Comprehensive Guide to the OU Students Association Forum Service

Index

Open University Students' Association Forums
"AT A GLANCE"

This is a brief guide summarising the O U Students' Association forum service. More detailed information if you require it can be found in the Comprehensive Guide to the Association's Forum service.

1. Student Association community forums are open to all those with access to the University's online learning systems regardless of their membership status with the Association. This includes present and past students as well as University central staff and Associate Lecturers (tutors).
2. There are also closed forums for Association business which can only be accessed by specified groups of students such as 'Talk to your Students Association' Forum, Elections Forums and By-elections Forums.
3. These forums are moderated by students and ultimately controlled by the Association's student representatives with support from the permanent office staff.
4. 'The Association's forums are not part of the OU's official academic provision. But many students who use them find that support from their fellow students makes their OU experience more fulfilling
5. With the exception of the President and Deputy President all students involved in providing the service are unpaid volunteers
6. All users of our forums are required to abide by the University's Student Computing Code of Conduct and online communications systems guidelines which can be found at http://www.open.ac.uk/computingguide/codes/guidelines.html
7. Unless otherwise stated all references to 'the rules' are references to the details found within these University documents.
8. All our forums have a Spirit of Forum and those contributing to any particular forum are expected to contribute in line with its rules. Failure to do so may result in posts being removed and persistent failure to observe the Spirit of Forum may be referred for further action, or removal of permissions in case of posts being made in the closed forum by users who don't represent that specified group of students.

9. We have a Complaints Procedure and a Disciplinary Procedure which are set out in full in the Comprehensive Guide to the Service

Our commitment to those who use our service:-

We aim to:

- offer an open space to the service users to enhance their study journey
- treat all users of our service fairly and give clear information about their rights to challenge our decisions
- be impartial in dealing with complaints or considering disciplinary action and where possible in the first instance to resolve them informally
- follow the procedure for dealing with complaints

We will not tolerate users of our services:-

- who refuse to operate within the rules
- who refuse to follow individual Spirits of Forum
- who abuse other contributors
- who abuse moderators, staff or elected representatives for carrying out their responsibilities within our procedures
- whose behaviour potentially disrupts the service

… and finally

If you wish to challenge any aspect as to how a forum is managed please contact the forum moderators in the first instance or refer the matter to the Forum Controller

OU STUDENTS ASSOCIATION PUBLIC FORUMS
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE SERVICE

SECTION A - THE BASIS OF OUR SERVICE

1. Rules and Guidelines for Association Forums

a. The Students Association runs a range of forums within the OU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
These include study-related forums, general interest and discussion forums, and forums for those wanting to engage with their study and fellow students. They provide for study support and a social area for students to meet and help build a viable student community.

b. In order to continue to run these forums, we need to show the University we can run them efficiently without having any bad effect on the University or using too many of their resources.

c. The Association is responsible to the University for ensuring these responsibilities are fulfilled. The President is responsible to Association members for safeguarding the provision of this service.

d. The Students Association forums are run independently by students, for students. Everyone who can access the OU's online learning environment (current and past students and OU staff) are welcome to use our forums, but all the moderators are or have been students.

e. The Association requires all forum users to participate in line with the rules and guidelines laid down for each forum. In particular, all users need to respect and cooperate with our Moderators, the

Association Staff acting as Controller of the forums, and the Controller's Advisory Panel (CAP).

f. Participants in the Association's online public forums should be aware that they are open to students under the age of 18, who are able to access them with parental guidance / approval. This should be borne in mind when reading and replying to posts.

g. Participants should be aware that under the Security Act 2015, the Open University has a statutory duty to pay 'due regard' to the possibility that vulnerable students could be drawn into terrorism. The Student Association Forums on the University's VLE fall under this jurisdiction and therefore it is incumbent on the Students Association to report for further investigation, any pertinent activities that might include 'hate ideas' or discussions around 'violent intent

Posts of this nature are likely to breach our general guidelines and it is sufficient for a moderator to deal with them on these grounds. Further action if needed will be taken by the Office Staff who have undergone the relevant training.

