1. Peer Mentoring

A presentation was delivered about a recent Peer Mentoring pilot on module DD102.

Evidence suggests that mentoring works and the question for the Student Experience and Quality Group within the faculty was "how can we do it here?" The team looked at good practice across the University, which included the Students Association, Careers, the Faculty of Education and Languages and the Faculty of Business and Law.

The specific aim of the pilot was to build a one to one relationship between mentor and mentee in a secure place. This was achieved through online electronic communication with the option to use Skype. The team investigated bespoke software, but used the existing VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) and built individual forums for each mentee.

The team contacted 300 students as they registered for the module to ask if they would be interested in being mentored. 37 students requested mentoring. Within that, 25-29 mentees were very engaged.

The 15 mentors were experienced students in their second or third module. Mentors completed an online iCMA (Computer Marked Assignment) training quiz, had access to a website with guidance materials and an agreement between mentor and mentee was established, including advice for meeting outside the scheme if that was required. A full risk assessment of the scheme was conducted, and advice sought from student services. Mentors were encouraged to send students to their tutor for academic queries.

The pilot scheme ran from October 2015 to January 2016. Evaluation of the outcomes of the pilot is ongoing.

Evaluation so far:

- A short survey went to mentees to get a feel for their feelings about being involved in the scheme. Headline results show that 60% thought scheme should continue to end of the module.
- The team has recognized that mentees could have been given more of a steer about what they could use their mentor for.
• There were some issues with ease of access to the forum, without saving the link. In hindsight, the team would have made it clearer that students should save the link as a favourite.
• A focus group took place on OU Live with 6 mentors. All found mentoring an extremely positive experience, which was not onerous. They knew what they were doing and felt well supported. No mentors felt they would want monetary reward for their time, the motivation was that they wanted to give something back. The majority of mentors were psychology students. Some were motivated by building skills and experience.
• The team are continuing to look at retention rates for these students. Those students being mentored were more active on VLE. Early evidence suggests that participants in the mentored group are more likely to be retained.

2. Fees and Funding

A detailed update was given about the current situation with Fees and Funding.

Tuition Fee Loan Applications

The Student Loans Company is intended to open for part-time loan applications in mid-May.

From June/July students in Wales will be able to apply for Tuition Fee Loans online for the first time.

This will only be available for Tuition Fee Loans and not for Course Grants or Dependent’s Grants which will still require a paper application.

It is hoped that next year opening will be earlier across the board.

Fee Credits

For all modules starting after 1 August 2016 a universal fee credits scheme will apply to all students, except those studying under transitional fee arrangements. This will include undergraduate, postgraduate and nations students.

Under the new scheme students will receive a 25% fee credit towards a future presentation of their module regardless of their deferral date. The validity for fee credits will also be reduced to 13 months for all levels of study.

Old Framework Qualifications

All old framework qualifications will be withdrawn on 31 December 2017, with the Open qualifications continuing to be available until 31 December 2019. Students who have experienced exceptional circumstances may be permitted to apply to have an extra year to complete their named qualification.

End of Transitional Fee Arrangements

Transitional Fees will not be available after 2016/17 but the University will offer a fee discount for some students in 2017/18.
Financial Support

The current system of government funded fee and course grants (financial support) ends on 31 August 2017 and will not be available for study until after this date. The University has therefore agreed to fund an additional year of discretionary financial support for some students for the 2017/18 academic year. Potentially eligible students will be identified and contacted by Student Fees in spring 2017.

Loan eligibility

Part-Time Tuition Fee Loans in England are only available to students who began, or are beginning, a qualification on or after 1 September 2012. This means that loans will not be available to students who have maintained their eligibility for Transitional Fees into 2017/18.

Nursing Loans

From 2017/18, new students on pre-registration nursing courses (which lead to qualification with one of the health professional regulators) in England will take out maintenance and tuition loans rather than receiving a NHS grant.

