

Appendix 3 - Association Impact Updates for Council - Speaker Notes

At the start of the year the President agreed with the University's Council for the Association to be given a standing agenda item at every Council meeting in order to update Council members on our work and the impact it has in making a positive difference for OU students.

At the Council's meeting in February, Sarah Jones (President) and Danielle Smith (Student Member of Council) shared the first of these updates.

The session speaker notes are shared below and the slides that were supplied to Council members after the meeting are in Appendix 4. A [Hoot blog](#) was also created to share the updates with students.

"We wanted to share with you just a few updates on areas of the Association's work where we are making a big difference for OU students

Our Freshers Activities

The Students Association organises Freshers Fortnight for new and returning students twice a year – in September/October and in January/February. Our most recent Freshers Fortnight 25 January – 7 February saw our highest levels yet of student engagement in our online events, competitions and communications.

We ran a total of 49 events providing both informative sessions and social networking opportunities for students starting, or continuing, their study journey. A few examples are:

- *A Welcome to the Students Association and Freshers Fortnight which saw 165 students attending,*
- *a Societies and Clubs Fair that had 112 attendees,*
- *our Meet your student reps session with 83 attendees,*
- *our University Challenge Warm-Up – always a popular event! - with our new 2021 team which had over 100 viewers.*

We are appreciative of the support from our University colleagues – including Library Services and Careers & Employability Services - who work in partnership with us to deliver our Freshers programme of events.

I wanted to share with you a few student comments from our Freshers feedback survey:

'I found the sessions I went to very informative. The range of things available to access was varied and diverse which I think attracted a wide range of people. Doing Freshers this week has made me realise, as a new student to Open University (starting Feb 2021), that the social aspect at the Open University of students is vast - I thought learning with the OU would be quite isolating but actually the social aspect took me by surprise and it almost feels a closer community than that of a red brick uni.'

'Freshers fortnight was brilliant! It gave me the opportunity to get to know more about the OU, Clubs, events, The Student Association etc. It was also really beneficial to get involved and meet other new students - it felt a very positive and supportive environment. I now feel more at ease about starting my course, after engaging with as many Freshers' sessions as I possibly could, knowing that there is a huge amount of support available.'

'If it hadn't been for Freshers fortnight, I would be blind to so many great opportunities, tools & events that the OU has to offer. It gave me a well-rounded understanding of and insight into the OU, whilst being fun and social. I am so excited to be starting my OU journey!'

I think this feedback helps to highlight the critical role the Association plays – alongside the University - in developing a welcoming and supportive environment for new students and in helping to build a strong and vibrant student community to enhance the student experience.

Individual Representation

We are incredibly excited to be launching a brand new support service for students later this year.

We currently offer only collective representation for OU students - but for the first time in the Association's history, we will be introducing an Individual Representation service in the Summer. This will allow us to offer individual, direct, case support to students going through Stage 2 and Stage 3 appeals and complaints and to students with cases before the Central Disciplinary Committee.

The provision of this service will deliver important benefits to students, to the University and to the Association. Students will be able to access more comprehensive support from the Association during difficult and challenging situations in their study journey. This support - which will be easy to access, more comprehensive and personally-tailored – will deliver improved student outcomes and also greater acceptance of, and satisfaction with, those outcomes.

This will increase the support services and independent advice to which the University can sign-post students, in line with the Good Practice Framework of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education (England & Wales). This service will also be a significant contributor to the University's Widening Access & Participation Plan and Student Success priorities by increasing the level of resources and advice available to disadvantaged or under-represented students who may otherwise struggle to access these critical support services. We strongly believe that the introduction of this new service will therefore greatly contribute to our shared goals of increasing student satisfaction and student retention.

We are grateful to the University for providing the additional funding to allow us to introduce this new service – on an initial 15 month pilot programme – and also to our colleagues in the University's Student Casework Office who were instrumental in helping us develop the business case and who are partnering with us on the introduction of the service.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)

Like the rest of the world, we were appalled by the murder of George Floyd in the US last year and issued a formal statement in June 2020 on the Black Lives Matter Movement. In our statement we confirmed our commitment to undertake tangible actions to improve our organisation and our commitment to EDI – setting out 12 pledges. I wanted to let you have an update on our progress so far.

A cross-organisational working group was formed comprising both student representatives and staff members. This working group is shortly to be converted into Committee status and its membership expanded to include Trustees and the recruitment of a ‘student consultative group’.

An equalities action plan has been created setting out clear actions we will be taking to deliver against each of our 12 pledges.

We are making ‘unconscious bias’ training mandatory for all student representatives, staff members and Trustees.

During Black History Month and Student Voice Week we held a number of consultation events for Black students and are incorporating this feedback into a wider EDI research programme which is currently under development.

We have introduced a new ‘Equality Impact Assessment’ tool which has already been piloted and will now be embedded into our business-as-usual processes.

We are reviewing our website and all other online channels to identify how we can better represent Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices, along with creating a dedicated resource bank on our website covering both guidance and support.

We are also looking forward to working closely with Marcia Wilson in key areas such as the University’s Race Equality Charter application and it’s work on the degree awarding gap. Alongside this partnership working, we will - of course - also be fulfilling our commitment to our members by acting as a critical friend to the University, challenging the effectiveness of the University’s Equality Scheme and Equality Champions where necessary and holding the University to account on its commitments in this area.

Policy & Public Affairs

In our policy and public affairs work, we have been working across immediate and longer-term priorities as the pandemic continues to heavily impact our members’ lives and student experiences.

In relation to the COVID19 crisis, we have worked to highlight with ministers and politicians the role that OU students are playing on the frontline, especially in teaching and nursing professions, and drawn attention to the sacrifices these students are making and the impact that it is having on their studies. While much of the conversation around HE during the pandemic has been focussed on issues around student accommodation, we have worked hard to remind policy-makers that distance-learning students have also been impacted significantly in different ways,

including having to home school children, losing jobs where entire industries have suffered, and feeling more socially isolated than ever.

Our longer-term priorities will continue to focus on improving student finance for part-time distance-learners across the four nations, looking to Wales as an example of what could be possible. Connectivity and digital exclusion is a major issue for OU students, and we are eager to continue to remove barriers to entry and success for protected characteristic groups. We have developed manifestos for the Welsh and Scottish devolved elections, focussing on these priorities – our manifestos will be published shortly.

Just to share a few of our recent policy & public affairs highlights:

- *I put a question to the Minister for Universities regarding maintenance loans for PT/DL students at an All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students*
- *We submitted a response to the Welsh Government consultation on the Draft Tertiary Education and Research Bill*
- *We submitted a response to the OfS consultation on Digital Poverty*
- *We enabled students in Scotland to attend a round table evidence gathering session hosted by the Westminster Scottish Affairs Committee*
- *We are also formalising a relationship with Athabasca University Students Union and Graduate Students Union – Athabasca is a Canadian distance-learning University – with a view to collaborating internationally in the future*

The expansion of our policy & public affairs work is a key element of our strategy where we are looking to create significant impact – our (ambitious!) aim is to make ourselves the ‘go to’ student organisation for anyone who wants to hear ‘student voice’ on the challenges and experiences of distance- and part-time learners.

I hope this has been useful – we have created a short powerpoint which I will circulate after the meeting which captures the key highlights and also has links if you would like to find out more about our work in these areas.”

Council members were very pleased to receive the report and found it extremely informative. They are looking forward to the next update at the May Council meeting.