement, a mentor will be appointed to a new mod and any pertinent information will be sent. Mods will also be given access to the mods area which contains a practice area and can be used for informal peer support between mods. Where the mod is already a mod of another forum, they will just be given the necessary additional mod permissions (unless they request a mentor and / or further information).
c. Moderators for any single forum will be given access to a private discussion forum open only to mods for that forum.

9. A Code of Conduct for Moderators

a. Mods must be aware of the rules, and their location, and must abide by the rules themselves both when acting as a Mod and as a contributor on all forums.
b. Mods must treat all contributors fairly, and be consistent in their approach to the forum and individual contributors.
c. All mods of a forum are not expected to read every contribution to that forum, but all messages must be read by at least one Mod within the team (e.g. if a Mod goes on holiday they are not expected to read all messages sent in their absence).
d. Mods must respond to a complaint within XX hours, and ideally within XX hours, but they do not need to wait for someone to complain before they delete a message which clearly breaches the rules. Such messages must be unapproved immediately they are seen by a moderator. Unless complaints are regarding a co-mod, all complaints should be copied to all members of the mod team so a
consensus decision can be reached. Forwarding a message is acceptable to ensure all mods are aware of a complaint.

e. Mods should adopt a professional stance at all times when acting in the capacity as moderator of a forum (e.g. being polite and non-judgemental), and should be aware that their actions as a contributor to a forum that they moderate can influence the tone of the forum and the behaviour of others.

f. Mods should recognise that the forum belongs to the Association and the contributors. Mods should only intervene in response to a complaint or a breach of the requirements. They have no more say than any other user of the forum and have no authority to, for example, decide which topics can be discussed (except where stipulated in the Spirit of Forum) or prescribe the way the forum is viewed. They may, however, split or merge threads for the sake of clarity and can lock threads when discussion has been exhausted or the thread has moved to topics outside the Spirit of Forum.

g. Mods must not provide official support or advice on any matter, other than guidance about the requirements for using the forum. This is particularly important where forums are deemed to be “supportive” in nature, for example health related forums.

h. When deleting posts, mods must inform the sender that the message has been deleted as part of the process. If multiple posts within a thread have been deleted then a single message on the forum to that effect will be sufficient notification. Mods should only delete messages which are not in accordance with the Spirit of Forum or the rules. Mods should not delete other posts except at the request of the sender.

i. If a post has been deleted the moderating team should discuss it and decide to either restore it, suggest it be modified by the original poster or keep it deleted.
j. Mods need to ensure they are not over-zealous or heavy-handed, and should use their judgment on whether aspects such as off-topic conversation should be allowed. It will not be the same for all forums, but it should be recognised that off-topic conversation can allow a forum to run more smoothly at times and a sometimes heavy-handed approach can cause more disruption than a handful of off-topic messages.

k. Mods are permitted to post in forums that they moderate as contributors to any discussion (but see (l) below. If posting as a moderator they should make that clear.

l. Mods should be aware that at times it may be necessary to withdraw temporarily from contributing to a forum that they moderate, for example to ensure impartiality when a strong debate is underway.

m. Mods should remember that the Association’s forums are open to all. No individual or group of regular contributors should be given preferential treatment. Forums should always be a welcome space for all participants and new posters should be encouraged.

10. Support from Forum Controller

a. Forum Controller is a virtual identity, managed by Association staff. The Forum Controller identity operates during office hours from Monday to Friday and can be contacted via a generic mailbox at ousa-controller@open.ac.uk

b. Formal complaints about any matters to do with the Association’s online public forums should be addressed to the Forum Controller in the first instance with ‘complaint’ in the subject heading.

c. General enquiries can also be sent to the Forum Controller mailbox and will be answered as soon as possible, but it is
advisable to first seek an answer or advice from Mentor Mods or Mods Discussion, whichever is most appropriate. If an issue requires an urgent response, the mail should be marked “urgent” so that it may be given priority. Please only use the “urgent” identifier when it is necessary to ensure the most urgent matters are addressed efficiently.

d. Forum Controller will make every effort to answer enquiries or deal with problems as soon as possible. It would be helpful if subject lines could clearly indicate the nature of the problem or enquiry (e.g. Advice required on X, Moderator application, Moderator resignation, Ruling required on Y and so on) to assist the efficient operation of the mailbox.

SECTION D.  FORUM REQUESTS

< To be reviewed as part of the general VLE review >