Hello. I'm Rob Avann, returning officer for the OU Students Association elections 2018. And…?

I’m Verity Robinson, the deputy returning officer for these elections.

Thank you for joining us tonight. So welcome to sunny Milton Keynes for the president live candidates questions and answers. So tonight we’re going to be putting your questions that were submitted in advance to your five candidates for president. So we have four with us here in Milton Keynes. Cath Brown, Graham Rimmer, Sam Ung and Joe Brooks-Harmer, and one joining remotely, which is Harry Gallimore-King.

I'll be interviewing each of the candidates one by one, and then later in the show Verity will be hosting a group discussion where candidates will get an opportunity to ask questions of each other and hold a wider discussion. So a little about moderation tonight. We’ve got a team of moderators operating tonight and they’re going to be watching all the live comments as they come in.

We want this to be a really engaging discussion tonight, a really good session, we’ve lots of discussion on the answers to the questions, but please remember to ensure that all comments are respectful, fair, not personal, and in line with the spirit of our policies on bullying and harassment. Speak as you would as if the person was in the room. Any comments that fall outside this will be removed and we will be reviewing all comments afterwards and taking action where necessary.

Now, please remember, all candidate profiles for your candidates are up on the elections portal at www.ersvotes.com/oustudents and also don’t forget that voting opens on Monday and you will receive a voting email to give you your chance to exercise your vote. Now, first up after this short break we’re going to have our first interview which is with Harry Gallimore-King remotely. So see you in a minute.

Welcome back. So with me on the line joining us remotely is Harry Gallimore-King. How are you, Harry?

I’m very well, thank you. How are you?

Yes, I’m very well thank you, very well indeed. So, we’ve got your questions here that have been submitted by students from the forums. So first question, Harry. Ruth asks what skills and experience you can bring to the role. What
did you learn from your role at Canterbury Christ Church, and how would it apply here?

HGK Well, at Canterbury Christ Church I worked alongside quite a few of the student representatives as part of the student union, because I was actually a student representative for my faculty, which greatly involved working with the councillors and also the sabbatical officers of the university. And all of that, with the meetings and things like that, has given me experience of those meetings. But outside of university I also did work for a further educational college and that obviously has exposed me to managing meetings, managing learners’ experience and all of that kind of thing.

RA Okay, and what differences do you particularly foresee with this role compared to some of your past experience?

HGK I think this will be much more involved and hands on. Before it was just more of a consultative role whereas this is more of a leading position. So I think that will be the main difference.

RA And is that what’s really attracted you?

HGK Yes it is, because coming from education myself and working in education, that has given me a passion for students, making it better for them, their experience on the whole, and also making sure that the academic standards are as good as they can be.

RA Okay. So second question. A large part of your manifesto centres around national higher education reforms. So how would the Students Association contribute to arguments about those? And what about the changes within the OU? Are you going to represent existing students who are affected in the here and now?

HGK Yes, I believe wholeheartedly in representing the existing student body, especially with the Student First Transformation programme that’s currently being under review. But nationally I do feel like all students are disadvantaged by the fees, especially going back from 2010 where they were increased by two thirds, which wasn’t really justified or valid, in my opinion. And I think that the whole national student body should come together against that.

RA Okay. So you would really want to do a lot more on external work, a lot more on external representation?
Yes, I believe that external representation is key to achieving that goal. Of course that’s not my only goal, as you’ve read from my manifesto there’s more to do with wellbeing, health and other things as well, but that is just something that I feel is unjustified against every student.

Okay, all right. So next question. You mentioned particularly that induction, student engagement and student experience is lacking in the university, and I think many students would agree with you in terms of that. What initiatives and new ideas would you want to do to change that?

Well, there are several things. So already I’ve been talking to other students about the Young Students Group and things like that, so one initiative idea would be an outreach kind of initiative that targeted people that are in post 16 education to try and draw them to the OU, change the perception of the OU, because there is a negative connotation when it comes to OU degrees and things like that, hence why we have more of a mature student body than other universities. And I think that would be key to changing that and bringing in more people to the university.

Having not previously been a trustee of the Association, which of course the president is automatically a member of the board of trustees, what do you think you would need to learn to be able to hit the ground running in that role? From whom would you need to learn it from and how would you go about doing that?

Well, I think I’d need to learn almost everything about the role from the existing student trustees, and also the president and things like that, existing members, so when it came to the transition period where you go for your handover I would make sure that I took on board everything from those trustees, from the past president, and used all of that knowledge and experience to then go forward with my own.

Okay, so you’d very much want to talk to the current board members, pick up from them as to how you move forward. Any particular training or things that you think you might need to do to be able to do that role?

Well, I think that, if I’ve read correctly, there is training from the Association around that and I would obviously take all of that onboard and make sure that I fully engaged with that to be able to fully fulfil the role.

Okay. Now, you talk quite a lot about student wellbeing in your manifesto and wanting to see some changes on that front, feeling it’s really important to tackle and reduce isolation felt by OU students. How would you want to go
about doing that with the OU? What would you seek to try and achieve? What does division look like in terms of that?

HGK Well, I think this is another issue that is highlighted with the Association as well, because there’s a lack of engagement from students across the board. So I think that, as I’ve said on many of the answers to the forum post, that it would have to be a targeted campaign across a few VPs and I’d want to work with them together to achieve that goal of publicising and making changes within the OU and its Association to make students feel more comfortable and it’s an Association that they all want to be a member of and a university that they actually feel like cares about them.

RA Okay. And do you see mental health as being a particular area? I know you mentioned mental health in your manifesto, you’re one of two candidates that drew it out, do you see that as a major focus that should be taken forward and that the Association should do more about?

HGK I do, I wholeheartedly agree with that and mental health is something that’s quite close to me. And I think on a whole national scale, not just with students but across the board we have an issue when it comes to mental health and sufferers from that being disadvantaged across the entire, whether that’s jobs, whether that’s education, whether that’s just living. And I think that’s something that needs to be changed everywhere and I feel like this is a starting point where I can bring that campaign up and actually make some real changes.

