Academic Representation
A consultation with OU students

March 2018
Thanking you!

A big thank you to the students that have taken part in the Association’s online consultation about Academic Representation. Unfortunately, we cannot respond to every item. However we have some headlines for you in the You Said – We Did section of this response. If you would like a response to any of the other items that were covered in the consultation then we would be happy to give you one, so please keep up the dialogue with this particular piece of work.

So... what is Academic Representation anyway?
The student voice is the thoughts, views and opinions of students on an educational journey. Most schools, colleges and Higher Education institutions in the United Kingdom have feedback mechanisms, where students are consulted on their learning experience or debate issues that are affecting them. At university there are commonly robust Academic Representative and student engagement structures as well as Students’ Unions, Guilds or Associations working to make sure that students are being treated fairly and as equal partners in decision making processes.

The Students Association and The Open University are committed to working in partnership to enhance the student experience and quality of teaching. A major part of the University and the Association’s ability to do this is through our Academic Representation structures which play a vital role in providing information on what the OU is getting right, and student opinion to enable continuous development and a better study experience.

The Students Association plays a key part in making sure that the OU student voice is heard through various volunteering opportunities, and getting your feedback assures us and the OU that we’re working on projects that truly matter to you. Your elected leadership team also represent your voice on a national level, making sure that the collective OU student voice is heard loud and clear.

Some of the roles that are involved in Academic Representation at the OU:
Learner Experience Representative
Central Committee Representative
Senate Reference Group
The six student members of Senate
Faculty Association Representatives
The Central Executive Committee

Click here to see more on oustudents.com
Why did we do the Consultation?

The Students Association consistently carries out research to explore two key areas: improving the services offered to students and gaining further insight into different aspects of the student experience. The purpose of all our research-related activities is to better understand the views and concerns of OU students, so that the Association can identify what students need from us and how we can take their interests forward within the University.

Each year, the Students Association undertakes analysis of OU students’ feedback to the ‘students’ union’ question in the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS is targeted at undergraduates in their final year of study, and in 2017 over 14,800 OU students took the survey. In the consultation, we reviewed how students might respond to the new question statement in 2017, which is phrased as: "The students’ union (association or guild) effectively represents students’ academic interests."

**In 2017, 44% of students who responded agreed with the above question. This score ranked 13% below the sector average of 57%.**

While the pre-2017 question asked for overall satisfaction of the Students’ Union, Association or Guild, its focus was considered to be too broad. The changing of the statement to focus specifically on academic representation, whilst helpful to our work, has been found to challenge students in terms of their understanding. The statement assumes that there is a consensus around the definition of academic representation across both institutions as well as the sector, and that students have a good awareness of which student union activities fall under the banner of academic representation. Cognitive testing has shown that respondents found it hard to interpret the new statement and understand how their students’ unions were involved in academic representation.

With the change in focus from general satisfaction to students rating of a specific aspect of the Association’s work, the 2017 results could not be compared directly to those from previous years (as recommended by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)). Throughout October and December 2017, the Students Association undertook student engagement activities in order to better understand our scores. This consultation was one of those activities.
**You Said - We Did, Part One**

**WHAT DOES THE TERM ‘ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION’ MEAN TO YOU?**

You said: Students should be represented by people who are able to identify and address issues affecting students in a manner that is understanding, proactive and timely.

We did: This is mainly done via our Learner Experience Representatives, Central Committee Representatives and Senate members. We currently have over 150 students volunteering within Academic Representation and Student Voice related roles, putting students at the heart of university decision making. We can make efforts to improve our visibility of our representative work by utilising channels such as the VLE forums, our website and social media. However, our volunteers are often bound by strict confidentially agreements. As part of our Association strategy we have committed to work with the OU on a Code of Practice for Academic Representation, which will seek to be an agreement which enables us to offer better information about rep work and achievements to the wider student body.

You said: There should be two-way communication between faculty and students on key issues, such as curriculum content.

We did: The Faculty Association Representatives have this at the heart of their role. The Students Association already conduct Faculty specific online chats in Freshers Week, which has the possibility to extend to other times in the year. Since this role was introduced in 2016, there have been a number of developments made to improve the link between individual faculties, their elected representatives, and Student Voice volunteers. Whilst this role in particular continues to develop, there may be the possibility for module websites to include relevant FAR details, as well as the opportunity for FARs to have reserved membership on our Senate Reference Group, and to work more closely with their faculty-specific academic services teams.

You said: Student representatives should be ‘in at the ground level’ of any discussions about anything that impacts students.

We did: Our CEC team continue to foster good relationships with both students and OU departments to ensure that they are at the forefront of discussions regarding issues that may impact students. At the time of creating this document we have representatives on all but one Boards of Studies, and our growing team of Learner Experience Representatives continue to pick up on module and departmental specific issues and successes.
You Said - We Did, Part One

WHAT DOES THE TERM ‘ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION’ MEAN TO YOU? Continued

You said: We should be holding the University to account and making sure it maintains the highest academic standards. You want a Students Association that is willing and able to act in the best interests of students at all times. Decisions can appear to be already made by the time that student representatives have the opportunity to comment.

