



# TEF

# Student Submission

**Open University Students Association**

**January 2023**

## About the Open University Students Association

On 16 May 1972, the Open University's (OU) Council approved the formation of the Open University Students Association. The organisation has three main bodies: the Board of Trustees (BoT), the Student Leadership Team (SLT) – known as the Central Executive Committee (CEC) in governing documents – and the staff team. These are supported by student representatives and volunteers and together they enable positive change for OU students. This enabling structure is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

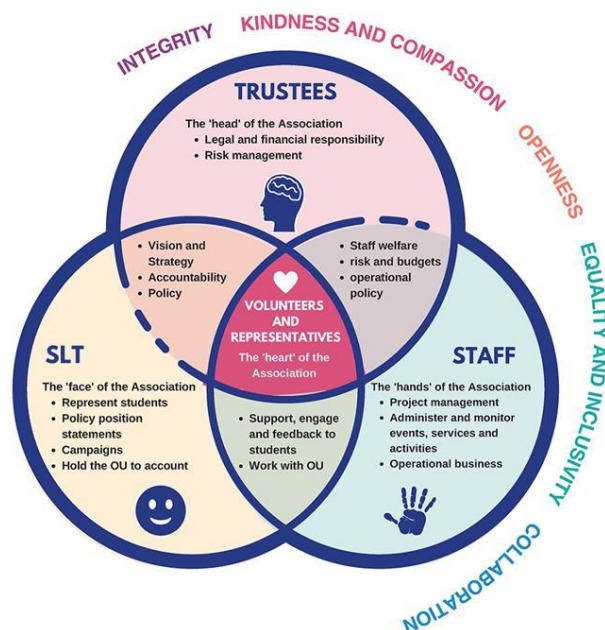


Figure 1: How the Open University Students Association is run

At capacity, the BoT consists of twelve trustees, made up of six directly elected students, three ex-officio officer members from SLT and three external members. They manage the legal and financial responsibilities for the organisation, ensuring that the Association acts within its Articles of Association and bye-laws, meets the obligations of the Relationship Agreement and complies with the duties of the Education Act 1994 and Charity Law, as well as other regulatory frameworks and responsibilities. They also oversee the Chief Executive and the staff team.

The SLT, or the face of the Association, are a team of current students, elected every two years to represent OU students' interests and to influence all levels of decision-making within the OU. They set the Association's strategic direction, run events and activities and talk to the OU on behalf of students about issues concerning them. The SLT consists of 19 student members: two paid positions – the President and Deputy President – and 17 voluntary positions comprising the Student Member of Council, six Vice-Presidents with their own respective remits, five Faculty Representatives and five Area Representatives.

The staff team, or the Associations hands, are led by the Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer and Director of Membership Services. Collectively they oversee the following teams: the Community Team;

the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) and Student Welfare team; the Volunteering and Representation team; the Operations team, which also looks after the OU Students Educational Trust (Ouset); the Digital Communications team, Strategy and Insight; Executive Support and Staff Welfare; and Resources.

The [Ouset](#) is a grant-giving charity whose funds are raised by students, alumni and the wider community and used to benefit students experiencing financial hardship. It is a separate registered charity supported by the Association.

Both the SLT and staff team are supported by hundreds of [student volunteers](#). This number varies through the year according to the operational needs of the Association and the OU. Roles include, but are not limited to, being a member of an OU governance committee; facilitating community events; providing support services; and operating stalls at OU graduations.

### **Mission, vision and values**

The [mission of the Students Association](#) is to make a positive difference to all OU students. Our vision is to support, encourage and empower OU students by

- offering students the support services that they need
- creating opportunities for students to engage in a vibrant and inclusive community
- being a strong, effective and accountable representative body
- working in partnership with the OU to enhance all aspects of the student experience.

Our [values](#) are:

- Integrity
- Equality and inclusivity
- Openness
- Collaboration
- Kindness and compassion.

