THE COUNCIL

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

2012 Report to Council

The Council is asked:

(a) receive the OUSA annual report
(b) note that the Compliance Statement is included as an Appendix to this report

This report consists of the following:
1. Introduction
2. Conference 2012
3. Activities Since Conference 2012
4. Looking to the Future
5. Concluding Comments
   Appendix – 1994 Act Compliance Statement
   Conference 2012 Book 1 – Central Executive Committee Report
   Conference 2012 Book 2 – Board of Trustees Report, including the accounts
   Conference 2012 Book 4 – Policy Statements and Bye-Laws
   {Note: for the record, Book 3 consists of election addresses and is not included here but is still available to view from the OUSA website}

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 It may have taken longer than we expected when we embarked on the ‘OUSA Futures’ project in 2007, but OUSA has at last transformed itself. I believe that was evident at our Conference on campus in June. As well as doubling the numbers of students actively participating in Conference (from around 200 for the last 10 years or so) we succeeded in pushing the number of first-time attenders up from a high of c50% over the last couple of years, to over 75% this time. On top of that, within a few days of Conference taking place, over 2,000 more students had watched some or all of our coverage via web-casts. OUSA’s success at Conference however (more of which later) was not only about some pleasing statistics, but rather about a very new and different way of engaging with students that I believe has set us on the path we need to follow for the future.

1.2 We are acutely conscious that the transformation of the higher education landscape in the UK, and the University’s necessary response to that transformation, will bring very significant changes to the study body – even
with the commitment to maintain the mission. These changes will be felt right across the University, but it is likely that they will have a singular impact on the Students Association. By the time I became OUSA President in 2011, I had served an extensive ‘apprenticeship'; I had been an active student in my OUSA region for three years when I was elected to the OUSA Executive to represents my fellow students in what OUSA calls its Southern Europe region. I then had four years as Vice President Education in which to learn my way around OU committees and their papers and develop an army of contacts and useful networks throughout the University. – All this still didn’t really prepare me for the learning curve I was about to embark upon when I became President and a member of University Council in 2011. It is highly likely that in future, student leaders will have no such lengthy preparation for these leading roles. The new fees structure make it seem inevitable that OUSA will lose the services of an extremely important cadre of students on whom it has relied for many years Those students who already have extensive, previous experience, both as students and in the world of work, who feel sufficiently confident in their ability to succeed with their studies that they are able to take on this extra commitment – and have the time to do so! I am glad to say that together with my fellow Officers, Trustees and Executive Committee members I recognise not only the immediate challenges for OUSA but also those that lie ahead. We are doing our utmost to ensure that we use our own ‘transitional arrangements’ to hand over a Students Association that can effectively serve the interests of the OU students of the future.

1.3 My predecessor, Roz Evans, reported to Council last year on the formal changes we had made and of course, Council approved our new Constitution. This has laid the foundations for us to create a new type of organisation that is more flexible, able to respond more quickly to change and most importantly far better equipped to reach out to students – whether they want a long term involvement with their Association or just to seek our help on specific occasions.

1.4 All these changes also give rise to a number of modifications to the way in which this report is constructed for a number of reasons. OUSA now has a Board of Trustees which is separate from the Central Executive Committee; our Conference and the election of our Trustees, Officers and other Central Executive Committee members are now held biennially; the OUSA year now runs from August to July instead of April to April; we no longer change our Constitution every year and, after special provision for a review of our Constitution after the initial two years, the Constitution will now only be reviewed every four years. A practical result of these changes is that we have now agreed with the University Secretary that our accounts will go to the OU Finance Committee early in the year and that our annual report to Council will come after the end of the OUSA year, i.e. to this autumn meeting.

