Open University Student Consultative Meetings

Response to feedback
Spring 2017
Two topics were discussed:

- Building a Student Community
- Educational and Pastoral Support

132 students attended face-to-face meetings in:

- London
- Manchester
- Milton Keynes
- Newcastle

Cardiff
- Dublin
- Edinburgh
- Exeter

45 international students joined the Online International Students Consultative Meeting
Introduction

From Nicola Simpson, Students Association President

The Students Association have been working in partnership with the University to shape the consultation process since it began in 2014. We work to ensure that the consultation topics are genuinely student-led, setting the agenda for face-to-face and online discussion in partnership with University staff.

I attended the consultation meeting in Exeter. It was great to hear about the range of student experiences and ideas for what could be done better. The two main discussion topics were about building the student community and educational and pastoral support at the OU. Students Association representatives left with lots of ideas about how we can improve what we do and you can read more in our responses to your concerns and ideas.

What you say at consultation matters. Students Association representatives use the consultation findings when we represent students on University governance committees and although we can’t promise that the OU will always make the changes that students want, your representatives will continue to amplify your voice.

Thank you for taking the time to share your views, to read the responses and to be an active member of our community. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this document with the Students Association please get in touch via our Students Association forums.
Introduction

From Jonathan Wylie, Interim Chief Operating Officer and Director of External Engagement

First of all, a big thank you to everyone who took part in the meetings we held up and down the country (and online) earlier this year. It was great to hear your views on issues that are important to us all across the University. I attended one of the meetings myself and it reinforced for me the need to continue to put students at the heart of everything we do.

You shared some excellent insights on a range of issues. In this document you can read about how we are acting on your feedback. While immediate changes have not always been possible, we have outlined how we have responded, or intend to respond, to the issues raised. In some cases we have explained why we are not proposing anything different at the moment.

You may have seen that, as The Open University approaches its fiftieth year, we are launching an overhaul to ensure it is ready for the challenges of the next half century – the Students First Transformation Programme.

The Programme is conducting a root and branch review of every aspect of our operations – from the experience of students to its teaching and research – to enhance the OU’s reputation as a world leader in lifelong and distance learning. The feedback you have given is being considered by the Programme as it develops its proposals for a redesigned student experience.

There will be many more areas in which it will be important that we seek your views. These will help us make better decisions and ensure that the redesigned OU is shaped to students’ needs. The student consultative process will continue to create opportunities where you can share your experience and ideas and I hope you will continue to tell us how we can do better.
Introduction

The Students First Transformation Programme

Much of the feedback you gave us about how we can build student communities and the sort of support you want us to provide for you, will be used in shaping a reinvention of The Open University through the Students First Transformation Programme.

Over the next two years the programme aims to deliver:

• World leading part-time and distance learning and teaching, with digital innovation at its heart
• A streamlined curriculum shaped to students’ needs and adaptable to change
• High quality research focused closely on the teaching curriculum to maximise its impact
• Close links to employers to ensure the curriculum reflects the skills they need; and students equipped with the skills they need for the digital world in which they will be learning and working.
• Greater choice for students over when you start courses and your pace of study.

Your feedback from the Student Consultative Meetings will be acted on in the context of this programme, and will be an important consideration in future decision-making. Much of what we are planning as part of this programme is based on what you have already told us through student consultations and in other forums – a more developed and consistent induction programme, greater flexibility around start dates and more personalised support. Representatives of the Students Association and the wider student body will continue to be involved in this process.

We will be communicating more detail as and when available, and organising further student consultation, so please do keep a look out on StudentHome.
Introduction

Students Association response to the Students First Transformation Programme

Since the Vice Chancellor announced earlier this year that the University would be undergoing a radical reinvention, reviewing every aspect of the University and what it offers to students the Students Association have been working to ensure students have a voice. Student representatives have been involved in discussions about some aspects of the future of the University and we continue to engage where possible but we would like to see more opportunities for students and student representatives. Students Association representatives have been encouraging the senior leaders of the University to enter into a meaningful dialogue directly with students, provide a platform to raise your concerns and the opportunity to offer your expertise in finding solutions to create a better student experience. We believe that consultation needs to be honest about the challenges facing the University and focused on finding the best outcome for students. The challenge for the University is to meet the diverse needs and expectations of students and help us to achieve our goals.

We hope that the University leaders will provide opportunities for the wider student body to have your say in what happens at the University before all the big decisions have been taken.
Induction

You said:
Induction could be improved, for example to signpost potential sources of support and set expectations around tutors and Student Support Teams. You also said it would be useful to access a module ‘taster pack’.

