



Student Voice Researchers

**Student Journeys**

**Project 2018**

The Report

Revd. Mark Humphries. Dip CPC.

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# **Student Voice Researcher Student Journeys: The Report**

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## **Introduction**

This report was commissioned by the Student Voice Team at the Open University Students Association (the Association). This report aims to understand the journeys that students make through their education with the Open University and their engagement with the OU Students Association; the report will conclude by asking the Association questions that were raised. The report has investigated various issues surrounding this engagement and has done so by reading documentation and reports on Higher Education students, and their engagement with their student unions, guilds and or associations; we also looked at previous engagements by volunteers with the OU Students Association, and some of their stories are highlighted in this document. The Student Voice Researchers on this project carried out two telephone interviews, and had discussions about the benefits and barriers to volunteering. The highlights of those conversations have been reproduced below, and Humphries is aware of the time investment given by these students. He and his colleague on this project, wishes to express their thanks to these very busy students.

The project's genesis came about to investigate why some students engage with the Association and others do not. To prepare for this report Humphries and his fellow Student Voice Researchers (the Researchers) met at The Open University's (OU) Walton Hall campus, Milton Keynes on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2018 (see Image 2); during this Induction Event, the Researchers listened to various presentations from the Student Voice Team, and met with individual staff members to discuss the various aspects of why this report is required. They also were briefed in some research skills that they will use both here and later on in their studies and work-life. It must also be noted at this point that the staff team at the Association made this event both fun and

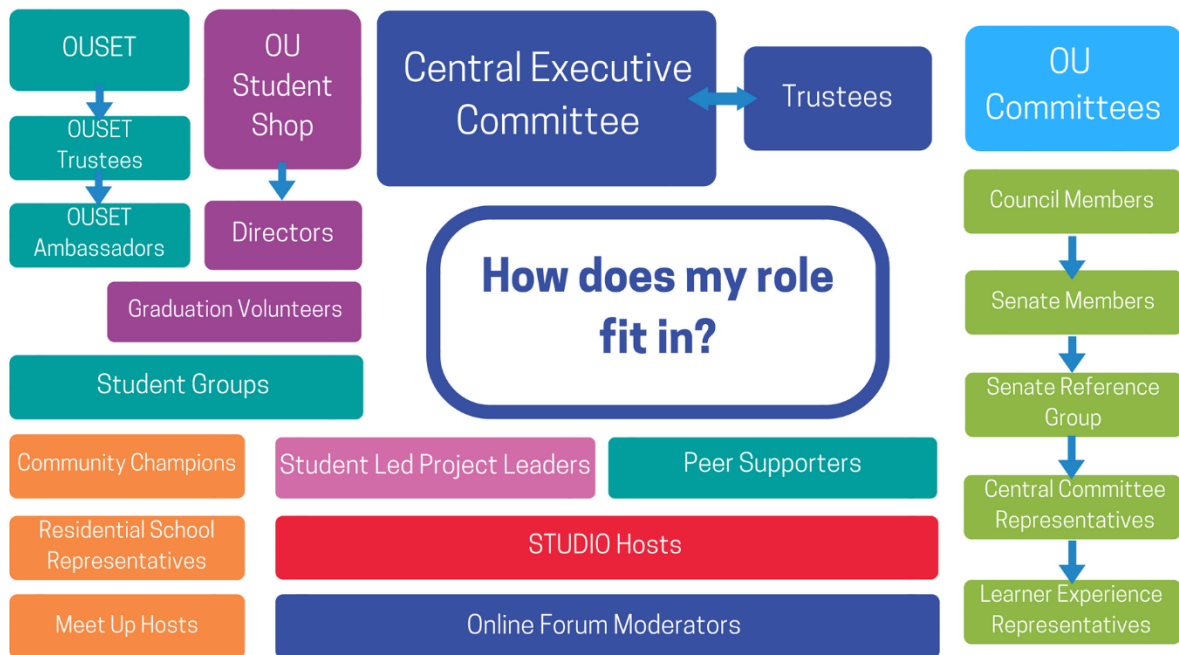
informative; the Researchers were also treated to an amazing lunch and lots of coffee and cake.