You Said: You think academic representation is about students having someone they can get advice from or just to chat to when they need it, but who will also represent their needs to the University in an effective way.

We did: The Students Association continues to hold The University to account and keep The Open University mission at its core. We have membership of many University committees/working groups that are designed to influence policy. This right is enshrined in the Student Charter and Relationship Agreement and applies to any committee whose terms of reference affect the student experience.

We did: The Students Association at present does not offer individual representation although is part of our longer term strategy. Instead our Officers represent the collective interests and needs of our students. We are happy to make efforts to be more transparent about this by specifying that we do not offer individual representation on our website. There is potential for us to create a FAQs page on who to contact when you have different problems. E.g. IT helpdesk, your Student Support Team, or your tutor. In terms of speaking to your elected leadership team every two weeks, your current VP Community hosts an online drop-in for students to take part in. These will soon move to Adobe Connect to engage a wider audience, and we are trialling the use of new face-to-face events.
You Said - We Did, Part Two

WHAT SHOULD ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION LOOK LIKE IN YOUR STUDENTS ASSOCIATION?

You said: There should be a clear agenda of what the Students Association wants to achieve, a strategy for achieving it, and a channel of communication that makes these things clear to students.

You said: Communication strategies that recognise that not all students are ‘natural engagers’ and may value a range of channels. This could include a tutorial-type activity.

We did: Our 2017 – 2020 strategy continues to shape and influence the direction of travel for the Students Association. Regular strategy updates are brought to each of the Central Executive Committee meetings for further information and input, of which all papers are available to our members via our website. The Association also creates an annual report that goes to the University Council each academic year. We have published an informal snapshot of some of the Association’s activities in 2017 in the format of the ‘12 days of the Association’ which includes some text from the annual report.

We did: It is recognised that due to the vast number of OU students, there is no one method of communicating with students. When information is sent out all channels (email, social media, and signposting to / from website, post and mail) are utilised. We are committed to ensuring that students who do not use social media are able to access equivalent information through our website and via email. We also offer a mailing list for student who prefer to receive a digest of news via a monthly email. The Digital Communications Team will shortly be reviewing our use of communication channels as part of the Association’s Communications Strategy. Community meet ups and online meet ups regularly take place in several areas over the UK and beyond. However, they are currently not linked to tutorials.

You said: The Students Association could be more prominent (for example on StudentHome) with a proactive approach towards publicising what they do in this area, and asking students for direct input.

We did: We occasionally put messages on StudentHome. We can investigate having a permanent square or further structured advertisements. Links on module home pages would be a big advance for us, and we will continue to utilise social media.

Want to see our work? You can find our 2020 Strategy by clicking here
You Said - We Did, Part Two

WHAT SHOULD ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION LOOK LIKE IN YOUR STUDENTS ASSOCIATION? Continued

You said: We should have student involvement in policy development and review. A thorough review of the processes and procedures that are currently in place for developing and promulgating the policies of the Association, leading to all students of the University being able to play an active part in policy-making.

We did: Our CEC currently debate policy and new OU practice at their Central Executive Committee Weekends and via forums with students. As part of that process, we release policy statements to the wider student body and work alongside the OU to ensure that students are kept in the loop about new changes and developments. We have launched our new website and will continue to produce content around policy for the wider student body. The Students Association will continue to develop the student-led practice of policy review and initiation, and we are actively investigating how we can utilise new platforms in order to make this process more accessible. The Students Association has over an hour as part of the OU Student Consultation face-to-face events to speak to students, and consult them on hot topics as and when needed. We will also be seeking to utilise the new Student Ideas platform to support the Association when creating future policy.

You Said: There was a need to improve accountability and reporting lines of representatives.

We did: All Central Executive Committee (CEC) members produce a quarterly report detailing their activity. There is a specific forum on the VLE through which questions to either the CEC as a whole or to individual representatives can be posted. Questions can also be sent to the Association office for forwarding on to the appropriate member.
You Said - We Did, Part Two

WHAT SHOULD ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION LOOK LIKE IN YOUR STUDENTS ASSOCIATION? Continued

You said: There should be an ongoing review in place concerning the development of Students Association policies concerning Education, Equal Opportunities and Student Support, as well as Constitutional and other rule changes.

We did: There is a legal requirement to review the Constitution every five years. The Association undertakes its review every four years. This review includes a consultation with the Association’s forums, a face to face consultation as laid down in the Constitution and a final vote at Conference to approve or reject the amendments. Vice-president Administration is tasked within the remit to ensure the updating of bye laws and associated rules to keep them current.

The CEC discusses policy at its regular quarterly meetings and also via on line discussions between these. It is also involved in making submissions to external consultations as necessary to ensure the voice of the part time distance learner is heard. (As mentioned earlier) The new Student ideas platform developed as part of the joint OU-Association Student Engagement platform offers a route where individual students can suggest ideas for other students to discuss and which could inform the CEC in its ongoing discussions.