What the University is doing to respond:
We appreciate that the induction provision for students is in need of development, and in particular signposting to resources could be improved. We have established an induction focus group, formed of staff from across the University, to develop a cohesive and comprehensive induction for new students, which will take into account the points you have made. In addition, we are recruiting to a role which will focus on induction and drive forwards this initiative.

The Open Media and Informal Learning team at the University provide a range of free short courses which are designed to give students insight into the content of modules, develop study skills and prepare for online distance learning. A lot of this content is situated within OpenLearn, the University’s free learning platform. In addition work is in progress to examine new and innovative ways to provide students with a wider range of materials.

We have identified that these resources are not signposted particularly effectively to students, so we are developing both the range on offer, and the signposting to them.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
The Students Association is also aware of some of the difficulties faced by our members when they first become students of the Open University. To this end we have developed our Online Freshers Fair and send an invitation to all new students welcoming them to the University and pointing them towards our Freshers website. The website has been designed in response to students telling us what they needed to know and wanted to find out when they were new to OU.

Knowing that many OU students continue to be unaware of the existence of the OU Students Association, sometimes not until the end of their study if at all, for the future we will be calling on the University to include reference to the Association and some useful links to our services – including our community building activities – into the confirmation email to all new and continuing learners.
Streamlining and signposting online communities

You said:
Existing communities, for example Students Association social forums, should be streamlined and better signposted.

The OU needs a coherent, consistent approach to its VLE forums with a view to maintaining activity, building community and encouraging discussion.

What the University is doing to respond:
From September 2017 there will be new ‘subject’ websites, with a full roll-out scheduled throughout 2018. These will replace the existing qualifications online websites and the student study dashboard. Once live the website will be available from the ‘Study’ tab so will be much more visible and easier to access.

Each subject website will have a dedicated forum area called ‘Connect’. The purpose is to create a community through enabling award, subject and qualification-level connections. Students will have access to their subject website for the duration of their award plus an additional three years. This provides the opportunity for these forums to become a vibrant community for a large number of users over a longer duration.

Students will have the option to add links to their own personal area and the subject websites can also display live Social Media (Twitter and Facebook) feeds.

The University has also refreshed the content found under the Community tab on StudentHome so that it provides more relevant information and links.

Within modules and qualifications, faculties have the flexibility to manage forums in the way most suitable for their subject area and students. Your feedback has been passed on to the faculties, with a view to addressing the issues you have raised.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
The Students Association is currently undertaking a review of the structure of its network of Forums on the Virtual Learning Environment and this will include the streamlining of the current forums on offer and the closure of those that are no longer being used by students. A further project to redevelop our website is also underway with an expected launch towards the end of this year. The website will provide better signposting to all of our services including the online forums and clearer direction about their use.
Community building

You said:
Community was important to your studies with the OU.
• Why not introduce an OU community app that would make it quick and easy to be in touch with other students?
• Students not on Facebook should not miss out.

What the University is doing to respond:
A feasibility exercise on developing an OU app to enable students to connect with peers concluded that instead of developing a new app from scratch at this time, we should instead take advantage of a new set of features becoming available within the OU’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). These will be tested with a view to integration as a student tool.

Facebook is sometimes used by parts of the University to reach students who may not engage with ‘official’ forums and talk to students in an environment where some feel more comfortable. We know that it’s not for everyone and no student should miss out on activities essential to their studies.

We’ll keep looking at making the most of the different ways in which students like to engage with the University.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
As students we know the value of being part of a student community and this is a central aspect of our work in the Association. Students value the opportunity to join our events and connect with each other through groups and societies.

The Students Association has long been asking the University for a tool to enable students to connect with each other online and investigating what this might look like. Ongoing upkeep is costly and outside our budget. We will continue to investigate other options and call on the University to fund this facility.

The Students Association understands that not all students engage with social media. We aim to provide and promote all our activities across a range of media. Students will be directed to our redeveloped website when available, which will be a hub for all our information.

Our online magazine will continue to be emailed to all students: a wealth of information about opportunities, updates on new initiatives and news from representatives.
**Tuition**

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<td>Students would like tutor support to be of more consistent high quality. The quality of some online tuition was of particular concern.</td>
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**What the University is doing to respond:**

The [Tutor Support Statement](#) expands on aspects of the Student Charter concerning the relationship between students and their tutors. It sets out what you can expect from your tutor and vice versa. The University has updated the statement in the light of student feedback and the implementation of a new Group Tuition Policy.