Postgraduate Loans (Master’s Loans)

Loans for postgraduate study through Student Finance England were recently announced by the Government. Loans will be available for postgraduate students as a contribution towards the cost of studying Open University masters degrees starting in 2016/17. The earliest date for applications to Student Finance England will be June 2016.

Key facts

- Standalone OU Master’s qualifications which can be completed in 3 years or less will be eligible.
- Non means-tested loans of up to £10,000 will be available to Master’s degree students aged under 60.
- Loans will only be available to students resident in England.
- Students will repay 6% of their income above £21,000. For example, based on an average salary of £25,000 a year, repayment would be £20 a month. If your income is below £21,000, you will not make any repayments.
- Students are under no obligation to use the loans to cover their module fees.
- Loans will not be available to students intending to study postgraduate certificates or diplomas.
- Loans will be paid directly to students in instalments over the first two years of study.
- Repayments for a postgraduate loan will be made in addition to any repayments towards an undergraduate loan.

E L Q relaxation
The Government have taken the decision to widen the scope of the current equivalent or lower qualification (E L Q) relaxation scheme to include all STEM subjects from 2017/18 tuition fee loans will be available to students wishing to do a second degree in all STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) from 2017/18.

The policy shift is intended to address the current gender gap in STEM subjects and occupations. There is plentiful evidence of the poor female representation in these areas and we have early evidence that a significant proportion of the early enquiries to the OU about ELQ exemption and to study computing engineering are from women.

The OU currently has three qualifications which are eligible for the existing scheme:

- BSc (Honours) Computing and IT (Q62)
- Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) (Q65)
- Master of Engineering (M04)

The University is working with the Government to highlight the challenges from the previous implementation and clarify definitions to shape the direction of the policy forward.

**Part-Time Maintenance Loans**

Until now, maintenance loans have only been available for full-time students. This may have had an impact on students deciding whether to study full-time or part-time. There has been a sharp decline in part-time students since 2008. To help address this, the Government has announced that, from 2018/19, part-time students will be eligible too.

The Maintenance Loan is the main student loan product for living costs for undergraduate students. The current full-time loan comprises of two parts;

- Non-financially assessed amount, which all students who are eligible for the loan can receive.
- Financially assessed amount, which depends on household income.

A period of consultation will take place prior to the induction of the loans. The OU has been asked to contribute to this process to shape the final project.

**3. Disabled Students Allowance**

A written update was provided, which was circulated prior to the meeting and can be found below.

Comments can be passed on to S F E by the Open University.

The University is currently looking to update their webpages and will look to include something re completion of forms / how to avoid them being sent back.

The 16/17 D S A Guidance has been issued recently and the team will be producing a summary of the main points as soon as possible. However, this basically mirrors the points included in the consultation response issued by the government at the end of last year.

Here is a link to the 16/17 D S A Guidance.
There is separate guidance again for new and continuing D S A students.

There is an S F E form which students can ask their G P to complete in order to ensure they supply the necessary evidence to S F E. Although a letter from the GP (or consultant/specialist) is fine so long as it contains the necessary information, it may be easier to get them to complete this form instead.

Below are the notes from the O U D S A application form which details what the University require in the way of evidence of disability:

Please ensure that you provide the required evidence for all the conditions you want us to take into account. We can only consider those conditions for which we have acceptable evidence. Please note we cannot accept benefits letters or appointment letters because they do not show the information we need.

This is the only evidence we can accept for a physical disability, sensory disability or mental health condition.

A recent letter from your G P or appropriate medical specialist (e.g. hospital consultant) which confirms the current nature of your physical, sensory or mental impairment. The letter must confirm that the impairment has a substantial and long-term (more than 12 months) adverse effect on your ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Ideally, it should also briefly explain how you are affected by your disability. The doctor’s field of expertise must be relevant to the disability they are confirming.

If you are blind or visually impaired you can submit proof of registration as a blind or partially sighted person from your Social Services Office.

