Students in Transformation: Speech by Nicola Simpson at Student Voice Symposium

Hello everyone – here in the room and listening in online.

For those who don’t know me, I’m Nicci – an OU graduate, an OU student and the President of the Students Association. Earlier today you will have heard from some of my colleagues on the student leadership team and many of you will already know a great deal about our work.

For me – everyday in my role is different, juggling a lot of different tasks and issues but over the past year, the transformation of the university has obviously been a major focus of my work. Earlier today you may have heard Lorraine talking about our work in academic governance. As President I am a member of the education committee, senate and council each of which has a different role – but all need to have an awareness of how the decisions taken at their committee impact upon students.

A lot of my work is University facing, representing students within the University but I also spend time representing students interests in Higher Education more generally and working with the Students Association team on many aspects of our work – from Freshers events to our student Conference.

When I spoke to some of my fellow reps about what I might do or say here today I was encouraged to stand up on stage with a placard and a loudhailer and repeat the mantra ‘Listen to Students’ for 20 minutes. Alternative suggestions included doing an interpretive dance and letting you figure out what it all means or to record my presentation to be played on the big screen and keep all my fingers crossed that the technology would work.

As I progress through this presentation I hope you will understand why students have made those suggestions.

So what do Students know about the transformation?

Very little!
Way back in June 2017 – which feels like a lifetime ago. 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 places the needs of students and the wider economy at the centre of all it does’

We were 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 duplications. Students would have greater choice over when they start courses and the pace of their study. We were also told that ‘change of this scale will impact on staff – in the coming years fewer people would be needed overall’.

For those of us representing students we immediately started questioning what was meant by ‘digital by design’ as we know from our own research and what students have been telling us they prefer a blend of online /onscreen and 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 wondering what was 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 importance of the relationship between tutors and students – which is crucial to our success.

So what have students learned since then?

In the October Edition of Open News which is sent to students – in a 271 word article titled ‘Students First Transformation: keeping you up-to date’ students were reminded of the redesign that had been announced in June and told that the mission of the university would remain the same and that the OU ‘want to be revolutionary in their use of technology.’

It goes 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 – so 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 via 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. Having a dedicated space to share information about the changes in the University is something we have been asking 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 a long way to go. The page links to a number of places 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 provide meaningful comment.

The Students Association have been working 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. Though we do have some challenges in what we can report – as student representatives are bound by strict confidentiality agreements which we must sign before taking up positions within OU Committees and working groups where detailed planning is underway.

Given that there is little information about the transformation being sent directly from the University to students it isn’t surprising that students have found the recent reports in the news media about the university interesting. These have sparked students’ interest in issues related to curriculum cuts, digital delivery and the tuition model adopted by the OU.

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

**Where are Students in the Transformation?**

Student representatives have been involved in the work of some of the different workstreams 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
workstreams. For some of these, we have been active participants in regular meetings of
the groups, for others our involvement has been more limited.

Senior members of the university have 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 to improve engagement opportunities.

We want to have the opportunity to shape the 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 their tutors and other
students face to face or where all learning material is delivered online or onscreen. It’s not
uncommon to hear this reflected back to us as if we are anti digital – dinosaurs stuck in the
past, unable to move on.

At countless meetings students talk about how such a move to digital would (or already has)
impact 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, however when it comes to written policy we see references to
digital pedagogy, print materials (where appropriate), print on demand being available for the
next 5 years. We cant help but wonder who gets to decide when it is appropriate to have
hard copy materials and what does the university have panned for print on demand after
those 5 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 a range of 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 F A Q document - in response to the question
‘Couldn’t digital by design exclude some students – 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 we face.
One of the responses from the university is that a “full setup of tablet PC (Windows 10), external monitor, keyboard and mouse can be purchased for £320 - a fraction of the cost of a single module.” Those of you who are members of senate will know that last week I asked how the University is seeking feedback from those who experience financial hardship and other disadvantage – as comments like this – suggesting that people need just go out and buy some new kit are 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 this is for them to access.

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 on the move but any of us who spend a lot of time travelling know that it’s not as easy in practice and at times like that – when we can’t get online, that is when we are grateful to have a book to turn to.

Concerns about the loss of high quality print materials 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. Governance committees are looking at the curriculum on offer and considering what modules, pathways and qualifications are to stay and which are to go. Whilst students are members on those committees – they haven’t had the opportunity to discuss the proposals with the student body (that pesky confidentiality agreement forbids it) and it may come as a surprise to many students that the modules they were really looking forward to doing in the future may not be available to them.

**What would students like from the Transformation?**

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.

*We would encourage an engagement strategy which includes:*

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

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

Open forums and roadshow events opened up to encourage student attendance, or a student equivalent as students may have different concerns about the proposals.

Finally we would like to see a plan – some workstreams are well underway with their design work, 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 have heard today about our work in building the student community and in academic representation and the opportunities for student consultation and the student engagement project. You have heard me speak on how students have been involved in the transformation – and how they could be involved its up to everyone here in the university to help make this a reality. If students haven’t been consulted in the decisions you or your units are taking, ask why. If you haven’t explored the implications of any changes to all student groups – then you are taking 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 OU.

But let’s not finish there – let’s finish by recognising that some workstreams have done more than others to engage with the student body, 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 any from the difficult discussions – at University we are learning to think critically – let us apply that to our own university and the challenges it faces.

Thank you.