RA So which bits of our current strategy do you feel most passionate about and which bits would you perhaps want to look at reviewing or perhaps even dropping?

HGK So when it comes to the strategy I think that we could even look at… I understand it has been set until 2020, but I believe that that could be all reviewed again. I understand it’s a set but obviously everything could be reviewed and questioned, and that’s something that I would want to work with across the board with all of the elected representatives to get a real student reflection on that. Because I feel like with the amount of members the Association currently has it only represents a minority group of the university rather than the whole group of students across the board, which I think is, although great for those students, it doesn’t necessarily provide an advantage to the rest of the student body.

RA So Richard asked what does the role of president really mean to you?
HGK  That means representing every student no matter who they are and no matter what their characteristics are and making sure that we have a university and an Association that they’re all proud to be part of.

RA  And how would you particularly want to go about forming a relationship with other CEC members, with the deputy president, with other trustees, with other students and other volunteers, long time volunteers within the Association? How would you want to go about achieving those things?

HGK  So I’d want to meet with them all and I understand that is obviously part of the role anyway, but as soon as I was in post I would want to make sure I set time to get to know them all, to make sure that we align our kind of beliefs on what we’re achieving for the OU. Because it’s not just about what I want, it’s what everybody’s fighting for, because they’re a representative of the student body in their own segments. And I think that’s what’s key, is to make sure that we understand everybody is there to represent someone. And it’s important we take all of that onboard and that's kind of how I would tackle that.

RA  Now, you’ve been one of the candidates who’s been very, very active on the elections forums particularly it’s fair to say. How would you see continuing to do that if you were to be elected as president? Visibility and engagement with members, is that something that you would really want to take forward, do a lot more about?

HGK  Definitely. That was actually a question that has funnily enough come up in the forums, and as I said then, I was unaware of certain groups as I'm already a member of quite a few groups on Facebook and within the OU, but I haven’t seen them all, if that makes sense. And part of being elected would be to make sure that I go out there and I am involved in every group. I always have, because no matter what it is about I would have an opinion on that and so would other students. And that’s what I want, even from the forums about the election questions I’ve taken people’s comments on board, I haven’t necessarily kept the same opinion, and things have changed over time.

RA  All right. Thank you, Harry Gallimore-King, that’s the end of your questions. Thank you very much for joining us.

HGK  Thank you so much.

RA  Thank you.

((break 0:34:37 - 0:37:57?))
RA Okay, welcome back. So we are here with Cath Brown. Good evening, Cath. How are you?

CB Evening, Rob. I’m fine thank you. Hello everybody out there.

RA So we’ve got a series of questions for you, Cath, so let’s get straight down to it. So first question. You state that you would like to develop and extend the impact of academic representation, offering students effective channels to feed into the rep team. What do you envisage is the best mechanism for collecting student feedback with a population as large as ours?

CB I don’t think there’s one single best mechanism actually, Rob, I think we need to explore different possibilities. In the most recent term the CEC has worked on extending our range in social media, very much supported by the office team on that, but I think we need to explore that a little bit more. I think we can look at how we use our social media communications. I think we should push the OU to provide us with something rather better than the VLE which everyone knows is very user unfriendly, so that we can use that to gather student communications. I’ve been talking to a few students during my campaign about this, and one of the things they were suggesting is perhaps we should look at some Twitter chats with a particular hashtag. Perhaps we could look at some Facebook lives where we’re actually specifically asking for student engagement, live chats. So I think we just need to keep experimenting really, I don’t think there was one simple solution.

RA Yes okay, but you see academic representation as very much a central pillar of your manifesto really in terms of what you want to do and what you want to make better?

CB Absolutely, yes.

RA So, second question. Within our structures for academic representation how would you approach the disconnect between sometimes CEC policy and the Central Committee Representative team, the CCR team, who attend university committees on a regular basis? How would you approach that and how would you want to develop that better alongside the vice presidents who deal with that area?

CB I think that’s a really, really important thing. I mean I think at the moment we’re actually asking our Central Committee reps to go in, well obviously not unsupported because they are supported by Phillipa and Helen in the office
and so on, but we’re not actually equipping them with anything, we’re not saying this is our stance on some of these big issues. Now we don’t want to be dictatorial to them but I think we do need to be giving them a little bit of a steer, a little bit of support and help in that. So for example I think we need a stance on big issues such as we support blended learning, and I would like to evolve these policies on the big issues, perhaps in consultation with those central reps and with other interested parties as well. And then that means obviously they’re going to be in a position to buy in to those sorts of ideas.

I think the other thing is that it would be really good to have more occasions on which central reps and CEC actually talk to each other, because obviously CEC are there in the central reps forums, but we don’t always get as much engagement, that means that we don’t get the free and natural exchange of views and discussions. In my current role I’ve been quite fortunate to actually get some pretty good channels of communication with some of the stem CCRs and I think that’s given me a few ideas that it would actually be very beneficial for all of us to get the informal exchanges happening earlier, the discussions before they go into the meetings and so on.

RA Yes, okay. So how do you see striking a balance between central policy making but still giving individual student representatives the chance to air their own views that are maybe different from central policy? How would you find a balance between those?

CB I think the starting point is just having an awareness that a balance is necessary. I think also it is possible to say that the Students Association general policy is so and so, I’m not sure whether everybody agrees with it and I personally might not. And I think we should certainly empower people to do that, we don’t want to try and silence them from expressing their own views. and also I don’t think we should be looking at policies on every little titchy tiny thing, we should be looking at some overarching big ideas here, so that people are able to still respond on the fly when they’re in a meeting; we’re not expecting to be able to dictate exactly what they say to every single question.

VR And in your manifesto you talk very much about greater partnership working with the university. How do you see a balance between greater partnership working? So what do you mean by that side? But also how do you balance it with your other pitch around being a stroppy student union? So how do you find that balance between partnership on the one hand but being stroppy on the other when you need to be?