After the Researchers left the Walton Hall campus they returned to their home areas to read documentation and to prepare questions that they put to OU students that have agreed to be interviewed for this report. The interviews took place over the early part of the week commencing Monday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2018, and would be facilitated by the Research and Information Officer from the Association. Humphries and his colleagues would, at this point, like to thank all the staff members at the Association, the interviewees and the Open University for this opportunity to inform and enhance the works that are carried out by the Open University Students Association.

### **The Students Association**

The OU Students Association, is a student union and also a registered charity (England and Wales 1144251 and in Scotland SCO042840); it came into being in 1973 after a hard fought battle (see Image 1). Every enrolled student with the Open University is automatically membered with the Open University Students Association, which is why this project is vital. It will assist the Association which wants to act for the whole student body.

The Association has an elected body that governs the charity; they are better known as the Central Executive Committee. This body is chaired by a President (and has been since 1973), and the members of this group serve for a two year term. The objective of the Students Association is to “[e]ngage students in a vibrant and supportive community and create new opportunities.” There are at least seven different teams that make up the staff group at the Association’s office, and the following diagram show where **you** fit in.(The OU Students Association website, (2018)).



### Volunteering:

*The Student Volunteering Landscape 2014* reports that 31% of the Higher Education population are engaged in volunteering, and that they work, on average, 44 hours a year (based on a 32 week term). This report did not look at students engaging with their own student unions, associations, guilds etc, but at volunteering in general. Notably this report did suggest that 33% of their respondents said that they would prefer to volunteer within their student union .Interestingly, if that percentage figure was to be transferred to the Open University Students Association it would mean that the Association would have a ball-park figure of 55,000 volunteers which might give them a different reason for carrying out this Student Journey project.

The OU Students Association gives a wide variety of opportunities where students can get engaged in volunteering. They are creating more opportunities that will allow students to match their time availability, and their flexibility of working choices – do they prefer to work on their own or in a group? (Sinha, P., (2018). The *Volunteering Research Project 2018* report says that 82% of the students who participated in a focus group stated that their main motivation for volunteering with the OU Students Association was to make new friends, [this

was also true of one of the interviewees in our project], some 84% were engaged in their volunteering “to help the student community” (Poppenga (2018)). It is worth reporting at this point that many of the students that are engaged with volunteering invest more time than is advised by the Association, (see chart 1 recreated from Sinha (2018)).

*The Student Volunteering Landscape 2014* reports that the 725,000 volunteers in Higher Education are investing £175 million into the UK economy. Whilst that report looks at students volunteering in organisations away from their university the economic benefit must be looked at. Humphries is not aware at this stage of the exact numbers of volunteers that engage with the Association, but based on the minimum wage (see link to the minimum wage rates)<sup>2</sup> let us think about how much our volunteers are investing into the OU Students Association. Volunteering is an investment of people power and financial power, and we, at the Students Association must harness as much of both aspects as we can.

### **Case Studies**

The OU students Association website has many examples of case studies for us to view. In this section of the report Humphries will select a few stories to share; stories that express why people got involved with the Association. **Sue Goodyear** is having a study break after gaining her degree, but her story shows a variety of opportunities that Sue was able to engage with. Her reasons for getting involved were: **Someone helped her, and she wanted to repay that, personal development, and to get the voice of students heard**, (Past Trustee (2018)). **Billy Docherty** says that “volunteering with the Association is being part of a community of diverse people”. He volunteered so that **student get support, to encourage ideas, a better OU community could be built, and to meet new people** (Faculty Rep(2018)). **Sheila Cameron** is the **Disabled Student’s Group Chair**, and she volunteered to: **be part of a community, meet current and previous students, to give back, and to feedback on the student experience**, (Disabled Group Chair, (2018)).

