A Very Snuggly Community: Where is the entrance and how deep is the Student Voice rabbit hole?

By Jodie Schuster

Introduction

So, here I am involved in opportunities with the Open University Student Association (OUSA) again! But why and how did I get involved in the first place? The first opportunity I took up through the OUSA was a shadowing role with the Learning & Teaching Development (LTD) Team in July 2018. At that time, I was actively looking for shadowing opportunities and with a simple input of the words 'shadowing opportunities Open University' into a search engine, I found the OU community web page. My aims included gaining a clearer picture of how student voice was incorporated within the Higher Education (HE) environment, an understanding of how students from widening participation backgrounds are been supported, and to get a feel for a career as a researcher.

However, my current involvement, as a Student Voice Researcher, was fairly by accident. I was sent a link via email from the LTD team to view the publication of my story and I noticed that I could click on the OUSA icon. It led me to the OUSA website; a hidden place to get more information on Student Voice at the OU, and as it turns out, a place to seek out and apply for further opportunities.

I wrote on my application for this position 'student voice is my passion…I am even researching student voice for my dissertation…I [would] like to explore my fellow OU students' journeys [and] I know, from my own personal experience, that engaging with the Student Association can be an empowering, rewarding and thought provoking (I want to add scary!) journey to undertake. So, here I am, left wondering why my fellow peers got involved, how they found out about opportunities to get involved, what is their experience of engaging in opportunities, and how can we get more OU students involved?[1]

Question underpinning my research:

> ➢ What is there to get involved in?
> ➢ When did students first hear about the Association?
> ➢ What are the barriers to participation?
> ➢ How to encourage participation?

Involvement in what?[2]

Upon undertaking an initial online search into what types of activities and opportunities are available as an OU student, I wrote the following in my research journal (2018):

> *I did not realise the depth of opportunities available to me as a student of the OU*

Even though I have been an OU student since October 2016, and started to explore the available opportunities after I had undertaking the shadowing, I simply had no idea of the buzz on the Milton Keynes campus, nor the buzz off the Milton Keynes campus!

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[1] Scope and Scale of research will not allow me to answer all these questions in this written report but my research partner will be addressing some of these questions

[2] My report cannot cover the full range of opportunities available and I have had to be selective.

My first contact after the shadowing was the Summer additional of the OUSA magazine; a quarterly magazine I had been receiving via email since 2016 but never bothered to read before. I found out through reading this particular magazine that the OUSA was buzzing with opportunities. For example, there had been a Central Committee Representative Seminar held over two days in April. This was filled with new and returning OU student volunteers and OUSA staff members all deeply engaged in the activities planned for that seminar, such as attending a regular Pubhd event were "you go to a pub…listen to a few short [interactive] talks…[and give the] speaker a pint" (Thiemann, 2018)[3]; developing skills through mock meetings (Cave, 2018); participating in workshops (Anna, 2018); a research exercise and presentations to inform the student volunteers on the "importance in the University's structure" (Hadjipanteli, 2018: 13).

Or in fact there was a Central Executive Committee (CEC) in the first place and you could not only attend meetings, events, participant in discussions and vote, but you also had a choice of being a Committee member or an observer (Docherty, 2018; Anna, 2018). Moreover, the CEC has a student leadership team (Patterson, 2018) who all submitted reports and all OU students have access to and available to read via the OUSA website (OUSA, 2018a). Or take the opportunity to become a Learner Experience Representative with the Student Voice Team like Hannah Jayne Profit had done (Profit, 2018).

There are student clubs to get involved with and the OUSA had 10 official clubs which all had been set up by OU students and have activities and meet-ups both on and off campus (OUSA, 2018f) such as the 'School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Club', 'Carers Club', Dyslexia Club' or the 'Walking Club' for example (OUSA, 2018b). However, my last count on the OUSA website stood at 34 clubs including 'Role Play Games Clubs', 'Biology Clubs' and 'Public Speaking Club' (OUSA, 2018c); it is still growing and more information is available via the OUSA webpage (OUSA, 2018n). Not interested in joining a club? Then what about becoming a member of one of the 22 different societies? (OUSA, 2018d) Get involved with developing your chosen societies newsletter, or what about attend a meeting for the 'OU Business Associate Society' (OUSA, 2018e). Attend a revision weekend or a conference (OUSA, 2018d), or simply attend one of the nights out organised through the Postgraduate Student Society or join their Facebook Group for 'friendship' (OUSA, 2018d; OUSA, 2018e). Further still, there are emerging and affiliated clubs and societies to become involved with such as the 'Shakespeare Society' or the 'Robotics Club' for example (OUSA, 2018d; OUSA 2018l; OUSA, 2018m; OUSA, 2018e).