CB I think the partnership is what comes first, and again, I’m going to refer back to some of my current experience here where if I have an issue to resolve with
someone about a particular module my starting point is to work on the basis that they want to deal with concerns just as much as I do and that we're going to have a sensible discussion about it and try and work together on it. If it doesn't look like they are then that's when you start bringing in the big guns and that would be my approach with the university. But I do think I would like the university to understand that it is really beneficial to them to work with us, and not just ticking a box to say oh look, student in the room, this is great, but they can actually see there is a massive advantage to having us there, that we're contributing something. And I hope that the kitemark project in the Association strategy could actually contribute towards that.

VR And one of your big promises that you make is around seeking to take forward individual representation, to bring that into the Association. So do you think that's feasible when we know that the university has got to make significant financial savings over the next few years, and we're entering a period of time where that might be the case for quite some while? Do you think that's feasible or do you think that's not realistic to be able to achieve it?

CB I think it's optimistic. I wouldn't have said it's completely unfeasible or I wouldn't have brought it in because that wouldn't have been an honest manifesto approach. I think again it's something we need to see, convince the university of the benefits of increasing this intention to do that. I know that obviously the negotiation's already happened for this incoming academic year, so we'd probably be looking part way through the term before this could be achieved. I think also we'd probably need to be realistic about how much we could do in the short term. If we start promising everything to anyone that we represent on any disagreement they have with the university then we would be swamped. If we looked at very specific things when for example someone's got a disciplinary issue about a plagiarism charge or something like that, that might be something that's slightly more achievable and if we could at least aim to get the funds on a small scale basis first, if that works that then gives us perhaps the ammunition to develop it in future terms.

RA Now, in your manifesto you talk very much about there being not a place for hierarchy in the Central Executive Committee. So if that's the case why did you stand for election to the leadership role? How do you balance the two elements?

CB Yes, it's very true, I have always said I don't like hierarchy and I don't, but there are different roles, that the role I'm standing for is a fundamentally different role to the one that I'm currently in for example. What I mean by not being hierarchical is not saying that this particular group of people's views are more important, or that this particular group of people's views are the only
ones that I want to consult. Obviously I appreciate that in some roles, particularly obviously president and deputy we will be privy to information that not everybody on the Central Executive Committee will have, that’s the nature of the role, and I don’t feel it’s hierarchical the fact that one observes confidentiality in that sense. But what I’m really getting at here is that I would like, on anything where we can involve everybody, we do. Instead of the historical officer team meetings in between CECs I’d like us to consider having a meeting that’s on a specific topic of interest and invite CEC members to opt in to that so that we’re basically harvesting as many talents as we can.

RA And a lot of students on the forums have asked questions about what candidates might need to learn in order to be able to do the roles effectively. Would you say that perhaps being a trustee is one of those areas that you’ve not had the exposure to yet, and therefore would need to learn more about it? And if so, how would you take that forward? Who would you need to learn from? What training do you think you might need to do? How would you see yourself being effective in that role?

CB Yes. Firstly it’s absolutely something where I would need to learn more. I think I’ve got a few small ideas by having read The Essential Trustee on the government website. I’ve been a company director which I know is a different role because it’s not related to a charity, but in terms of the overall responsibility, have some of the ideas. I believe there is standard training offered to all new trustees, and I’d definitely look forward to taking advantage of that. As with many roles, I would wish to talk to people who are already in the role, I think that’s a great opportunity. I enjoyed the opportunity to come and observe the trustees’ meeting. Obviously it doesn’t tell me exactly about their full responsibilities, but it gave me an idea of how they’re actually working.

RA And last question. You place a big emphasis in your manifesto and in your slogan as well around courage and being courageous. So what do you see that meaning in terms of in this context and in this role, and for the Association moving forward in terms of being courageous?

CB I think it means being prepared to take, I will say, appropriate calculated risks. I think there are many cases where it might be rather more comfortable for us to try and stay neutral. I’m not saying we should never stay neutral, sometimes it’s an entirely appropriate and sensible stance, but I think sometimes we perhaps need to pin our colours to the mast a little more. I don’t think that’s ever a particularly easy decision. And for me personally I think sometimes it’s be prepared to say something that is not going to make you very popular.
RA: All right, Cath Brown, thank you very much.

CB: Thank you, Rob.

((break 0:48:03 - 0:50:18))

RA: Hi, welcome back. So I’m here with Sam Ung. Hi Sam.

SU: Nice to meet you, Rob. It’s an absolute pleasure to be here, thank you for facilitating this.

RA: No problem at all. So, Sam, I’ve got a series of questions here from the forum that students wanted to ask you, so we’ll go straight into these.

SU: I’ll try my best.

RA: So Marie notes that you’ve not been as active in the elections forums as some of the other candidates. How would you explain this to students wondering whether to vote for you?

SU: Well, I’ve just finished my TMA number five, so that’s the last one and obviously I’m all new to this. I’m an outsider, so I’ve been trying to catch up on all the reading material you guys sent me in my candidate’s pack, so I’ve been studying up on the constitution, the Students’ Charter, the Royal Charter. I’ve been trying to catch up with all the stuff that I need to fulfil this role. So sadly I did try to put as much time in the forum as I could, and as some of you might have noticed I went to the wrong forum and I started answering the live questions, and I got a…

RA: No, sure. But you’ve been back in over the last few days I think haven’t you and started to answer questions that are in there.

SU: I tried to answer as many as I could, but yeah, I had a lot to prepare for this. Obviously I’m disadvantaged seeing as I’m the new guy, I’m not part of the establishment, so yeah, it’s all a bit nerve wracking but yeah, I’ve been trying to put in as much work as I can to prepare for the role.