2. **Management of the Service**

a. A combination of appointed and elected students take the main responsibility for running our forums. Our appointed student moderators (mods) have the primary responsibility for the day to day management of our forums. Moderators will be listed in the relevant Spirit of Forum and can be contacted via the relevant forum suite 'contact your moderator' forum.

b. Moderators are supported by a Team from the Association Office in the form of the Forum Controller.

c. Beyond Forum Controller there is a Team appointed as the Controller's Advisory Panel (CAP). Any matter that needs to be determined about the provision of this service and which has not been covered in this guide will be determined by CAP on the authority of the Association's President. No member of CAP should be contacted privately to discuss any matter which is under consideration by the panel. Any correspondence for CAP should be addressed to the Forum Controller's mailbox ousa-controller@open.ac.uk

d. CAP has a maximum of six members; four Central Executive Committee members and two Moderator. The conditions of their

appointment and their responsibilities to the service are listed in their respective job descriptions.

e. Current CAP members will be listed in an appendix to these guidelines.

f. CAP membership is determined by the Central Executive Committee of the OU Students Association where members are appointed for the duration of their term of the office (two years), or in the case of Moderators' membership; their appointment is determined by the current CEC CAP members.

3. The Principles of the Forum Service

We aim to:

- treat all users of our service fairly and give clear information about your rights to challenge our decisions
- be impartial in dealing with complaints or considering disciplinary action
- follow the procedures for dealing with complaints

We will not tolerate users of our services:

- who refuse to operate within the rules
- who abuse Moderators, staff or elected representatives for carrying out their responsibilities
- who are either intentionally or otherwise disrupting the service

In the day to day management of the forums, our aim is to provide a balance between the rights of the individual and the service to the majority.

From experience we know there are the odd occasions when significant Students Association resources are spent managing a local dispute or disagreement. Although we want to encourage good quality discussion and, where appropriate, robust debate - and we don't want to censor too heavily or step in unnecessarily – we do have an obligation to ensure that the rules are adhered to and we take this responsibility very seriously.

We also witness the occasional differences of opinions where individuals struggle to compromise and accept each other's viewpoints. We will deal with these instances with common sense and fairness.

CAP has a duty of care towards a wider student body and will work hard to understand where the problems lie by reviewing the evidence and circumstances – but in no way can we act as a court of law and any decisions will be made on the balance of probabilities.

Since our forums are managed by volunteer students, with some office hours support from paid staff, inevitably we cannot guarantee 24 hour coverage, and there has been the odd instance where advantage has been taken of this to cause a problem for moderators within a forum.

As you might imagine, any behaviour in this respect would be treated as a serious breach of the rules.

We ask that users of the service understand and accept these principles.

SECTION B - FORUM MODERATION

1. Introduction

Without moderators (mods) the Students Association could not provide the suite of social forums currently in existence. The Association appreciates this and thanks those volunteers who give their time to support this service for other students.

Moderators are responsible for ensuring that our forums comply with the University's online communication systems guidelines. Although some forums are less active and less controversial than others, all moderators need the same basic knowledge and skills to be able to perform the role. Some forums will, however, require more experienced moderators due to their nature and would not be suitable for new moderators.

2. The role of Moderators

Moderators are unpaid volunteers who give their time freely. They work within a moderating team to ensure the smooth day-to-day running of the Association forums in accordance with the rules.

3. The duties of Moderators

a. To work as part of a Team of moderators to ensure a forum runs smoothly. This will require communication within the moderator team using a dedicated moderator team forum.
b. To ensure a forum operates in accordance with the rules.
c. To ensure that any message which contravenes the rules is deleted and that the sender of the message is notified of this moderator action at the same time.

d. To ensure messages sent to them via 'Contact Your Moderator' are answered in good time.

e. To provide the Forum Controller with any necessary information for complaints to be dealt with in accordance with the guidelines.

f. To assist contributors in understanding the rules pertaining to the service in general, and the individual forum in particular.

g. To ensure that the moderated content is not discussed outside of the forum structure or other approved communication channels.

