University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on Curriculum Fit for the Future
23 September–13 October 2014: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the Forum.

Note: There were 354 posts. 37 forum members made at least 1 post and 7 students made 10 or more posts.
Executive summary

Each discussion thread is summarised on the coming slides. However, some of the key points arising from the consultation are summarised below:

- Students want greater flexibility and choice. This applies to the range, value and start date of modules. In particular they want more 30 point modules and an end to the rigid 120 points at each level requirement.
- Although not specifically asked about, students wanted to see less focus on online-only courses and preferred a blend of online and printed materials.
- Curriculum developed across disciplines and with third parties is broadly welcomed but there was a strong feeling that this should not be at the expense of core academic content, including subject-specific content.
- Students want more (consistent) information before they start their qualifications and modules; in particular they value being able to view module materials and want more information about Q qualifications pathways particularly with regard to the last presentation date of modules.
- Advice from phoning the OU is too often incorrect and inconsistent.
Discussion 1: General

Four questions were asked in this first discussion, specific points raised in relation to those questions are below. Several general points were raised under each question by a range of students. These were said to make the OU curriculum less flexible and therefore less attractive than it was:

- The rigid progression rules that mean students have to study 120 points at each level (although the pathways were seen as helpful guidance for some).
- The reduced range of subject matters for which there are modules available (breadth and depth).
- The reduced number of 10, 15 and particularly 30 point modules available.
- The reduced flexibility on start date.
- Out of scope for this consultation, but many students objected to modules being increasingly online only.

How attractive do you find the OU’s curriculum?

- The OU curriculum was attractive when qualifications fitted with current employment or future career plans, particularly where there is professional accreditation.
- The psychology curriculum was attractive, particularly the graduate conversion route to a BPS accredited degree which is now being stopped.
- The breadth of curriculum was attractive and the ability to study a broad degree with the option of specialisation.

What do you value most about the OU’s curriculum?

- Its (albeit declining) choice and flexibility
- Its ethos
- The Open Degree
- Being encouraged to read outside of the teaching materials
- That there is more than one way to study a subject - e.g. the psychology curriculum because of the approach to qualitative research.
- Qualifications that support employment (the removal of the PGCE noted as unfortunate).
- Modules written ‘for adults’.
What would you change with regard to what the OU teaches?

Suggestions included:
• More academic content
• Greater breadth and depth
• Less self-reflection and skills-based activities (although others found these helpful).
• Less online collaborative work.
• Science modules should not shy away from material requiring mathematical competence.
• Less interdisciplinary modules at the expense of ‘core content’ or more specialised modules.
• More opportunity to be stretched and challenged.
• A return to residential schools rather than the online equivalent.
• Remove timetabled activities that have to take place in week X (particularly collaborative activities).
• Ensure modules are updated to remain current.
• More media based subjects and a broader postgraduate offer in Social Sciences.

How could the OU’s curriculum be more attractive?

Suggestions included:
• More opportunities for practical experience in the sciences.
• More options at L3 without pre-requisites for those studying the Open Degree, or be clearer which modules have genuine pre-requisites.
• A broader offer of science modules at postgraduate level.
• Offer integrated Masters courses e.g. MChem, MPhys.
• More choice within named degrees/subject areas, particularly at Level 1.
• By asking a wider range of students what they want.
• Promote unique modules to be studied in a standalone way.
• Provide suggested pathways for the Open Degree.
• Offer postgraduate qualifications in Creative Writing and Statistics.
• More options for specialisation at L3 and to study a subject as single honours.
Discussion 2: Mission & Values
How important is it that the OU offers a curriculum that chimes with its mission and values?

The general feeling was that curriculum should chime with its mission and values provided that the academic content was sound. Points about decreasing choice, flexibility and availability of printed materials were re-iterated in relation to the mission and values, and were thought to make the OU less open and inclusive.