RA: You’re certainly not the only one who’s not already in another role, I mean there’s other candidates certainly even in this process that have not been involved before who are finding their way into things. So what are your particular pledges and promises to OU students?
SU  Oh, I like that question. Yes, I think and I was discussing this with a few members of the staff, that the Students Association has lost a bit of its fire. There was a time, and it’s funny because I just heard another member of staff say this, there was a time when the Students’ Union would speak or the National Union of Students would speak, or write a letter, and it would be heard in parliament. You know, our voice was once a very formidable one, we would speak up in the north and they’d hear us in Whitehall. And I want us to sort of get back some of that.

Don’t get me wrong, I understand the presidential role isn’t a dictatorship, obviously I’ll be working closely with the team and the OU staff and the members. I’ll preside over the meetings and ensure a smooth and efficient every day running of the Student Association, but I would use my position to rally support for more causes for the students. I think there are things that worry the students that aren’t being addressed. I think we’ve been lost in a lot of bureaucracy I think, or to some extent, and I think if we focused more on the things that really matter to students. For example, will I be able to finish my course? What quality of life will I have when I’m studying? What quality of life will I have after studies? What job opportunities will I have after my degree’s done? You know, will my degree still be worth the same when I’m finished? I think this is what students focus on. I think to a certain extent we’ve lost some of that.

RA  Okay. So how would you seek to address that? What particular initiatives would you want to take that would address those things?

SU  Well, first of all I would need to rally support from the Student Association, obviously you can’t do that as one man, and then from that I would rally support from the OU itself, and then try to get as much support from other student organisations and other universities, so we have a clearer and stronger mandate to take to Whitehall, to take to the Houses of Parliament. You know, not just local government but national government. You know, let’s talk to them with a stronger and united voice. Why not? I think we’ve been so enclosed in these four walls thinking, well if we win the debate in this room then this will make things better for students. No, to get a better deal for students we need to take it to the people making the million pound decisions, we need to take it to the people that are making the cuts to the universities obviously which affect the students.

RA  So Barbara asked, what particular challenges you think are facing the Association and the university and how you would seek to address them?
SU  Well, I think that would link to my previous answer. Obviously one of the main challenges now is the budget cuts. Obviously we’re still in austerity, but I think everybody would agree that whenever the government needs to find money for something they do and normally everybody knows that whenever they want to go to war there’s always billions of pounds there but when it comes to students and university, traditional institutions, historical institutions of our country, they’re the first to get cuts. And I don’t think that’s necessary. Why should something so altruistic take a blow before something as misanthropic as war?

RA  So Greg asked, why does the OU matter to you as a person and why should it matter to a wider society?

SU  Well, one thing I remember they used to say about students was we need to listen to the students because they’re the future prime ministers, they’re the future CEOs, and when the OU was opened in 1969 under a Labour government, under Harold Wilson, if I remember correctly, the OU was set up to offer a higher education qualification for those that otherwise wouldn’t have been able to get it. Now me, I’m a mature student, I’m 42 years old, I’ve returned back to studies again to compete in this ever changing job market, so for people like me it’s invaluable. Now only that, but I’ve always regarded the OU as being at the forefront, the pinnacle of social and educational advances.

RA  So Paul and Owen have both asked, what do you know about the issues facing OU students right now and concerns over changes happening at the OU, particularly things like Digital by Design and the funding cuts and other things? So what would you particularly like to do about those if you were elected?

SU  Well, these are issues obviously that are the staple running of the Students Association and obviously in close links with the OU. So these are issues that are obviously top priority, these are the everyday issues that the Students Association and the OU deal with. So these would have to be done as a team, this is not a decision that the president takes, he’s now going to impose his opinion, these are issues that I will be working very closely the staff, with the team members. And hopefully more engagement, a large engagement with the students themselves which we call, you know, the actual members of the Students Association. So hopefully it’ll be more of a group thing rather than just me defining what needs to be done.

RA  And you’ve not previously been a trustee of the Association, so what do you think you particularly need to learn in order to be able to do that part of the role? And how would you seek to do that?
SU Yes, obviously there’s a lot for me to learn. Being an outsider there’s a lot of people here who have established friends, they’ve established links, but I would say to the students out there, I would appeal to the students that haven’t voted before, the students that don’t regard these elections as important, I would appeal to them to pay attention. Because if you don’t have a say then obviously we have less of a mandate, we have less authority to say, you know, our students want this or these are the needs of our students.

And I would say, to those that do vote normally, if you keep doing the same, if you keep repeating the same actions then you’re going to get the same result. So if you keep voting for the same system and for the same candidates and for the same old establishment, if you’ll forgive my language, you’ll get the same result, so maybe you need someone new, maybe you need someone from the outside, someone with some fresh ideas, someone with some new drive. I would say that’s where I might be better as a candidate rather than someone who’s already established and already in the swing of the establishment or already part of the machine of the establishment.

RA Okay, and that’s what you particularly think you can offer and you can bring?

SU Absolutely. I mean I remember a time, like I said, when the Students Union would bar Tony Blair and we barred, up in Leeds University, we barred Gordon Brown from coming into the Students Union. And those days, yes, it was a small protest, but my teacher used to say to me, he used to say, Sam, we’re in trouble and they didn’t lift a finger to help. Most of us, most of the people listening here, most of the people that are in this building, we’re never going to be in a position where we can mobilise armies or have billion dollar contracts, but whatever we can do, you know, if we can write a letter, if we can make a phone call or even if we can just vote. If we can just take interest and vote, I think just lift a finger. If all you can do is lift a finger then just do that. I think if we all just played a part I think the world would be a different place.

RA Okay, all right. Thank you. Sam Ung, thank you very much.

SU Thank you very much, Rob.

((break 1:00:48 - 1:04:16))

RA Welcome back. So I’m here with Graham Rimmer. How are you, Graham?

GR Good thanks. Yourself, Rob?
RA Yes, I'm all right, thank you. So I've got a series of questions to ask you, Graham, from the students on the forum, so we'll wander through and ask you these bit by bit. So the first question. You mention in your manifesto that the academic governance structure is quite inflexible at the OU and that you particularly would want to challenge the nine to five ethos and the Milton Keynes centric. In fact you're one of the few president candidates to actually mention that as being a particular pledge that you wanted to bring forward. So could you tell us a little bit more about how you would do that and what changes you would want to see?

