Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Sam and I work at the Students Association.

And I'm Helen, I also work there as part of the Student Voice team.

And I'm Sue and I also work at the Association as a support coordinator for our reps.

Excellent and we’re here today to have a little bit of a chat about the Kitemark Project and essentially I'm going to throw it open to Helen first of all to tell me and explain to me what is a Kitemark? What essentially are we talking about?

Well before we get into the detail of the specifics of this project I think everybody listening will be familiar with the idea of a quality mark, a standard that’s been reached. Perhaps in their food cupboards they’ve got something that has the Fair Trade quality mark, that in itself represents something, and that’s the premise of the Kitemark.

I think most people are probably quite familiar with the really common one, the British Safety Kitemark; the logo is actually a kite. You see that on a lot of electrical items, things like children’s toys and as Helen said it just gives you the confidence of knowing that certain standards of safety or quality have been met in a product.

Okay so safety, things found in the kitchen, exactly what does this Kitemark do then for our particular audience and our environment?

Well as part of everyday professional work we’re always at the Association trying to build our professional networks and just in a conversation with one of our OU colleagues I got chatting about the idea of a quality mark. They had come across it in NHS where patients had been involved in awarding a certain level of quality to various processes and we just began to discuss whether it might be able to be developed in terms of higher education, and in particular within the OU.

Okay so the idea came from essentially networking with colleagues as well within the OU. Who else was involved in thinking about this project though?

Well of course our central executive committee of students are currently working with their strategy which will last until 2020 and some of them have become directly involved with the project, Vice President Education, Vice President Representation and Research, and going forward into the term of new CEC, perhaps other VPs will begin to get involved. So it very much wants to be student-led but with support from the Association staff team and support from an advisory group that is including different colleagues from the OU.

So there is a strategy for the Association essentially. Do you know where students might be able to find that as well?
Helen: Yes, it’s on the Association website and it’s updated regularly as part of papers that go to each of the central executive committee meetings. So you should be able to track the progress of the Kitemark Project and other strategy items via that.

Sam: So can you tell me about these first steps of the project because it seems very, very interesting; it’s a quality mark, I’d like to understand, you told me a bit about who was involved and where the idea has come from but tell me how you’re approaching it as well?

Helen: Well Sue’s involved currently with work to do with student engagement and what we realised that the Kitemark to try and define student engagement in the first instance was quite difficult but that is at the heart of the Kitemark Project, trying to understand what is real, authentic student engagement and how it can enhance the work, both for the Association and for the university. So I don’t know Sue if you want to say a little bit more about how it fits with what you’re doing with student engagement?

Sue: Yeah I think it’s a really good point, I think there are a lot of phrases that get used, so we talk about communicating with students, we talk about engaging with students, we talk about involving, we talk about consulting and a lot of times those terms are used interchangeably, but actually they all are very specific and they can be quite different and things like consultation, as Helen said, needs to be meaningful, it needs to be genuine, it needs to be authentic. And I’ve been doing a lot of work on the transformation programme and I think what we’ve seen on that programme probably replicates what we’re seeing in the university overall, which is there are parts of the university that are really, really great at involving students and consulting students, they see the benefit of it, they’re keen for that input, so we get a lot of involvement and a lot of engagement, but there are other parts of the university where perhaps it’s less so. Sometimes it can feel occasionally like asking a student to join a particular meeting or a project is more about putting a tick in a box than it is about genuine authentic engagement. So I think this sits really well alongside the work we’re doing on the transformation and change programme as well as how we work generally with the university because it is about trying to foster something where student involvement is the norm. So in any sort of change programme or project it’s absolutely the norm that we somehow try to embed it into the overall culture of the university so that involving students just becomes almost woven into the fabric of all the OU’s processes.

Helen: And when we first began to unpick the definition of student engagement we threw it open to a group of students to help us try to define that and if we were trying to measure that what might that measure look like? And of course it actually raised as many questions as it created answers but it was a really worthwhile exercise because it was quite clear at the beginning although some
students were emphasising that certain numbers of students should be involved in engagement, actually it went way beyond that and we began to realise it wasn’t about measuring the quantity, the number of students involved but it was about the quality of that engagement and what it actually brought to a project or a programme in order to enhance its effectiveness.

Sam
So speaking about measurements essentially measuring quality and measuring engagement in my mind it would appear that there might be some sort of tool being developed as well to support the work of the Kitemark? But I’m trying to think and visualise what this tool might look like in my head as well. I wonder if you could help me out with any suggestions?

Helen
Well actually that's pretty much where we’re at. We’ve spent quite some time pulling apart the definitions, trying to put them back together, gathering ideas from other places, from our colleagues within the university. But now you’re right we’ve actually got to get down to the work of devising and refining a measurement tool. So we don’t know exactly what that looks like at the moment Sam, but that is very much the next stage and we want to involve students in that work.

Sam
Okay so that work in terms of supporting and potentially being in a room and understanding what quality means or engagement means or are you thinking long-term in terms of a big award ceremony for people that are achieving the Kitemark?

Helen
Well at the moment the project is very much testing the water, working out whether this is something that is viable on a larger scale and for the long-term yes we’ve got high ambitions but actually we’re just working in the here and now at the moment and trying to develop the tool, get into a period where we can begin to test different projects and programmes to assess where they are in terms of including students in their work and then eventually maybe the tool being also used as a planning device as well. But yeah we’re providing, via the elected students, updates regularly to central executive committee meetings, to Conference 2018, with a view to there being some firm ideas of whether or not this is going to be a possibility on a larger scale, hopefully by the end of this year.

Sam
Well it sounds really exciting and actually it sounds like it's possibly the first of its kind actually in higher education, is that a fair statement?

Helen
I don't know if we can say absolutely hand on heart but I do know when we were in the very early stages of this project I tried to find out if other students unions were involved in anything like this and nobody seemed to be but of course many people were interested in the idea of it. So it may be the first of its kind, we’re not sure. What we do know is that all universities, including the Open University, do have their own quality processes, whether they're on a national standard that they have to be working towards or right the way to the
module level. But actually this is different because this isn’t about the university’s quality process, this is about the Association being in a position to say, ‘We approve of this, we agree that this has achieved a certain standard.’ And so I think that is what makes it different.

Sam
That’s very exciting. So you’ve talked a little bit about where the project is at now as well and so my next question to you is essentially about how students can be involved and do you have to be a student with quality and student engagement as your interest, or do you think if you're perhaps not completely familiar with those terms you can still be involved?

Helen
Well I think going forward there will be scope for both of those types of student to be involved, first and foremost it’s about being a student with the Open University at the moment, but actually in terms of defining and refining a tool to be used as a measure I think it would be valuable if some students who perhaps have done that sort of work in another place, a workplace or elsewhere, so they might be particularly involved and interested in becoming more involved, but it might just be actually it’s a student that really wants to be sure that, like Sue mentioned earlier, this is never a box ticking exercise that this is always meaningful. And so I think lots of different students will be able to contribute and I think the best place to keep their eye on is the Association website for opportunities. We think there'll be some that are, what we would call short-term volunteering opportunity where it might just be a one-off but there might be opportunities for people to be involved in a longer term.

Sue
And it really is an opportunity to get involved that we think is quite ground-breaking in terms of what we’re doing here. So I think really exciting opportunity.

Sam
Okay well we’ve heard it from our experts then, thank you very much both Helen and Sue and as mentioned if you want to have any further information then please check out oustudents.com.