OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)
25 September – 6 October 2020

INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENT NETWORK INFORMATION

The CEC is asked to:-

i)   **note** the information relating to discussions and ideas around creating an international distance-learning student network with other open and distance-learning student representative organisations across the world

1.   Introduction

1.1   This paper is put to the CEC by the Students Association's Policy and Public Affairs Manager and is sponsored by the President.

1.2   The intention of this paper is to provide information regarding discussions that have taken place with student leaders and staff from Athabasca University Students Union in Canada with a view to creating a more formal mutually beneficial relationship.

1.3   Although this paper is for your information only, it is hoped (and encouraged) that you might bring forward ideas and opportunities as well as highlighting any barriers, challenges or risks that you foresee.

2.   Context

2.1   *About Athabasca University:* Athabasca University describes itself as "Canada's Open University" and is "dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for adult learners worldwide." They have over 40,000 students. The average undergraduate is 27 years old, and 73 per cent of their students work while they study. In a number of ways they have a very similar profile to OU students.

2.2   *About Athabasca University Students' Union:* Much like our own Students Association, AUSU is an independent student representative organisation, with elected student leaders and a staff team to support them. Their organisational and governance structures are different to the OU Students

Association but their goals and purpose are broadly similar.

2.3   *Making contact:* Towards the end of the previous term, the previous President was contacted directly by the President of AUSU with a view to setting up a meeting to share experiences and find out more about each other's operations. The meeting took place online and was a friendly and informal environment where we compared notes and discovered that we sheared many of the same characteristics in our student populations and many of the same challenges.

2.4   A second meeting was arranged and in the interim period, an outline proposal was drawn up with a view to presenting to our Canadian counterparts what the benefits of an international network of DL student organisations could be and what it might look like in practice. This was presented at the most recent meeting (14/09/2020) with an enthusiastic response from the Athabasca contingent, who are going to go away and discuss with their student leadership and staff teams prior to the next meeting on 7th October 2020.

3.   Information relating to an International Distance-Learning Student Network

It should be noted that the outline presented below is, at present, just an idea of how such a network could operate and work together.

3.1   *Purpose:* An International Distance-Learning Student Network would create a worldwide community of practice to share learning and innovation between student leaders and staff, and also enable collaboration where possible to benefit the distance-learning student community and enhance the student experience.

3.2   *How might we work together/collaborate:*
- Sharing best practice
  - Voice/Elections/Volunteering/Public Affairs/Individual Rep etc
- Sharing innovation/learning from new or longstanding initiatives
  - Engagement strategies/Using new tech etc
- Collaboration in some areas of work
  - Community/International volunteering opportunities – providing students with the opportunities to engage internationally
- Raise the profile of issues experienced by DL students worldwide
  - Disabled students/international recognition of DL/PT degrees etc
- Helping to improve DL student representation worldwide
  - Social mission – making the world a better place

3.3   *How might it work in practice:*
- Quarterly meetings (online)
  - o   Perhaps with focus on a particular element of work each meeting i.e. volunteering/representation
  - o   Share experiences/innovation
  - o   Presentation & questions/discussion
- Centrally accessible database of contacts across partner organisations for different areas of expertise
- Shared research findings repository (for findings that are shareable)

- International DL student community events, fun competitions, and engagement activities

3.4 *What are the costs/logistics:*
- Could be started without any cost to any organisation (other than employee time)
- Shared databases and documentation could be available through OneDrive
- Regular (quarterly?) online meetings would be the basis for the development of the network
- Depending on the direction and type of activity the network wanted to pursue, there may be a need for a website in the future (i.e. community building activity may require a 'hub' for activity to be advertised/hosted)

3.5 *Who would be involved*: Upon undertaking some research, it was apparent that there are a huge number of open and distance-learning universities across the world. However, the culture around student representation from country to country varies significantly, with very different models and degrees of independence from the institutions themselves.

Initial thinking is that a group of 5 or 6 student unions/guilds/associations (including ourselves and Athabasca) would be involved in the initial stages of agreeing objectives and a format for working together. Research has been carried out into where *independent* student representative organisations exist in distance-learning settings around the world, although no communications have been established at this point other than those described in section 2 of this paper.

4.   Next steps

4.1   Although this is not a discussion paper, it is hoped that it will begin a process of sharing ideas and concerns.

4.2   Specifically, your ideas around opportunities to learn and collaborate (don't be afraid to think big!), as well as any particular barriers, challenges or risks that your foresee a network like this needing to overcome, would be particularly useful contributions to be able to bring to future discussion with our potential international partners.

5   Your feedback and thoughts

6.1   Any and all thoughts or queries are enthusiastically welcomed. So please don't hesitate to email Dan at dan.moloney@open.ac.uk.

Sarah Jones   **Dan Moloney**
President   **Policy and Public Affairs Manager**