GR I think what I'm focusing on there is having the ability for more students to engage, because obviously I work full time and I have been a member of academic communities before because I couldn't get enough time off. So rather than necessarily changing it I think I want to speak to the university and say is there any way students can get involved with those academic committees, but not necessarily having to be here in Milton Keynes and obviously being nine to five. Now, I understand that obviously university staff work those kind of hours, but I want to look at opportunities for obviously the widening of participation with those committees. So I think it's conversation based at the moment, I'm not necessarily saying that needs to all go online, because I don't want it to be because I understand that being in the room, actually has some weight. So it's more about kind of does it have to be at nine o'clock in the morning? Does it have to be Monday to Friday?

RA And would you very much like to see the OU do a lot more about remote attendance and things like that as well then? And people pitching in advance.

GR Yes, I think it's obviously opened up a conversation about having that opportunity to do so.

RA Yes okay. All right, so advocating for lifelong learning, you talk about as well quite a lot, so how would you approach this and what would you want to see achieved?

GR Okay, so obviously I came to the OU, I was lucky in that... Sorry, when I came to the OU I didn't do a degree when I was 18, I kind of waited, and with the funding changes that's how I decided to come along. And I think other people can have that opportunity as well. So I would advocate the OU in terms of it being an alternative choice, so like myself, if you didn't go to university when you were younger try the OU out, because they are flexible to yourself as a student. And so that's how I would communicate my journey and celebrate what I've achieved as being an OU student.
RA And would you want to work a lot more externally then in terms of generating much more government support around lifelong learning, building on what the current president has been doing?

GR Yes, absolutely. The current president has obviously been very vocal in key events which I think is absolutely amazing and if I’m elected I will want to continue that forward. We are the largest, well, second largest student movement in the UK and I think we’ve got a very powerful voice that we might not necessarily use to our advantage in the external environment and I think I’ve got the ability to do that.

RA So would you want to be much more of an externally facing president perhaps, you know, not just focusing on the internal issues but looking out?

GR Not at all. I mean I want to see a blended approach, I think a good 50/50 split, because at the end of the day I’m being elected to support our students and they’re here. An external environment is an extra to kind of say think about the Open University.

RA Mental health. So you and Harry were the two candidates to really pull this out as being a big issue, which I think a lot of students would agree with. What would you like to see done on mental health, and does it form one of your biggest commitments of what they can expect to change if they elect you?

GR If I’m allowed to, I will out myself. I do have a mental health condition, I don’t really talk about that that much, there’s only a very few number of staff members who know that and support me very well and obviously now I want the student movement to know that I understand and that’s why I want to get rid of the stigma. People just kind of push it to one side and kind of go, oh they’re just stressed, and actually it’s not just stress. And it’s Mental Health Awareness Week this week and I’ve been really pushing that, kind of it’s not stress, you know, it is okay to talk about it and the stigma around that and that’s one of the things I want to do, working with the vice president, student support, and equal opportunities to do that.

RA So would you want to see much more services done on mental health, both from the Association and from the university?

GR Absolutely, yes.

RA And so what would they look like? What change?
I think what it is is kind of breaking down barriers, having that kind of platform for students to kind of it’s fine not to be okay and it’s okay to get the inside out. And they’re the things I would lean on because we don’t have that much of it at the moment and I think we can use that kind of, people that know it, i.e. the Mental Health Foundation to kind of support us in doing that.

And Paul and Kate asked on the forum, what platform do you envisage encouraging many more students to engage in the Association? How will you seek to bring many more people in to the Association and to be involved? How would you take that forward?

We have the forums and I’ve noticed throughout my own engagement over the past few years that they do tend to go really quiet, and oh it’s the same people kind of posting. Now I’m very much a believer that there are watchers out there. I was one of them until I was brave enough to send that post out. In terms of the platforms, I think it’s worth having a conversation about looking where students are. We know they’re on social media, predominantly Facebook, but I think actually there’s quite a few out there on Twitter and Instagram. I don’t think we use those as much and it would be really good to kind of have a look at those. And one of the things I do want to have a look at, and I think I’ve banged on about this a lot, to staff as well as… Could we just put a postcard in the books where people still do get books, or can we put like a welcome email out there as well, to say you are a member of the Students Association, we’re here for you.

What particular campaigns would you really seek to focus? So coming back to the external, you know, the world and representation, what sort of campaigns would you seek to prioritise, and would you be giving VP media and campaigns very much a steer of what things to look at or what areas to get involved in?

Yes, well I wouldn’t necessarily say I’d be steering any vice presidents because they have their own remits, I want to kind of be a president who supports those vice presidents, so be so it’s like a team ethos and you’re not alone doing what you’re doing. And in terms of the campaigns, the first thing that I want to have a look at is obviously the funding situation that the OU are currently facing, and also in terms of the mental health. They’re two really big key ones for me and I think we can lobby government to kind of have a look at the funding situation. And we don’t do that much of it and I think it’s that kind of oh, it’s too political and actually I don’t think it is political at all, I think we have about a 170,000 people voice, we can take that forward.
RA And you talked very much about involving other student movements or working with other student movements. So who would you say is other student movements? Are you talking about the NUS or are you talking about other unions?

GR Yes, I think obviously the National Union of Students is probably a bit of an elephant in the room in terms of the Association because we’re not affiliated to them, but I think as they are the biggest student movement and I think the work that we could do together could really open up those channels in terms of let’s do things together. I mean our work on the Poverty Commission, it’s absolutely fantastic, and that’s a really good stepping stone in terms of working with them. I’m not saying we’re necessarily going to affiliate to the NUS, but I really do think people like NUS in terms of the student voice can be supportive and they have the people there. So rather than us starting from the very beginning we can use them for a little bit.

RA So moving away from that a little bit, so Danielle and Kat have both asked, what ideas or thoughts do you have for initiatives or actions on how we can start regaining student confidence in the university, following recent events?

