On August 1st 2018 I took up my post as the Student Association’s Vice President Education. Halfway through the term is a good time to reflect on what has been done and what there is to do. My particular role is focused on bringing student voice into the academic governance of the University. Academic governance is the process of assuring quality in curriculum, assessment, teaching and the overall student experience. As such it is very important to all students that we have a say in this. And we do. Students are represented on all the academic governance committees including the body with ultimate responsibility, Senate. As well as this there is strong student representation at faculty and school level with students being full members of Boards of Studies. One thing I have been working towards is to how best engage these students in the annual Quality reviews so that they can feed in their advice and opinions at an early stage. This may mean some changes and one big project for the 2018-20 term is a full review of academic representation and the production of a Code of Practice to supplement the existing Relationship Agreement. This will lay the platform for increasingly effective and influential student input. Together with the Student Voice Team and the Deputy President we have conducted a widespread survey of OU staff and of students and are now using the results to see where and how we can better represent students. Alongside this there were also useful and well regarded workshops with the Senate Reference Group regarding the new University Strategy following the Critical Review and also the accreditation with the Mid States Commission on Higher Education which makes the OU one of very few institutions accredited within the UK (and Europe) and the United States. Student Voice isn’t just confined to the University. As an Association we are committed to pushing the voice of part-time and distance learners in the wider Higher Education sector. OU student representatives have been extremely visible in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcome Framework (TEF). We are the only student body to have representatives on both the provider level TEF Main Panel and the Subject Pilot Main Panel. We also hope to work more closely with the University to ensure that student voice is a key part of any submissions made when the TEF process becomes compulsory. We are also engaging more in consultations with government and other bodies to ensure the voice of the part-time and distance learner is heard at all levels. We are hoping to develop this external voice as part of the 2020-2023 strategy.
The Students Association as the representative body for OU students is committed to working with the University to ensure that students are partners in shaping their student experience. We support all forms of student engagement as a means to enhance various aspects of the academic journey and quality of teaching and learning.

It has been an exciting year for the Students Association and our elected Student Leadership Team, as we continue to provide opportunities for the student voice to be heard throughout the Open University – as well as campaign for students to be at the forefront when deciding what interests and really matters to students.

We started the academic year with a few unknowns due to a change in university leadership; what would this mean for the work that has already progressed to developing existing initiatives? Would the OU’s leadership support our agenda of putting students at the heart of decision making? How would it work with the new PVC Students office?

Whilst we have been able to celebrate many successes over the academic year, we have also been able to dedicate the time to reflect on our own work. As part of developing a new Code of Practice to support student representation and our volunteers, we committed to working alongside University colleagues to conduct a full review of our work – which was the first of its kind at the Association and OU. The results of the review present us with an opportunity to campaign for a truly student led student representation, and also provides us with an evidence base to continue developing new practices in this area.

Looking forward, we are seeking more ways to embrace the student voice and diversify the opportunities for students to participate. This has been an ongoing topic to explore, as the Association has been developing a refreshed strategic direction for the organisation. We will continue to be ambitious, bold and put the needs of students first – as well as find new ways to empower the student body to have their views heard and actioned.
OUR YEAR

AT A GLANCE

Undertook training 83%

No training 13%

Unable to attend 4%

10 opportunities for volunteer development

320 responses to the Rep Review

#1110 Followers on Twitter @OUstudentsVoice

6300 Views of Student Voice pages on oustudents.com
Presentations at various national conferences in the HE Sector

...and we attended over 6

81% of our volunteers retained for 2019

11

Student blogs this academic year

Over 115 student ideas

11

New monthly training briefings, 83% of volunteers engaged online

"Whilst there I wasn’t sure if I felt part of the university as a whole. But since I came home, I have begun to realise how much benefit I got from just being there, seeing the campus, library, etc. and today I actually feel part of it all."

- Student Observer to a Faculty Assembly
OUR TOP AIMS

1.) To Support BME Students

One of the projects explored under our Student Voice Researcher initiative, (commissioned by the Association Student Support team) was the "Experience of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students" and how they engaged with the Students Association. This report considers the importance of a student community which positively influences the student experience, as well as how a lack of diversity in student representation is an issue around the UK and not limited to the OU Students Association. The recommendations from this report have been taken on board as the Student Support team continue to work on establishing the Association’s Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Students’ Working Group. This group will be made up of students who have an interest in driving forward race equality for OU students. The group will work collaboratively with The OU Students Association and The Open University to improve the representation and the study experience of BAME students.