In the revised statement we have made it clearer what you can and can’t expect from your tutor, and what to do if these expectations are not being met. The tuition you receive is carefully monitored to ensure its quality.

From September 2017 the University will be using Adobe Connect as the new online rooms tool, replacing OU Live. This new tool supports a good level of interactivity for lively and engaging tutorials, and for collegiate and collaborative events. This change in technology supporting online rooms has been welcomed by those who have used it and a comprehensive programme of training is in place.

<table>
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<th>You said:</th>
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<td>More face-to-face opportunities for tutorials would be welcome, particularly at module start. Those of you who are international students would like more opportunities to attend face-to-face tuition events; you also wanted more opportunities for OU facilitated informal study groups.</td>
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**What the University is doing to respond:**

The Students First Transformation programme is reconsidering the first-time student experience. Students will be invited to participate in this work.

The Programme is also looking at options for Open Days and curriculum-themed events as opportunities to bring students together, which could focus on study skills, subject specific and other related topics, keynote presentations, seminars and opportunities to meet and network with one another and OU academics. These might be both at an early point in study or pre-study and offered at other key milestone points. It is still early days and we’ll be keeping students informed and asking for their input as we develop the concepts and assess the feasibility.
You said:
The new Group Tuition policy appeared to pose a risk of less interaction with your own tutor and tutor group and fewer face-to-face tutorials, perhaps further away than previously.

What the University is doing to respond:
These points have also been identified by two recent reviews, which included feedback from students. Faculties have been looking carefully at their tuition strategies for modules starting in October this year, taking into account this feedback. Also, a sub-group of the University’s Education Committee is evaluating the policy and due to provide a final report in Spring 2018. The Students Association are represented on this sub-group. Focus groups and interviews with students are taking place to explore issues, including those you have raised, in more depth.

We are looking at attendance data at both online and face-to-face tutorials to better understand patterns of attendance and inform improvements. This and other data, including your feedback, will inform thinking about a new teaching framework being developed by the Students First Transformation Programme.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
Students Association representatives have been raising student concerns about the group tuition policy and its implementation through several channels at the Open University. We know that students value the opportunity to meet with their own tutor at locations convenient to them and to access tutorials delivered by others whether that is online or face-to-face.

As students we value high quality support from our tutors. The importance of a good relationship between a student and their tutor should not be underestimated. We know that some students continue to have problems with online tutorials and we work to ensure the University understands how students are affected.
You said:
It is not obvious enough who to contact for what type of support.

What the University is doing to respond:
As part of the work on an improved induction and orientation experience we anticipate that there will be changes to the online Help Centre and the way it is promoted.

The Help Centre is subject to continuous improvement methodology, with feedback monitored on a daily basis. This, along with trend data and a 'healthiness league table' helps us prioritise both proactive and reactive improvements to the site.

We have also been doing work on the 'Contact us' experience to better route people through to the correct contact point – email, phone, web chat (where available).

Hopefully you will see improvements in this area soon.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
The OU Students Association understands that students may be confused about who to contact for different sorts of support in the University.

The Association has a direct mailbox through which students can ask for advice about where to go for different kinds of advice. We provide this signposting service to students and help them to get access to the correct unit and thereby the right information.

We are also working to improve our website and increase the visibility of our student representatives so that students know who to contact about different concerns.
Student Support Teams

You said:
Responses from SSTs to emails are not quick enough and the ‘triage’ system is not transparent.

What the University is doing to respond:
There are service level agreements (SLAs) in place for the Student Support Teams (SSTs) and Student Recruitment within Student Recruitment and Support Centres (SRSCs) to monitor the service to students both when responding to emails and when answering phones:
- 80 per cent of emails should be answered within two days and 90 per cent within 10 days;
- 80 per cent of phones should be answered within 20 seconds.

The quality of response is also important.
Over the past year, some SSTs have been relocated and all will now be located within new SRSCs. Work is underway to ensure that service to students consistently meets these service levels once all SSTs have fully transitioned to their SRSCs. This includes moving to an extended hours service which has gradually been rolled out across the SSTs and will include the provision of web-chat in the future.