GR Yes, I think we do have a part to play in that and I think what we need to understand is what theOU are trying to do in terms of their transformation programme. It’s had several names over the past couple of years and I think my understanding is it’s on pause at the moment with our new acting Vice Chancellor. So at the moment I don’t think I have an answer to that because we don’t know what the university are doing, but in terms of kind of going backwards and making sure that we kind of bring back faith into the university I’ve seen a lot of radio… Sorry, not seen, I’ve heard a lot of adverts, and I think they’re starting to do that. And I would also promote that the OU is open and you can live for lifelong learning.

RA And what would you want to see the Association do to support the university in regaining that confidence? I mean do you think it’s the Association’s issue to help them in the first place, and if you do, what do you think we should be doing?

GR I think we have a responsibility to our current students to kind of say that we’re supporting the university in changing some of those kind of perceptions out there about the way the university is going or potential cut, or everything that’s going through. So in terms of what we can do I think it’s supporting the OU’s agenda once they’ve got one, and then in terms of bringing new students in we can actually say there is a movement there… Not a movement, that’s the
wrong word, but there is a group of people, there's a community there for you, and we can sort that out.

RA Okay, final question. Degree attainment gap. So you’ve mentioned this. What would you want to seek to do on that and in collaboration with who?

GR Yes, I think the degree attainment gap is massive in terms of our BME students and our disabled students, and I would like to support the vice president in equality and diversity and the equality office here at the OU to kind of find out why that's doing. I’m aware of the project ((inaudible)) stuff and obviously I’m quite involved with that and obviously my role as the Chair of Plexus, the LGBT support group, I’ve been working with staff members already to kind of start that process going and how we can open up a conversation with our BME students.

RA All right, Graham Rimmer, thank you very much.

GR Thanks, Rob.

((break 1:13:44 - 1:21:40))

VR Hello everybody, welcome back to the show and unfortunately we’ve had notification from Joe Brooks Harmer, unfortunately he’s ill and he hasn’t been able to make it today so we’re going to move straight on to our round table discussion with our lovely candidates. How this is going to work is I’m going to ask some questions, pose some thought provoking ideas and talk about some topics and we’re going to encourage everybody to have a conversation about them and discuss what they think and how it affects their candidacy and their manifesto. So, hello everybody, welcome back to the table. And hello Harry on the phone.

HGK Hello.

VR Harry is down here, just for anybody that’s watching. Right, I want to talk about something that a couple of you have mentioned in your manifestos already and a topic that Rob has brought up with a couple of you already this afternoon. Mental health. It is a priority? It is not a priority? Mental health.

GR Oh, can I start? This is very much a clear manifesto pledge of mine. It’s a stigma across, not just the Association but across the entire country, people just kind of put it to one side and people don’t think it’s comfortable to talk about, because they want to hide it away. And if elected I want to bring that to
the forefront of what we do alongside the other one priority that I have. I just want to go it’s okay to talk.

VR  Okay. Sam, how about you? Is it a priority?

SU  It absolutely is a priority now. One aspect of mental health I would like to point out is I would like more of a focus of… I think there could be more work done towards the male mental health. Now it should be established by now that when you deal with women and you deal with men in terms of mental health there’s a different approach to the way you deal with a man and with a woman. Now, I feel that the OU has done some excellent work in encouraging more women to come forward and the mental health of women, but I sort of feel that they’ve neglected on the men’s mental health.

You know, mental health issues where it could affect their studies, like depression, suicide or even homelessness. Now, quite often when men are in those circumstances the last thing they want to see is another woman, the last thing they want to see… Because quite often these issues are put up because of relationship issues. So I do feel that there is work to be done in terms of addressing men’s mental issues. I think the OU and the Students Association has done a wonderful job encouraging women and working with mental health amongst women, but I feel that we’re sort of behind with men’s mental health.

VR  Okay, great. Cath?

CB  I think mental health, there are two big aspects here really. There’s the what you might call very serious medical problems, but there is also a big issue about mental wellbeing. And it’s something that I’ve noticed, I guess partly from my own professional background, teaching in schools, that we’ve got a big issue with younger students in particular dealing with anxiety, with resilience, with the whole idea of pressure to succeed. And I think actually both of those things are a priority in a different way. I think one of the things is more integrated within the OU study and the more serious issues is perhaps looking at can we produce… whether there’s the option to have very specific provision to help support students in that way. I think this is something that the OU is very keen on isn’t it? I remember the previous VC talking about it as a real priority.

VR  Harry, how about you? Is it a priority for you?

HGK  Yes, I believe that mental health is a very big priority, not just with university students but across the board in every industry, because it’s not something that just picks certain people, it’s everybody that can be affected by it. It’s
something close to me with both my mum and my husband both suffering with severe mental health issues. And I think one of the main issues is people coming forward and obviously the stigma that’s attached to it. And it’s something that we need to work on as a collective group of students to help with other students, but also on a bigger scale as well.

VR Okay, so if we’re talking about mental health, we’ve seen mentioned time and time again the issue of isolation with OU students, how will you work with the student support teams and the relevant vice presidents in tackling that issue as president? Harry, if I could go to you first?

HGK Yes. Well, I think training is a big aspect, so making sure that people are actually aware of what exactly mental health is, all the different aspects of it, because it’s not just one kind of label that you can apply to everybody because one person’s mental health problems are not the same as somebody else’s. So it’s something that I think needs to be integrated with training and making sure that awareness of the issues are out there so people are aware of them more.

VR Okay, so we’re talking about training and awareness. Graham, do you agree or would you do something different?