However, if you are not interested in joining a club, society, or becoming a member of the CEC then there are other things to get involved with. Take my current project as an example. The Student Voice Researcher project is an exciting and thought-provoking opportunity to develop your academic researcher skills, make a valid contribution to the Student Association's Strategy (OUSA, 2018h), meet and collaborate with fellow OU students, and meet our OUSA staff members. Or if you are looking for something more local, then get involved as a Student-led Projects Leader and develop a community project (OUSA, 2018i). There is even the opportunity to set up a local 'meet-up' (OUSA, 2018j) or attend a local 'meet-up' which can be found through the OUSA Facebook page (OUSA, 2018i).

Finally, reading Profit's article in the Summer magazine opened my eyes to understanding that the OUSA is not only about volunteering and clubs, but it is also about having a support structure in place

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[3] See Harding (2018) for Thiemann's reference.

for students and understanding that OU students are more than a personal identifier code. I also came to realise after reading Profit's article that hearing students' voice can "make a difference [and] support [given by OUSA staff members] really benefits students" (Profit, 2018: 15); you can even join in a conversation on Twitter to gain or give support, get your voice heard or simply just read posts and connect to other students (OUSA, 2018g).

How to start borrowing: Access to the OU Warren

As an OU Student you automatically become a member of the OUSA

(Personal Communication, 2018)

I did not know I was automatically enrolled in the OUSA nor did I really care to know. Why? Well, I was undergoing huge changes in my life in 2016 and this included starting my course, and being a member of a student's association had no bearing on my life (or so I thought!) As a new student in 2016, I am in no doubt that I was informed in some way at the beginning about this, but I paid zero attention. The OUSA did not exist as far as I was concerned! After all, I had already gone through 4 years at a brick university and while there I only attended 1 Freshers event to see what kind of clubs/societies I could join, and like now, I am still not interested in getting involved. In other words, my brick university student association offered nothing of interest to me, so if the OU had an Association, then nothing would interest me. But what about other OU students?

Undertaking an interview with a fellow OU student[4], who is currently engaged in many activities and volunteering roles, expressed a similar process of initially ignoring the OUSA when they first become an OU student. As the following expression[5] was given in the interview:

I probably did receive loads of things through the post from the OUSA but probably binned them as I didn't have the time to read all that stuff…I was busy with full-time work and studying

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

I could not help but wonder, how interviewee 1 became so involved in the OUSA then? Well as it turns out, they also made first contact with the OUSA in an indirect manner, like I had. Interviewee 1 expressed their access method:

I was unaware of OUSA before…it was for personal and career reasons…I personal need to past my module…I was looking for past papers in the shop [OUSA website] *and came across the opportunities*

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

And how did interviewee 2 first access the OUSA? Indirectly of course! Which is expressed in the following statement:

*I didn't know about the OUSA…only found out through **word of mouth**…at a local meet-up a student volunteer **told** me about the Association*

(Interviewee 2, 2018)

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[4] As requested by the interviewee, all information has been anonymised to protect their identity.
[5] I have termed this as expression as I did not record the interview and acknowledge I may have not scribed the students voice word for word.

For both interviewees it was word of mouth which led to them engaging with further opportunities and activities, as these two expressions highlight:

*It was through **speaking to two student representatives** who explained what the Association did … and then I became more aware…from there [OUSA society] I **heard** about the Association …I then **heard** about [opportunity] from [staff members name] and then I **heard** about [society]…then from there I became involved with [OUSA club] …then was **told** about [volunteering opportunity]*

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

*I got involved in further activities through **word of mouth**…and **though other students** and social media*

(Interviewee 2, 2018).