Queries are triaged within SRSCs depending on how time critical they are. For example students in acute distress are triaged as high priority to Educational Advisors. Other time critical queries will be handled as soon as possible whilst queries that are less time critical will be handled in the order in which they were submitted, whilst maintaining service levels.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
We know that the quality of student support is just as important as receiving timely support, inaccurate advice and guidance can be very disruptive and causes unnecessary stress for students.
Student representatives work to ensure University leaders understand the importance of getting this right and seek continual improvement to both the timeliness and quality of student support.
You said:
A single named point of contact through a student’s journey was, in general, supported. But several barriers to making this approach a success were identified. The role would be particularly useful for disabled students and could be optional or temporary depending on circumstances.

What the University is doing to respond:
It is not clear that the advantages of having a single point of contact outweigh the disadvantages that you have identified, but we do want to ensure that students have access to the right support that will help you be successful in your studies. The Students First Transformation Programme aims to support students more closely than ever by tutors delivering a hands-on, highly personalised education. We are in the process of developing our teaching framework, but we anticipate there will be an emphasis on one-on-one tutorials, ensuring our high-quality tuition continues. We are also considering ways in which we can better coordinate our support of students in a more personalised way. Students are involved in that discussion and your feedback from the consultative meetings will also inform that process.

The OU does provide individual named Educational Advisor support for a small number of students who have complex needs. These are most often students with multiple disabilities but not necessarily. The number of students who can be supported in this way is necessarily small because of the ratio of students to Educational Advisors and is ideally only put in place for a short time period to support a student over a particular difficulty.
Peer support

You said:
Optional mentoring of newer students by more experienced students or graduates or some sort of ‘buddy’ scheme would be welcome.

What the University is doing to respond:
A student buddy scheme is being piloted across faculties to help facilitate dialogue between students new to a module and those with experience. The role of the student buddy is:

- To aid student momentum, retention and engagement on a module
- Peer support to help with confidence and motivation
- To provide study advice and share experiences

The role complements the established role of the Associate Lecturer which provides academic support to students.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
At the Students Association, we understand the value that experienced students can provide to newer students and our online peer support services, our Disabled Students Group, our LGBT+ group are all examples of students supporting students.

A key objective in our current strategy is to explore further forms of peer support and we will shortly be exploring the potential and feasibility of a study-buddy scheme. We also know how much students value the informal support that other students provide and we continue to seek ways to help students connect with each other.
Support for students with mental health issues

You said:
Students experiencing mental health issues would like more support.

What the University is doing to respond:
There are some online resources available for those experiencing a mental health difficulty in the OU's Help Centre. This has also been nominated as a topic for online consultation and agreed in principle, so an online consultation on how best the University can develop the support it offers in this area can be expected in 2017-18.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
The Students Association is very aware of the pressures and stresses that OU study adds to already busy lives. We understand that all of us have mental health that needs to be looked after and to this end we will continue to raise the issues of support for mental health at every opportunity and in all of our appropriate audiences with the University.

In respect of Students Association resources in this area, we have established online peer support services; a continued involvement with Nightline, the through the night listening service for students with problems; and support groups that connect students to each other for example our Disabled Student Group and LGBT+ Group (Plexus).

We also have a number of related online forums where students experiencing similar pressures are able to link up and gain some mutual support and understanding.
Issues specific to international students (1)

Raised as part of the Online International Students Consultative Meeting

You said:
Insufficient online tutorials is of concern, with this problem compounded by their timing (often 6.30pm UK time).

What the University is doing to respond:
The Students First Transformation Programme will be looking at the feasibility of a range of enhanced support models for all students, including 24-hour provision as a possibility.

The University is also exploring how better use might be made of online tutorials, particularly as we are experiencing a greater proportion of attendance at these events and faculties have been looking carefully at their tuition strategies for modules starting in October this year taking into account your feedback.

You said:
You would like better library access.

What the University is doing to respond:
The online Library can be accessed from any country via the internet. All of our journal holdings and 60 per cent of the library books are available electronically. We prioritise purchasing electronic books over printed items so you can access the Library from anywhere.

Your comments mention the desire to use a physical library and have a scheme similar to the SCONUL access reciprocal borrowing scheme in the UK. SCONUL is operated by a consortium which The Open University is a member of; it is not administered by the University. We have investigated and unfortunately there is not an equivalent scheme available in other countries as far as we know. We continually review this position and should an appropriate scheme become available we will work with the relevant consortium to offer access. In the interim we advocate the use of public libraries in other countries for study space and access to library resources (supported by the extensive online OU Library).
You said:
The possibility of online/virtual degree ceremonies should be explored.

