OU Students Association Senate Reference Group

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

Senate

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

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

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

OU Students Association Senate Reference Group

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

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

Currently SRG has a membership of 40 student places in 6 different categories. Current membership on separate document-link needed

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

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

18 April 2018

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

Nicci Simpson introduced the meeting describing the events of the previous couple of weeks and that the appointment of Mary Kellett as Interim VC was a positive signal that the Association could feel reassured after a challenging year there was a commitment to rebuild trust for students and staff of the OU. The Central Executive Committee met the previous weekend and had confidence in
Mary’s appointment. Nicci confirmed that work agreed by Mary related to Transformation will continue beyond any interim VC term.

Sue Maccabe (Association Project Lead for Transformation) then led a short table activity where members were asked to consider their Hopes and Fears for Transformation. This will inform CEC when discussing with Mary any priorities for the next few months.

In an eventful run up to Senate there were several withdrawals from and changes to the agenda during the week before the meeting including the Teaching Principles Paper which will probably be back in June 2018. The SRG April meeting included the following papers and discussions:

**Motion-Voting Procedures S-2018-02-02**

Discussion included:

- Poorly worded
- Uncertainty about whether it could be agreed and implemented in same meeting. Agreed that this was possible if certain procedures followed

**Curriculum Plan S-2018-02-03**

SRG members also received a confidential tabled paper EC-2018-02-02 Curriculum Portfolio Review Summary agreed at correspondence meeting of Education Committee on 5 April.

Discussion related to the EC paper cannot be reported on but on the Senate paper discussion included:

- Funding for PG-do fees cover module costs?
- Different funding structures for 4 nation Access students
- International strategy and Brexit
- Apprenticeship OU students having different tutor support to other OU students even when on same module
- What is the exact status of the apprenticeship students? Full members of the Association but how easy to ‘reach’ via the company they are employed by?
- Pressure on Apprenticeship students to complete qualifications in shorter times even with time available for studying from employer
- Why the need for specific Apprenticeship pathways-could employers be encouraged to view the modules/quals already available through the OU as suitable for their workforce
- Good opportunities for more partnership work especially in 4 nations
- Much of the management of the plan sits outside the OU governance structure and therefore students may not be represented on the groups making decisions
- Concern re the implementation of the plan-the ‘how’ it will be delivered. This is likely to be found in the Teaching Framework
- Would like more evidence and more detail and less business speak of ‘markets’ and ‘products’
- Has the plan gone too far with Taught Postgraduate modules or does this just reflect that
  the OU needs to concentrate on being the 1\textsuperscript{st} steps into HE for students who otherwise
couldn’t access?

**Motion-University Charter & Statutes S-2018-02-06**

The paper related to Charter & Statutes was withdrawn but the motion remained. Discussion
included:

- Comments in the motion could be superseded depending on what VC says at Senate

**Academic Performance Report S-2018-02-07**

This is a regular paper to Senate. Discussions included:

- Top 10 research awards but out of what total?
- What work is currently underway regarding the attainment gap re BME achievements? VP
  Eq Opps explained there is work but somewhat piecemeal but a significant difference of
  27.9\% should be enough evidence to ensure far more focus on this work
- 17J figures for retention/passive withdrawal are worse than 16J which included the effects
  of Group Tuition policy
- Still no measure of quality of SST response rather than time taken to respond. Hard to
  measure as sometimes not known until 6 months on whether advice given was
  right/wrong/useful

**Motion of No Confidence SFTP S-2018-02-08**

Discussion included:

- Will this still be discussed at Senate after recent events
- The language in the motion
- The specifics in the motion might require specific responses rather than just one sweeping
decision either way
- Does the financial argument stand up to scrutiny?
- Are the cuts as ‘severe’ as the motion states now more information is known?
- Is there scope for continuation of some workstreams but for pausing others?
- Re multiple start times-Is there scope for piloting some changes with some modules rather
  than wholesale?
- Could too many changes cause collapse entirely?
- Should new VC be given chance to reflect on the Transformation before insisting that it is
  paused. A chance to ‘have conversations with…..’ as she has indicated
- Can an amendment be proposed-not an ‘envisioning’ but more a re-evaluation of where
  current work has reached
- Is the motion meant to disrupt?
- Was the motion designed more as a strong message to the previous VC (before he resigned)
or maybe to VCE as a whole
• Transformation is everything and everyone at the moment. If paused concern that some ‘good stuff’ could be lost
• No change is not an option—that’s agreed
• Contradictory nature of the language

Motion of No Confidence VCS-2018-02-09

There was an assumption that this motion would be formally withdrawn at Senate so no discussion

Academic Quality & Governance Committee S-2018-02-10

This was starred by the CCR on AQGC to inform other reps that information related to the Mid States re accreditation process would be heading to several governance committees. Others shared more information about the process and implications.

Rep also confirmed that an academic governance review (separate to any within Transformation) will be conducted in the near future, with an additional AQGC meeting planned for May. This would have implications for reps if there is a change to any structure.

Research Committee S-2018-02-11

Concern raised that this meeting had not been quorate and that senior members are often missing meetings because called away on Transformation priorities. (Note from author for additional information-after checking, this meeting was convened on a day when industrial action had been called)

The meeting ended with a thanks from Nicci to all the reps in the room for all their work in a difficult period and especially thanked all for honouring all confidentiality boundaries.

April’s Senate is a joint meeting with OU Council and it has become a regular date for OU Council members to join SRG members for an informal lunch. This year a short video explaining the SRG was premiered and will be available on our website very soon. Members then chatted in small groups about the purpose of each group and about current concerns before Council members headed off to their formal meeting. You can find out more about OU Council here [http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/governance-ou/government-structure](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/governance-ou/government-structure)

The Senate 6 members then met very briefly to discuss all the above and more before attending Senate in the afternoon of Wed 18 April.

Hot off the press update from Senate from VP Education

Senate started with a statement from Richard Gillingwater, Chair of Council and Mary Kellett, the new acting Vice Chancellor. In short Mary asked for a period of about 2 months to pause the Transformation and look at what needs to be done (such as improving IT) and will evaluate with all stakeholders in the university what our priorities are. This was really welcomed by members of Senate.
She also said she believes research plays an important role in a university and she will look into how the OU can continue in a sustainable way.

There was much discussion about the Curriculum Plan, however it was not for approval – it will come back to Senate in June.

There was no time for the Academic Performance Report to be discussed, but it will come back to the June Senate at the top of the Agenda so it doesn’t get missed again.

The motions about the Charter and the Transformation were withdrawn, to see what action Mary will take. They can be brought back at a later date if necessary. The motion about the Vice Chancellor was withdrawn.

In general there was a positive atmosphere in Senate – it remains to be seen if actions will follow the encouraging words from the acting Vice-Chancellor.

**Interested to find out more?**

If you would like to get involved with SRG by reading more about the roles available and how to apply then the Association would be very pleased to hear from you by emailing Student-Voice-Team@open.ac.uk