4. The requirements for becoming a Moderator

a. A moderator must be a current member of the Association at the time of their application.

b. A moderator must not have anything more than an informal warning currently on record with the Association regarding forum use.

c. A moderator must be prepared to undertake training to enable them to carry out their role effectively.

d. Moderator applications from students who are also Associate Lecturers (ALs) will be accepted provided that they perform the role as a student. However, applications from ALs will be carefully scrutinized by CAP and their specific merits and any potential problems considered.

e. A moderator must be able to work within a team.

f. A moderator must agree to uphold the rules.

g. A moderator must be able to understand that different forums require a different approach to moderating, and agree to work with the moderator team to find the approach that suits their specific forum the best (so long as it is in accordance with the rules).

h. A moderator must be able to communicate effectively, be aware of the etiquette of electronic communication, and understand the differences between being viewed as a contributor and being viewed as a moderator of a forum. If posting as a moderator they must make this clear.

i. A moderator must be prepared to review messages in an unbiased manner and treat all contributors with respect.

5. The requirement for forums in terms of Moderators

a. All forums require a Team of Moderators in order to function effectively. The ideal is a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 6. Quiet forums may operate with fewer moderators than this but it

will be taken on a case by case basis and reviewed periodically by the Forum Controller.

b. If the Forum Controller deems that a forum is not adequately covered by moderators, vacancies will be publicised as per section 6a below. If the forum cannot function effectively until new moderators are appointed, the forum will be temporarily made read-only until new appointments are made and a message will be placed in the forum to advise of this action.

6. **The application process for becoming a Moderator**

a. Applications to become a moderator are welcomed at any time. Details on how to apply can be found on www.oustudents.com

b. Where a new forum is being requested, an advertisement for moderators will be placed in the Association's Forum Requests forum as well as the Moderators' General Discussion Forum.

c. Should the Forum be approved, any vacancies not filled by this process will be re-advertised in the Moderators' General Discussion forum. Where an existing forum needs or wants new moderators, an advertisement will be placed in the forum concerned and the Moderators' General Discussion forum.

d. Potential applicants must read these guidelines and the rules. If they are in agreement with the documents, applicants must send a message to the Forum Controller, letting them know that they have read and accepted the details and indicating that they wish to moderate an Association forum specifying if they wish to be considered for a specific forum or are willing to be considered for any vacancies. Checks will be made in accordance with 6f section (below) and, if the application has been accepted, the applicant will be granted the relevant moderator permission if they applied for a specific forum or sent a list of forums in need of additional moderators. The applicant then follows the standard procedure in 6g section (below). If the application is refused, the applicant will be notified and reasons will be given.

e. Potential applicants must read these guidelines, the relevant Spirit of Forum if applying for a particular forum and the associated University documents regarding use of University computer systems. If they agree to these, applicants must send a message to the Forum Controller confirming this and stating which, if any, forum they are applying to moderate and give a brief reason for

their application (no more than 300 words please!). They must also complete the Association's forum online training pack.

f. The current moderator team of the forum concerned will be notified of an application to join the team in order to give the opportunity for any reasoned objections to be raised. All applications, and any reasoned objections, will be forwarded to the Controller Advisory Panel (CAP) for consideration. In general, approval will be given when the applicant meets the requirements noted in section 4, but CAP reserves the right to decline any application. All applicants will be notified and reasons will be given to applicants that are unsuccessful. The decision of CAP will be final.

g. Applicants who are successful will be given a six month trial period of moderating and assigned a Mentor moderator who will support the trainee moderator. This will be waived if the applicant is already an Accredited Moderator or already undertaking a trial period. At the end of the trial period, co-moderators and Mentor Moderators will be invited to comment on the performance of the applicant as a Moderator. CAP will then review the applicant's moderating conduct over the trial, taking into account these comments where necessary, and, if deemed in accordance with these guidelines, will approve the applicant as an Accredited Moderator.

