Welcome to your first issue!
from Vice President Education - Lorraine Adams

Welcome to our first ever Student Voice Bulletin and I hope you will find it informative. One of the main aspects of my role is to keep you informed of all of the latest news and updates happening with Student Voice so with our first edition we wanted to let you know what the team has been up to and what we have planned over the next few weeks.

We are looking at putting together some guidance on the major issues the OU are discussing in committee meetings and will update you within the next few weeks. I would appreciate any feedback on this first edition and if you would like to contribute towards the next bulletin then please get in touch.

It is for all of our Student Voice volunteers and will be uploaded on to our website so we can let all students know what we have been doing. Please feel free to share also!

Senate Reference Group - October 2017

Wednesday 17 October saw the members of the OU Students Association Senate Reference Group gather on campus in Milton Keynes from far and wide across the UK and Europe to discuss the hot topics of the Senate papers. The business of the Reference Group is the business of the Senate meeting, so there were lots of papers to consider. The agenda for this meeting led to very interesting discussions on papers related to the NSS, and how the OU need to respond to the results. The implementation of the new Academic strategy and what it will really mean for current students was a cause for more passionate conversations from the members. Reports on Annual Quality and Academic performance kept the discussions lively, and when the members had the opportunity to discuss the Students First Transformation Programme (SFTP) and how this will fit into the OU Governance structure - then opinions were really flowing freely!

With another discussion on the new but contentious subject of the Academic Model for Apprenticeships, the six members of Senate had plenty of food for thought as they went into their working lunch before they attended Senate meeting that afternoon.

Click here for the latest news

Interesting Higher Education Reads (Clickable!)

Catch this interesting article on Wonkhe, pulled together by an ex Sabbatical Officer. As well as giving us an insight as to how data and research around student satisfaction is being viewed in the sector at present, it also explores the relationships between unions and their institutions - and how the new bank of Student Voice questions within the National Students Survey 2017 have been answered. It also highlights the role of Student Representatives, stating that as crucial users of research and data, they require institutions to sustain a culture of empowering those students in the role.

TEF, REF, and now a KEF. What exactly is a Knowledge Excellence Framework as announced by Jo Johnson in October 2017? I am unsure here how it will sync and co-exist with the other new benchmarking tools in place. Strange timing too, all this talk of new process for quality in Higher Education whilst the QAA are undertaking a review of the Quality Code...

Check out the QAA Consultation on the UK Quality Code here.

"Student Voice helps represent the student body in the disparate and digital connected style of study we have. It creates communities and a feeling of belonging - giving us a voice and support when we can sometimes feel disconnected and alone. Instead of being alone we are part of something big, doing something amazing for ourselves in a rich and diverse community."
Our First Online Catch Up for Representatives - Success!

Tuesday 24 October saw a first for the Student Voice team-an online catch up for the newly formed team of Central Committee Representatives. This was their opportunity to meet online with each other and Vice President Education. The first meeting used OU Live and there are plans to move to Adobe Connect once the Association are fully trained to use it! 16 reps joined the online session for an hour in the early evening to have an informal chat about the role so far this term. After a few introductions and comments to compare the weather in various parts of the UK and Europe the discussions then moved on to the practicalities of being a rep on an OU committee.

We heard from reps who had been to their first committee of the year and how it went, and also from reps who have a meeting in their diary but are yet to visit the OU campus in Milton Keynes. New reps shared their concerns and questions while more experienced reps shared tips and hints of how to be more effective. Reading papers and writing a report after the meeting proved to be of interest to most. We touched on why the reps had been attracted to the role and what keeps the more experienced ones coming back each year. Motivations varied but overwhelmingly the message was that this role is important and can make a real difference.

Although the reps attending felt well supported in their role there was a very interesting question about how the Association provide guidance to the individual reps to ensure a collective voice is available when necessary and the reps were pleased to hear that the current CEC have already started to think about how this might work better. As the hour came to an end discussions turned to the future and whether a regular catch up like this would be useful and everyone agreed it would be. Plans may include faculty specific meetings, reps deciding on the subject matter for catch ups and which day and times work well. Want to get involved in the next online chat, or perhaps you might like to facilitate one? Get in touch with the Student Voice Team and let us know how we can support you. Watch this space - these are here to stay!

Volunteering Research - Focus Groups and Talks

The Association is proud to be working with our wonderful team of volunteers, and we want to offer you the best possible support and opportunities. We want to understand what makes our volunteers tick – so take part in our new Volunteering Research Project!

Caroline Poppenga (VP Representation and Research) is asking for your views, so check out your Association volunteering newsletter to find out how you can be involved.

The National Student Survey 2017

The NSS is a nation-wide survey of mainly final-year undergraduates which aims to gather opinion about students’ experience of their course and what it’s been like to study at their institution in general. There are 27 questions relating to eight aspects of the learning experience, including teaching quality, assessment and feedback, organisation and management, and student voice. The survey is an important part of the academic calendar as its results feed into elements of public university ‘league tables’, and Universities often use the results to influence their focus for the year ahead. This year, the response rate came in at 53%. That’s around 14,800 students!

The OU’s overall satisfaction level dropped slightly this year, achieving 86%. In the past, the overall satisfaction score has been as high as 91%.

There is significant discontent with the ‘student voice’ experiences of recent graduates, with just under 56% of students indicating that they are satisfied with elements of Student Voice, such as being given opportunities to provide feedback (74%), feeling that staff in their department value their views and opinions (64%), they understand how their feedback has been acted on (38%), and that they feel the Students Association represents their academic interests (44%). Do you think that the overall data provided from this survey is reflective of what students are experiencing in your faculty, or on your modules? Get in contact if you would like to know more!

Our Research - And how to embed

The Association’s research is informed by our mission to listen to students and support the student community. We recognise that OU students are a diverse population and that the student experience at the OU is a varied one. By reaching out to students on different platforms, identifying trends in feedback, and exploring these topics through our research projects, we aim to strengthen our academic representation work and get the student voice heard within the University and beyond!

Thus far, we have looked at how modules are delivered (print and online) and how students choose their modules (past reports can be found here). You can use our research findings in different ways. The Association’s research can support your role as CCRs, for example, by helping you take evidence-based arguments to your committee meetings. Similarly, information about current developments within the University and the broader Higher Education sector can help LERs better identify trends in student opinions and concerns.

As student representatives, you can be involved in our research right from identifying key areas of the OU student experience, to encouraging participation on platforms such as the Association’s Student Research Forum and sharing our research findings with the committees that you are part of. We would love to hear from you, so if you would like to talk to us about areas of the student experience that could be explored in the future, please get in touch!