

## OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

### Central Executive Committee (CEC)

22 - 24 April 2022

### STUDENT CHAT PLATFORM

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The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **Note** progress on a strategy project to pilot a new Student Chat Platform

#### 1. Introduction

1.1 One of the key **strategic objectives** for the OU Students Association is to build social and academic student community. The positive impact of feeling part of a community which is inclusive and representative can banish feelings of loneliness and isolation which often contribute to students feeling unable to continue with their studies.

1.2. Over time, the Association has borne witness to a gradual decline in engagement with its suite of online Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) forums. Alongside this, there has been a move towards the use of online platforms such as Facebook and more recently Discord as places for OU students to come together. Whilst we are in no doubt that these spaces provide vital opportunities for student community to grow, we are also aware that this carries risk because many students choose not to use them, or do not feel that they are “safe”.

1.3 Consultation with students has highlighted the need for a safe space for student-to-student interaction, as illustrated by the quotes below:

“Why not introduce an OU Community app that would make it quick and easy to be in touch with other students? Students not on Facebook should not miss out.”

“Facebook is definitely not the ideal place for OU students, it allows people to not be held accountable. I find the OU forums are not as accessible as Facebook so it would be good for the OU to develop OUSA's website to be more like Facebook. I'm only on Facebook for OU groups.”

1.6 Alongside this, the Association also has a major challenge in communicating its activities to its members, OU students. We know that direct communication is the

most effective way of broadening the reach of our message and engaging more students in our work. We also know that once students are aware of the Association and its activities, they are likely to look favourably on our work and indeed to get involved.

1.7 In April 2021 we initiated Strategic Project 7a to “create new communities where students can benefit from social interaction and informal mutual support” to consider this problem.

## **2. Test and Learn**

2.1 In May 2021 we were awarded funding by the OU’s Digital Strategy Steering Group to complete a “Test and Learn” project with support from the OU’s Emerging Technologies team.

2.2 This Test and Learn project was co-ordinated by an external consultant who completed comprehensive interviews with a range of students, persona mapping, benchmark research, identification of features and prioritisation and an accessibility report.

2.3 Key findings included:

- New students are overwhelmed and find it difficult to find the student community;
- Discovering the Association is challenging;
- A single student community space needs to be created;
- Students feel isolated and are looking for events and meet-ups;
- A new Community platform was seen as useful and exciting.

## **3. Digital Student Experience (DSE)**

3.1 The findings of the Test and Learn Project were reported back to the Digital Strategy Steering group and significant overlap was identified with some of the aims of the Digital Student Experience programme, which is looking at the student journey, including StudentHome.

3.2 Initially, we were hopeful that the aims of our new chat platform may be integrated into the work of the DSE programme whilst maintaining autonomy.

3.3 Subsequent discussions with the DSE team, alongside an additional presentation to the Test and Learn Working group has revealed that the timescales are significant and do not align with our aims for the project.

3.4 We will continue to work with the DSE team on plans for the digital student journey and update them on progress on our project.

## **4. Next Steps**

4.1 We are now looking to pilot a platform which provides a safe space for students to communicate with one another within the Association.

4.2 The key requirements for the Student Chat Platform are:

- Compatibility with single-sign on;
- Ability for students to direct message one another;
- Group chat function (forum style);
- Easy moderator functions – including report and block functions for users;
- Ability to erase all details of a user and fully compliant with GDPR rules;
- Fully accessible – both mobile and desktop applications;
- Fully customisable with Students Association branding.

4.3 Other features we are keen to see would be:

- News and events (duplicated from our website);
- Segmentation/filtering for students with different interests;
- Option for integration into ours and the OU's websites.

4.4 A newly formed Project Group of CEC members and Association staff have met and actions are underway to work towards a pilot platform being introduced in the next 6-9 months.

4.5 Providers under consideration:

- MSL (our new website provider);
- Aluminate;
- Other platforms, including bespoke solutions.

4.6 Further updates will be provided as appropriate as the project progresses.

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