h. If CAP decides at the end of this trial period that the applicant has not fulfilled the requirements for the role of moderator, they will advise the applicant and remove moderator permissions. CAP has the discretion to offer an applicant a further six month trial period, but they are under no obligation to do so, and any decision of CAP at the end of a trial period is final.

i. Moderating an Association forum is a responsibility accompanied by specific permissions. If at any time it is proved that a moderator is misusing those permissions or failing in their responsibilities, moderator permissions can be withdrawn. If there is any doubt over a moderator's conduct, CAP reserves the right to temporarily suspend moderator permissions pending investigation. It should be noted that this will only occur in cases where evidence is provided that is considered of a serious enough nature to warrant suspension of permissions. In the case of all other complaints, Moderators will continue to moderate as normal whilst an investigation is undertaken.

j. In considering the possible removal of Moderator status, CAP will follow the process laid down in the Association's Complaints and Disciplinary Procedures

7. Team of Mentor Moderators

a. There will be a team of Mentor Moderators.

The role of this team will be:

- to act as mentors for new moderators (please see 7f section below);
- to provide ongoing support for moderators if required
- to assist in the moderation of any forum requiring occasional support;
- to provide advice to CAP where necessary
- to ensure that the moderated content is not discussed outside of the forum structure or other approved communication channels.

Members of the Association's Central Executive Committee cannot serve as Mentor Moderators.

b. Current Accredited moderators who have moderated a forum successfully for a minimum of 12 months can apply to become part of the Mentor Moderators Team. Ideally they will have experience of handling various types of forum, settling disputes, and resolving difficult matters.

c. Applicants for the Mentor Moderator Team should forward a written application to Forum Controller stating how they feel they would be able to fulfil this role effectively, including examples of challenging situations they have dealt with as a moderator where necessary (no more than 500 words please).

d. Applications will be forwarded to CAP for their consideration. All applicants will be notified of the success or rejection of their application, with reasons being given for rejection. The decision of CAP is final. Rejected applicants can re-apply after 6 months to join the Mentor Moderator Team.

e. Those accepted as Mentor Moderators will be given access to a closed forum, Mentor moderators, which will enable them to effectively carry out their role. All moderators will have write-only access to a forum to contact Mentor Moderators so that they may contact the team at any point for advice or support.

f. All new Mentor Moderators will be allocated a Mentor Moderator to act as their advisor during their trial period. They can contact the Mentor Moderator at any time for support, guidance or advice on any moderating matter.

g. Mentor Moderators may be called upon by CAP to offer advice. This will occur where CAP feels that Mentor Moderators have knowledge or information that will assist in their duties, and will be in the strictest confidence and at the discretion of CAP.

h. Where there are more applicants than positions on the Mentor moderators team, CAP will endeavour to select the applicants with the necessary skills, knowledge and personal qualities to support the smooth running of the Association's suite of forums as a whole.

i. A Mentor Moderator must be currently actively moderating at least one forum

8.   Initial support and information for Moderators

a. On successful application, all new moderators will be sent a message by Forum Controller and asked to confirm that they have read and understood the information in the Guidelines and that they agree to operate within the terms stated. They will also be required to return a signed copy of the Moderator's agreement. This confirmation and Moderator's agreement will be kept by Association for the duration of their time as a Moderator.

b. On receipt of this agreement, a mentor will be appointed to a new moderator and any pertinent information will be sent. Moderators will also be given access to the moderators' area which contains a practice area and can be used for informal peer support between moderators. Where the moderator is already a moderator of another forum, they will just be given the necessary additional moderator permissions (unless they request a mentor and / or further information).

c. Moderators for any single forum will be given access to a private discussion forum open only to moderators for that forum.

