Nicola Simpson – Student Voice Symposium speech

Students in Transformation

Hello everybody, and thank you for introducing me, Lorraine.

For those who don't know me, I am an OU student, an OU graduate, and the Students Association President, but you've just heard that, of course. So, I'm going to be talking about similar things that you will have heard my colleagues from the Student Leadership Team talking about today, but I'm going to have a focus on the Transformation.

I'm not going to have a lot of slides to show you, so you can just focus on me and listen to what I'm saying.

So, for me, in my role, every day is very different, and I have a lot of different tasks and things to juggle, but over the last year, the Transformation of the University has obviously been a major focus of my work.

So you've heard Lorraine talking already about governance and academic representation, and as President I am a member of the Education Committee, Senate and Council. Each of those have a different role to play in the University, but all need to have an awareness of how the decisions taken within their committees impact upon students, and that's what we help to bring to those spaces.

So, as well as my inward facing University work, I also represent students in the Higher Education sector more generally. And I work with the Students Association, the whole team, on all aspects of our work from Freshers events to running student conference, and every part of our work.

So, last night there was quite a few students here on campus and I talked to them and I asked them, 'What should I talk about when I stand up here and talk about students in Transformation?' And they gave me lots of suggestions about what I should do and I see a few of the students in the room now and they're laughing because they know what's coming. One of the suggestions was that I get on stage, I play some music, and I do a little dance, and I call it 'Students in Transformation', and I let you figure out what it's all about. The next suggestion was that I create a video and I just put it on the screen and let it play and keep my fingers crossed that it all works. And we've already seen today how that doesn't, sort of, seem to happen. So instead, you're getting me with a bunch of paper and I'm going to read it off and credit to anybody who can stand up here and do this without something in front of them. I think it's incredible what people can do, but I can't, I need my notes.
So, all these alternative suggestions have come about for a reason and I hope that after I've finished, you'll see why people are telling me that I should stand up here with videos and with the dancing. It comes across in the themes of the rest of what I'm going to say.

So, what do students know about the Transformation?

Can I see a show of hands in the room from people who think students know a lot about the Transformation? No hands. Students who know a good amount? Still, nothing. You're all right. Students don't know very much about the Transformation. They know very little about the Transformation. I'm going to talk about some of the things that they do know.

Back in June 2017, which feels like a very, very long time ago, but really isn't, the Vice Chancellor announced that the University would be conducting a ‘root and branch review of every aspect of its operations’. ‘A major savings and reinvestment plan will recreate the University so that it is digital by design and the needs of students and the wider – which places the needs of students and the wider economy at the centre of everything it does’. And at the time, you'll remember that a lot of people sat down and said, 'Well, do we not do that already? Are we not already putting student needs to what we do?'

We were also told that over a period of two years, the University would deliver world leading part time distance learning with digital innovation at its heart, a streamlined curriculum, high quality research focused closely on the teaching curriculum, close links to employers and a University free from duplication. Students would have greater choice over when they start courses and the pace of their study, and we were also told that ‘change of this scale will impact on staff – in the coming years fewer people would be needed overall in the University’.

For those of us representing students we immediately started to ask questions. 'What does it mean: digital by design?' We know from our own research and what students have been telling us they prefer a blend of online or onscreen alongside hard copy materials.

Students with limited internet access, using shared devices or working all day on screens tell us that an online only university would be difficult or impossible for them.

We also started to wonder what it meant by a streamlined curriculum and lobbied the University to maintain a broad offer of subjects and courses. With the suggestion that the University would operate with fewer staff we also reminded the senior leaders of the University of the importance of the relationship between students and tutors, which is really crucial to our success.

So what have we learned since then?

In October, the edition of the Open News, which is sent out to students, had a little piece on the Student Transformation. A 271 word article which was titled ‘Students First Transformation: keeping you up-to date’. Students were reminded at that point of the redesign that had been announced in June and told that the mission of the
University would remain the same, that the OU ‘want to be revolutionary in their use of technology.’

