Exploring ways to engage the OU student community in the OU Student Association’s research work – Analysis report

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Introduction

The aim of this project is to offer a student’s perspective of the current views surrounding the OU Students Association’s work and how the Association can ensure that more of the OU students engage with the Student Association’s research work. This project is lead by the Student Voice Research and Information Officer Pooja Sinha. In the course of this report, I will discuss the reading that I have done regarding the objective of the report and analyse the qualitative data gathered from the online discussion surrounding the three main themes or barriers that may impede on student’s participation: Time Constraints, Being Judged/Cultural Diversity and Awareness.

This project is a follow up by the Association to its previous work into the student-Association relationship. In this report, I will be using information collected from these previous works to analyse the data from the online discussion and establish any correlations. This project allows the Association to gain a better understanding of the student’s perspective of the Associations research work. By doing so, the OU Students Association hopes to identify channels of improvement to facilitate the participation of more students in the Association’s research work. This report also serves to provide the perspective of fellow students about ways to better reach the fellow students and engage them with the work that is done by the student reps and the staff of the Students Association i.e. representing the voices of the students need, ensuring that the OU’s experience is worthwhile for the students.

The three main themes identified by the Student Voice Researchers and Pooja are Time Constraints, Awareness and Being Judged / Cultural Diversity.

Method

Pooja arranged for an online discussion with 4 other fellow students of the OU on the 12th of March. On the day of the online discussion, we had 5 students in attendance. The participants of the discussion will be referred as Participant Number, henceforth. This is due to the regulations surrounding data protection.

The qualitative data gathered during the online discussion was analysed by method of Thematic Analysis. Pooja ensured that the Student Voice Researchers understood the concept and application of thematic analysis during the face-to-face induction session. During the face-to-face induction session on the 8th of March, Pooja and the volunteer researchers (myself included), identified the sorts of themes that are associated with the barriers for student engagement with the Association. We then went away for the weekend to familiarise with the online material, such as previous research work done by the Students Association and other materials in the Association’s website and proceeded to construct questions around the identified themes to ask the participants of the online discussion.
The themes identified during the induction session were Time Constraints, Being Judged, Cultural Diversity, Confidence, Awareness, Experience, Accessibility/Disability and Approachability. The identifying was done by Pooja, Jess, Chloe and myself. These themes were then narrowed down to three: Time Constraints, Awareness and Being Judged/Cultural Diversity. The questions surrounding the themes of all the SVRs were then collated by Pooja to ask the participants of the online discussion. The participants of the online discussion were then asked questions regarding the three most important themes identified, which were: Time Constraints, Awareness and Being Judged/Cultural Diversity. During the online session, the SVRs took turns to ask the participants some open-ended questions surrounding the three main themes to encourage discussion amongst the participants and the SVRs.

The key questions that were asked during the online session were:

- If you only had two hours to spare, what type of Association activity/event would you go for?
- What kind of research activities would be most inclusive? [Follow up or clarification: How can we invite different viewpoints, ensure students are able to express their views?]
- What could make our research activities more meaningful to you?
- As an OU student, what do you think the barriers are for students to engage with research?
- Do you visit the Association’s website often?
- How often? What type of information would you look for when it comes to research?

Following the question, the participants were encouraged to share their views as a reply to the question and further discuss other aspects of their experiences as a student of the OU and a member of the Association. The participants were also encouraged to make suggestions for some of the concerns raised.

The data collected includes but are not limited to the notes from the online discussion and previous research done by the OU Students Association. The notes from the online discussion were analysed once collected to identify the relationship between the content of the discussion and the themes associated with the initial questions. The analysis of the notes was then codified according to the themes that they reflect.

**Findings**

Once the discussion ended, I have categorised the responses from the participants according to their respective identified themes. Below, I will discuss further the link between the responses and the challenges identified by the participants.

**Time Constraints**

The participants feel that most of the time spent on the Association’s website was spent trying to navigate the website, which is time consuming when looking for valuable information. Participant 2 said that the students often must click through the
Student Voice tab on the Association’s website in order to learn about research opportunities. She also said that if the student was not aware that the research can be found under the student voice, the chances of them accessing the research page is low. One solution for this would be to ensure that the Association’s website is easy to navigate for the target audience.

It was said in the discussion that sometimes, students might simply not be interested in engaging with the Association as they simply don’t have the time for it. Participant 5 pointed out that not all students may be interested in exploring social activities in addition to their work and study.