1.5 I am therefore submitting our key reports to Conference 2012 as an integral part of this report to Council. In particular, our Board of Trustees Report covers the important matters of governance and finance and includes a full copy of the three sets of accounts relating to our organisation for the financial year ended 31.7.12. The accounts for OUSA and its wholly-owned, private company OUSA (Services) Ltd have already been scrutinised by the OU
Finance Committee at its meeting in March 2012 as required. Our OUSET accounts are also included in that report and since this remains for the moment a separate organisation from OUSA these accounts are not a formal matter of report to Council, but it is useful for you to see them. The Central Executive Committee Report gives a more detailed account of the activities of all members of the Executive and the “Policy Statements and Bye-Laws” complete the detailed picture of our first year of operation under our new Constitution. I have also included the standard “Compliance Statement” as an Appendix to this report. Conversely, possibly for the first time, there are no Constitutional amendments for Council to approve. The remainder of this report deals with Conference 2012, our activities since then and a brief look towards the future.

2. CONFERENCE 2012

2.1 We had promised that the move to a radically different, biennial Conference would result in a bigger, better, more inclusive and more participatory event – and I am delighted to say that this is exactly what we achieved. We set ourselves some challenging targets and to be quite honest, in those last hectic weeks of the run up to 22 June, the tension was such, that all the members of our Executive and staff team were talking in whispers, - even online...... we really did wonder if we had promised more than we would be able to deliver. I am so pleased and proud that we all kept our nerve as Conference turned out to be a wonderful week end. I think what made the experience particularly scary was that we ended up experimenting with a whole range of ‘firsts’. – There was an entirely new format, with new business arrangements and a radically different way of engaging with the OU community, using for the first extra-OU channels such as Twitter and FaceBook for getting the message out. We used podcasts and videos as part of our election hustings, which was a daunting prospect for many of the candidates. Perhaps the most important first of all was the number of full delegate places available to all students whether they’d ever come across OUSA before or not. It was our first attempt to run Conference simultaneously as both a face-to-face and a virtual event and the first time we had used all electronic voting – I could go on and on, as there were many other firsts along the way, but I think you will have got the picture. Did everything go perfectly? Of course it didn’t. Did we make any mistakes? Of course we did.. However, the overwhelming feedback from our students – both those for whom it was a first-ever OUSA experience and for those who’d attended many, previous OUSA Conferences – was that it was a fantastic event.

2.2 I think one of the other things that I am proud of, is the way we responded to the challenges that came up along the way. When, in the summer of 2011, we began the planning Conference 2012, experience told us that we should moderate our expectations or we would be in danger of undermining our success by setting the target too high. Many of us feel that the OU Campus in Milton Keynes is our natural home and a vital ingredient of Conference. So, although we knew that our target of 400 delegates attending on campus would not fit into one single lecture theatre, we decided that as we had not succeeded in breaking through the 200 delegate barrier in the past 10 years, we could afford to worry about outgrowing the Hub theatre when or if, the time
came ...... Which it did! ....... So, towards the end of May when it became apparent that we were going to outstrip our most optimistic forecast, we had to put in a tremendous amount of effort to find an innovative way of running the Conference (including electronic voting) in two separate lecture theatres on campus as well as scouring Milton Keynes for the extra hotel beds we needed. We also had to cater for the needs of our c200 registered online-delegates, their voting system, video feeds with the facility to ask questions during live events and their online chat forums.

2.3 I would like to take this opportunity to thank the OU community – from right across the spectrum of Vice-Chancellor’s Executive to Associate Lecturers, Faculties, Library, LTS, IT, Communications, Estates – we had so much excellent support that I feel sure I’ll have left people out but we really did appreciate every single one of you who gave us your support. We are currently undertaking a detailed analysis and evaluation of Conference 2012 to see what improvements we can make in the future and we’ll be sharing that in a variety of ways with colleagues across the University. This has been given impetus, as I am absolutely delighted to say that, after initial worries that it might not be possible to fit our 2014 Conference into the University’s schedule, we have now had confirmation that we have a firm booking for 27 – 29 June. We will again be engaging with the University and in the true spirit of being a learning community we believe that together we will be able to produce an even more successful event in 2014 and that the OUSA Conference will increasingly become a cornerstone of students’ engagement with their University.

