

Exploring ways to engage the OU student community in the OU Student Association's research work – Analysis report

By Jessica Drue Williams

This topic really interested me because I love research and I was genuinely intrigued to learn why students did and didn't engage in research at the OU Students Association. Student associations play a big part in student experience at university, as well as giving students various opportunities. On the contrary my initial thoughts were, many students are either unaware of the OU Students Association or find that there are barriers preventing them from being involved. For me, it is very important to be a part of/have as much involvement as I can with the educational facility I am studying at. Many students seem to be unaware of the Open University Students Association and the opportunities they have on offer. I initially thought students may not have engaged as much due to the fact that there was limited awareness about the Students Association as well as confidence, disability and language barriers.

I was very intrigued about the OU having a student association as it made me feel like, although I wasn't attending a brick university, I was still getting the experience of being involved in something meaningful such as the OU Students Association. For me it is important to be hands on/involved within my educational institution and the Students Association gives me this chance. Once looking around the website, I found it easy to navigate and find many voluntary opportunities. These opportunities stood out to me as I am passionate about voluntary work and making positive contributions/changes. I applied for many of these roles and the staff have always been easy to communicate with. The website is quirky and well designed. The opportunities that the Association have to offer are outstanding and the staff have always been extremely kind and welcoming. The Association staff all seem very passionate about the Association which makes the experience even better as they show they care about the Students Association. It's always nice to be involved with opportunities run by individuals that are dedicated to them. Overall my experience from the moment I stepped onto the Open University campus to the moment I left was outstanding. The Association staff were very helpful and attentive to any questions we needed clarification on in regards to our research preparation. They are very understanding and patient which makes the experience even better, more memorable and meaningful.

On the two training days we had, we explored our thoughts and views about the possibilities preventing students from engaging with the Students Association and we came up with many ideas, for example language barriers, accessibility, confidence, lack of time etc. We explored different ideas and put them into categories. These ideas helped us form a picture of how we would conduct our research when it came to interviewing our interviewees. We worked as a team with our mentor to identify the different themes that could restrict students from engaging with the Students Association. Each Student Voice Researcher came up with ideas on the different restrictions that may prevent students from being more involved in the Association. Our mentor then worked with us to put those into broader categories.

Following our discussion we identified the following themes;

Time constraints, being judged, cultural diversity, confidence, awareness, experience, accessibility/disability, approachability.

In preparation for our project work we had to identify questions for each of them. This was done individually and the results from this were as follows:

1. If you only had two hours to spare, what type of Association activity/event would you go for?
2. What kind of research activities would be most inclusive? [Our follow up to this was: How can we invite different viewpoints and/or ensure students are able to express their views?]
3. What could make our research activities more meaningful to you?
4. As an OU student, what do you think the barriers are for students to engage with the research? [Follow up: Do you have any suggestions on how these can be overcome?]
5. Do you visit the Association's website often? [Follow up: How often and what type of information would you look for when it comes to research?]
6. Do you have any suggestions to make student engagement in our research more fun and meaningful?

The students that engaged in our SVR research were very helpful in helping us to conduct our research and answer our questions. The feedback was amazing; they were very patient with us SVRs. One of the main points that stood out to me was the conversation on accessibility. Many of the students that engaged with us on Adobe Connect felt that there were accessibility restrictions which prevented them from regularly engaging with the Students Association and the website. They also felt that there were language barriers on the SA website and they voiced that there was a need for the Association to have the option of various languages on the website. Anxiety came up in the conversation and some students felt that they got anxiety when it came to engaging with other students, which they felt prevented them from participating in research, activities/events etc. with the Students Association. Confidence seemed to be a barrier that triggered anxiety for some students as they felt they may be judged, looked down upon, and possibly rejected. I agree that students may find it hard to involve themselves due to accessibility. As someone that suffers from dyslexia it's a bit intimidating doing a project with people you may have never met before as you may feel judged for your disability which also goes hand in hand with confidence. A few students said that the website was outdated, the colours were too bold or the website was too difficult to navigate around. I personally disagree with this, I find the colours catch my eye and make the website interesting as opposed to many other websites that are boring. It's nice not to have the same old 'boring' website and it kind of gets your mind off the stress of 'this is a website related to my university. Oh yeah that assignment is due next month'. The Students Association website is a nice short distraction from everyday life and a nice way to be involved in university related and unrelated topics. It's like a little welcoming community that you get to know and cherish. Awareness is a big factor in student engagement and the students explored ways we can help raise awareness for OU students so that they can also get the most out of the Students Association and benefit from being involved in the amazing work, events and activities the Association has to offer.

Many of our themes can go hand in hand, or may be relatable to each other in some ways. As I mentioned before for example having dyslexia myself could lead

to me feeling lack of self esteem or the feeling that I may be judged for reading out something wrong or not being able to speak aloud without saying a word incorrectly.

The feedback us Student Voice Researchers received was expected as in our discussion we came up with many reasons similar to the reasons we were given by the students that participated in our research. This helped us have what felt like an instant connection with the students as we had not only come up with questions but we had actually thought through our questions, reasons and empathised with the restriction possibilities. It helped that I was able to closely relate with some of the feedback due to me having experienced some of those barriers.

The recommendations in order to encourage maximum student engagement would be to raise more awareness. I feel the OU should explore the possibility of helping their students engage more with the Association such as adding a link to the Association website on emails they send, they could also add a link on student home as well as mention/recommend the Students Association in phone calls they have with students. Increased social media presence would be great for raising awareness to more students at the OU, as social media is a big part of technology in this era. To help students engage more with research the Association could possibly look into tailoring specific research projects to students studying those subjects. For example if the research is based on science, it is highly likely that a research project like that would interest someone who is studying a science related course. Another example would be for the research project we conducted. This type of project could possibly interest someone studying a psychology related subject as this type of research relates closely to how the human mind operates. I recommend that the OU work closely with the Students Association to help raise awareness of the Association and increase student engagement. Students felt that they would engage more if their names were added to the reports stating they engaged in the research as they felt it would give them a sense of achievement.

Analysis report written by - Jessica Drue Williams. Concluded on 20.03.2019.

References:

Student Voice Researchers - Jessica Drue Williams, Kajan Kokulanathan and Chloe Elizabeth.

Student participants - Anonymous.

Student association mentor - Pooja Sinha.