### **The Interviews:**

My colleague and I had the pleasure of interviewing two students that have found the time to engage with the volunteering schemes in the OU Students Association. We agreed that we would not identify these respondents, and for that reason they will be known as Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2. See list 1 to read the basic discussion prompts that we used. We did try to stick to this plan, but as discussions and conversation happen they sometimes find a path of their own. Both of us were aware of this, and were able to return the interviewees back to the focus when we wandered a bit far from our path,

**Interviewee 1:** (Interviewed w/c 26:11:2018)

He has been studying with the Open University for a decade reading various modules and is now reading for a BSc combined STEM degree. His involvement has been more subject-specific and has joined societies and clubs for the social aspect of life; this was evidenced when he continued to talk about going along to meet-ups, but he also talked about time constraints (which is a key factor in the *Student Volunteering Landscape* report).

Our interviewee became aware of the Association after visiting the online shop (oustudents.com), he was buying past examination papers. On being asked the question about when he first heard about the Association he did say that he might have binned some of the mailings as he didn't have time to read them.

This interviewee wanted to know more about the relationship between the Association and the Open University, especially at faculty level. He was interested in the structure and procedures of the Central Executive Committee; he has attended meetings with this committee as an Observer. One of the key points for this student was learning more about the 'serious' side of the Association and the volunteering opportunities. This student wanted to make sure that if he invested time (short as it was) that it was put to good use.

Of note was the seriousness that this student's tone took when he started to discuss some of his wants and needs. He discussed the flexibility and respectability of both the Open University and the Association. He wanted his contribution to have an impact on decision-making (which he will be through this

report). He then talked openly about wanting my printed material and opportunities to attend residential schools. It was his passion about these things that urged him on to engage with our Association.

He told us about the efforts that he has invested to attend face-to-face (e.g. events arranged by the FUSION Society). This interviewee is also a keen advocate of the social media sites, and in particular, Facebook. He did go on to say that he felt as though the Milton Keynes site was “the centre of the universe” and wanted to see the regional centres being used more and that the Association ought to be clear about what the volunteer will be getting involved in and (my interpretation of what he said is) to have a more realistic person-specific description.

This student felt that there was some lack in the quality of student-volunteers that the Association selected; the volunteers were not representing the voice of the student-body as they were not speaking up at meetings. My thoughts on this are that there might be a need to look at this respondents suggestion above; a realistic person-specific description of who the Association are looking for would be of use to both Association and perspective student-volunteer. Having said this, he did say that he recognised the need for student contribution, but that it had to be balanced with their area of expertise. To give an example of what he was discussing, he commented on the volunteers needing to give feedback after attending meetings etc, and that this feedback had to be in report form. The unvoiced question that I heard was about the ability to write reports; then questioned the needs for reports as committee secretaries provide official minutes of these meetings.

This interviewee did praise the staff-team at the Association and said that they had always given him the support he needed. He talked about the feeling of being connected and a part of the university because of being engaged with his roles. He told us that because of his engagement in these activities he has made friends both online and face-to-face.



When we asked our final question the interviewee responded by telling us that to engage student participation the Association needed to be:

**\*Clear on expectations,**

**\*Concise in communication,**

**\*Giving background information,**

(so that students are aware of the relationship between OU and Association)

**\*More visible with their reports,**

(felt that the Central Executive Committee reports were too many clicks away to find easily)

**\*Sending out regular mailings about what they do,**

and

**\*Highlighting the impact of Student Voice.**

**Interviewee 2** (Interviewed on the same day as Interviewee 1).

Our second interviewee has been studying with the Open University for five years, and he is working towards a degree in Business Management. After his graduation he will be seeking employment within this field, and in particular, wants to work within Marketing or Human Resources. He got involved with the Association to help combat the feeling of being lonely, and to feel part of the community. Like our previous student, this interviewee did not know about the Association until 2017; he only found out about them at a Meet-Up, and this is how he also became involved with groups and activities. He has attended Conference (2018), where he met other students, felt a real part of the community and which he described as “fun.”

He told us that he enjoyed the opportunity to visit the Walton Hall campus in Milton Keynes (which is something that I must echo). He has sat as part of the Central Committee Representative group which meets around four times a year. This interviewee is still involved with the Association, and hosts the Meet-Ups in his local area, (these happen every 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday and the 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday in the month). He makes sure that he has “freebies from the Association”, and information leaflets for the students to take away. He did go on to mention his disappointment at the lack of numbers attending (on a personal level I can add that this is a shame as the venue is centrally located within his area). He is still

enthusiastic about his involvement (which was evidenced to my colleague and I during the interview), and is trying to arrange a Christmas Meet-Up in his area.