## **Sources of information for our TEF submission**

### **Collaboration with The Open University**

The [OU Student Charter](#) and [OU/OU Students Association Relationship Agreement](#) sets out how each party works together to secure the University's mission. The documents are regularly reviewed to set the terms of engagement between each party.

### **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) contact**

The appointed contact for the Student Submission is the Deputy President of the Students Association. This individual has had previous experience as a Faculty Representative on the previous SLT, working with stakeholders across the nations in relaying the interests of OU students and part-time distance learners more broadly.

### **TEF indicators**

In the research we conducted for the submission, we focused on following indicators:

- Teaching on course
- Academic support
- Assessment and feedback
- Student voice.

Research for the first three indicators consisted mainly of qualitative research and quantitative findings from the National Student Survey (NSS), with anecdotal data complemented by our internal Annual Members Survey (AMS).

### **Students Association staff support in compiling information**

Staff support came from the Association's Strategy & Insights team and Policy & Public Affairs team. The Strategy team were responsible for conducting and compiling research for the submission. This came in the form of holding incentivised focus groups, invites for which were sent out by email and publicised on social media, and surveys sent out to our Central Committee Representatives (CCRs). The focus group had      attendees and the survey received      responses –      from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), from Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM),      from the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) and      from Open/Access courses.

In addition to conducting specific research for the submission, we were also able to obtain relevant data from the Association's AMS, the OU's NSS results and the CCR representative reports, which covered every school in the OU.

### **Working with the OU**

The office for the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) (Students) were responsible for the OU's submission to the TEF. Their overall remit is to enhance students' learning and teaching experience at the OU, so they have a large collection of quantitative data on the student academic experience.

    has been meeting with them regularly for support with the student submission. Collectively, we have been able to establish timescales and gather data whilst maintaining the independence of the Association submission, thus preventing undue influence from the OU. Data provided by the PVC Students' office has come largely from the findings of the following surveys: the NSS (2022 results), the Student Experience of a Module (SEaM) – a bespoke OU survey run at the end of each module (2021 results), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (2021 results) and the Graduate Outcomes Survey (2021 results).

## **Student experience**

### **Quality of resources**

Our findings around learning resources, and student views on this, have centred around access – both to printed and online materials. Our findings from the focus group found that most participants thought the resources offered by the OU (including print books and online learning materials) were of a high quality. Participants agreed that online resources were easy to find, though some commented that they would like the time limit on accessing the resources – currently three years – removed to allow access for those studying for six years.

*"The quality of the resources for me has been amazing ... a lot of the research and the stuff being presented to me is very current and very up to date and the tutorials added to that as well. So I've always felt like it's been fantastic quality throughout."*

This is consistent with the NSS score for Learning Resources, where 84% of respondents were satisfied. Whilst there was a 0.5% drop in satisfaction for this from 2021, this is roughly 3% higher than the sector average. This speaks to the OU's reputation for striving to make Higher Education (HE) accessible to distance learners, which in turn stresses the need better consider distance learners in discussions about HE nationally.

participants felt that resources such as audio files could be listed better, following systematic naming aligned with the module sections. Furthermore, participant pointed out that sometimes there had been delays to their alternative-format learning materials reaching them by post. This is a re-occurring issue that is regularly raised with the OU and does impact on the student experience.

The provision of alternative formats while awaiting a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) assessment was highlighted by a participant as having been especially helpful.

*“They actually sent [the alternative format learning material] out before I went through DSA. So they saw my diagnostic report and the disability team sent the stuff out.”*

This speaks to the fact that the OU is the largest provider of HE for people with disabilities, with 83% of those with a specific learning disability being satisfied with the OU, according to the latest NSS results.

The provision of alternative-format learning material is also something that several of our CCRs have highlighted as a priority. While some schools respond well to this need, it is inconsistent across the OU.