2.4 I would like to do something that I don’t think is usual in this report, which is to refer to our staff team at the OUSA office. They have been incredibly supportive throughout the many changes that have been part of the process of transforming OUSA. In common with staff of any organisation engaged in earnest with a change agenda, this has not always been an easy or comfortable position for them to be in. Despite this, even by their own standards they excelled themselves in their contribution to Conference. The logistics they had to deal with alone were mind-boggling yet they came through it all showing nothing other than courtesy, help and warmth to the students who descended on the campus from all over. They really did do OUSA proud and I know that my fellow Trustees and Executive Committee members would want me to say so.

3. ACTIVITIES SINCE CONFERENCE 2012

3.1 This section of my report is not intended to cover detailed information on all of our activities since June. We engage with both the University and students in many and varied ways and we regularly produce reports and minutes from our formal meetings which are shared with the offices of both the University Secretary and Director, Students as well as being generally published and available across the University community. We also have a main website (www.ousa.org.uk) which features news items and activities. However, having provided some detailed information in relation to our past activities via our Conference reports, I did feel that it would be useful to identify to Council some of our more significant activities and events of the last few months.
3.2 Conference triggered the start of our new system of electing students to our Central Executive Committee and Board of Trustees for a period of two years. An important part of our strategy has been recognising that, as part-time students, volunteering our time to serve our Association, we need to give ourselves a realistic amount of time in which to achieve the goals that we set ourselves. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to be able to focus our time on achieving things for our student members, without quite so much time being used up on the process and repetition of elections themselves. Another major gain from the shift to a two year term of office for students in the senior positions is that it makes it far easier to be more forward looking and to develop a Strategy for OUSA that is not only short term. Given that backdrop, our first, new-style Conference was followed by a first, new-style ‘induction and handover’ weekend in July for both incoming and outgoing members of the Executive and Trustees. This whole process had been made possible by our decision to move away from the traditional OUSA system of electing incoming leaders at Conference for them to take up office immediately on leaving Conference on the Sunday. Our arrangements now deliberately allow for a period of overlap with incumbents continuing to the end of July and incomers taking up their posts from 1 August. The feedback from this weekend suggested that it was a huge improvement on what we have done before, but I’m sure that, just like our Conference, it can be further refined and improved. In future years, I would certainly like to see us again engaging with the University to ensure that there is a ‘University specific’ element to our induction process for incoming students.

3.3 Our experience of adopting an explicit Strategy statement for the first time in 2011 has been very positive. The Board of Trustees report contains a copy of the OUSA Strategy for 2011/12. Following discussion at our Executive weekend in early November, we shall shortly be publishing the final report on that Strategy and are already engaged in the start of a more ambitious, new version. We are looking ahead to 2016 to establish our more long-term priorities and will then be working up a more detailed Strategy to set our goals, targets and priorities for the term of the current students i.e. to mid 2014.

3.4 As I hope will be clear from all that has gone before in this report, we are extremely focussed on the whole question of student engagement. As a past Vice President Education, the fundamental importance of OUSA’s role in working with the University to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning experience for our students is never far from my thoughts. I have been particularly active in ensuring that we understand what the new Quality Code means for our students and how that can help us in our collaboration. I have, in the last few months attended two different events organised by the QAA. By far the most useful was the one on the Student Engagement Chapter I attended with the General Manager in October. It was particularly interesting to talk to student leaders and staff from other student organisations to share ideas – and frustrations – about the challenges. However, although I don’t think that the Student Engagement chapter of the Quality Code will be driving OUSA’s ambitions I believe that it might well add strength and impetus to our historic objectives. We shall be looking to the University to collaborate on this, in a way that fully recognises the importance of OUSA’s role in achieving effective student engagement, and where we jointly reject the ‘box ticking’ approach to compliance. I think that the OU and OUSA come from a tradition
of treating students with the respect they deserve as members of a learning community and I hope that our new Students Charter will underline that philosophy.

