

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)

16 – 18 April 2021

OU BUSINESS SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP WITH UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **Note** this update on the upcoming commencement of the relationship between the OU Business School and the University of Bologna.
- ii) **Consider** the position of students involved in this partnership if they wish to stand in elections and **Recommend** an appropriate remedy.
- iii) **Recommend** any additional steps necessary to ensure students studying as part of this relationship are adequately supported.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The relationship between the OU Business School (OUBS) and the University of Bologna (UniBo) is to commence in September 2021, with students studying for the MSc Finance qualification at both institutions. This paper provides an update on how the implementation of this relationship will affect students, given that the qualification will be studied in a way different to other OU qualifications.

2. Background

- 2.1. Planning for this relationship began in the academic year 2017/18 and eventually went through the different stages of Academic Governance between 2018 and 2019. First presentation was anticipated to start in October 2020. During this process, objections were raised at every stage by student representatives. The reasons for this included: costs to students, the financial risk to the OU, lack of student support, issues relating to the obtaining a visa and travelling abroad. Despite these objections, the partnership was approved.
- 2.2. In February 2020, FBL were informed that the partnership was being delayed by twelve months from October 2020 to October 2021. The reasons given for this were varied but are of no relevance to this paper. We are now at the stage where the commencement of the partnership has been confirmed to be starting in October 2021 and focus from student representatives has changed

from opposing implementation to challenging the OUBS to ensure that the highest level of student support is maintained, and their full rights are protected.

- 2.3. The OU Students Association's relationship with the post-graduate school of OUBS has often been challenging, with an appearance of unwillingness to meaningfully engage with the respective student representatives when challenged. Following the recent appointment of a Partnership Manager for this partnership, seems to be an opportunity for meaningful communication appearing, though this is often a time-consuming process.

3. Further Information

- 3.1. Whilst there are some areas where satisfactory answers are still outstanding because decisions have not been made, some answers have been provided, and these will now be set out below, split into four sections:

- 3.2. Enrolment

Enrolment for this qualification opens imminently ahead of the commencement of studies in October 2021, with students expected to travel to Italy shortly before the start date. Students will enrol directly with the OU, with the creation of a dedicated qualification website in production to help answer any common questions.

- 3.3. Payment will be made to the OU, in sterling, and will be reflective of the prices normally charged by UniBo. The OU will then pass on this to UniBo, where necessary, such as in year one where the students are studying on the UniBo campus. These prices are lower, but not by much, than the OU prices. The price will be fixed in sterling for each offering, with any change in foreign exchange rates being absorbed, or gained, by the OU, providing a stable price for all students in that cohort.
- 3.4. Support for obtaining a visa, now required after Brexit, will be given by UniBo, drawing on their greater experience in this area.

- 3.5. Studying

The first year of studying as part of this qualification will take place on campus at UniBo. Students will need to make independent arrangements with regards accommodation etc., though guidance can be given through UniBo.

- 3.6. Despite studying in Italy first, students will be considered a student of both institutions from day one. In addition to this, students will have access to a 'dummy' VLE, allowing access to OU resources, including library access.
- 3.7. Concerns still exist over the potential differing standards in the approach to accessibility. The Master's Teaching Director in FBL was unable to give a definitive answer on this, stating that UniBo will have to adhere to appropriate EU/Italian law in this area and he believes support will be similar. It was also highlighted that some of the issues of distance learning will not be applicable because students will study year one in person on UniBo campus. It was

highlighted that this can raise different challenges and they have been encouraged to get further assurances in this area.

3.8. Conversations are also ongoing with how any resits will be handled, including the number of attempts permitted. If any of the modules completed at UniBo require a viva-voce, the student will need to do these, in person, at UniBo.

3.9. Support

The current default position is that the student will use the student support team of the institute that they are currently in attendance at. Conversations are continuing around this, with the partnership team recognising that there might be occasions where access to the other student support team will be appropriate. This has been encouraged.

3.10. As the students will be recognised as OU students, even when studying in Italy, they will be members of the OU Students Association by default, with access to the various support initiatives we have, as well as other features of being a member. This could be accessed in the same way as any international student.

3.11. As a member of the OU Students Association, students on this partnership will be eligible to both stand in and vote during elections. This raises the issues of residency when it comes to the roles of AAR. At present, students can only stand for the position of AAR, or vote for an AAR candidate, in the geographical region in which their address is registered with the OU at that time. This potentially has an impact on the students studying this qualification, as they may only be resident in Italy on a temporary basis. Whilst the chance of this issue arising might be minimal, it is a possibility that may occur that is not covered by our current rules, and will need consideration, not only for this partnership, but to futureproof for any similar circumstances

3.12. Student awareness of the OU Students Association, and their ability to access the different resources, has been discussed. It has been agreed that we can create something small to be included in one of the communications at the beginning of studies. This will need to be a descriptive paragraph or two and will need to be developed.

3.13. Contingency Planning

When considering the impact of the pandemic, it has been suggested, as a prudent measure, to the partnership team that some contingency plans are in place in case the pandemic continues to impact the studies of the students enrolled, or if a similar novel situation arises. In conversation with the partnership team, it has been discovered that there is currently no contingency plan and there were no plans for this to be developed in the near future. The appropriateness of this approach has been questioned, and they have agreed, albeit reluctantly, to consider having some contingency plans in place. It has been suggested that events to be considered, include:

- Inability to travel to or from Italy due to restrictions imposed.
- The closure of the campus at UniBo.
- Ability to access the same support given to other OU students.
- Advice on the need for appropriate insurance.

3.1. **Next Steps**

- 4.1. A student representative will soon be appointed to a working group set up for the implementation of this partnership. This student will have MSc Finance experience and has already been provisionally identified. In addition to this, I as FAR will remain involved in discussions.
- 4.2. The next meeting with the faculty is due to take place towards the end of April, at which the working group will be established.
- 4.3. The CEC is asked to consider the position of students who are involved in international partnerships involving overseas attendance and recommend a solution to allow for full participation in the election process.
- 4.4. The CEC is asked to recommend any additional steps that we should take, as a Students Association, to support and aid the students studying as part of this agreement.
- 4.5. The CEC is asked to recommend any additional areas which need to be discussed with the partnership team within FBL.

Gareth Jones
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