This participant said that social-media was the best vehicle for dissipation of material and information. He also commented that emails would be useful for mailing out mass communications regarding events and activities. He uses the Association's page that is local to his area to inform students of their meet-up times.

The interviewee said that there was support from the Association in the following ways:

- \*Advertising the Meet-Ups,**
- \*The supply of leaflets and information,**
- \*Training sessions to develop skills,**
- and**
- \*Having travel expenses reimbursed.**

Our respondent did go on to mention improved methods of support which include access to Sharepoint (a Microsoft device which allows sharing of content online). He would like to see more training video presentations so that student-volunteers can access this information online and regularly during the initial stages of their engagement. He also said that it would be good if there was more structure<sup>1</sup> of the staff team and student leadership team at the Association.

We asked about advice that he would give a student new to the Open University. The participant said that he would encourage all students to get involved and attend meet-ups. He commented on the confidence building that these activities can bring. He, along with others, have suggested that tutors could be asked to point students in the direction of the Association website ([www.oustudents.com](http://www.oustudents.com)).

## **The Author's Response to the Interviews**

The author brings another voice to this report; his own voice as a student and volunteer with the Association. He uses this section to discuss the points raised by the Interviewees. Interviewee 1 raised the point of wanting more printed material. While Humphries likes hardcopy material to read, study and make notes upon, he is also aware of the current trend to create a paperless environment both in the community as a whole and within education from primary school through to Higher Education.

Kilgore (2012) states in the Abstract to his thesis *Less Paper, More Learning: The Future of Education* that “[t]echnological advances are becoming more present in the modern day world including in the school system. In the past years, schools have already been exposed to newer technology such as SMART board, laptops and overhead projections to enhance the learning experience.” He goes on to say that with these technological advance in Information Technology and mobile devices it only makes sense to add them to the learning environment.

Humphries would suggest that those who carry mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets and the like would welcome a paperless learning experience. This seems to be more beneficial to those students that juggle many time-consuming activities, and those that cite time barriers as a reason for not getting engaged at a deeper level with the Association.

There was also some discussion with Interviewee 1 about the need for student volunteers to write reports and submit them to the Association. His argument was that Minutes would be produced from the meetings, and these would be dispersed to the interested parties. There is a counter argument to this; and that is the voice of the student writing the report. Minutes will details what happened when, and will go on to discuss the matters at hand. Reports submitted by student-volunteers (like this one) will go on to give a voice from the attendee’s perspective, and that is important to the Association if they are going to hear student voices.

Both of our telephone interviewees are keen advocates of the various social media platforms employed by the OU Students Association. Humphries is aware of students that do not use social media; during the induction event that he attended recently he met at least one Masters degree student that did not know what to do, or what different social media platforms were for. In that case the author of this report would not suggest to the Association to rely on these platforms in reaching the student body as a whole.

One contrast between our two interviewees was their take on the Walton Hall Campus in Milton Keynes. One of the respondents (Interviewee 1) felt “as if it was the centre of the universe.” The second Interviewee was happy to attend the site, and enjoyed his visit. The author of this report has only visited the campus once, and he would concur with the second interviewee, and will go on to say that he found the staff (of both OU and the Association) friendly, welcoming and accommodating. This does, however, raise questions for the Association. How can the OU Students Association attract volunteers to training and or other events if campus, and the travel distance and time is seen as a barrier?

Humphries is aware that time and travel can be real barriers to stopping a deeper level of engagement; he is also aware that the Association are accommodating and will reach out to meet a need. Recently two volunteers attending campus needed extra night accommodation; one needed an extra night prior to the event due to the time that travelling on public transport would take. The other needed an extra night at the other end of the event due to becoming too tired and too ill to drive. The Association covered those extra hotel costs which is evidence that the Association is committed to its student-volunteers.