2.) To communicate about our work

Over the past 12 months, we have now doubled in the number of followers on the @OUstudentsVoice Twitter account. The monthly growth fluctuates between 20-50 new followers a month at peak academic times and growth of between 10-20 a month during quieter times of the year. Our monthly impression rate continues to average around 30k however we now have better engagement from OU students. Followers now tweet directly to the account and involve us in their dialogue, and to share their success stories. To better engage students with this account we have released around ten twitter polls, alongside sharing student quotes, creating competitions, and providing opportunities for students to discuss OU Teaching and Learning. In total there have been over 6,300 page views of everything Student Voice related on oustudents.com - with ‘What is Student Voice’ being a popular choice along with the Student Voice landing page. As part of the Student Voice section of the website, student blog submissions have doubled over the past 12 months from 7 to 15. These blogs tell the experiences of being involved with the Association as a volunteer, as well as reflect on participating in projects and attending conferences and meetings.

3.) To improve our NSS Score

On the 3rd July 2019, President Cath Brown released an article on oustudents.com with our response to both the Open University scores and reflects on our own.
As part of efforts to raise awareness of the vital role student representatives play within the University’s governance structure, the Student Voice team were able to create a new resource to kick start their campaign. The 'I Am a Rep' video was created to raise the profile of the rep’s role to the wider student body and the University, by highlighting how student voice is delivered across different facets of the OU. In addition, the video sought to inspire students and staff by drawing special attention to how student volunteers have benefited from taking on this valuable role. The I Am Rep video comprised of 11 student participants and two members of staff from the University senior management team. We were delighted to have all those student participants feature in the video providing their understanding of the student rep role and how it has aided their personal development whilst volunteering with the Students Association. It was equally very important to have the involvement of Mary Kellet (VCE) and Liz Mar (PVC Students) supporting the campaign. In the video, they both expressed how important Student Voice is in improving the student experience at the university. The contribution of both staff and students will be significant in propagating this campaign especially within various departments of the University. Additionally, it also points out the role student voice via student reps plays in the success of the University, and how instrumental and valuable they are in institutional decision making.

For students who are not aware of the work student reps do within the governance structure, the video is an opportunity to get a glimpse of what the role is all about and why it is integral to the work carried out in enhancing the student/academic experience. This also applies to several pockets of staff teams within the Open University who are not familiar with the student representation system. Our focus was to create a video which would have the longevity to continue to raise awareness of the student representative role for both current and future students and members of staff. The student participants involved in the video spoke passionately about their role and how it has impacted and motivated them to actively get involved in advocating for student voice and with this we hope that more students are encouraged to engage with the student rep system.

Our plan is to get the resource to as many students as possible using various social media channels where students and staff are engaging. The video is publicly available on oustudents.com and we will continue to promote the campaign.
Our new Research Strategy

Our Research Strategy for 2019/20 was approved at the January 2019 meeting of the Central Executive Committee (CEC). Through consultation with the student leadership team, the following areas were identified as the key aims for our research work:

**Aim 1**: To set out a clear mechanism to prioritise research projects.
**Aim 2**: To enable informed decision-making within the Association.
**Aim 3**: To enable our student volunteers to represent OU students at the university and national levels.
**Aim 4**: To partner with other organisation in the HE sector to build on our insights into the part-time and distance-learning student experience.
**Aim 5**: To engage the student community in our research work and disseminate research findings in fresh and innovative ways.

We will be progressing several pieces of work under these aims in the next few months and creating meaningful opportunities for the wider student community to engage in our research work.

**Achievement**: A finalised strategy with work already underway as to how the aims of the strategy can be achieved

How do we communicate with students?

Our research communications are aimed at engaging the wider student community and developing a library of resources that enable us to share our work through different print and online formats, including videos, banners, postcards, booklets, infographics and social media engagement.

We are encouraging Student Voice Researchers to share their experiences with the wider student community, and blogs written by our volunteers are hosted on the website. Summaries of our research reports are being produced in different formats such as infographics, to make our work more approachable and engaging. We are using social media to promote research events and opportunities, as well as light-touch engagement such as polls during Freshers events.