This is the only evidence we can accept for dyslexia or other Specific Learning Difficulty (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder, dyscalculia, dysgraphia):

A full diagnostic assessment report which meets D S A standards. We cannot accept any other type of evidence of your Specific Learning Difficulty. A screening test is not sufficient. The D S A Office has an advice sheet about how to obtain the evidence we need. Please contact us if you would like a copy. Our contact details are on page 17. A D S A cannot be used to pay for the cost of obtaining medical evidence or diagnostic reports but the OU itself may be able help with these costs. You should ask your OU support team for further information if you need help with these costs.

If you are having trouble obtaining the required medical evidence, please contact the D S A Office for advice.

Of course students who are with another funding body should also contact them for advice if they are having difficulties obtaining evidence from their G P / consultant/specialist.

The Students Association are asked to direct students to the O U D S A Office if we are their funding body regarding any queries they may have. Of course they should go to S F E / W if their award is with them for specific information re their award but we do have a D S A Disability Advisor, also based in the D S A Office, who these students can contact for assistance if they need to. It is helpful if students are directed to the D S A Office / their
funding body as D S A can be quite complex. Staff in the D S A Office are experienced in this area.

4. Support for Disabled Students

It is hoped that by mid-summer there will be a new Disabled Student Support Team within W A S S (Widening Access and Success Service), which will be based in Milton Keynes. The drivers for establishing this new team have long existed, but largely because of the forthcoming changes in the University’s regional presence, the opportunity has now arisen to set up this new team.

Important drivers are to provide more consistent and coherent support for disabled students. Support is currently provided from disparate locations - students go to their Student Support Team (S S T) for profiling, they go to W A S S for alternative formats, residential schools and other support and services. Proper oversight and governance will help to ensure proper reasonable adjustments for students.

The aim is to have a team that is there for students to go to for aspects directly relating to their disability. Students will continue to go to appropriate teams for other advice. Embedded within W A S S and the Disability Support Centre will be the Access Centre, Alternative Formats, Disabled Students Allowance (D S A) and the Disability Advisory Service.

There is an obligation to support students who have D S A awarded through Student Finance England (S F E) with advice. At present, this resource is with temporary staff and will be embedded within the new team.

The team will take initial enquiries, triage work, reasonable adjustments, and will have faculty specialisms but will not be experts in curriculum. The details of boundaries, cross over and handover are yet to be determined.

The new team will consist of:

1 Senior Manager (Grade 8)
6 Disabled Student Support Advisers (Grade 7)
1 Disabled Student Support Team Manager (Grade 7)
6 Senior Disability Advisor (Grade 5)

At peak times, an additional 3 Advisers (Grade 7) and 3 Advisers (Grade 5) will be recruited temporarily.

The Project Implementation Team is currently being set up and the first workshop will take place on 6th April. A representative from the Students Association would be very welcome at this workshop. A student consultation forum will also be set up next month.

There are concerns about grey areas, for example exams. The workshop and ongoing project team will be looking at all of these issues. The equality analysis is still to come.

It is hoped that the timeline will allow for recruitment in early May, then training ready for the new team to be in place for October 2016 module presentations.
5. Information for New Students

This will be raised outside of the meeting.

6. Any other business

A new Social Mobility Task Force has been set up within the University to feed into the Social Mobility Advisory Group which the Vice Chancellor, Peter Horrocks, sits on. The task force are keen that members of the Inclusion meeting are aware of this work.

The Equality, Diversity & Information Rights Team are establishing a new website “Real People” which will include real student stories about how they are managing their studies. The team are looking for students with protected characteristics who would like to contribute, ideally with a photograph.

Objective 1b of the new Equality Scheme is about closing the attainment gap between non-disabled and disabled students and black and white students. There is thinking towards the possibility of Peer Mentoring in helping to close this gap. A paper is being written at the moment and the OU Students Association will be asked for support where appropriate.