It went on to say that ‘For you, our current students, there is no immediate impact and your studies will continue as normal.’ Bear in mind the first announcement had already told students that over the next two years the University would deliver world leading part time distance learning with digital innovation at its heart, you can see why students feel messages have been inconsistent. Those who are at Access or Level 1 now will experience a very different university by the time they finish their qualification.

The remainder of the Open News article goes on to remind students of the voice students have in the governing processes of the University and the ways in which students have or can give feedback. For instance through the Student Consultative forum, face to face consultation events and workshops attended by student representatives.

Last week information about the new Student Voice website was sent to students with a link to the specific tab on Transformation. I’m assuming people in here have seen that? Can I get a show of hands of people who have been on that website? A few people, a few still to look at it. It’s a dedicated space to share information about the changes in the University, and that’s something we have been asking the University for since the reinvention was announced in June last year but when you take a look at the page you will see that there is still a long way to go with the information that is on there. The page links to a number of spaces to share views, but the website is sorely lacking in any information about what students of the future can expect and on which students can actually provide meaningful commentary.

The Students Association have been working really hard to keep students informed that changes are coming with articles in our OU Students Magazine, our executive reports and through our dedicated OU Redesign forum. So when all of this was announced back in June we created a space for students to talk to each other, because the University wasn’t doing that anywhere else. We do have some challenges though in what we report, and you might have heard about some of these earlier today, because as student representatives, we are bound by confidentiality agreements which we must sign before taking up our places on committees and working groups where all of the detailed planning is taking place.

Given that there is little information about the Transformation being sent directly from the University to students, it isn’t surprising that students have taken the recent reports in the news media about the University, as very interesting reading, indeed. And that’s what they’re talking about in public spaces, and Facebook, and on Twitter. These have sparked real interest in issues related to curriculum cuts, digital delivery and the tuition model adopted by the OU, and how that might be different in the future.

Students value the support they receive from their tutors. I can’t say that enough. And they continue to seek reassurance that tutors and tutorials will not be a thing of the past. As we know, that good relationship with a tutor and access to high quality tuition makes the difference between a pass and a fail, between a 2:1 and a 1st. Students want the best possible experience and outcomes from their efforts. After all
they make significant personal and financial sacrifices to study with the Open
University.

So, where and how are students involved in the 'Students First
Transformation’?

Student representatives have been involved in the work of some of the different work
streams which have emerged as part of the Transformation. We have been involved
in the work of the Academic Excellence, Enhanced Employability and Career
Progression, Teaching Excellence and Innovation, Student experience, Technology
and the Operating Model work streams.

For some of these, we have been active participants in regular meetings of the
groups, but for others our involvement has been much more limited.

Senior members of the University have already themselves acknowledged that there
needs to be a much more joined up approach in how student representatives and the
wider student body are engaged in the work of the Redesign and we have recently
been involved in a number of conversations with senior leaders to improve
engagement opportunities.

We want to have the opportunity to shape thinking and decision making at the
University but for many of us, we worry that our voice is not heard and at times our
views are misrepresented by others in the University.

Taking digital as an example, there are many occasions where student reps have
talked about the importance of digital platforms in our learning and in building
communities. We know that the digital experience needs to improve. What we
oppose is an online only university, where students have few or no opportunities to
interact with tutors and other students face to face, or where all learning material is
delivered online or onscreen. But it’s not uncommon to hear this reflected back to us
as if we are anti digital, that we’re dinosaurs stuck in the past and unable to move
on.

At countless meetings students talk about how such a move to digital would, or
already has, impacted upon their studies. Often when we raise these issues,
members of University senior team attempt to reassure us that hard copy learning
materials and face to face tutorials will still be available in the future, so why are we
so worried? It’s because when it comes to written policy, we see references to digital
pedagogy, and print materials ‘where appropriate’, in inverted commas, print on
demand being available for the next five years, so we can’t help but wonder who
gets to decide when it is appropriate to have hard copy materials and what does the
University have planned for print on demand after five years have passed?

There is an assumption that new and younger students have digital skills that enable
them to learn in new and innovative ways, but from talking to students we know that
many people are struggling to keep up with the pace of change and that students
whatever their age have problems in accessing material online for lots of different
reasons.

