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.

View a full list of SRG members 2017/18 (pdf, 212KB)

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.

(continued on next page)
20 June 2018

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

The meeting started with an update from Anna Barber, OU Acting Director of Strategy in relation to

S-2018-03-06 (SFTP Critical Review)

Points from the paper and review included:

- The review is being conducted quickly but thoroughly
- Review is finding much commonality about what works well
- Review is finding some commonality about concerns
- Such a critical stage must never be reached again-going forward concerns must be able to be raised much sooner
- Focus will be on the purpose; value; delivery; leadership & culture
- Purpose-a clearer case for change; more evidence; clearer vision
- Value-emphasis on benefits; transparency; feeling like part of the everyday OU rather than a separate ‘change making machine'
- Leadership & Culture-a new name away from SFTP; a sense of partnership with the Association; culture of openness
- Review set up to be independent and to put recommendations to OU with VCE (Vice Chancellors Executive) deciding which/when to implement

Comments and questions from SRG included:

- Everything seemed taken over by the transformation
- ‘Ordinary ‘ students were not being well informed
- So many different workstreams, some seemed in conflict with one another
- OU talked itself into a crisis!
- If students stay in the title there is a danger that implies that students are associated with the changes
- Want to be involved in workstreams but has felt like a tick box exercise for some who are
- IT needs changing and soon-please don’t delay this while the review is conducted
- Right technology for right pedagogy
- All agreed that receiving materials from the OU is a significant visceral milestone for students
- Could the phrase ‘digital by design' be discarded please
- Competitors to OU-is the OU making the most of their unique selling point?
- Reintroduction of tutor counsellors could help with retention
- How safe is the academic strategy in this review?

Discussion papers

Academic Performance Report S-2018-03-05

This regular Senate paper didn’t have time to be discussed at last Senate so the VC has given it an earlier slot in the agenda. Comments and discussion from SRG included:
- Although ‘the phrase ‘several possible reasons’ behind increase in withdrawals is referred to, the paper holds no keys to how these reasons are being addressed. This should be the whole purpose of the paper
- Retention is even worse than last year which was at the height of the Group Tuition issues
- Comparable figures are not used but even so the figures are appalling
- How are targets decided? And when not met, where are the ideas generated to move forward
- Research awards are mostly ‘awaiting response’. Will Brexit mean these are unlikely to be achieved?
- The paper includes both the individual student performance and the overall university performance. Should the two be given separate papers to really pull the issues apart more fully?
- This is now a regular item-in the past it was hidden, now in the open but fundamentally the figures are unchanged from several years ago
- All very worrying but it is what the OU is being judged on as per TEF
- Very mixed picture re tutor interventions
- Difference between sometimes using FTE as the benchmark and other times the actual OU student numbers
- Degree classification and grade inflation discussion in SRG forum-anecdotally reps on BoS report that OU students are slightly disadvantaged. Review panel in OU exists at module level and there is no Qualification level panel

**Students First Transformation Programme**

**Critical Review Update S-2018-03-06**

Discussion from Anna Barber’s update recorded above

**Motion S-2018-03-07**

This motion asked for a pause to the Students First Transformation Programme. SRG generally wanted to see the outcomes of the Critical review and did not support this motion

**Teaching Innovation Excellence Update S-2018-03-08**

This update was welcomed as an improvement to previous iterations and more of an ‘evolution rather than a revolution’. But with plans for communication with students not clear yet it will still need to be very closely monitored.

**Curriculum Plan S-2018-03-09**

Redrafted and revised from April Senate this paper asked for approval for the Curriculum Plan.

Comments included:
• Too many assumptions
• Too much jargon
• Student profiles
• Is the OU promoted to school leavers if younger students are sought?
• The equality analysis is fragmented
• Scope to include and embed Open learn and Future Learn into the OU curriculum. Is this wanted as non-validated but once it’s in there it will be hard to remove!

Curriculum Portfolio Review

Motion S-2018-03-10A Finances S-2018-03-10B

This motion asked for a pause to the Curriculum Portfolio Review. The late paper 10B provided additional information about the finances related to the review.

Discussion included:

• This paper was 18 months too late and would have been useful when curriculum cuts had first been discussed
• Decide the motion regardless of the extra info as the extra info still doesn’t give all the necessary info!
• Don’t remove profit making modules
• Some students have already been told about teach out periods-to change the cuts now would be v confusing. So far student response has been positive as new qualifications being introduced are appealing
• If the motion is agreed then ‘back to square 1’
• Cuts impact someone whenever they happen-leave it longer and they could impact more students and staff
• Faculties have engaged with the review in a sensible and thoughtful manner-don’t stop it now when they have worked so hard already
• Let’s focus on the implementation especially re teach out and the information that is being communicated via the OU website
• Does one hand know what the other hand is doing
• If the review is done well it should keep the curriculum current and agile for students
• Lines between Business as Usual and Transformation are blurred