GR I think awareness raising is certainly something we need to do and training is an element of that. I think certainly from a staff perspective if someone rings up they would know how to respond to those. But I think what we can have a look at is looking at what’s happening in the external environment, why should we reinvent the wheel? So we have Nightline which is open for students throughout the night, we have Switchboard which is the LGBT kind of version of that and we also have, well something I’ve seen on Facebook quite a lot, on Twitter, is talking about get the inside out. I think that’s got a really powerful message in terms of it’s okay to talk about it, it’s okay to be struggling. It’s okay. And in terms of talking about the isolation element, myself and I know Cath, we do regular meet ups and that’s kind of the start of kind of saying you’re not alone. We keep bouncing this number around, we’re 170,000 students but where are they? I mean you could be queuing with one in Tesco but the meet ups really, really help and I found them ((inaudible)) I think we just need to push those more in terms of how we can support students in getting them set up.

VR Great. Sam, how about yourself?

SU Well as with most serious issues, well most serious problems, I think you have to look at it, what’s the cause of the problem? What is the root because of the
mental health? Now I would say a lot of mental health is caused by stress, and for students a lot of the stress is caused by an uncertain future. Yes, there are other issues such as PTSD, you know, other anxieties that people have, but to address the root cause of the problem, I think that’s where the solution would lie. I think if we had a better system in place where we could have a more secure and provided for system where the student from beginning to end could feel that they would understand where they were and where they were going, rather than having this uncertain future. Will I be able to finish my course? Will I be able to get…? What kind of life will I have next year or when I finish my studies? I think these kind of anxieties can sometimes not only cause, but trigger the effects of mental health.

VR  So how do you think we could achieve that? How do you think you as president could achieve that?

SU  Well, first of all you need professionals, I mean we need to consult people that know about these things. And this is not for somebody that’s just, you know, your average layman and let’s just talk about it, no, we need to understand the causes and the root problems that cause mental health, rather than just discussing it and trying to find out an issue. I mean, something as serious as this you need to bring in experts, you can’t just sit around a table and think, well, how can we put a plaster over this gaping wound?

VR  Okay, so we’ve talked about training, we’ve talked about awareness, we’ve talked about getting professionals in to do it. Cath, what about yourself? What do you think?

CB  I think I’d like to go back to what you originally said about how we’d work with relevant VPs, student support and that sort of thing. Obviously we do need to be very, very aware, as Sam’s said, that there are some of these things we need to leave to the professionals, but there are some lower level issues that are still very significant for students that we can do a little bit more about. I mean I know that there is a plan that we reintroduce the peer support service, obviously we don’t expect our peer supporters to deal with, again, very, very serious issues, but I believe that they’re going to be trained rather more fully than they were in the past to help them deal with, shall we say, the anxiety, the stress and that sort of thing.

I think in terms of the issue you mentioned about isolation, Graham’s already mentioned the point about meet ups with the VP community and the area reps and so on can extend this so that it’s not just face to face meet ups but we also have virtual meet ups. For example, Steph and I did an online meet up on Christmas Day for students who might be feeling isolated from the festive
season. And I think we can look at doing more things like that so that people feel that someone out there cares. One of the things I’m not quite sure is joined up at the moment is if we feel that there is a serious concern about a student that we’re dealing with in our capacity as a rep, how we refer that on. And that’s something I’d maybe like to see tightened up a little bit so that we can get the best support that’s right for them.

VR  Okay, great thanks, there’s some really great answers.

GR  I think, if I can follow on, I think that’s a really important message actually, because we’ve had a couple of occasions where students have come to us and we’re like okay, what do we do? So I think as long as, if we’re going to start looking at mental health in terms of its seriousness and the kind of levels people need to engage, if there’s a trigger that our peer supporters know that they’re being protected just as much as the student will get protected, so there is someone at the other end that we can phone up or we can say right, there’s an intervention required here. And like Cath was saying, in terms of working with the VPs, they have got this mandate to do that, and I think myself as president, I would lead that charge, that forward, was the face so to speak, but I would hopefully bring the VPs forward to that kind of standpoint as well and say this is your… not baby necessarily, but this is an opportunity for you to kind of bang your own drum, not it just be always the president’s drums to bang.

VR  Okay, great.

CB  And one other thing actually, another VP could be really good for this, thinking about your awareness point, is we’re now going to have a VP medium and campaigns. The campaign about the awareness, and it’s fine to be open about it, it’s fine to talk about it, that could be a brilliant campaign.

VR  Yes. Well, another thing that’s very close to everybody’s heart at the OU at the moment and certainly again, a couple of you have already mentioned either today in your manifestos or in the forums, is diversity. We know that there is an issue with our degree awarding gap between white students and their black counterparts. Now how are we going to tackle that as a Students Association? Cath, if I could go to you first?

CB  I think we need to try and find out what’s actually going on here, because if we’re just looking at raw figures in isolation are they telling us enough to help us really address that? I mean are we correctly appropriately for previous education attainment? Previous education attainment in the right subjects and so on? Are we looking at it being an advice and guidance issue about people’s
choice of course in the first place? Are we looking about appropriate peer support? Well, not peer support in our sense but peer mentors, student buddy schemes that could help black and ethnic minority students to see someone that they can identify with achieve.

I think the one that I would probably pick out once we'd got the necessary detail on here would be to look at the student buddy schemes. It's something that I've been involved in in a small way, helping set up one trial in a couple of modules, and I think it can be incredibly beneficial. And there has been evidence in other fields, certainly in my own area, that having mentoring from someone in your field, from your own ethnicity, can make a lot of difference to aspirations and achievement.

VR But I suppose if we haven't got the engagement with that particular demographic of students how are we going to get them involved?

CB Possibly we could do some sort of rather more targeted campaign. I remember seeing some targeted campaigns for organ donors based on we're not having enough people in certain categories there.

VR We haven't got enough kidneys, give us yours now?

CB Well, more or less. ((laughter)) But there were fewer people from certain backgrounds who were signing an organ donation pledge, and actually saying, look, we need help to support people like you in the broadest sense, that we could do with more representation. And yes, obviously making sure that we do have as many role models as possible and being honest with ourselves and examining carefully, are there barriers in place that we're not thinking about? Asking people these things. Getting people to give us honest feedback about these things.

VR Okay, great. Sam, what about yourself?