*“Some alternative-format documents did not include transcripts or diagram descriptions. These were available on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) but if a student was using the specifically prepared formats, they would not have accessed the VLE. This has now been corrected and descriptions etc. are present in alternative format documents.”*

*“Raising delays in materials, particularly written material for students who require it. Improved recently.”*

Overall, we can see that students are generally content with the OU’s provision of online learning materials. Further work to improve providing alternative formats is needed, but we are encouraged by the progress made and the OU’s willingness to continually engage on this topic.

### **Learning and teaching**

It is widely accepted that one of the OU’s main appeals to prospective students is the hybrid learning platform. This is something that has and continues to be warmly received by students. All focus group participants agreed that the face-to-face and online teaching hours had been available at times that suited them. Online tutorials were particularly helpful for participants who would otherwise have to travel long distances to attend in person. This has been supported by an agreed tutorial recording policy in recent years.

Participants also found that encouragement from their tutors to explore information outside of the course material had inspired them and added to their learning.

*“I’ve had amazing tutors ... [The tutor] just brought in her own examples, recent news stories that relate to the materials and just really brought it to life with kind of examples that we can go and read further on. She also recommends texts outside the OU that we might want to read if we’re finding a particular topic interesting. So, it just adds so much more depth to it and it’s really very enjoyable.”*

Conversely, lack of engagement from tutors – such as not having their camera on during tutorials or heavy reliance on PowerPoint slides – made the experience less enjoyable

Tutors are fundamentally integral to the OU student learning experience as they are key to making that experience both enriching and enjoyable.

The NSS results largely corroborate the positive reception of teaching by students at the OU. Despite seeing a 2% drop in satisfaction from 2021, satisfaction remained high at 84% in 2022. However, when unpacking this further, only 47.9% of participants agreed with the statement in item seven on the 'Learning Opportunities' section of the NSS – 'My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt'. This is down from 51.5% in 2021 and is roughly 13% less than the sector average, thereby highlighting a particular ongoing challenge for the OU.

We can infer that the OU's hybrid learning platform does make the provision of such opportunities a challenge.

### **Support**

Focus group participants complimented the OU's Support Services but felt that the team needed additional training to advise on more complex situations where students might need more help navigating existing policy documents/guidelines. Participants were also appreciative of the support they had received from the OU's Career and Employability Services.

*"[Careers and Employability services were] amazing ... helped me at the end of my last degree. I had a one-to-one to help me with my teacher training application."*

Moreover, participants had a positive experience with the OU accommodating their requests regarding mitigating circumstances (e.g. special circumstances forms or discretionary postponements).

*"The support explaining what my options were, regarding finance as well ... and then also while I actually went to enrol back on my deferred modules ... the support was exceptional."*

Despite the positive experiences, participants did also highlight potential improvements to support services. While they felt their accessibility needs, where applicable, had been met, felt that more could be done for students while they were awaiting an official diagnosis (such as ADHD or dyslexia).

mentioned the need for better visibility of the OU's support services, in particular around mitigating circumstances, as they had come across some students who were unaware of the support that they could access.

*"I would say communication of [support that comes under mitigating circumstances] needs to be a bit better as well because personally I spend a lot of time on social media directing students who are in quite difficult circumstances to apply for it...They don't know it's available...I think it should be made clear right at the start of your module that that is available if you find yourself in those circumstances."*

The CCR survey showed that all respondents mentioned signposting to essential services provided by the University in committee meetings, thereby establishing signposting as an area the OU need to improve on.

### **Assessment and feedback**

Focus group participants highlighted potential improvements that could be made around assessment:



- Errors in exam papers (such as incorrect numbering of questions or incorrect data) had been spotted too late in some instances, and amendments posted on module forums on the day meant that some students had already submitted their exams.
- Clearer guidance for students around how they could access online assessments would be helpful, including details about how many times they could access and amend their assignments.

*“So, I had a question because iCMA [interactive computer-marked assessment], obviously you can log in and out ... take as long as you want. I didn’t know with the iCME [interactive computer-marked exam] so I had to wait a week for my tutor to answer the question. If I log in, do I have to complete it within a certain time frame? Because there was absolutely no guidance, and I did not want to open it and then find I had to do it all then and there.”*

Participants were appreciative of receiving detailed feedback on their assignments, particularly where tutors had highlighted specific areas they could improve on.