3.5 This neatly brings me to the issue of the 2012 NSS and the related roll-out of the new KIS information. Naturally, I was delighted that the University again achieved such fantastic results, but perhaps I might be forgiven for being a little more focussed this year on the first outing for the question about satisfaction with the students union/association. For a fuller explanation of our take on OUSA’s results, please do read the article we published on the news page of our website http://news.kmi.open.ac.uk/rostra/news.php?r=82&t=2&id=225 in September. For my purposes here though, I really just want to make two points. We have very much taken on board the implications of the introduction of an independent, public measure of satisfaction with what we do, from our own students; however, opinion polls or no, we were already very clear that achieving engagement and satisfaction with OUSA is our overarching, strategic objective. How effective we are perceived to be will also have an impact on how the OU is perceived and we need the help of the University to achieve our objectives. So far, I have only referred to engagement and satisfaction but the most important part of Engagement is awareness. OUSA was top of the leader board on one facet of the survey – 37% of our students ticked “not applicable” specifically as opposed to ticking the option that they had no view either way. It is clear that, despite all our efforts, huge numbers of our students still do not know that we exist. Changing that statistic is a joint responsibility of OUSA and the University – and I very much hope that it is also seen as an objective that should be in the top priority list for the University as well as OUSA.

3.6 I have referred briefly already to our November Executive meeting – which was in fact the first, full Executive of our new term. As ever, we had a wide ranging agenda that included all the most important topics of the day, but I wanted to make a particular point about this and future Executive weekends. Throughout our work to transform OUSA into an effective organisation for the future, there has been an important strand running through our discussions about how we communicate, engage with issues and with each other, create teams at different levels and across the student/staff boundary, and generally how we work together. We continue to develop our abilities to make more effective use of the technologies that enable us to conduct our business, as well as our consultations, remotely. I expect those efforts to continue and both our skills and the technologies to increase in sophistication. However, we are absolutely certain that the limited opportunities we have for face-to-face engagement – as Officers, as an Executive, with our own staff, with key members of the OU community, must be safeguarded. We can and will do many things remotely but we need these rare opportunities to bind us together as effective teams and collaborators. The importance I attach to this has led me, since I became President last year, to strive for ways that we can make the best possible use of these rare occasions when we come together at our Executive weekends. An important ingredient of this approach has been to make far better use of the opportunity to invite colleagues from the University to come and work with us – giving presentations on important topics, briefing us on new and important developments or giving us an introduction to a topic
we are going to go on to discuss later in the weekend. Whilst some of our experiments during these weekends have not met with unanimous support, the whole Executive, and our staff, have agreed on the great benefit of having people, like the University Secretary, Director, Students or other members of his team, Director of LTS and leading reps from the Associate Lecturers to come and engage with us directly. We continue to search for economies in our operation but I think we must resist the pressure to accept that abandoning face-to-face activities is going to be the right solution – even in a distance learning organisation. For all the wonderful things our University does remotely, I’d like the Vice Chancellor’s Executive to consider how it would affect their team if they could only meet face-to-face perhaps four times a year – or not at all – and then put themselves in the place of our Executive!

4. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

4.1 I’ve already briefly referred to the work we have started to develop a new OUSA Strategy. We have given ourselves until the end of this year to refine that work with the idea that we launch our refreshed Strategy at the start of the New Year. A number of the key themes from our 2011/12 Strategy will certainly, and quite rightly, return to move on to a new phase. I do see the overarching objective for the four years ahead as being summed up by the words “awareness, engagement, satisfaction” and I expect that to be evident in the individual priorities that will be included in our new Strategy.

4.2 The work we are currently involved in with the Student Consultative Processes Review will play a very significant part in determining how effectively OUSA and the University can collaborate to engage students in the continuous improvement of the quality of their education. If we are able to achieve a new structure that is genuinely driven by shared objectives, such a structure could considerably enhance both the University and OUSA’s effectiveness in hearing and responding to student voices. We are very aware of the financial pressures on the University but genuine engagement with a massive, diverse and dispersed student body is not something that the University should expect to achieve without committing a realistic level of resources. We shall continue to see achieving a new structure that is going to work for students as well as the University as a major priority in the coming year.