SU That's the big question, equal opportunity, yes.

VR Yes, diversity.

SU Well, I think there's only so much you can do, but I've always believed that so long as you've got good principles, you've got good policies, you've got a good product, you know, you're teaching a good degree, you're a good institute, I think people will come. I think the only issue comes when people from a certain background or from a certain group start to perceive your institution or perceive your organisation as a certain demographic. For example, I get men
coming up to me asking me, why are you running? You’ll have no chance, they said. They said the Students Association is a female run committee. And I think it’s because I think there’s like 18 women now and there’s like three men. I’m not blaming the Students Association, but there can be that perception. And trying to combat that perception is very difficult because obviously you want the best man or the best person for the role, or the best person for the job. So would you positively discriminate so you could fulfil ethnicity quotas or gender quotas? I mean this is the big question. I’ve always said so long as you’ve got a good product and you’ve got good policies the people will come.

VR  Okay, great. Graham?

GR  I don’t think gender’s got anything to do with it necessarily because we know of people and of students who don’t identify as man or as a woman. And I think it’s absolutely fantastic we have a lot of women who are on our current central executive because it shows that these women, these are our future, type of thing. So I disagree in terms of the fact that we need to target certain genders or certain races, but I think we are a culturally diverse institution. I’ve been to lots and lots of meet ups and I’ve seen people from all different backgrounds, and I’m learning from those backgrounds as well. I embrace that.

In terms of the attainment gap as well, I think what we need to be specific about is it’s not just the Open University that has this gap, it is the entire UK that has this gap and I think we need to open the door about kind of what is everyone else doing? Now, many people know that I work at a university as well and our attainment gap is just as high as the Open University’s, and I’m hoping that I can bring some of the knowledge that I’ve gained from that institution into my presidency role and again, working with the vice president in college on diversity.

And I know the current post holder has attempted to do things in terms of the social world. It wasn’t received very well by the rest of our student population, which is quite disheartening really, and I think we need to just kind of take a step back, have a look, speak to the people in the Open University that do have that kind of knowledge and that reach and then we just do it, just kind of take the bull by the horns, forgive my analogy there, and just kind of say let’s just talk to students, let’s just kind of put messages out there and go we need you, that usual kind of horrible poster.

SU  I’d like to respond to that.

VR  Go for it.
SU  Now, if the shoe was on the other foot, if for example there were 18 men and two women on the committee, do you not think there’d be an outcry? Or for example there were 18 white men for example and only four black men, do you not think there’d be an issue there?

GR  I think we need to have an ability to make sure we are culturally diverse in terms of the central executive, but at the end of the day the people that get elected are the right people for the job because it’s the students that will decide if they have a good manifesto, if they believe that they can do the job, not necessarily looking at their gender or their ethnic background.

VR  Let me stop you there. Let’s go to Harry. Harry, if you were elected as president how will you tackle the issue of diversity and the attainment gap? Harry, can you hear me? Oh, Harry is not here. Right, let’s try and get Harry back. While we’re doing that, while I’m trying to fiddle around with this I would like you to answer the next question for me. True or false, academic representation should be the Association’s number one priority. True or false and why? Graham?

GR  I do believe that it’s a number one priority because if the academic community and the university don’t know what we want and how our experience is affected by the changes that they’re proposing how will we be able to deliver that change for our students?

VR  Great. Sam?

SU  Yes, I believe it is, I mean the first directive of the president of the Students Association… ((aside s))

VR  Sorry about that. Harry, can you hear me now?

HGK  Hello. Can you hear me?

VR  Harry, can you hear me?

HGK  Yes, can you hear me?

VR  I can. Fabulous. Sam, I’m very sorry to cut you off there, please carry on.

SU  The president’s first directive is to represent the Students Association to external organisations, so yes. You see, I was speaking to Rob before, I said the only way we’re going to make changes is if we address the people that make the decisions. Now we can make changes within these four walls, we
could make decisions and the committee could get together and we could make changes within the OU, within the Students Association, but until we start taking things to the people that dictate how much money we get or what policies or what fees and taxes students and university have to pay, then things are not going to change. You know, so long as up in Whitehall they call the shots we’re always going to be under their rule. So of course representation is absolutely essential, we need to take our rights to them.

VR Okay, great. Harry, can you hear me?

HGK Yes, I can.

VR Fabulous. I’ve got two questions for you. First I would like you to tell us what you would do if elected as president about tackling the issue of diversity and the attainment gap.

HGK Well, going back to what Cath was saying, I’d say I’d agree mostly with the points she made, and I think that we need to look at what the real issues are and like with the key points being possibly engagement of ((inaudible)). And I’d want to work with all of the elected representatives as I’ve mentioned on the forum to do targeted campaigns towards specific people to make sure we are reaching out to every type of demographic and that they’re all being engaged with the Association and the university as a whole.

VR Okay, great. And the next question I had was a true or false question. Academic representation should be the Association’s number one priority. True, false, and why?

HGK Of course. I think the Association needs to represent a whole range of different issues and not just the academic side of things, because you also have the senate reference groups and other things like that are to do with academic direction strategy and things like that, aimed specifically towards that. And I think that the Association needs to target a lot more than just that on its own.

VR Okay, great. Cath?

CB I haven’t got a lot of choice what to say here, because my manifesto made it very clear that I think it is the top priority. I certainly take Harry’s point, it’s not the exclusive priority, as I also mentioned, I think the support functions and the community functions are very clear too. But the number one thing that affects students as students is the academic side and when I talk to students on social media reforms about what they want from their Association, then
basically someone sorting out their academic issues is what they're looking for.

VR  Okay, great. Thank you everybody. That's all we've got time for this evening. Don't forget to tune in tomorrow to watch the deputy president's question and answer. Thank you everybody for watching. Thank you everybody in the room. Thank you Harry on the phone. Thanks to the camera man. Thanks to all the production crew, thank you my hair and makeup lady. And don't forget to vote on Monday. Thank you very much. Good night.