*“I’ve always found feedback to be very detailed and very helpful on my TMAs”*

Participants mostly felt that they had been able to achieve good grades with the different assessment methods used within their module. Issues they had occasionally encountered were:

- conflicting advice from tutors
- last-minute amendments to incorrect information in exam papers
- not being able to draw on the expertise of tutors outside of their tutor group.

*“[If there are] specialists in an area that you’re asking questions about, I think it’s perfectly acceptable for [tutors other than the one assigned] to give advice and follow up. I think the whole thing is too subjective on the AL [Associate Lecturer] that you get.”*

The NSS showed an 82.6% satisfaction rate for assessment and feedback, down from 84.9% in 2021 but more than 14% higher than the sector average for 2022. This emphasises that generally students are satisfied with assessment and feedback at the OU, with any areas for improvement presenting themselves as minor adjustments.

## Student voice

### Representation on OU committees

There are currently student representatives on 43 OU committees, 32 of which relate directly to taught provision (undergraduate and post-graduate). These committees range from Boards of Studies, which focus primarily on the content of modules and qualifications, to Senate, which is the academic authority of the OU. Student representatives are supported by both committee staff and a dedicated staff team within the OU Students Association. They also have the opportunity to come together once a month at a forum led by the VP Education where they can share issues and best practice and receive important updates from both the OU and the OU Students Association. Since 2018, over 200 individuals have been involved in representation, many of them across multiple years and roles.

### Quality monitoring and enhancement

The quality monitoring and enhancement (QME) process is an annual exercise at the OU to ensure that academic standards are sound and that a high-quality student learning experience is in place. This is overseen by the Peer Review Group. Whilst providing current quality assurance, responses also impact future developments.

During the 2020/21 academic year, the VP Education successfully campaigned to become co-chair of the Group and for student representatives to be able to submit independent reports on whether they felt that their school was meeting the required standards. This was described by one member of staff as “*the most innovative use of student engagement she’s seen in all her years at the OU*”. The QME process has been revised for the current academic year, with student submissions to be re-instated next year.

### **Student voice week**

In 2017, the Students Association launched its inaugural Student Voice Week, which has continued to be an annual event, planned and hosted in collaboration with the OU. The specific objectives have varied year-on-year but have general themes of increasing awareness of student voice activities and increasing participation in them. 2022 saw over 3,000 students register for a catalogue of 38 events, ranging from workshops on making OU study inclusive, to student and staff chats on social media, to an introduction to the newly elected SLT.

### **Student consultations**

As well as taking part in consultations, student representatives are also able to shape the consultation process at the OU. At institutional level, there are currently three student representatives on the Student Consultation Management Group who help shape the overall process. Members of the SLT promote and often host/co-host consultation events to which the wider student body are invited, which in recent years have focused on study support during lockdown, tuition strategy and the future of exams. At school level, student representatives on Boards of Studies help shape the consultation planning and feedback processes, and often participate in consultations as moderators.

### **Student voice toolkit**

Over the past few years, student representatives and Association staff have collaborated with the OU Student Voice Team to produce a *Student Voice Toolkit*, which provides guidance and best practice for OU staff for involving students in curriculum design, projects, research, and committee meetings. It emphasises the need to take a partnership approach, and student representatives were able to offer particular insight into making these initiatives equitable and accessible to the diverse OU student body.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the OU’s Emergency Management Team (EMT) had a subgroup for Academic Implications (AIG), chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. It was responsible for making key academic decisions whilst ensuring quality and standards were maintained. Student input on academic policy decisions in response to the pandemic was expressed through Association representation, through the President and VP Education, on AIG. Where AIG identified that existing OU policy and regulations did not enable sufficient flexibility to provide appropriate support for students to complete their module, temporary changes to policy were introduced – something which the Association representatives contributed to.

