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.

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.

October 2017

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

The agenda for the October meeting covered issues including:

National Students Survey (NSS)

Discussion included:
• Although the report provided some much needed in-depth analysis students really want to know what the OU is going to do to improve results. Anecdotes from members included inconsistencies experienced in tutorials and between different tutor’s marking and advice sometimes for students on the same module.
• The question related to the Students Association was different this year to last so can’t be used as an accurate comparison but is still useful for the OU and Association to consider.
• Student engagement being referenced throughout this and other papers but what does this really mean? Is it really meaningful?
• Students are looking forward to the launch of the OU ‘Student Voice’ website which should include more ‘You said, we did’ information. This closure of the feedback loop is important.
• Association research on module choice and study preferences is available for the OU-have they really listened to the opinions therein
• If WELS and STEM have examples of good practice, could this be adopted University wide?
• Is the OU concerned about improving the NSS ratings or genuinely improving satisfaction for students as these are different aims?

Academic Strategy Implementation

Discussion included:

• Student reps on other committees have seen curriculum plans which give a clearer indication of some timescales. Decisions regarding continuing qualifications and modules will be on an individual basis and won't be purely based on whether they are profit making. Reputation and accreditation will also be factors.
• Talk of academic communities but still no clear definition of how students can be part of these
• Part of this paper included a risk assessment but the high risks have not been fully evaluated

Academic Performance

Although the actual student numbers of this paper are confidential and cannot be reported on, there is concern in this paper for the numbers of current students being ‘retained’ in between modules.

Discussion included:

• 30 credits v 60 credits pros and cons for students and what difference this makes to retention. 2 x 30 might be more manageable but is there a drop out risk point in between but is 1x60 heavier workload. Anecdotal examples suggested that workload for 30 credits can be as high as a 60 credit module—should that ever be the case?
• Might 5 credit smaller chunks be part of the future model? Students have more control over how much they take on and when depending on other commitments?
• This isn’t faculty specific but rather a ‘systemic’ problem and therefore students would expect this to be treated urgently

Annual Quality

Discussion included:

• The purpose of this paper is to provide information to funding bodies for England and separately to Scotland. Deliberate decision to include criticism as indicates that although the outcomes aren’t good, this paper reassures that the processes are fit for their purpose.
• More student involvement in quality matters is vital both for assurance and enhancement. This paper refers to opportunities for student engagement but most of the students in the room hadn’t necessarily heard about for eg ‘being a critical reader’

Academic Governance Assurance

Discussion included:

• Whether reps on other OU governance committees feel that they have been able to be effective in their role. Several confirmed that they did feel effective, listened to, respected on their committees.
• Mention made of dissemination of information to wider constituents (i.e. wider student body) and whether we currently do this and if not can we start!?

Students First Transformation Programme (SFTP): Approach to Governance

Discussion included:

• What was previously referred to as OU Redesign is now called SFTP and this paper identifies the different structure and substructure for decision making and where it fits into OU governance committees and when
• Senate workshops are included as a mechanism for gathering information/providing information. Can SRG members be included in these or just the six Senate members? Hopeful that more than six funded places can be agreed so that a wider SRG presence can be confirmed

Academic Model for Apprenticeships

Discussion included:

• Although this paper was for ‘approval’ only there were concerns from SRG that the student experience for apprentices would be very different than that for current students. SRG felt that a ‘level playing field’ was required to ensure best
experience for all. Don’t want different curriculum designed/different assessments just for apprentices

- From an Association perspective, how are Apprentices to be represented?
- If Apprentice model is deemed a big part of the OU’s future then early figures signing up are disappointing

The Senate members then met separately to discuss all the above and more before attending Senate in the afternoon of Wed 18 October. Early snippets from the actual Senate meeting:

- there will be places for some SRG members in the Senate workshops
- the whole HE sector is underperforming re Apprenticeship targets, not just the OU but that the paper will need more scrutiny by the Education Committee before approval
- acknowledgement that the risks re NSS survey results need to be reassessed and there is a need to feedback and respond to student feedback more effectively

**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.