What the University is doing to respond:
We are in the process of reviewing all aspects of Open University degree ceremonies. Part of this review will involve understanding student expectations and is also likely to include consideration of online/virtual degree ceremonies.

The University has trialled virtual degree ceremonies previously. These proved to be less popular with students and were costly to the University however, advances in the quality and accessibility of technology may make this a more popular option now and one that can be investigated further.

You said:
Having morning examinations may require an overnight stay at additional cost.

What the University is doing to respond:
Exams start at 10:30am to allow students time to travel to venues in the morning. We try to allocate students to centres as near to them as possible and we do advise students they can re-allocate to a venue of their preference within the UK or Continental Europe without additional charge.

If we didn’t have exams in the morning it would double the overall exam period, not only impacting costs but ultimately impacting the timescales for issuing student results.
Issues specific to international students (3)

Raised as part of the Online International Students Consultative Meeting

You said:
The University needs to provide better communication on Brexit.

What the University is doing to respond:
We have released a statement and Q&A for international students about the potential impact of Brexit. Please note, these are only accessible to students based outside the UK on our international website. As the terms of Brexit and how this impacts the OU and its students become clear we will update these and communicate directly with international students as appropriate.

You said:
Why are exams still hand-written and why can’t technology be used for exam resits for international students?

What the University is doing to respond:
The University has been investigating the possibility of students taking their exams online, and has run several pilots over recent years. These pilots involved students taking their own laptops to their exam centre, connecting to the centre’s Wi-Fi and then accessing their online exam using a secure web browser. The feedback from the pilots has been encouraging but there is still more analysis needed before we could offer online exams on a wider basis. Issues such as the availability of suitable exam centres with reliable Wi-Fi and sufficient electrical sockets to enable large numbers of student to plug in their laptops, and integration of our current systems with those required to support online exams, are currently preventing us from running larger-scale pilots, but it’s something we’re aspiring to in the future.

The University has also looked into the possibility of using the online exams system for overseas exams. However, the initial setup for an online exam is very labour-intensive so the cost of doing this for the small number of students involved would be prohibitive.
Other issues

Issues raised outside of two main consultation topics

You said:
Module descriptions should be clearer about how much content is online.

You said:
The move to increasingly online module materials is an issue for some students.

What the University is doing to respond:
We plan to include this information in a forthcoming update to the module descriptions.

What the University is doing to respond:
We must ensure we deliver an excellent digital learning experience in the future, to equip our students with the skills they will need to thrive as 'digital citizens', to connect with colleagues and other students, and get the best possible learning support.

Under the Students First Transformation Programme we are aiming to make Open University learning ‘digital by design’ over the coming years. This means that, except in exceptional circumstances where digital is not appropriate, your learning experience will be constructed around high quality, dynamic and responsive digital materials rather than print – materials that are specifically designed for an optimum digital learning experience, and not just books presented on a screen. Our design, delivery and support decisions will be driven by pedagogical and student need.

What the Students Association is doing to respond:
In 2016 the Students Association completed a research project exploring student preference for print and online/onscreen module delivery. Our research found that far from being a vocal minority, concern regarding the loss of print materials is widespread among OU students. Students Association representatives will continue to speak on behalf of those students who need or want printed materials and continue to press the University for clarification about what digital by design means in practice and evidence that this is in students’ best interests.
Other issues

Issues raised outside of two main consultation topics

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<th>You said:</th>
<th>What the University is doing to respond:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study materials are sometimes not made available in good time.</td>
<td>The University does not have a policy of ‘just in time’ delivery and where there are issues, please do raise them as soon as possible with details of the module concerned.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>For new modules there is often phased availability, as material required later in a module is often still in development when the initial material is released.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The appropriate balance between material availability and ensuring faster delivery, plus flexibility and responsiveness to student feedback will be considered as part of the Students First Transformation Programme, and your feedback will be considered as part of that process.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Delivery dates are kept up to date on the Despatch site, which students can access via StudentHome. Students can use this page to check whether a parcel has been sent, if it hasn’t been delivered as expected.</td>
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Thank you…

…for your involvement with Student Consultation

Thank you so much for all your excellent feedback at the Spring 2017 student consultative meetings. Although we have only been able to respond to key themes in this document, all your feedback has been shared widely with relevant parts of the University and will be used to inform future decision making.

To get involved in online forums and face-to-face meetings in 2017 please visit the student consultation website at www.open.ac.uk/students/consultation/volunteer and sign up to our mailing list.