Specific points made included:

- Innovation was welcome but not for it’s own sake and should not be at the expense of openness or more traditional but effective teaching methods.
- Being inclusive should not make the teaching materials less challenging or be at the expense of academic content.
- Responsive should mean listening to student feedback as well as responding to individual student needs. The OU should be responsive to students rather than employers.
- Being open to an idea should not mean necessarily implementing it.
- The new fee structure made the OU less open.
- Being open to people means giving anyone who wants it a chance at higher education with the potential to turn out useful members of society who can contribute constructively to that society, therefore careers are an important feature of what the OU should be offering students now.
- The OU should be leading the way in terms of green credentials.
- Breadth of curriculum should not be a substitute for depth.
- There needs to be greater clarity about what subjects are contained in interdisciplinary modules.
- The OU should make the most out of its innovative research departments by offering a coherent and in depth route from undergraduate through to postgraduate courses.
- There is merit in short non credit bearing courses based around OU TV series, box-sets and books.
- The OU should retain its uniqueness and not try to compete with brick universities.
- The emphasis should remain on academic content, and not shift to vocational qualifications.
- The mission should not be an excuse to tap into global markets and thereby shift to online only tuition.
Discussion 3: Collaboration
What is your view of curriculum that cuts across different academic disciplines?

There was generally a positive response to cross-disciplinary curriculum if it was not compulsory or at the expense of being able to specialise in one or two subject areas. Points made about decreasing flexibility and choice were reiterated in this context.

Other points:

• The Open Programme is the most important and valued cross-disciplinary opportunity.
• Students should not feel forced into multidisciplinary modules or pathways when what they want is a specialist named degree. Subjects should not be watered down and risk a ‘Jack of all trades, master of none’ culture.
• Multidisciplinary modules should mean just that, not a major subject with a ‘smattering’ of others, possibly at a lower level.
• ALs can be specialists in only one discipline which can lead to problems with supporting students on areas of the module covering other disciplines.
• Multidisciplinary modules work well when there is a choice of EMA so students can opt to be assessed on their strongest subject.
• Subjects should not be ‘forced together’ - some have an easy relationship e.g. Science and Maths
• With multidisciplinary modules students have the opportunity to be stronger in some areas than others and so potentially do not feel that they are struggling all the way through.
• Some positive comments about the following interdisciplinary modules: History of maths/science/medicine, U214, A207, S283, A275.
• A module which was more of a challenge was AA100 particularly with regard to assessment.
Discussion 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, sustainability etc?

- It was felt that anything explored should be relevant to the module and not be there 'for the sake of it'. Core material first and foremost. Understanding the underlying concepts and theories of a subject is most important to provide a good grounding in the subject. Quality should be the main focus.
- A choice element in the last TMA or EMA could give students the chance to apply their studies to current issues if they want to.
- Current affairs/issues/studies can be explored in different ways such as forums or news items rather than in core materials.
- ‘Innovative’ subjects were better as multidisciplinary modules that could be chosen rather than added in to core subject modules.
- Innovation was welcome in some instances but only as a relevant add-on and in ensuring subject areas were up-to-date.
- It was suggested that cutting edge courses could attract people to the OU.
- Curriculum teams should look at the purpose of the module and its intended audience before introducing innovative subjects.
- Risk of 'overkill' if the same global issues are covered in more than one module
- Do not lose sight of traditional subjects
- Universities do not always have to be ‘ahead of the curve’. Things which seem new and exciting when a module is first written, may not be so impressive five years down the line.
- Suggestion of a 30 point core module plus an optional 30 point add-on of related ‘innovative’ content.
Discussion 5: Partnerships
What do you think about curriculum that's developed with third parties?

Points included

• The general view was that other organisations can make a valuable contribution by way of additional information, expertise, viewpoints, networking opportunities and make the curriculum more attractive.

• However, care should be taken about whose interests are being served by the link up, which should not be for commercial gain or at the expense of academic integrity or academic content. Collaboration should be to the benefit of students.

• The collaboration with the BBC is a positive example of developing curriculum with third parties.

• External academics and other experts make a valuable contribution to the curriculum.

• Other positive examples include collaborations with other universities, Royal Met Society, OpenPlus.

• Negative examples would be http://www.wbs.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/business-analytics/ which is too commercial or buying in a text from elsewhere and adding in a wraparound guide.

• It is important to work with professional bodies in order to offer accredited degrees, although these should not dominate what is taught or how.

• Third party link ups that would allow science students practical experience or language students more opportunity to speak the language would be welcome.


• Collaborations on curriculum delivery can also be positive or negative; there is an issue with using software linked to one commercial provider e.g. Apple/Microsoft but the partnership with Blackboard on OU Live has had a positive impact.

• There are risks to collaborations, they can become one-way with the OU just validating another institution, or as in the case of College of Law end up in competition.
Discussion 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?