‘There will always be those who will always say, I don’t want any part in this.’

This can be a factor for the lack of engagement from the student community who identify with the constraints mentioned by participant 5. Running events/activities that are related to specific subjects or modules may be appealing to more students from the specified subject or module. Relatability of the Students Association’s work with the OU subjects or modules will be very appealing to students looking to improve their knowledge and skills regarding their interest subject. P5 mentioned that running module specific activities/events might help to overcome the above disinterest from some students and increase awareness in the related modules/subjects.

**Being Judged and Cultural Diversity**

This barrier did not seem to have any major traction among the participants of the online discussion.

**Awareness**

The major issue that the participants raised was the lack of awareness of the Students Association, its works and the services offered by the Association. This was identified during the induction activity as a major contributing barrier towards the participation of the OU students in the Association’s research work and the subsequent online discussion was heavily skewed towards this aspect.

A few issues identified regarding awareness or lack thereof were;

- Many new students might not be aware that they are a member of the Students Association by default, when they enrol. Participant 5 said that the Association may be missing a lot of students, as students do not realise that they are automatically a part of the Association.

- Not many tutors push the idea of the Association or its services to the students. Participant 4 felt that students should be encouraged by their tutors to join in and use the online forums and said there had been no encouragement to do this at the face-to-face tutorials they have attended. Participant 2 added, at present not many students are aware of the Association’s work or its presence and how the students can get involved. Participant 5 also said that, from the three tutors she had had so far, only one of them really encouraged her to use the forums. It should be noted that the participant did not distinguish between OU forums and Students Association
forums. I believe that here-in lies an issue of lack of clarification of the Students Association for the students. Participant 1 clarified this by stating that she uses the formal OU forums but does not engage with social media.

- A lack of face-to-face interactions within the student community which makes it more difficult for some students to become aware of the Association. Participant 5 said that the lack of face-to-face opportunities may result in students losing out on being a part of a wider community of students. "[My fellow students] are names on a screen to me". Participant 2 added to this, stating that the OU used to conduct Open Days at the Campus, which had a heavy presence of the Students Association where the students could go and have a chat with the student representatives and the Association staff.

According to the New Students Survey conducted in 2017, between 2016 and 2017, the overall awareness of the OU Students Association has increased from 72% to 82% (New Students Survey, 2017). According to the New Students Survey of 2017, the age group ‘56 and over’, showed the highest levels of awareness of the Students Association and the highest levels of familiarity with the Association’s work (New Students Survey, 2017). The age groups ‘26 – 35’ and ‘under 25’ showed the lowest levels of awareness of the Association and its work (New Students Survey, 2017). This is interesting because it shows the wider demographic of the Students Association, which is mostly mature students. The age group, with the various commitments and challenges, could be a contributing factor towards the limited participation of the students, regardless of the levels of awareness.

The New Students Survey of 2017 also identified that OU students mostly use the OU’s forums rather than the Associations VLE forums (New Students Survey, 2017). The limited exposure of students to the Association’s forums means that limited students will be aware of the Students Association. The Association will need to work with the OU to figure out ways to encourage more students to use the Association’s forums as well as the OU’s forums.

Discussion

This project had allowed me to gauge the extent to which the identified themes and their associated constraints contribute toward the lack of student engagement with the OU Students Association. The main constraints for student engagement were time related and lack of awareness of the Students Association and their work. Some recommendations of improvement based on the findings are as follows:

1. The organisation and delivery of more Module/Subject related research activities by the Students Association. This would mean that more students of particular module/subject will participate in their respective activities with the Association.

2. More exposure of the clubs and societies run by the Students Association via tutors and OU staff members e.g. student support team mentioning the availability of the clubs and societies to existing and new students, when they approach them for information.
3. Adopting some traditional means of communications in addition to online formats i.e. letters mailed to students from the Students Association, which has information about the Association’s research work, the impact of the Association’s campaigns and other activities carried out by the Association.

4. The organisation of more face-to-face activities on campus or other meet-ups to ensure the participation of students and make them aware of the community of students of the OU.

5. Improve the layout of the Students Association website to increase exposure of the services and work done by the Association, so it is easier for the student community to find.

6. Student Support and Tutors should push the idea of the OU Students Association more to their students, thereby increasing the channels of awareness for the Association.

References