### **Concluding thoughts:**

This project has looked at Student Journey’s and how the student body engages with their Association. Humphries suggests that not all students who engage with the association in some form or another will go on to become volunteers. As suggested by Interviewee 1, he went to the website to look for

past examination papers and then clicked on the other tabs to find out what this Association was about. Had he not been so inquisitive the Association might have lost the services of this student-volunteer.

This poses a new set of questions for the Association: Who are the students that engage with the Association's website but do not go any further? Is there anyway of capturing their data (within the constraints of GDPR) in order to follow up their contact? In what way would the Association respond to these students?

It is also possible, of course, that there are students that receive emails from the association and do not reply; remember the comment that Interviewee 1 said about the binning of material mailed to him. How many of us delete emails because of their subject line, or because we rush into our inboxes? There might be students that respond to surveys that are emailed out, but do not seek out the website. Humphries, as a Student Voice Researcher is interested in finding out the answers to these questions.

It appears that the OU Students Association are on the right pathway to assist students to get involved, but there were voices that we listened to that have expressed some issues that still need addressing. One of our telephone respondents suggested that the Association needs to be clear on what is expected from each volunteer for the role that they undertake. He also suggested that it would be useful to be furnished with some background information about why that task needs to be carried out. While one of our Interviewees told us that they enjoyed visiting the Walton Hall campus in Milton Keynes, the other suggested that the place felt as if it was the "centre of the universe." He said that he would like to see more events, activities and training taking place at different regions across the United Kingdom.

Mark Humphries  
December 2018

# **Notes, useful links, images, charts and references**

## Notes and Useful Links

1 Structure = the way that the different teams look to make it clear which team is responsible for which aspect of student life etc.

2 See Minimum Wage rates Available at <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>, accessed 30:11:2018.

## Useful Links

For the Volunteer Policy 2018:

<https://www.oustudents.com/uploads/www.oustudents.com/5b02c337bc7d5-Volunteer%20Policy%202018.pdf>

For the Volunteer Agreement 2018

<https://www.oustudents.com/uploads/www.oustudents.com/Volunteer%20Agreement%202018.pdf>

For all your training needs

<https://www.oustudents.com/volunteer-zone-training>.

## The Questions asked of the Interviewees:

**Q1.** Could you tell us a little bit about how long you have been studying with the OU?

What subjects are you studying?

Are you studying for leisure, work/career?

**Q2.** What kinds of activities or clubs are you involved with through the Students Association?

How did you find out about these clubs and activities?

**Q3.** When was the first time that you heard about the Association?

Do you remember how you heard about the Association?

**Q4.** What motivated you to get involved with the Association?

Are you currently undertaking any volunteering roles with the Association?

Have you undertaken any other volunteering roles in the past, either with the Association or another organisation?

**Q5.** In your engagement with the Association, were there some key steps that you took- from first hearing about the Association to getting more involved?

What is your preferred way of hearing about Association news/events?

What is the most effective way for you to communicate with other students?

**Q6.** What challenges or barriers have you faced in your role(s)?

Are there any negative aspects to volunteering?

OU study often demands that students juggle work, study and family commitments. Could you please tell us a little bit about how you balance the different demands on your time?

**Q7.** Does the Students Association offer you support when you are engaging in Student Association activities?

Are there areas where you think the Association could improve the support it offers?

(If lack of support is highlighted) Does this have an impact on how you engage with Association-related activities?

**Q8.** Do you feel that getting involved with the Association has benefitted you?

Have you found these benefits to spill over into other areas of your life?



If you were to meet a new OU student, what advice would you give them about getting involved with the Association?

**Q9.** Do you have any thoughts on how to encourage participation in Student Association activities from other OU students?

In your view, what is the biggest barrier for students to get involved with the Association?

What should the Association do more to encourage students to get involved?

These questions were used to guide our conversations. For the most part we stuck to the script, but in order to let the conversation flow other questions might have been asked as well. Some of the questions listed here might have been omitted due to the respondent answering them naturally before we got to them.