9.   A Code of Conduct for Moderators

a. Moderators must be aware of the rules, and their location, and must abide by the rules themselves both when acting as a Moderator and as a contributor on all forums.

b. Moderators must treat all contributors fairly, and be consistent in their approach to the forum and individual contributors.

c. All moderators of a forum are not expected to read every contribution to that forum, but all messages must be read by at least one Moderator within the team (e.g. if a Moderator goes on holiday they are not expected to read all messages sent in their absence).

d. Moderators must respond to a complaint within 3 working days, but they do not need to wait for someone to complain before they delete a message which clearly breaches the rules. Such messages must be unapproved immediately they are seen by a moderator. Unless complaints are regarding a co-moderator, all complaints should be copied to all members of the moderator team so a consensus decision can be reached. Forwarding a message is acceptable to ensure all moderators are aware of a complaint.

e. Moderators should adopt a professional stance at all times when acting in the capacity as moderator of a forum (e.g. being polite and non-judgemental), and should be aware that their actions as a contributor to a forum that they moderate can influence the tone of the forum and the behaviour of others.

f. Moderators should recognise that the forum belongs to the Association and the contributors. Moderators should only intervene in response to a complaint or a breach of the requirements. They have no more say than any other user of the forum and have no authority to, for example, decide which topics can be discussed (except where stipulated in the Spirit of Forum) or prescribe the way the forum is viewed. They may, however, split or merge threads for the sake of clarity and can lock threads when discussion has been exhausted or the thread has moved to topics outside the Spirit of Forum.

g. Moderators must not provide official support or advice on any matter, other than guidance about the requirements for using the forum. This is particularly important where forums are deemed to be "supportive" in nature, for example health related forums.

h. When deleting posts, moderators must inform the sender that the message has been deleted as part of the process. If multiple posts within a thread have been deleted then a single message on the

forum to that effect will be sufficient notification. Moderators should only delete messages which are not in accordance with the Spirit of Forum or the rules. Moderators should not delete other posts except at the request of the sender.

i. If a post has been deleted the moderating team should discuss it and decide to either restore it, suggest it be modified by the original poster or keep it deleted.

j. Moderators need to ensure they are not over-zealous or heavy-handed, and should use their judgment on whether aspects such as off-topic conversation should be allowed. It will not be the same for all forums, but it should be recognised that off-topic conversation can allow a forum to run more smoothly at times and a sometimes heavy-handed approach can cause more disruption than a handful of off-topic messages.

k. Moderators are permitted to post in forums that they moderate as contributors to any discussion (please see 9l below). If posting as a moderator they should make that clear.

l. Moderators should be aware that at times it may be necessary to withdraw temporarily from contributing to a forum that they moderate, for example to ensure impartiality when a strong debate is underway.

m. Moderators should remember that the Association's forums are open to all. No individual or group of regular contributors should be given preferential treatment. Forums should always be a welcome space for all participants and new posters should be encouraged.

10.   Support from Forum Controller

a. Forum Controller is a virtual identity, managed by Association staff. The Forum Controller identity operates during office hours from Monday to Friday and can be contacted via a generic mailbox at ousa-controller@open.ac.uk

b. Formal complaints about any matters to do with the Association's online public forums should be addressed to the Forum Controller in the first instance with 'complaint' in the subject heading.

c. General enquiries can also be sent to the Forum Controller mailbox and will be answered as soon as possible, but it is advisable to first seek an answer or advice from Mentor Moderators or Moderators Discussion, whichever is most appropriate. If an issue requires an urgent response, the mail

should be marked "urgent" so that it may be given priority. Please only use the "urgent" identifier when it is necessary to ensure the most urgent matters are addressed efficiently.

d. Forum Controller will make every effort to answer enquiries or deal with problems as soon as possible. It would be helpful if subject lines could clearly indicate the nature of the problem or enquiry (e.g. Advice required on X, Moderator application, Moderator resignation, Ruling required on Y and so on) to assist the efficient operation of the mailbox.

SECTION C - FORUM REQUESTS

1. Introduction

Within reason, the Association is happy to make provision for whatever forum topics members would like to discuss with other students as long as these are consistent with the Spirit of the OUSA Forum and the rules placed on all users of the service. However, there are a number of practical factors which need to be considered when we receive requests for new forums.

