Draft summary

Consultation on Research and Enterprise at the Open University

06–18 July 2018

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

Record of contributions

There were 73 posts by students; 22 students made at least 1 post, 4 students made 5 or more posts, and there were 30 ratings. Below are extracts from some of the most liked posts:

Question 3: [P19]

‘I think that there needs to be some acknowledgement by someone somewhere that the OU takes in students with few digital literacy skills, to ones with excellent skills – a full spectrum of ‘mature’ and younger students with a whole variety of job experiences. Can someone please do some research into how you account for that without either a) driving the ones with the skills utterly insane while also b) not leaving people who don’t yet have the skills behind. And also that this needs to be done without sacrificing actual content. E304 has some digital literacy stuff which is optional for example.

My second main point is a worry that, by trying to make every single bit of research ‘count’ towards the criteria, the OU may fail to invest in its future potential because some pieces of research won't fit into the boxes. The way I have seen this gotten around in the past is by ringfencing ‘sounds exciting and I have no idea how it might pan out’ money. Maybe applied for by a Dragon's Den type procedure. Or else having some specific time set aside to do whatever you think you're interested in for everyone. Or both.

Otherwise there’s a danger than some excellent work might never happen just because no-one can quite justify it... yet. Innovation does require risk and you need some in there. You could even crowdsource some student involvement maybe... just as the Zooniverse project does. It'd be exciting if nothing else...’

Thread: A consultation too far?

‘I have to wonder, based on the lack of participation, whether this wasn't a consultation too far?

I found the plan to be too specialized for me to really comment on, and maybe others feel the same. Was the material too complex for the target audience, or is everyone on holiday?’

Q1: OU Research

To what extent are you aware of the research that the OU undertakes? For example have you ever accessed research by OU academics as part of your studies?

Please tell us a bit more about how you have accessed research by OU academics and what impact it has had, or not, on your studies?

Note: when we talk about accessing research, this could be through reading a research paper or book, listening to a conference talk or podcast, or watching a video.

Students had quite a mixture of awareness and knowledge regarding OU specific research, this seemed to vary between different subjects and what level they were studying. Many students mentioned that they learnt about OU research from sources outside of their core studies, these included:

- Via general media and collaboration with outside bodies.
- Attending events.
Quite a few students said that they had not been made aware of any OU research throughout their whole studies and expressed disappointment that it was not publicised more to them as undergraduate students.

Other student comments and suggestions are summarised below:

- A few students became aware of OU research due to applying for postgraduate and research degrees, but not from their previous undergraduate studies.
- The high reputation of the OU was felt to be largely due to the research it conducts.
- Knowledge of OU research informed several students’ decisions to study with the OU.
- Notices about OU research could be more visible – currently students do not always visit the StudyHome page where more information is posted. One student noted it was quite difficult to find out about OU research through the main website.
- It was suggested that faculties could post regular summary articles about OU research to forums.
- Students mentioned using tools such as ORO and Athens for accessing OU research.
- Students noted that the subject area being studied impacts the likelihood of needing to access research.
- Several students were made aware of research when they attended residential schools where staff shared what they were working on.
- Postgraduate students in general seemed much more aware than undergraduate.
- One student mentioned that they had more confidence in the module teams once made aware of OU research.
- Several students noted that knowing about OU research helped cultivate interest in related areas which in turn helped with their studies, and motivated them to look into postgraduate studies.
- The main positive impact of research awareness mentioned by students is feeling inspired to study and potentially conduct their own research.