I think it is safe to assume that word of mouth and the advisement of other students' words is the most effective form of communication to gain access and to start borrowing. And it is visibility and access to the OUSA website which is essential to unlock the OUSA warren in the first place. From here there is space and scope to borrow where you like. This initial access and further digging down the rabbit hole can be seen by another OU student. To quote his words:

*I have been a Student Representative and also involved in the Student Consultation process for some time…and I have participated in the Association's own Research in different ways and am a regular user of the OU's fantastic library. And over the years I have been involved in the Student Community in all sorts of ways…I saw the Student Voice Symposium advertised on the OU **website**. It looked interesting and so I decided to attend"*

(Patterson, 2018: 20)

This is my space your digging in! Barriers to burrowing

A recent OUSA volunteering Research Project (VRP) identified two major barriers involved with volunteering, these are time constrains and accessing information (Sinha, 2018).

The most common reason giving by OUSA volunteers is time constraints (Sinha, 2018). There is a pressure on OU students because, most of us, are part-time students with other factors which drain our time. For example, the VRP identified four barriers in relation to time constrains:

1. Work commitments
2. Family commitments
3. Need to focus on studies
4. Very little spare time

(Sinha, 2018: 35)

And being an OU part-time distant student myself, I can appreciate that these factors do have an impact on your decision to volunteer, attend an event or even read the OUSA magazines. The constrains on time was also a major factor for both of the OU students we interviewed for this project, which can be seen in the following expression:

*Barriers? It has to be **time**…barriers would have to be **trying to balance** my studies with work and volunteering…I feel I'm **juggling a lot of commitments**…there's also the **traveling to meetings** which can **take a lot of time***

(Interviewee 2, 2018)

Interviewee 1 was more vocal about time constraints and displayed moments of frustration they felt while carrying out their role:

Time! Time is a big factor…and once your volunteering they think they can put more on top of you…can you do this and can you do that?!...it [current role] *was sold as being three days of meetings over the year…then there's writing up reports after* [activity] *which is **time consuming** and I don't feel students should have to do that…**plus the traveling to a number of events in Milton Keynes** which is often seen as the centre of the universe!...this* [current role requirements] ***doesn't take into account other commitments** that students have such as full-time work and family commitments*

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

Clearly, both students felt the squeeze of time. Both interviewees also touched upon other factors which takes up precious time, such as the need to travel to Milton Keynes for events and meetings which they thought had not been carefully considered by the OUSA. Interviewee 1 also argued for the need of more:

local events which could be held in other cities such as London…something close to access points like the train station…it is time consuming travelling to Milton Keynes

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

Interviewee 1 goes further and expresses that the OUSA had not fully considered the factor of time:

the time investment is far greater in practice

(Interviewee 1, 2018).

Interviewee 1 also touched upon the second major barrier, accessing information (Sinha, 2018). They thought that the OUSA was creating barriers because of poor quality of communication about what the role requirements were. They offered a remedy to the problem, ss can be seen in the following expression:

*We need **clear and concise communication from the OUSA** about what you're getting yourself involved in…the Association needs to be **upfront about the time commitment** needed…the Association needs to **clarify and give direction**…which is **clearly communicated** to the student* [name of role]

(Interviewee 1, 2018)

Interviewee 2 also thought that accessing information and communications channels needed to be addressed by the OUSA and they also offered solutions on better modes of communication:

***Information on events on the Association's website needs to be more visible**…social media is the easiest mode of communication…and mass emails could be another way…access to Sharepoint would be good…the Association could also give more information about the structure of staff team and student leadership team…need to know who is who when you have a question*

(Interviewee 2, 2018)

To summarise, both students felt that time constraints was the major barrier in their volunteering roles and both highlighted the barriers to accessing information. Interviewee 1 argued for clear and concise

communication about what the requirements of a role will entail including a realistic time scale, and also argued for a particular focus on giving clear direction once a student was in the role. For Interviewee 2, visibility of events and opportunities was a priority, and they argued for the need of multiple modes of communication and for extra information to be clearly available and accessible to student volunteers.

The VRP also highlighted the following:

where gaps in communication were identified, the common theme appears to be the need for clear lines of communication, and clearer expectations around how different groups can feed back about their volunteering work

(Sinha, 2018: 23)

As this research project has demonstrated, there is a need to develop ways of clearly communicating about what the role involves and to offer more direct and applicable support to students once they are in their chosen roles. There is a need to develop a platform for student volunteers to give their collective voices and I feel this project is a step in the right direction for hearing those voices. I have certainly used this as a platform for my own voice to be heard! This research project is also an opportunity to open up communication channels between staff and students, and I argue that projects such as this one, is essential for developing a clearer line of communication.

A carrot key: How can we grow the warren?

