Curriculum Fit for the Future: Student Consultative Forum

The consultation period ran from Tuesday 23 September to Monday 13 October 2014.

The response below outlines how the points made on the forum influenced the proposals for the Curriculum Fit for the Future and the identification of the University’s curriculum aspiration and principles, which were approved by the University's Senate on 28th January 2015.

Summary and Response

There were over 350 posts. Thirty seven forum members made at least one post and seven students made ten or more posts. A complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the Forum. The questions posted provided a range of responses on the forum and consequently our reaction to them has varied.

1. **General:** How attractive do you find the OU’s curriculum? What do you value most about the OU’s curriculum? What would you change with regard to what the OU teaches? How could the OU’s curriculum be more attractive?

   The feedback we received was that the changes to the curriculum have made it less flexible and there has been a reduction on the module points available. For instance the number of 10, 15 and 30 credit modules have been reduced.

   However, students value the ethos of the University and the fact that guidance on qualification pathways have provided a useful source of information for many students.

   As a result of this feedback and consultations undertaken with colleagues across the OU we considered that choice in the curriculum and academic coherence were very important issues that needed to form part of the curriculum principles going forward. It also needs to be a priority matter for the OU and therefore we identified it as a "catalyst for change" which means it forms an essential part of delivering a curriculum that is fit for the future.

   **Principle 6 approved by The Senate reads:** Our curriculum strikes a balance between facilitating student choice and providing academic coherence to support student progression.

   "Principle 6: Balancing Choice and Coherence
   The design of the curriculum offered will strike a balance between facilitating student choice and providing academic coherence to support student progression. Qualification and module design will facilitate knowledge acquisition, and student retention and progression¹. This will be supported by an infrastructure that provides flexibility in when students study and at what intensity."

   **2. Mission & Values:** How important is it that the OU offers a curriculum that chimes with its mission and values? The OU’s mission is to be “open to people, places,

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¹ The design of the curriculum will also align with the Learning and Teaching Vision and Plan (S-2014-04-08) which includes how the curriculum will be presented to maximise student success.
methods and ideas” and values are: inclusive, innovative and responsive. See [http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/mission](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/mission) for more information.

The general feedback from students was that the OU’s curriculum should chime with its mission and values provided that the academic content in curriculum continued to be sound. Many students expressed a concern that the decreasing choice, flexibility and availability of printed materials could be viewed as making the OU less open and inclusive. In addition the new fee structure for English students meant that some students felt that had made the OU less open.

In response to this we recognise how important it is that our curriculum stays true to the OU’s mission and its strategic objectives. With this in mind we have the following principle which was approved by Senate and here is an extract from the Senate paper:

“Principle 1: Our curriculum is driven by the University’s mission and strategic objectives

Openness is not only the basis of the University’s mission but an essential part of our reputation and institutional identity for staff, students and society. The focus on widening participation, equality and diversity, and providing an opportunity to learn to all who wish to do so must be embedded in the curriculum and the learning experience of all students. Securing the Mission and thriving as a University is at the heart of the University’s strategic objective to “deliver an outstanding student experience”, part of which will be achieved through the curriculum offered.”

3. **Collaboration:** What is your view of curriculum that cuts across different academic disciplines?

In general students provided a positive response to interdisciplinary curriculum but that subjects should not be forced together and care is taken in the development of any interdisciplinary curriculum. In other words, students did not want a watering down of academic rigour to make way for interdisciplinary curriculum. A couple of interdisciplinary modules were specifically mentioned by students with some very positive feedback and request for more of those types of curriculum.

We have taken account of student views and also looked at some of the research on emerging social and global challenges that graduates will face in the future. In response we have identified another “catalyst for change” principle similar to the choice and coherence principle above as follows. Here is an extract from The Senate paper:

“Principle 7: Our curriculum embraces interdisciplinarity to enable students to engage with social and global challenges

Through the University’s unique combination of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and single discipline curriculum that is both locally and globally relevant, students will succeed and enrich their lives. The University has an opportunity to enhance this curriculum, providing greater thematic coherence and to equip its students and society to understand and engage with the social and global challenges of the 21st century, such as the ‘megatrends’ articulated by the Oxford Martin Commission 2013.”

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2 Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations report ([http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/commission](http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/commission))
Please note that the intention is not just to create interdisciplinary curriculum for global and social challenges only, it is to enable and support interdisciplinary curriculum where it is appropriate and where students would find that attractive and relevant to their needs.

4. **Innovation:** How important is it to you that the OU offers highly innovative curriculum, such as addressing global societal issues such as Health, demographics and sustainability etc?