When these policy changes were implemented at faculty level, concern was raised by student members of the Student Experience Committee (SEC) and the Qualifications and Assessment Committee (QAC). It was felt that the tone of the policy paper was not sufficiently balanced to reflect the student experience, with too great a focus on academic standards and insufficient focus on the impact on students. Members on QAC and SEC noted that whilst this policy was in line with the rest of the sector, this was a complex process which historically had not been made explicit to students.



The exceptional circumstance of COVID-19 highlighted the need to make this transparent to students and centre their lived experiences.

A group of students formed an OU Module Results Appeal Group on Facebook – about 500 members – to highlight their discontent on how module results were determined. This group organised an online petition and contacted politicians, notably MPs. The main feedback was that the extent of the impact of Standardisation, particularly on the results of students who undertook remote exams, was unfair and produced results significantly different from individual students' expectations of their performance on the module. The PVC (Students) met with the organisers of this group and their feedback was considered and informed the following:

- Actions were taken to raise awareness of Standardisation, including adding information to the Help Centre and updating module-specific remote exam guidance documentation.
- Work was undertaken to improve communication and provide information for students undertaking remote exams from September 2020.
- In response to student feedback following the June 2020 exams, a pilot was undertaken on a small number of STEM modules in the September resits where the submission window within which a student should undertake their remote exam was changed from 24 hours to 4 hours within a 24-hour period. Analysis of results showed that this change had reduced the inequality between students as a result of personal circumstances and the time they must dedicate to sit a remote exam.
- An exceptional appeals process was established and made available to any student who had completed a remote exam or whose Final Assessed Task had been cancelled in June 2020.

The pandemic had an impact on module result outcomes. The data for 2019/20 showed that for all students with a module result outcome there is an overall increase in the module pass rate of 3.4% for undergraduate modules and 5.1% for postgraduate modules compared to 2018/19 modules conflated for the same period.

## **Student outcomes**

### **OU policies and initiatives**

The OU have a proactive student support policy whereby the University ensures that students receive the right service at the right time in order to maximise their opportunities to succeed. This entails a coordinated and enhanced study and support model which covers all aspects of a student's goals, needs and study experiences. It includes an underlying aim to be inclusive of all students within a diverse student population, and this is achieved through establishing several different modes of contact: phone calls, emails, bulletin board messages and text messaging.

The approach also prioritises proactive telephone support to factor in those students least likely to ask for help. This proactive telephone support is given to students from certain cohorts and makes use of predictive analytics to identify students who are at risk of not continuing. These efforts resulted in a statistically significant improvement in pass rates, with students in the 40–60% probability range seeing their pass rate increase by 15–19 percentage points. Targeted academic support sessions were also run to complement proactive student support. As highlighted in the institution's TEF submission, these have played a key role in improving student motivation and mood.

### **Pastoral support**

A key form of support for students is the OU's Careers and Employability Service (CES). CES provides support to students and to alumni up to three years after they have stopped studying. Support entails one-to-one telephone or video appointments, interactive group sessions and a range of online tools including the use of AI. CES has a data-driven approach which helps the OU further understand 'the whole student'. This provides insights into the career needs of students so that resources and services can be targeted appropriately. For 2020/21, the pass rates of students engaging with CES were 16.4 percentage points higher than those who did not engage, thereby making increased engagement a priority for CES.

Since the 2019/20 academic year, more than 36,000 OU students have declared a disability in each academic year, thereby highlighting the need for extensive and comprehensive support for students with additional needs and/or a declared disability. Support includes non-medical support, residential schools support, specialist alternative module material formats, equipment loans, and alternative examination arrangements. A dedicated Disability Support Team work with students and their Student Support Teams (SST) to create a personalised profile for every student that declares a disability. The OU have invested heavily to support students with additional needs and/or a declared disability – this increased investment corresponds with a generally satisfied user, based on information from our focus groups. However, as highlighted in the 'Student experiences' section, more proactive support could be afforded to students awaiting an official diagnosis and signposting to services ought to be clearer and more streamlined.