**Q2: Using research in your studies**

*During your studies at the OU, to what extent have you been provided with guidance or assistance to access and use research relevant to your studies, for example within your module materials, in guidance for TMAs or at a tutorial? Please tell us about your experience of this and how it could have been improved?*

Students responded similarly to the first question as there was quite a mixture of experience, again seeming to largely depend on the subject area and module requirements. Student comments and suggestions are summarised below:

- Not all subjects require accessing research as part of the core studies, such as undergraduate Maths and other STEM subjects. A high-level of core understanding is sometimes required before being able to access and understand research.
- Quite a few students had no awareness of outside research relevant to their studies and received no guidance in accessing it. Some expressed disappointment that they were not guided to related research and that a lot of their studies was self-contained.
- Others noted that it was not necessary or relevant for the subject they were studying to go beyond their module materials, but that perhaps this should be encouraged more.
- Most students noted that accessing research was not introduced until level 2 and 3 studies, and they were increasingly encouraged to use research the further through their studies they got.
- Some students suggested that online library training sessions could be better encouraged by module teams.
- Students who did access and use research as part of their undergraduate studies were generally very positive about the guidance given and learning gained from it.
• It was suggested that there could be more research related online seminars and conferences via Student Hub Live.
• A separate Future/OpenLearn module could be developed on how to access and use research.
• Some students expressed frustration with being introduced to PROMPT multiple times throughout their studies and the ‘tick-boxing’ reflection activities associated with it.
• One student was unhappy with the lack of development in critical and analytical skills following research based projects.
• Students noted the importance of being taught how to assess the quality of research as well as accessing it.
• One student mentioned the lack of clarity on what was meant by the Academic Strategy aim of developing ‘sustainable student-focused academic communities’, and the perception that in conventional universities students can more easily converse with academics and other students regarding research outside of their topic.

Q3: Draft Research and Enterprise Plan
Do you have any comments you would like to share on the attached draft Research and Enterprise Plan?

Several students noted that the plan was difficult to read, outside their areas of expertise and that they did not feel able to comment fully on it. However, there were quite a number of questions asked by students which were mostly responded to comprehensively by OU staff. Please visit the thread at https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=96175&expand=1&timeread=1532078444 and see the post-dated 11 July at 12:28 to see the responses.

Other comments, questions and suggestions from students are summarised below:

- A well-liked post discussed the idea of conducting research in how to better cater for a student base with such a large diversity in digital literacy skills and abilities.
- It was asked that high-risk research could be mentioned in the plan. A subject expert advised this kind of genesis research is usually funded internally by faculties and the plan won’t take this away.
- Students noted the importance and value of research purely for the sake of increasing knowledge and hope this is not overlooked.
- It was asked if the allocated research days for academic staff was likely to change or is staying the same (44 days for central academics, 22 for tutors). OU staff could not confirm, but it was noted that a current review is in part looking at what academic contracts there should be.
- It was suggested that the role of Postgraduate Research students was made clearer in the plan, and also clarify the difference between Research and Scholarship.
- It was mentioned that the needs of external stakeholders and research groups may not always meet the same needs of students on taught modules.
- One student observed that the OU does not appear to offer research degrees by distance learning and asked if it was an option being considered for relevant subjects.
- It was expressed that the document could be clearer on what metrics the plan is driven by, whether these are just quantitative or also qualitative.
- Niche areas of research that the OU specialises in should be kept regardless of cost-effectiveness.
- One student asked for an international outlook to be included, and also questioned the phrase “cross-institutional thematic research capability where the University has critical mass and established reputation in areas aligned to 21st century challenges and/or OU mission”. An OU staff member responded with a list of some of the internationally recognised thematic areas that the research plan aims to support, and explained that ‘critical mass’ is reached if the University is capable of putting together meaningful research proposals for funding.
- Concern was expressed by the phrase “We will provide a clear framework that supports the commercialisation of all forms of Intellectual Property (IP)” and what implications this may have on research papers being freely available.

An additional thread noted that though the first two questions were straightforward and quite open, some students thought the plan was too complex and/or long for them to have time to read. It was suggested that more background information on the Research Plan would have helped to make it accessible, as well as providing more general context and perhaps asking more specific questions. Most students seemed to agree that the time of year also contributed to lower participation levels.