We do not want to have large numbers of forums used by very small numbers of students. This can be an undue burden on both the Association's and the University's administrative and technical support and can also cause unnecessary structural layers making the service generally more difficult to manage and navigate. We will also seek to avoid overlapping forums or those of similar subject matter. Another type of forum which we will seek to avoid are those which go beyond self-help and which might imply that they are a source of expert advice which could give rise to liability arising either for the Association or the University or both. We will undertake regular housekeeping on the system, merge or remove forums that are not being used.

2. Requesting a Forum

There is a dedicated forum called OUSA Forum Requests for registering requests for a new forum. Those who wish to indicate their support for or opposition to establishing such a forum may post their views here.

If there appears to be sufficient support for a new forum then a request can be made to Controller.

Any new forum request must include a draft Spirit of Forum and the details of any persons volunteering to act as Moderators. While Sprits of Forum are individual to each forum it is recommended to look at a sample of these for other forums before drafting. Controller will be able to advise if needed. If the proposed Moderators are not existing Moderators, then they will need to make an application in the usual way (see section 6 in Part C above).

3. Processing Your Request

Decisions on requests that appear fairly uncontentious and simple to implement have been devolved to a senior member of the Operations Team of the Association staff. The things considered include; what support there has been in Forum Requests; the adequacy of the Spirit of Forum; sufficient volunteers to Moderate the forum.

If the request appears as if it may be contentious e.g. there is a problem with the Spirit of Forum, the discussion about the forum request has provoked antagonistic debate which might prove difficult to contain later on or there is a potential conflict with the identity or reputation of the Association or the University, then it will be referred to CAP.

The decision of whether or not to approve a particular forum request and which students will be appointed to moderate the Forum will be entirely at the discretion of the CAP.

Once a decision has been reached by the Association a message will be posted on Forum Request either confirming a timetable for

the creation of the forum or a reason for the forum not being created. All new forums start up on a six month probationary period during which the conduct on the forum and usage will be kept under review. At the end of this period the forum will either be confirmed or withdrawn.

SECTION D – COMPLAINTS AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

1. Introduction

a. OU Student Association public forums are open to everyone with access to the University's computing services. The University allows the Association to run this service on the basis that the Association takes responsibility for ensuring that the University's Student Computing Policy and online communication systems guidelines are adhered to and where necessary enforced. Details can be found at:
http://www.open.ac.uk/students/charter/essential-documents/computing

b. All users of Association forums must familiarise themselves with the contents of these documents and operate within the stated rules. For all purposes relating to Association's Forums, references to 'the rules' means those specified within the documents referred to above. Where users of the services are in breach of the conduct required the Association reserves the right to limit or terminate their use of the services.

c. All users must read the relevant Spirit of Forum for each forum they wish to post on as they may differ. If forums are closed and should only be accessed by specified groups of students; then the relevant Spirit of Forum will define these groups of students. When posts are made by users who are excluded from specified groups their post may be automatically removed by the forum moderator/s and their permissions to access all forums may be removed. Depending on the nature of the post this process may be followed up by a formal disciplinary action. Where possible an informal warning will be issued in a first instance.

d. Elections and By-election forums can only be accessed by the current members of the OU Students Association. Forum users who are no longer members of the OU Students Associations are not allowed to interfere with the Elections and By-elections therefore their post will be automatically removed and their permissions to access all forums may be removed for the duration of the Elections and By-elections. Their permissions will be reinstated once they contact the Forum Controller (ousa-controller@open.ac.uk) and ask for their permission to be reinstated

e. These Procedures explain:

- what to do when another user is in breach of the rules
- how breaches of the rules are dealt with
- what action can be taken if there is a suspicion of an unfair treatment

f. In order to avoid contradictions or inconsistency in the treatment of members in relation to online conduct as opposed to conduct in general, these are the only procedures which will apply to conduct in Association forums. However, issues arising from these may be referred for consideration under the Association general disciplinary procedures if they fall under these.