Starred for discussion by SRG members:

AQGC S-2018-03-02

Comments included:

• Good to see a student place being approved on the Honorary Degrees Committee. Decision about whether a place for CCR or CEC with the CEC via the office at the moment-watch this space!
Update on PGR students on campus and where decisions re their support lies. AQGC rep suggested that this is somewhere in between Teaching Cttee and the Graduate School but is still confusing

Annual Effectiveness Review

Earlier in the year it was suggested that an AER would not be necessary this year and even if it had been that SRG would conduct a less onerous one than previous years. It was agreed to concentrate on three questions to allow the membership to have their say. The online SRG forum generated discussions over a 2 week period with contributions from approximately 15 members with at least 4 of them submitting an email response as well. This represents less than half of the current membership contributing to the discussions although more may have read the forum comments.

At the meeting the focus was on three questions which VP Ed hoped would take the forum discussions further:

1. **Communication with the wider student body - were elected reps the key to this?**

   Discussion included:
   - Better sharing of current report is needed - links to website is all that is needed
   - FARs could share with faculties (students) via new forum
   - Less about the info from the meeting and more about the relevance of SRG to ‘ordinary’ students
   - Should CCRs on SRG report back to the rest of CCR team via report as they would from any other cttee they are appointed to?
   - FARs have their own forum - advertise that more widely
   - AARs should be on SRG - could be mutually beneficial
   - The question of representation is far wider than SRG

2. **Does the current membership have too great a CEC/CCR influence?**

   Discussion included:
   - Volunteer roles were agreed last term to increase ‘ordinary’ students but CCRs have filled some. They still contribute effectively don’t they?
   - Should have more volunteer spaces and keep the advert open all year
   - CEC/CCR bring an informed opinion which is what SRG needs
   - Senate 6 need to hear from ‘ordinary’ students far more
   - Senate 6 hearing from reps on other committees can increase their confidence going into Senate
   - SRG must be about academic governance so is SRG the best place to communicate with and from ‘ordinary’ students
   - Earlier iterations of SRG meant a natural progression from regional committees. This helped with background and continuity but still didn’t have answers of how to disseminate updates effectively afterwards
• Papers are hard work—even if more volunteer spaces not sure if that would mean
  more would be interested in getting involved
• Consultations are useful for getting opinions from other students

3. **Are expectations for members including volunteers reasonable and understood by each member?**

Discussion included:

• Good to have volunteers but do they understand the expectations of the role before
  applying?
• Workshops have added to the workload for the Senate 6—how can this be managed
  better?

With the OU governance review on hold it now looks like the Association will be required to
submit a formal response so the exact nature of this will need to be agreed by VP Ed with
support from the office. The incoming VP Ed Peter Cowan and President Cath Brown will
need to make some decisions about the practical nature of SRG meeting for October 2018
onwards but the membership with the exception of some ex officio positions will continue for
the coming year unless the AER discussions also result in any additional changes.

**The meeting ended with sincere thanks to Lorraine Adams (VP Education) from Nicci
as President and Sandra as a previous VP Education for all her work in the role and
especially for chairing and leading SRG 2016-18**

The Senate 6 members then met over a working lunch to discuss all the above and more
before attending Senate in the afternoon of Wed 20 June.

**Hot off the press update from Senate from VP Education**

VC gave update on her first 2 months and although challenging she is determined to help
change the OU culture.

Good news re funding in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and in Space and Health

**AQGC S-2018-03-02**

Any progress in resolving the ongoing ‘all tutorials will be recorded’ issue—heard that 40% are
recorded and more students are watching them

Still to be agreed who will be responsible for PGR students

**Academic Performance Report S-2018-03-05**

All concerns from SRG were brought up

Warning re apprenticeships—national concern as take up not as expected

**Critical Review Update S-2018-03-06**

Same as at SRG—not many questions as need to know outcome
**Motion S-2018-03-07**
Passed to urge VCE and Council to end the SFTP

**Teaching Innovation Excellence Update S-2018-03-08**
Noted with no discussion due to time pressures

**Curriculum Plan S-2018-03-09**
Big discussion. Kevin Hetherington (VCE) gave reassurances that there will be good academic oversight

**Motion S-2018-03-10A**
A lengthy discussion very similar to SRG with our greatest concern being teach out and implementation. The motion to pause the cuts was defeated

Starred papers at Senate of interest to SRG

**S-2018-03-11 Academic Strategy Implementation**
Recommendations about the existing strategy will go to October Senate. Senate 6 said to consult students now even though the Sustainable Academic Communities project has been paused

**S-2018-03-14 Council Report**
How was it that Council had not been well informed about SFTP and not fully aware of the substance of the programme? This was noted with no reply

**That's all for June SRG!**

**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