We have trialled a new kind of research release for student volunteers this year, focused on specific themes around Higher Education in the UK. Our first release focused on part-time and mature students. The release signposted student volunteers to recent reports produced within the sector and offered tips on relating these trends to their role as Student Voice representatives. We will be progressing several pieces of work under these aims in the next few months and creating meaningful opportunities for the wider student community to engage in our research work.
Student Voice Researchers

The Student Voice Researcher (SVR) role has been developed as a regular offer, with two rounds having already taken place in November 2018 and March 2019. Students had the opportunity to scope out topics, talk to fellow OU students and offer us recommendations as part of their research reports. Our SVRs have explored a variety of topics, each focusing on a different aspect of the student experience.

The topics that have been explored this year are “Student Journeys, the Experience of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students”, and “Engaging the Student Community in Research at the Association”. For each topic, the focus has specifically been on students’ experience with the Students Association, which has meant that SVR recommendations can feed directly into the Association’s work.

The overall experience of this role has been a positive one for students, and SVRs are invited to share their experience with the wider student community through blogs. We are also offering SVRs more opportunities to build on their skills by presenting their work at Student Voice events like the Research Symposium.

Achievement: The SVR role has been successfully established as a regular offer to students.

Our first ever Research Symposium

The Research Symposium was held on 7 March 2019 and showcased the work being done by our Student Voice Researchers. Colleagues from the Open University and the Volunteering team at the Association also presented their work and recent projects, thereby offering a good overview of the research related work being undertaken within the university and the Students Association.

The event was also offered as a development opportunity for student representatives and volunteers, and allowed attendees to take part in talks led by the OU that discussed recent research into student satisfaction trends. There were also workshops that were hosted by the OU Marketing and Communications teams, that allowed volunteers to understand the work that goes into understanding student motivations and preferences. One of the student delegates has written a detailed blog about their experience of attending the event.

Achievement: We offered Student Voice Researchers an opportunity to present their work at our first research event.
The Student Engagement Standard

The Student Engagement Standard project (working title ‘Kitemark’) was commissioned in 2017 and a pilot programme for the Standard was undertaken during the late summer/Autumn of 2018. A team of student volunteers drew up a set of criteria which can be used for assessing OU projects for effective student engagement. Four OU project teams agreed to take part in the pilot programme and submitted reports and evidence to the student panel, who then assessed each project against the criteria set out in the Standard. All four projects were deemed to have met the requirements of the Standard based on a majority verdict by the student panel.

Following this pilot exercise, feedback was sought from both the student panel and the OU project teams. This feedback was used to develop a set of recommendations for the next steps on the project which were considered by the CEC. The main recommendations were: the project to be continued; further process development to create templates for evidence submission and assessment; activities to be developed to raise awareness throughout the OU and to promote student engagement.

The next phase of development on the Standard will commence from Autumn 2019. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all staff and students that have been involved in the project for their valuable contributions, a full paper report can be found on oustudents.com.

Change Agents Network Conference

The Students Association proudly supported the JISC Change Agents Network (CAN) Conference that took place in May 2019. The Vice President Media and Campaigns and Student Voice team were members of the project steering group and helped shape the aims and themes of the event alongside colleagues at the Open University.

The Students Association also were able to recruit eight student volunteers to act as Conference Makers, that were trained to support the events and activities as we enabled delegates to take part in the two-day event. Eight more students from the Central Executive Committee presented at workshops and panels throughout the event.

"The conference showed that there are boundless opportunities for staff and students to work together to support student success and enrich the student experience"

Barbara Tarling - OU Student Council Member
The Students Association continued to provide attendance at the March consultation events, with over 23 Association volunteers and 16 members of Association staff attending the online and face to face events. This year the topics were themed around Communications to students and Assessment. The Students Association also used the consultation time to show the newly created Achievement video, and that prompted interest from the student attendees and ideas for new campaigns that the Association could lead.

The Governance Review

Times change and we must change with the times. And the OU is no different. And one way to make the changes is to look at how things are done, hence the review of Academic Governance. The Governance Review is being conducted by Advance HE and it will report to the Senate in October 2019. Initially consultation with students was limited to an interview with the President. After some pushing this was extended to me, as VP Education, and an experienced former VP Ed. The extension to the time frame of the process (it had been designed to report in June after an April start) also meant that more students on committees could have a say. Regrettably, despite offers, the Advance HE team was unable to meet with the Association’s Senate Reference Group.

