

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION**Central Executive Committee (CEC)**

18 July 2020

POLICY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS UPDATE

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **note** this update regarding policy and public affairs work

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper aims to provide an update on the Students Association's policy and public affairs activity and outputs since January's CEC meeting.
- 1.2 The COVID-19 crisis has had an impact on the type of work that is required in this area and so it is hoped that this paper will bring all CEC members up to date with the activity over the last two quarters.
- 1.3 This paper is split into three sections. The first section provides details of advocacy work that has been completed. The second section provides an overview of some of the relationship building activity that has occurred. While the final section provides a key additional achievement to celebrate.

2. Advocacy work

- 2.1 *Higher Education Commission: Disabled Students Inquiry:* The Students Association response was submitted to the Commission and has been made public via the website. It surveyed the views of disabled students and highlighted issues around negotiating the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) and student loan application processes, delays in the provision of DSA support, and provision of alternative formats, whilst also highlighting areas where there is positive work being done by both the Open University and the Students Association. Since the deadline for responses closed there has been no further public action taken by the Commission, although I have emailed asking for an update and am currently awaiting a response.
- 2.2 *Engagement with All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students:* We have engaged with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Students on multiple occasions:

- 2.2.1 In February I accompanied Cath to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Students, where she spoke excellently in a discussion on the future of the Augar Report, highlighting the need for maintenance loans for part-time students. This was well received by the group of MPs present.
- 2.2.2 In March, when the government lockdown was established due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the APPG for Students wrote to the Minister for Universities highlighting the impact of the lockdown on students. As their correspondence was predominantly focused on the impact on students attending traditional brick universities, we felt it was important to highlight the impact on part-time and distance-learning students at the OU. We therefore wrote to the Chair of the APPG for Students, Paul Blomfield MP, with an evidence-based (gathered through a huge response to a call for evidence by Cath on social media) account of the significant effect that COVID-19 has had on students' finances, lifestyles, and mental health. This letter was made public via the Students Association website. Mr Blomfield replied personally, addressing the points in detail and requesting further engagement over the issues raised. We have since responded to his email and are awaiting a further reply.
- 2.3 *Education Committee Inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services:* A response was submitted to this Education Committee inquiry in May. Although it is clearly an incredibly broad topic that may not give much time to higher education, we felt that it was important that OU students' voices and experiences were included. The response submitted drew on the evidence gathered for the letter to the APPG for Students in highlighting the impact of the virus on the lives of students, how the Students Association has responded to COVID-19 in its work with the University's committees and crisis meeting groups, and the incredible additional work that elected representatives have done to provide support, entertainment, and community for our members. This response was made public on the Students Association website and has now also been published on the Gov.uk website. The inquiry has reopened the call for evidence until 21 July 2020.

3. Building relationships

- 3.1 *OU Government and External Affairs team (GEA):* We have worked together with the GEA team in Milton Keynes including sharing information to support responses to calls for evidence. While we are still in the process of figuring out how the Association's policy and public affairs agenda will work alongside theirs, there are positive and open lines of communication between us.
- 3.2 *OU Student Voice team:* I have been working alongside Rachel Garnham, the Senior Manager of the OU's Student Voice team, to engage with the Office for Students' (OFS) Student Engagement Strategy, which was released earlier in the year. Although this work is at an early stage, it has the potential to provide plenty of opportunities to work alongside the OU's Student Voice team to gather student perspectives.
- 3.3 *Nations relationships:* I have developed extremely positive working relationships with key individuals within each of the OU's nations offices,

opening up the potential for a great amount of mutually beneficial collaborative work. Having visited both Cardiff and Belfast prior to the lockdown, I now have monthly meetings with each of the external affairs people in the nations offices where we keep each other informed of current and future activities and opportunities to work together and, importantly, bring the Students Association voice into the work they are doing and hopefully create formal links between the Students Association and the nations offices.

4. Additional achievement

- 4.1 *Political Speakers at Conference:* From a policy and public affairs perspective, I was incredibly pleased that we were able to secure the participation of a high-profile selection of politicians to be involved in the 2020 Conference. These were Emma Hardy (Labour, current Shadow Minister for FE and Universities), Kirsty Williams, Lib Dem, current Welsh Minister for Education), Dr Steve Aiken OBE (current Ulster Unionist Party Leader), and Clare Adamson (SNP, Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee convenor). What was particularly pleasing was that we were able to include a range of politicians across both a wide geographical spread, catering for all four nations, and also a good ideological spread, thereby maintaining the Associations apolitical position. I hope that these speakers were both entertaining and informative, and that they may have helped more of our members to understand the impact politics has on their student experience.

5. In closing

- 5.1 If you have any questions or want to arrange to meet to discuss any of the points above, or ideas that you have around policy and public affairs, please do not hesitate to email me at dan.moloney@open.ac.uk

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