Want to see what we have been up to? You can find our Student Voice News page by clicking here
You said: There is confusion about how the Students Association and academic representation works with excessive jargon and initialisms, which doesn’t encourage engagement

We did: We are aware of the confusing terminology, and this is outlined in our strategy as to remove the jargon from our roles and role descriptions. We understand that due to the complex nature of a lot of the Academic Representation related work the overall message about what we are doing and achieving can be lost. We are looking to produce clearer resources and content in the future, which includes the launch this year of the student voice bulletin, we have produced a video based on the work of the Senate Reference Group and we are trialing the use of a Student Voice Twitter account to release bite sized and digestible bits of information that relate to our work.

Some of the terminology is not based on anything to do with the Association, and instead the structure relies on what the OU call their working groups, committees and such like. Acronyms are a barrier to clear communication. It is our approach to use them as little as possible, and we are committed to spelling out all acronyms, both our own and any used by the University, as set out in our 2016-18 strategy. Not only does this ensure that discussions are accessible to all students, no matter their level of engagement, it also ensures our documents and sites are accessible to those using assistive software.

In terms of the academic representation structure and how it interacts, the Student Voice part of our website aims to clarify the remit of each of our volunteer roles. We have held a number of Facebook live interviews (which have been transcribed and uploaded to our website) with members of the Central Executive Committee to broadcast more widely the work they do representing student views. This year we have also produced a Student Voice Bulletin which details ‘hot off the press’ updates, and are piloting a new Twitter account (@OUstudentsVoice).

However, thanks to this feedback we are now aware that we must do more to help students understand how the roles interact, both within the Association and with the OU decision-making structures.
You Said - We Did, Part Three

STILL THINKING ABOUT HOW YOUR STUDENTS ASSOCIATION CAN BETTER REPRESENT YOUR ACADEMIC INTERESTS, WHAT COMMUNICATION METHODS SHOULD WE BE USING TO CREATE A DIALOGUE WITH YOU?

PLEASE THINK ABOUT LISTENING, TAKING ACTION AND RESPONDING TO YOU

You said: Links to reps could be better signposted; sometimes pages found via links to student voice seemed to be dominated by internal Association matters.

You said: Prepare an induction package about the Association including its role in academic representation.

We did: We will continue to work to make improvements to the Student Voice section of oustudents.com and make efforts to ensure that links are better signposted. The team will strive to ensure that our content on the Association website is relevant to the wider student body, without losing sight of the quality of things that the reps have been achieving and what we are doing.

You said: Reps should have their title alongside their name on forums, although it was possible that this may make other students less open, while making reps more visible.

You said: Boards of Studies consultations should be advertised on module forums and subject websites.

We did: The Students Association completely agrees, and will continue to support the wider promotion of the BoS forums at the Student Consultation Management Group quarterly meeting.

We did: At present, we do not currently link contact details for any of the elected representative team, however you can get in touch with them via the Talk to Your Students Association Forums or via the office.
You Said - We Did, Part Four
WE ASKED: WHAT CONVERSATIONS DO YOU THINK YOUR ACADEMIC REPRESENTATIVES SHOULD BE HAVING WITH THE OU ON YOUR BEHALF?

You Said, Conversations about:

- Delivery of module materials
- Tuition provision and delivery
- Quality of academic content
- Moderation of forums
- How the OU is run and any significant change Changes to modules and qualifications
- Access for disabled students
- Tuition fees and funding
- Link to employers
- Cost of degree ceremonies
- Academic references
- Engagement with research groups for postgraduate students
- Variations in tutor support
- Student satisfaction
- Changes to pathways
- Web design
- Levels of Service
- Module content
- Training for student-facing staff
- Provision of qualifications that fit with current and future students’ needs.
- Flexibility of start dates
- Timely return of TMAs
- Provision of support at weekends
- Provision of support when something goes wrong
- Building academic communities
- Student retention

When these suggestions were posted, we consulted with our academic reps and asked if this list was accurate. Several of them commented that they were discussing themes related to these topics.
What else did you say in the Consultation?

Your concern was that: It may be that the main problem is that the University does not have sufficient respect for academic representation and does not sufficiently listen to the student voice, and in this context, it is difficult for the Students Association to turn this situation around and be listened to. We think that is an interesting opinion, this is probably a good idea for a second consultation. Is that something you would like to see us run?

You felt that sometimes the complaints process is more effective in making change. Absolutely in some cases that is the right direction of travel, as mentioned earlier - we do not support students with individual representation. However we are seeking to investigate this further, as in outlined in our 2017 - 2020 Strategy.

Another concern was that The Students Association is too authoritarian and rules-driven and could be more open. It should stop using titles with names that may denote gender.

As a registered Charity and as a Student Union we are obliged to have a constitution and good financial governance and these are implemented via the bye-laws. Students have the opportunity to participate in the review of the Constitution every four years and any changes made then must be ratified by students at Conference. All the CEC members and Student Trustees are elected by a ‘one member, one vote’ process held every two years and open to all students (except where external factors apply). These elected bodies are responsible for policy (CEC) and strategy and finance (Board of Trustees).

The Constitution and amendments will be featured as part of the Students Association Conference 2018 - click here for more details!