g. Where CAP (Controller Advisory Panel) is considering matters formally referred to it under these procedures, not less than two members of CAP will be involved and all decisions will be made on behalf of CAP collectively. If it is necessary for any matter dealt with under the Disciplinary Procedure to be considered by an Appeal Panel of the Central Executive Committee (C E C), no less

than three members of the CEC will be involved. No member of CAP will form part of that Appeal Panel.

h. It is not acceptable to try to bypass these procedures by writing directly to the individual mailboxes of the members of the C E C, including the President. CEC members will not enter into private discussions on matters which are, or which ought properly to be, the subject of these procedures.

2. Complaints Procedure

a. Stage 1 of the Complaints Procedure

In the first instance any complaint about conduct in an Association forum should be taken up with the moderators (mods) of the forum concerned using the 'Contact Your Moderator' forum. You should receive a response within 3 working days of submitting your complaint, but not necessarily have your complaint resolved in that time.

Following a response from the mod(s) if you remain dissatisfied, you may raise your complaint under Stage 2 of the procedure.

b. Stage 2 of the Complaints Procedure

If you have a complaint about the Association forum moderation or you remain dissatisfied after raising a complaint with the moderators, you can submit a formal complaint to the Association Forum Controller who can be contacted at ousa-controller@open.ac.uk . You will receive an acknowledgement to confirm that your message has been received.

You should be precise about the nature of your complaint and you will need to cite details of the message(s) about which you are complaining by giving the name of the forum, the subject thread, name of poster and time of posting. You may use quotes from messages to help explain your complaint but this will not be a substitute for providing the full details of where the message(s) can be found.

Association Complaints are managed by the staff members at the Association Office through the Forum Controller ID. If a senior

member of Association staff is satisfied that your complaint is relatively straightforward and can be handled at that level, you will receive a response within 5 working days. If the judgement of staff is that the matter is more complex or could require serious disciplinary action it will be referred to CAP at Stage 3 of the procedure. You will receive a confirmation email about the way your will be dealt with within 5 working days.

If you have received a response to your complaint from a member of staff under Stage 2 of the procedure but you are not satisfied with that response, you may raise your complaint to Stage 3 of the procedure.

c. Stage 3 of the Complaints Procedure

Where a senior member of Association staff judges your complaint to be complex and/or potentially requiring a serious disciplinary action, or where you remain unhappy following a receipt of a response from a member of staff under Stage 2 of the procedure, the matter will be considered by a panel of not less than three members of CAP.

Where a complaint is being referred to Stage 3 by a senior member of the Association staff they will make such other enquiries as are necessary in order to provide CAP with the relevant information as possible. Where you are raising a complaint at Stage 3 of the procedure, this should be sent to the Forum Controller with the subject title 'Stage 3'. The original dialogue concerning your complaint at Stage 2 will automatically be referred to CAP but you should provide a clear and concise explanation of why you are not satisfied with the outcome at Stage 2.

You will receive a response within 15 working days. If for any reason it is not possible to give you a full response to your complaint within 15 working days, then you will be informed of the delay by the Forum Controller and receive an indication of when you can expect a full response.

If your complaint is not upheld you will be given an explanation of the decision.

The decision of CAP will be final as far as Association's Complaints Procedure is concerned. However if you believe that the Association has failed to comply with or uphold the University's Student Code of Computing Conduct or the Online systems guidelines, or has not

acted in accordance with its own stated procedures, then you do have the right to submit a complaint under the University's Complaints Procedure which can be accessed from the following area: http://www.open.ac.uk/students/charter/essential-documents/procedure-complaints-about-the-ou-students-association-ousa

You will be expected to provide the University with evidence of where the Association has failed.

3. Disciplinary Procedure

a. Introduction

Where the Association has evidence that a user of the forums is not complying with the rules the Association will attempt in the first instance to resolve any problems informally. However, where it appears that the conduct concerned is serious or deliberate, then the Association shall not hesitate to use the formal disciplinary procedure.