If we go back to the information that students have been given on the Transformation
on the Student Voice Website, and in particular the FAQ document, in response to
the question ‘Couldn't digital by design exclude some students, particularly some being the very ones who the OU was set up to serve?’, the University demonstrates how little they seem to understand about the challenges that people face.

One of the responses from the University is that a “full setup of a PC, external monitor, keyboard and mouse can be purchased for £320 - a fraction of the cost of a single module.” This statement caused much anger amongst students.

Those of you who are members of Senate will know that last week I asked how the University is seeking feedback from those who have experienced financial hardship and other disadvantage, as comments like this, suggesting that people need just go out and buy some new kit are really unhelpful.

The University claims that their research shows that most students already own a device which would be compatible to the digital by design requirements, but our own research in the Students Association identified that students often share devices with others in their family. The more material that goes online, the more challenging it is for them to access as they battle for the laptop when their child has homework to do.

There are also other issues with broadband speeds and screen fatigue which mean that people have a less than satisfactory experience online. We have watched short films and animations produced by the University to demonstrate how people can access materials online and on the move, but for any of us who spend a lot of time travelling, we all know that it’s not as easy in practice, and we can’t always get online. That’s when we’re really grateful to have some books to turn to.

Concerns about the loss of high quality print material and changes in how teaching is delivered are not the only things we are concerned about. Students know that the University is making decisions about its future curriculum. This has been referred to in the public news media and in some of the communications directly with students from the University. Governance committees are looking at the curriculum on offer and considering what modules, pathways and qualifications are to stay and which are to go. That’s happening right now. Whilst students are members on those committees, they haven’t had the opportunity to discuss the proposals with the student body, because of that pesky confidentiality agreement that we have to sign. It may come as a big surprise to many students that the modules they were really looking forward to doing in the future may not be available to them.

So, what would students like from the Transformation?

That's a pretty big question. Student reps know and understand the enormousness of this project, and we are a major stakeholder. The Students Association can be supportive, and want to support student engagement. However we cannot ignore student concern as their representative body when there are issues.

Students who have been involved in giving feedback to the University and representing student interests want to know that their voice has been heard and that the University is not simply going through the motions and pretending to be interested in what we say.
Some students, and indeed staff at the University, feel that the communications and engagement strategy is nothing more than a management tool used to persuade rather than one that listens. Student views and opinions should be sought on matters that will affect them, ensuring students are part of the decision making process, not simply consulted towards the end of the decision.

So we would encourage an engagement strategy which includes:

Regular, transparent communications to students, which understands the difference between sharing information, consultation and partnership.

Proactively inviting students to take part in opportunities, both online and face to face.

Open forums and roadshow events that are opened up to encourage student attendance, or a student equivalent as students may have different concerns about the proposals. Some of you might of seen us at roadshows aimed at staff, that's because we've managed to sneak into those meetings in a lot of cases. There wasn't an option available to us as students to sign in and attend those events.

Finally, we would really like to see a plan.

Some work streams are well underway with their design work, and others are less so. We would like students to have access to a plan which shows them where are when they can expect to get involved if they want to.

You’ve heard already today about our work in building the student community and academic representation, the opportunities within student consultation and the student engagement project. You have heard me speak at length on how students have been involved in the Transformation, or how they haven’t, and it’s really up to everybody here to make something better a reality. If students haven’t been consulted in the decisions you or your units are taking, you need to ask why. If you haven’t explored the implications of any changes to all student groups, then you are taking really unnecessary risks in our future. You have heard students time and time again say that the University is moving in a direction that will make their experience worse and make learning inaccessible to them and others, so be prepared to soften your stance and consider that students have an expertise that just might be undervalued here at the University.

But let’s not finish there. Let’s finish by recognising that some work streams have done more than others to engage with the student body and showing what can be done. There is need for improvement in many areas, but there is still time to demonstrate how you value students. Step up the engagement, show students that you take us seriously, and listen to what we need. Invite more students to take part in consultations online and face to face, make sure students know how to get involved and don’t shy away from the difficult discussions.

At the University we are all learning to think critically. Let us apply that to our own university and the challenge it faces.

Thank you.