# Images

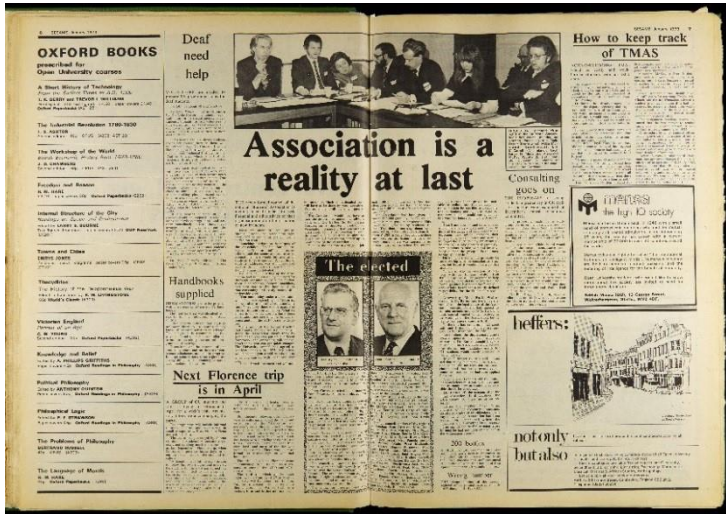
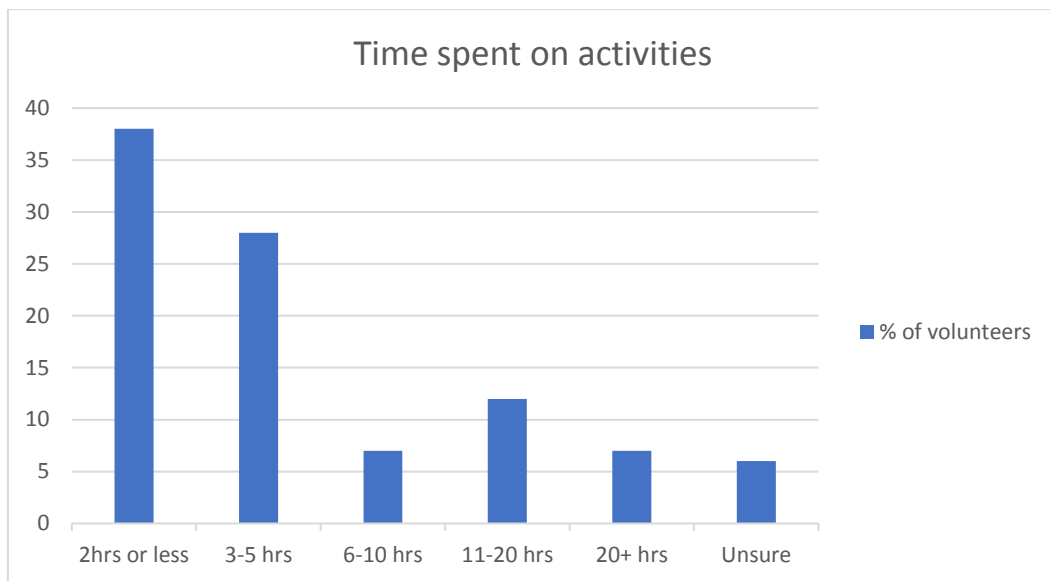


Image 1: Sesame (Student Newspaper announces the launch of the Association (1972) (The OU Students Association Website)



Image 2 Student Voice Researchers in training: (yes, the hats were a vital part of this training session even though my colleague has removed hers. Photos by OUstudents Voice.

## Charts and Tables



**Chart 1: Online survey respondents indicate the time that they usually spent on their volunteering role each week. Of note all 69 respondents replied to this question.**

## References:

Front Cover image Berrill Building (Main Reception OU Walton Hall site) used courtesy of phoenixcreatives, 2018.

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Open University Students Association Website,(2018), *Your Association*, Student Leadership Team, Available at <https://www.oustudents.com/central-executive-committee>, accessed 27:11:2018.

### Image 1

<https://www.oustudents.com/our-story>.

### Image 2

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<https://www.library.wcsu.edu/dspace/bitstream/0/640/4/Paperless+Classroom+Thesis.pdf>