OU Students Association Senate Reference Group

Before finding out more about the OU Students Association Senate Reference Group, you need to know about Senate!

Senate

This is the academic authority of the Open University which meets four times each year to consider business which relates to the academic work of the University both in teaching and research. There are currently over 100 members of Senate including six student members who are decided by the Association:

- President
- VP Education
- One member of CEC appointed by the President
- Three students appointed on behalf of the Board of Trustees

All OU students have access to the Senate minutes once they are published.

To help the six student members of Senate prepare for each of their meetings the OU Students Association Senate Reference Group (known colloquially as SRG) was convened.

The purpose of SRG is to act in an advisory capacity to the ‘Senate 6’ and to provide a face to face opportunity in which they are able to draw on the diversity of circumstances, views and opinions of other students.

Currently SRG has a membership of 40 student places. SRG meets on campus in Milton Keynes before each Senate meeting to consider the business papers and the members also make decisions and have discussions in between meetings in their own forum. At the meetings the members discuss as many papers as time allows with VP Education taking the Chair. The interesting discussions generate a large amount of information and opinions which the Senate 6 then consider in a separate meeting in between the SRG meeting and Senate—yes they do have a very busy day! They clarify exactly what they might want to raise at Senate but they are not mandated to take the views of SRG—the role of SRG is purely advisory.

Read on to find out what happened at the most recent SRG meeting and how you can be more involved.
January 2019

These notes are intended as a taste of the SRG meeting and not a detailed record.

The main discussion papers were:

1. The Academic Performance Report

The information on this paper is a regular update to Senate and reports on academic performance in terms of student progression including module retention, completion and pass. It also reports on student recruitment.

Discussion points raised included:

- That student numbers are rising and in many categories targets for recruitment had been exceeded.
- That completion rates have not improved.
- A comment that any initiatives in place to improve completion rates should now be reviewed for their effectiveness.
- A comment that some of the initiatives have been paused but that no-one is talking to students to find out where the problems are.
- A member’s comment that although she dropped out of a module, at no time was she contacted to be asked the reason why.
- To note that the completion rates in WELs have been rising over a number of years.
- Senate members agreed that the series of figures provided was too simplistic a view of the current situation and would be requesting some wider explanation and information to accompany this report when it is next presented.


The Director of Strategy Anna Barber provided an introduction to this paper which included the slides from a presentation which will be delivered to the Senate meeting. The aim of the presentation is to discuss how the University moves on from discussing the recommendations of the review into putting those recommendations into practice.

Anna described how the key strategic priority for the University is student success. That is:

- Understanding student goals and ensuring the correct study path.
- Providing appropriate support to achieve those goals.
- Delivering a high quality and flexible student experience.
- To help students to have positive development and career outcomes.

Student Success would be underpinned by the objectives of excellent teaching and research, growth and sustainability, technology that enables success and a dynamic and inclusive culture.

Members’ questions were invited around the presentation. The following points were noted:

- That there is no reference to value for money for students.
- That there is no reference to how a dynamic and inclusive culture will be achieved or how students might be involved.
- That no one has ever articulated what an academic community looks like.
- A concern that much student communication is around marketing.
- A concern that Teaching and Learning should sit with PVC Students rather than PVC Research.
- A question about accelerated degrees and the University’s position on this.

The Director of Strategy thanked the meeting for allowing her to speak to the students and said that she would feed back on their points raised.

Senate Members agreed on a number of points to raise to Senate as follows:

- To note that students welcome the fact that success will be redefined as a student reaching their individual goals rather than an emphasis on the achievement of a qualification.
- That the Student Association would like a written guarantee about the University working in partnership with students.
- That we welcome an emphasis on technology enabling success.
- The concern that Teaching should sit with PVC (Students).
- The concern that the risk assessment does not take sufficient account of the staff turn-over, the numbers of interim appointments or the impact of increasing workloads.

3. The Pro-Vice Chancellor’s Portfolio Update

This paper comprised of the job description for the PVC (Students).

Comments included:

- That the portfolio for the PVC appeared as expected although hadn’t taken into account a number of the suggestions raised by members.
- It was noted however that the Association has a very good working relationship with the PVC.
- Senate Members agreed to raise the point that although a focus on widening participation and the focus of student success for identified groups is welcomed, the University has to ensure that the right support is in place to ensure that success.

Other Matters under discussion to be raised at Senate.

1. That although the recording of tutorials is now outlined in a policy document, the details of implementation will be critical and we would like to see the proposals around this.
2. That Undergraduates need to be consulted about interaction with PGR students in respect of any teaching opportunities.
3. The concern that it is inappropriate to conduct important meetings by correspondence.

4. Any Other Business

1. That Committee secretaries need to post papers in advance of meetings and by not doing so is stopping our representatives from carrying out their role.
2. That the Association will be replying to the TEF consultation and Senate Reference Group members will be invited to apply.
3. The request that there is a slot for SRG matters on this meeting’s agenda of issues that members would like to discuss whilst Senate members are still available.