In a recent poll published on the OU Student social networking site Twitter, it highlighted the main preferences on how OU students access news. The results are as follows:

8%	Printed newspaper or mag
52%	On social media
32%	Newspaper/mag website/app
8%	TV/radio
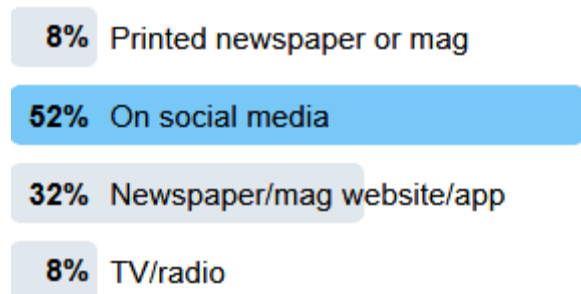
116 votes • Final results

(OUSA, 2018k)

As demonstrated in the poll, social media is the most preferred mode of commination and interviewee 2 also noted that social media is the easiest way to communicate (Interviewee 2, 2018). However, we need to think about those students who do not engage with social media but who would still like to be communicating to other students and finding out about available opportunities, which includes both social and more formal opportunities (Newble, 2018; Samengo-Turner, 2018; Interviewee 1, 2018; Interviewee 2, 2018; Sinha, 2018). For example, I prefer to read about opportunities in the OUSA magazine and take great interest in reading how students have benefited from volunteering and how this contributes to the OU student body. Clear and concise communication given to students via multiple platforms will be the most effective mode of communicating and raising awareness of OUSA. Also, I feel there needs to be a clear message of the importance of student voice and how voice feeds into the OUSA strategy.

However, at the risk of my voice taking over, I could like to end my report with the voices of both interviewees on how they would encourage participation in OUSA activities.
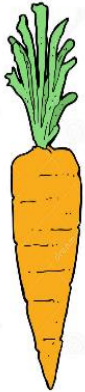
Interviewee 1:

- Be clear on expectations and offer directional support
- More concise communication
- More transparency and be clear on partnership between OU and OUSA
- Give background information through blogs
- More visibility to the formal issues such as CEC papers
- Make the OUSA website more accessible and straight forward
- A what's New session on the OUSA home page
- Sending regular reminders about what the OUSA does
- More celebration of successes of OUSA
- More information on the impact of student voice

Interviewee 2:

- More student voice out there to encourage participation
- More visibility to events and opportunities on OUSA website
- Highlight the benefits of getting involved such as increased confidence, gaining transferable skills and developing a sense of community
- OUSA should be more visible on Student Home page
- More engagement and encouragement from tutors about the Association
- Training materials which includes online training
- Communication on multiple platforms

Purpose of this report:

I asked the Research and Information Officer, Pooja Sinha, to give a brief explanation of how Student Journey Project relates to the OUSA strategy as I was struggling to put it down in my own words due to my learning difficulty. I feel Pooja expresses the purpose of this research report in a more formal and comprehendible fashion that I am capable of and I wanted to give a snapshot of the level of support I have received from Pooja throughout my time volunteering on this research project. Pooja writes:

'The Student Journeys Project has come about as part of supporting our student community. We wanted to gain a better understanding of how OU students engage with the activities organised by the Association, and their individual journeys with the Association. We recognise that students want to

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[6] All sources of the images have been acknowledged in the reference list

engage with us flexibly and with the option of a diverse range of activities. The activities and events organised by the Association, from participating in our Societies to starting interest-based Clubs, offer students the opportunity to do just that.

Through this project we wanted to explore how involvement with the Association has had an impact on students, and to use that insight to develop our work further as part of our strategic objectives to "engage students in a vibrant and supportive community and create new opportunities" and "raise awareness of our actions and the impact of our work to enhance the student experience and student success".

(Sinha, 2018b)

Jessica Smith, the head of student community adds:

This project, for us, is really about gaining and understanding into the motivations of volunteers and those taking part in community activities – including meet-ups, societies, clubs etc – and the impact of that involvement on their journey with the OU. Some key areas of interest for us are around loneliness and isolation and how engagement in Association activities can help combat those issues, and help students progress in their studies.

We are also really keen to hear more about how we can increase engagement in community activities – what are the barriers for students and how can we support students and volunteers more effectively.

(Smith, 2018)

A huge thank you to a very supportive and passionate OUSA team for allowing me to get involved, supporting me through out the process, and hearing my voice

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