*Feedback from the forum was that curriculum innovation is a good idea but should not be at the expense of quality and should certainly not be there “for the sake of it”. A couple of students thought that curriculum innovation would be appropriate for interdisciplinary modules and could attract more students to study at the OU.*

Taking into account student views and also the fact that one of the OU’s values is ‘innovation’ we identified that another “catalyst for change” principle would be needed to support and enable innovation in relation to curriculum. The following is an extract from the Senate paper:

“**Principle 7: Our curriculum is innovative in both its content and delivery**

Actively supporting and encouraging innovation for the benefit of the student ensures that the curriculum is attractive, exciting and leading edge. University staff can thrive in a creative and dynamic environment that understands and can confidently manage the risks which are inherent in innovation but necessary for the University and its students to thrive.”

5. **Partnerships:** What do you think about curriculum developed with third parties?

*The general view was that other organisations can make a valuable contribution by way of additional information, expertise, viewpoints, networking opportunities and ultimately making the curriculum more attractive. However, collaboration should be for the benefit of student.*

*Many students liked the fact that many OU degrees are accredited as this was helpful for employment prospects.*

*In response we have two principles that relate to creating curriculum in partnership with stakeholders and also the importance of having a quality curriculum that is assured by professional bodies. Here is an extract from the Senate paper in relation to the relevant principles which address the points made by students.*

“**Principle 3: Our curriculum quality assured in partnership with external experts and accrediting bodies**

It is important to ensure that the requirements of the external bodies who assure and accredit University curriculum are fulfilled. The nature of this will vary for different products, but the University must ensure that these requirements are met and look for ways in which the quality of its offering can be enhanced. The University’s reputation for quality reconfirms the value and credibility of the curriculum with students and employers and provides a competitive advantage over many other higher education institutions (HEIs).

**Principle 9: Our curriculum is developed in collaboration with prospective students, students, their tutors and support teams, nation offices, employers, partners and other stakeholders.**
Developing curriculum in partnership with students, their support teams, their tutors, employers, professional bodies and collaborative and validated partners (both domestic and international) will bring a richness and relevance to the curriculum that cannot be achieved working in isolation. Building on current good practice where external experts are included in curriculum design will strengthen the graduate attributes of students and the attractiveness of the curriculum.”

6. **Communication:** What is your view of the information about what you are going to study before you registered? What did you like and dislike about the OU’s communications regarding what you could study? Are there any areas that you believe could be improved upon and why?

   Student views varied on this question. We had a range of responses that suggested that advice to students has been very helpful on the one hand but on the other there have been instances of incorrect and conflicting advice especially in relation to transitional arrangements. A number of students thought that information about the curriculum was available but not always easy to find.

   We have passed this information onto the student services team in their role to deliver an outstanding student experience.

7. **Diagnostics:** How do you think the OU could help you choose the right place to start in the OU’s curriculum and the amount of curriculum to study?

   Students here were united in their views that students liked to have access to information which would help them make appropriate choices on where to start their study.

   We have passed this information to colleagues who will be looking at diagnostics and managing the information available to students before they start their study.

8. **Structure/scheduling:** How much choice and flexibility should there be within the curriculum? What in your view should be the balance between 30 and 60 point courses? What is your view about different start dates for qualifications? Would you like to see more choice within a module?

   Very similar to the earlier discussion threads, students raised the issue of wanting greater choice and flexibility. Students also liked the choice of start dates, some preferring to study over the summer, some in winter and others wanted to overlap their workloads rather than have big gaps.

   There was an acceptance that 60 credit modules were good for getting sufficient depth in a subject and worked well in the qualifications framework.

   Our response is that we will include this feedback in the implementation of the Choice and Coherence principle outlined in question 1 above.

9. **Anything else you wish to raise?**

   Students appeared to support the remark that with the focus on retention of students there was a concern the OU was losing its focus on content and rigour. It was important therefore that expectations were not lowered and whenever possible students should be differentiated between students who needed more help and support and those that could be stretched more.

   Our response is that we will be feeding these comments into the implementation of principle 5 (choice and coherence) and principle 3 (quality assured).
Furthermore, students discussed what “open” meant to the OU and the predominant view was that the OU comes from a position of strength and has a great track record. Therefore “change” does not necessarily mean “better”. This feedback is reflected in Principle 1 (securing the mission).

May we take this opportunity to thank all the students who read, digested and posted their views on this consultative forum. The feedback has very much shaped the curriculum principles and will certainly inform our next steps in implementation.