- Many students commented that advice is too often incorrect or conflicting, particularly with regard to transitional arrangements, although sometimes it has been very helpful.
- It is useful to look at teaching materials in the regional centre, including at regional open days.
- It is useful to know what preparation is required to successfully study the module and a clear description of pathways. E.g. Undergraduate mathematics and statistics resources are very useful and informative, including ‘are you ready?’ quizzes. This should be available to prospective as well as registered students.
- Brochures at times are difficult to understand
- There seems to be less information available now about planning a degree than there used to be. Some information on qualification websites is inaccurate and in particular there is not sufficient information about modules at stages 2 and 3 for the new Q qualification descriptions.
- Information about last presentation dates of a module is vital, including what is replacing it, and information about excluded combinations. Sometimes information on qualification pages can conflict with what is actually available.
- Information can be bland with OUSA/OU forums/Facebook more useful than what is officially provided, although sometimes other students advice can be inaccurate as regulations change.
- Openlearn units have been a useful preparation for study on some modules.
- Student reviews of modules are helpful (even the negative ones) as is the ‘students who studied this went on to study…’ information.
- ‘Testable materials’ were useful to ascertain ability to study.
Discussion 6: Communication ctd.
Are there any areas that you believe could be improved upon and why?

- Advisors need better training, including ensuring that if they are not sure of the answer to a question, they should not answer it.
- Make all module materials available to view in advance (this could be time limited).
- List of regional open days in a clearly accessible part of the website that include the option for future students of discussing with current students.
- Run an online ‘open day’ with materials on show and advice similar to OUSA ‘Freshers’ events. This could be timed to coincide with later stage of registration timetable.
- Examples of popular study paths within a qualification would be useful.
- Make it clearer which modules are to be discontinued, when and what their replacements are (if any).
- More information on pathways, including start dates, and the return of ‘degree planners’ would be welcomed.
- More information needed on teaching method, e.g. proportion of online study so prospective students can plan and know what to expect and whether OCAS is formative or summative.
- If course descriptions mention ‘study skills’ there should be some indication of what those skills are.
- Concern that with SSTs, silos could form in terms of knowledge and advice for students.
- Resources pages similar to those provided by maths and stats be available for all programmes of accessible to all current and potential students.
- Q qualification descriptions should contain detailed information on the pathways/modules.
- More accurate information on future availability of modules.
- Students should be able to view the forums of modules they are considering studying as it gives a flavour of the module.
Discussion 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?

Suggestions here echoed points made previously in that flexibility was required and more information needed so that students could judge whether a module was suitable.

Points included:
• The OU should take more notice of what experience a student has (e.g. previous qualifications/work experience) and provide some better diagnostic tests/processes/self-assessment tests.
• Providing access to materials would help students make their own judgment.
• Example past TMAs would be useful.
• The science short courses (and other 10-15 point modules) were a good indicator of how students would find OU study.
Discussion 8: Structure/scheduling
How much choice and flexibility should there be in the curriculum?
What 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?

• Suggestions here echoed points made previously in that greater choice and flexibility was required, particularly with regard to the 120 points at every level ruling.
• The general view was that the balance had tipped too much in favour of 60 point courses and that 30 point courses were more affordable, allowed for a more flexible workload (30, 60, 90 or 120 points a year), meant a greater breadth of subjects could be studied and were less of a risk if the subject turned out to be not as expected or if a personal issue came up during study.
• 60 point courses were good for getting sufficient depth in a subject but not if they were effectively two 30 point courses in different subjects.
• Students wanted a choice of start dates – some preferred studying over the summer, some in winter, others wanted to overlap their workloads rather than having big gaps.
• One suggestion was to make the start and finish date of modules much more flexible so that you could move straight from module to module with continuous tutor support (but without group tuition).
• Choice within a module would be welcomed if it meant e.g. collaborative activities could be avoided, students could choose their EMA topic; but for content it was less clear what the implications might be academically. It worked well in S103 but is less likely to work if there is an exam. M335 where you could choose two topics out of four was an example where it didn't work well as you couldn’t study all 4 topics.
Discussion 9: Anything else?

- It was felt that the OU should stick to doing the basics well and remain true to its mission.
- There was a concern about too much emphasis on global expansion.
- There was a concern that in responding to retention issues, the OU was losing its focus on content and rigour; expectations should not be lowered.
- It should be possible to differentiate between those students who would appreciate being stretched more and those that needed more help, and each supported.

Next steps

- We will come back to the Forum in Spring 2015 to show how the University has taken your input into account.