Please be aware that the Association only has jurisdiction over the activity on the Association online forums and cannot deal with problems that occur in other areas of the Open University's Online Teaching services. These should be referred to Forum moderators if appropriate or alternatively complaints should be made in writing to complaints-appeals@open.ac.uk providing the detail of where the problem is occurring and these will be directed to the administrators concerned.

For areas outside of the University's service, for example Facebook or Twitter, complaints should be addressed to the relevant system administrator.

Whilst the initial stages of this Disciplinary Procedure have been specifically tailored to deal with the online forums conduct, the latter stages comprise The Association Disciplinary Procedure covering the conduct of all Association members in all situations.

Similarly, if it is deemed necessary by the Forum Controller a contributor may have their access temporarily suspended or modified, without prejudice to the outcome until an investigation, which might include an appeal has been concluded. This is to allow for unacceptable online conduct to be treated on an equal footing with unacceptable conduct in any other situation. In the case of users of

the forum services who are not Association members, where it may be necessary to exclude such users from the forum services, findings on their conduct will be reported to the University. Any suspension made under these provisions will be reviewed by CAP within 5 days of being imposed.

b. Informal Action

Where the Association decides that a user's conduct within the forum network is not acceptable, but that it is a relatively minor or unintentional breach of the rules, consideration will be given to the use of an informal warning, or a temporary suspension of access permissions in case of closed forums for specified groups of students.

Informal warnings are intended to draw attention to, or clarify, the conduct that is unacceptable. As part of an informal warning the person concerned may be required to issue an explanation, either to an individual or to a forum. Where an informal warning has been issued this and any inappropriate messages concerned will be kept on file for a specified period of time (see table below, section 3d) and may be referred to in the future if there is a need to take further action.

Informal warnings will most commonly be issued by the Forum Controller

c. Formal Action

Where the Association decides that the inappropriate conduct is more serious, or where previous informal warnings have been ineffective, or where a user has more than two current informal warnings, formal disciplinary action may be taken. This may include disciplinary actions ranging from a period of "read only" access to any or all forums through exclusion from one or more forums, temporary exclusion from the Association forums or permanent exclusion from the Association's Forum areas.

Whenever formal disciplinary action against a user of the Association's services is considered necessary, the person will be informed of the case against them and will be given the opportunity to

put their side of the story. Once a decision has been made, the person will be informed of the basis of the decision and any disciplinary action to be applied. At that time the person will also be reminded of any right of appeal.

Although there are different levels of sanction under this procedure, users cannot assume that they are entitled to any particular number of warnings or levels of disciplinary action. The Association reserves the right to apply the level of disciplinary action which it feels appropriate in all the circumstances. The higher level disciplinary actions will only be awarded by CAP and in the case of the more serious disciplinary actions, there will be a right of appeal to the CEC.

d. Summary of Disciplinary Procedure

The table below summarises the key features of action under this Disciplinary Procedure. The word "exclusion" means the removal of all access to Association's public forums.

ACTION	AUTHORITY TO ISSUE *	APPEAL RIGHTS	TIME HELD ON FILE
Apology required	Forum Controller	No	3 months
Informal warning	Forum Controller	No	3 months
Formal warning with no disciplinary action	Forum Controller with the approval of the Head of Operations	No	6 months
Read only for up to 1 month	Forum Controller with the approval of the Head of Operations.	Yes - CAP	2 years
Temporary exclusion of up to 1 month	Forum Controller with the approval of the Head of Operations	Yes - CAP	2 years
Read only for a period over 1 month	CAP	Yes -CEC Appeal panel	2 years from completion of the period of read only access
Temporary exclusion for a	CAP	Yes – CEC Appeal panel	2 years from completion

ACTION	AUTHORITY TO ISSUE *	APPEAL RIGHTS	TIME HELD ON FILE
period over 1 month			of the period of exclusion
Permanent exclusion	CAP	Yes - CEC Appeal Panel and approved by the Association President	No expiry time

* This refers to the lowest level of authority necessary to issue the disciplinary action.