Supporting Student Satisfaction

The Students Association has continued to attend the Student Satisfaction Improvement Working group, which was originally formed to address the National Student Survey (NSS) results, but now has a broader remit to address student satisfaction more generally. The group is chaired jointly by a member of the Vice-Chancellor’s Executive and the OU Students Association President. Largely, it has been hard to identify work and actions for the Students Association, other than formally contributing to the physical meetings and online correspondence over the academic year - however, we have been asked to lead on a new piece of work.

In February 2019 the Students Association supported and OU event with the theme of Student Satisfaction, and our President spoke at this event about perceptions felt by the student body. At the time of this event, the Students Association revealed their manifesto for the continued development of student satisfaction related work on ourstudents.com.

Achievement: We are now able to draft our own student satisfaction action plan to take to the University, to get matters addressed and better wins for students.
The Review of Representation

This year the Student Voice team, Vice President Education and Deputy President were commissioned by the Student Voice Steering Group to conduct a full review into their student academic representation structures, this is best known as the project called the Representation Review. By June 2019 we had over 320 responses to the various stakeholder surveys, each detailing their views as to how student representation could be improved at the Open University.

Largely, the project gained useful and positive feedback, especially about the students personally volunteering in the role – and with using this feedback we are better able to evidence how students are contributing towards discussions about teaching and learning at the Open University. There was, however (and as the project intended to find out) further work to do around the impact of student’s voice, representativeness of representatives and how we can better communicate pragmatically with the student body about what is taking place.

It is interesting to see that several projects along this vein are also taking place across the sector, with many HEI’s also reviewing representation processes and systems. The future will bring new policies in order for students to be fully supported, and empowered to be an active member of the academic community.

Senate Reference Group

Following on from the Annual Effectiveness Review 2018, it was decided the membership of the OU Students Association Senate Reference Group would be to remain the same, including the newer category of 8 Senate Reference Group Volunteers. This newer opportunity has proved to be successful in giving a larger representation of Student Voice other than Central Committee Representatives and Volunteers recruited from specific geographical areas.

With the overall aim of the Senate Reference Group ‘to act in an advisory capacity’ to the six student members of Senate there is now a wider group of student volunteers feeding into this Student Voice in many formats, making relevant contributions online and in person. The role will continue to develop with new volunteers for the next academic year.

Achievement – Due to the popularity of the roles and updated recruitment to Central Committee Representatives expressing an interest, the Senate Reference group will have a different group of volunteers and widening the student perspective.
Central Disciplinary Committee

In December 2018 it was proposed that the student member of the Central Disciplinary Committee have better support and role definition. It was felt that as CDC was a special committee with a different function to the usual – it would require its own bespoke recruitment and selection process, in order to better support individuals in the future. In We held a consultation day with the 2017-2019 group of anonymous volunteers, who gave their view as to how the role can be further defined and clarified as well as gave us guidance as to what training should be offered. When the role was finalised we had over 19 applications in from students, as well as a set face to face co-facilitated training date in the diary delivering in partnership with the OU.

Student Experience Committee

The Deputy President and Vice President Student Voice have been working to support improving the OU student experience, by utilizing the opportunity to feed collective student issues into the University’s Student Experience Committee. This is the first time that representatives have had a fixed agenda item for a regular “Student Voice” paper to be submitted by students. This has been able to provide the student representatives with equal status on this student-focused governance committee. Collective items of concern and success that have been raised by students have been summarised in this regular paper, with the aim that actions will be taken or that information will be passed onto relevant teams.

To collect that student voice the representatives have been hosting dedicated monthly ‘Student Experience Discussions’ on the first evening of every month on Adobe Connect. These sessions provide a platform for fellow students to raise topics that impact on their student journey. This is a great opportunity for both the Students Association and the Open University to hear about the real student journey and the different experiences that affect it, both positively and negatively.

With support from the Association staff team, feedback is collated into a report that is taken to the Student Experience Committee. This allows the wider student voice to be heard and information to be taken away by the University for future action.