4.3 We are already taking steps to review the effectiveness of our new arrangements for organising OUSA in our Regions and Nations. We need to give more effective support from the centre to our students who are delivering on our commitment to emulate the University’s four nations strategy as far as the UK is concerned and we are starting to develop the structure we have created to relate to ‘global’ students. We have embarked on a review of our processes at this level since we think that what we have at the moment is still too bureaucratic to encourage engagement with the majority of students. That said, we have been able to retain and develop a considerable amount of the interest that we built up around Conference and have had a number of new students indicating an interest in involvement with OUSA. We are also very well aware of the implications of the move to Student Support Teams and have begun to consider the most effective ways for us to develop representation on a curriculum basis form the coal-face as it were, up to and
including the level of the Executive Committee. In fact we were very interested to learn more at our recent meeting about how the arrangements for the Associate Lecturers’ Assembly, with its mix of geographic and faculty representation, were working.

4.4 A major project that we are currently engaged in is the complete review of our office and staff team. Although our staff team are integral to all that we do, whilst it’s not what we’d originally anticipated, it became clear that we could not undertake this project until we had made the major decisions about how OUSA was going to operate in the future and what its priorities would be. There were other set-backs along the way and by the time we got to late 2011 it was clear that we were not going to be able to embark on this project in earnest until the other side of our first biennial Conference and the induction and handover processes for our new team of students had been completed. We simply did not have the capacity to deal with both things at once. There are some benefits of this position however. What we need from our staff team if we are to deliver on our “awareness, engagement, satisfaction” agenda and maintain our commitment to our leading student representatives being unpaid volunteers is now clearer than it has been at any previous point in time. It has always been our intention to invest the resources released from our move from paper to e-communications in our staffing support. The need to do this is more pressing than ever and as we approach the negotiations about the future of the OUSA subvention, we shall be hoping to convince the University that, even in this financially hostile climate, we need to be resourced to achieve the expectations placed upon us, both by the University and our student members.

5. EDUCATION ACT PART II – COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

The Appendix to this report consists of a statement on those activities upon which OUSA is required to report in compliance with the Education Act 1994. The requirements of this Act are not altered by the fact of OUSA’s registration as an independent charity and in fact, it now means that, in common with other students unions, OUSA is governed by the requirements of both the 2011 Charities Act and the 1994 Education Act.

6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

6.1 I could not close this report without commenting on the fact that I feel that OUSA is losing an awful lot of very important friends from the OU community this year. I am not going to turn this into a roll call and in many cases, we have already said our fond farewells and goodbyes, but I do want to make an exception in 4 cases. A few months ago, we said goodbye to Liz Manning. Liz was Assistant Director in the North at the point when I first became a member of the OUSA Executive and started attending the consultative meetings within my region. As I’ve mentioned previously I was one of the two OUSA Executive members who represented students in what the OU calls CE. I was immediately struck by Liz’s helpfulness and support – she gave me a wonderful feeling about OU staff and their genuine concern for students. Over the years, OUSA has come into contact with Liz in a number of guises and most recently she has given us tremendous support in getting our Safeguarding Policy together. Liz was a wonderful ambassador for the OU. My
first appointment when I took office as Vice President Education, was to attend the induction meeting of Professor Alan Tait as Pro Vice Chancellor. Subsequently I had many meetings with him at a most difficult time in the OUs history. I really appreciated the detailed reasons that he gave me for the cuts he had to make to the curriculum and especially his patience as he listened to my arguments as to why students did not agree with them. Roger Walters is also retiring this year. Although his contacts with us in recent years have been in his capacity as President of UCU, I know from my predecessors and the General Manager that Roger’s association with OUSA goes back far longer than that, and was in fact, much closer in the past. Until he became UCU President, he had been the leading member of staff with the responsibility for liaising with OUSA under a succession of Pro-Vice-Chancellors and then for the first couple of years under the Director, Students. Roger has been described to me as “one of the best friends that OUSA ever had”.

6.2 Finally, I want to say something about Will Swann, our retiring Director, Students. I need to be brief for I could say a very great deal. The OUSA Executive has just awarded Will our very highest honour, that of Honorary Vice President and I hope that will signify to Council how students feel about him. I told our Conference earlier this year that the University might find someone to fill his post, but that they would never find someone who could take his place in our esteem and affection. We wish him a very long and a very happy retirement – and when he registers as a student in January look forward to receiving his application for the NUS Extra card, which he played a vital role in helping us to secure for our students!

Marianne Cantieri
President & Chair of the Board of Trustees