The first student paper covered discussions across March and April and was submitted in May 2019. We have also shared this student submitted a paper with the wider student body on the ‘Student Voice’ area of the Associations Website.
At the Open University Student Consultations in March 2019, the Students Association trialled a new way of gaining feedback from students about our services. This was simply through the utilisation of suggestion cards. At each of the face to face meetings across England and the nations, representatives and staff spoke about how students can both be supported by the Association, and provide support for our work. We demonstrated the success of our campaign work and showcased the influence that the Students Association has had throughout the past 47 years via the newly created Achievements video.

This video demonstrates how powerful the collective voice of OU students is, for example when influencing UK policy about maintenance loans – as well as how students are represented in new groups. After watching this video, students submitted over 115 suggestions to the Association. You can see the breakdown of these in the below graph. With the development of the website oustudents.com, it was realised that we could design a new online platform to continue this important work and connect with our membership. As part of developing ways in which the Students Association can both better understand our membership and act on student interest – “Your Ideas” is a new platform soon ready to be launched on oustudents.com.

What ideas did our membership suggest?

- BAME networks: 14%
- Projects with the OU: 14%
- Local events: 17%
- Clubs and societies: 8%
- Student discounts: 6%
- Campaigns: 6%
- Community projects: 7%
- Volunteering opportunities: 19%
- Visibility suggestions: 12%
But wait... there is more

- We continue to provide a varied development schedule of activities for our volunteers.
- We have progressed work on a range of new research resources; by close of 2019, we will have a library of research-related materials for different events and online platforms.
- The Research Strategy work is already underway on different projects feeding into our strategic objectives and wider Association strategy.
- Postgraduate Research Students continue to be supported by the Deputy President and their dedicated liaison group.
- We will continue to welcome more student to get involved in reporting items to the Student Experience Committee - as a wide perspective of feedback allows a rich evidence base to take to the OU when reporting on student interest.
- We continue our participation in the Student Voice Steering Group meetings and have supported shaping action plans and monitoring and evaluation work.
- Student Voice Volunteers will continue to receive their monthly briefings. These include tips and advice on report writing, preparing for committee meetings, communication and sector-wide news.
- The Student Engagement Standard toolkit is ready to be shared on the new Staff Facing Student Voice Hub.
- We have been part of a successful campaign to support the recruitment and training of student Quality Peer Reviewers.
- We are looking forward to developing committee staff understanding of Academic Representation, by hosting our first training session.
- We continue to drive traffic to the Open University Student Voice Website, and student consultation forums on our social media channels.
- Gaining feedback from students has been very successful, and we are excited to launch the new “Your Ideas” platform in Autumn 2019.
- We are looking forward to welcoming new student members of the Central Disciplinary Committee and hosting their first face to face training event in Autumn 2019.
- We continue to act in an advisory capacity to OU colleges to support their voice and engagement related areas of work, and our insight is valued.
- Our online forums and online spaces continue to be busy places, where volunteers share information and insight to ensure the best possible representation of OU students.
- Our volunteers have taken part in many opportunities to be filmed, and speak about the benefits of student voice. Along with the “I am a Rep” video, these will be shared and distributed to both staff and students.
The Association has been working throughout this year on developing our new strategy to take us through to the 2022/23 academic year. This follows on from achieving a number of aims and projects that were outlined in the previous strategy.

Our highest priority is to ensure that what we do, (and how we do it), is guided by the needs, hopes and aspirations of our student members. As a starting point for this process, input was sought from our student leadership team, our student trustees, our appointed student representatives and the wider student body through a series of consultations, questionnaires, workshops and social media polls. Our student leadership team used this input to formulate our strategic vision - identifying the key areas we need to focus on over the next few years to ensure that the Association continues to reflect the specific needs of OU students, both now and into the future.

Our new strategy will focus on ensuring that all of our student members: are fully informed about the work of the Association; are able to access the student support services that they need; are able to engage with Association activities and events in the way they want to; are offered opportunities to make a difference through volunteering; and are empowered to positively influence and impact their study journey and their student experience.

Look out for further news on our new strategy when it is launched in October 2019.

What else is there to look out for?

- The Code of Practice on Student Representation
- Student Voice at the Association Conference
- The new Student Ideas platform launched
- A student led action plan for Student Satisfaction
- Student Voice Week #RoundTwo!
- Student led research and campaigns
- Teaching and Learning Conference
- 2020 Association Elections!