

25 - 27 April 2025

Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Update

The SLT is asked to:-

- i) **receive/note/approve/recommend** an update on the work of the EDI and Belonging Team
- ii) **receive/note/approve/recommend** an update from the Support Groups

Introduction

- 1.1 The EDI and Student Welfare Team would like to update the Student Leadership Team on work towards our EDI objectives and provide an update from our current support Groups.

Updates from the EDI and Belonging Team

- 2.1 Individual Representation
We lost a team member back in January so we've been running at limited capacity for a couple of months but cases continue to come in at a steady rate. This week, however, we welcomed a new administrator to the team and should be able to resume normal service again soon.

Case numbers:

January: 33

February: 24

March: 22

We have seen an increase in academic misconduct cases where AI usage has been identified. These are particularly high in students who have a registered disability and also high in the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL). We are following this thread

and seeking some answers from staff within FBL but also raising accessibility concerns on behalf of disabled students to various departments within the OU. Our primary concern is that Disabled Students Allowance can often recommend use of technology such as Grammarly which as well as spellchecking may also recommend sentence re-writes and this will likely trigger AI use.

We have also found that students well-being and ability to continue with studies is being significantly affected by the long waits for Academic Misconduct investigations to be concluded.

Unfortunately, it is a challenge to escalate these delays on behalf of the student as the Student Support Teams are limited in the support they can offer. The only alternative is raising a complaint, which can take 10 to 15 working days to be responded to if not longer. We will be looking at this in depth to see if it is a key area that can be considered as part of the current priority project around Academic Experience.

Finally some feedback from students:

“I found vital and beneficial the service timely response and active engagement providing me with a detailed advice on how to address an issue in an area I never faced and struggled to cope with before reassuring me and making me feel comfortable talking about it and to develop a deep understanding of good academic practices to maximise the value of my university experience.”

“This service helped me massively throughout my academic conduct referral. I felt supported in every way and felt as if I had all the time in the world to express my feelings. I felt like a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders once I had spoken to the support team. The response times were also great. I would highly recommend the student advice service.”

2.2 Library Study Volunteers

We continue to receive requests at pace and are racing towards our next milestone with 753 requests received to date. We had some recent service feedback from a student who learned about the 'LSV Service' via the printed Hoot magazine we send to prisons, “That's how I learnt about this service! I love them (The Hoot)...It has provided me with information I could not have got myself because I am offline. The information was very important for my TMA”

2.3 OU Students Connect Group numbers

Our team have continued to look after the OU Students Connect platform while ownership moves to the MarComms team. During

the last quarter we have created regional areas for the nations and 'international students' within the Conversations area, as well as creating a 'Meet the Candidates' space for the upcoming Elections.

There has been a steady increase in Group members joining this space since our last report:

- BAME Group – 55 (up 10 members)
- DSG – 285 (up 45 members)
- OU Pride – 117 (up 29 members)

There are 1242 students on the platform now and we are seeing increased interest from OU staff who are keen to share with students.

2.4 Highlights from the Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) Engagement Survey

I mentioned in our last update that evaluation of the SiSE Engagement survey would be shared and it has been shared in full to the Student Leadership Team. Here are some highlights:

- A total of 259 students (27%) completed the survey, with 242 responses eligible for analysis. We believe this marks the highest participation rate in a member-wide survey conducted by the Association, a 15% increase from the previous survey in 2022.
- Awareness of the Association itself was high (67%) but awareness of services available to SiSE was low (The Hoot – 39%; Library Study Volunteers – 39%; OUSET – 22% and Individual Representation – 10%).
- 7 institutions received above-average scores for two or more measures and one prison had 15 individual respondents.
- One student's feedback: "New students [should] receive an information booklet explaining the services available to them. I have just completed an access course with the OU and didn't know of any of the above services."

2.5 Clubs and Societies

With the recent staff restructure our team are excited to now look after Clubs and Societies alongside the Support Groups. With that we have this week welcomed our new Belonging Officer to the team and are preparing to start the Student Community Priority Project.

2.6 Neurodivergent Students Priority Project Update

- The priority project for neurodivergent student support is progressing with several key actions in place. A decision tree to

help neurodivergent students navigate their time at university is being worked on and will be shared with the group. Plans are also to share the report and action plan with other project teams relevant to this area.

- In addition to this the project team will gather input from neurodivergent students on the community support they need, and regular meet-ups will be organised based on their preferences. The action plan to guide the work is nearly complete, with final adjustments to be made according to the priorities set at the most recent meeting.
- An event put on by Natalie and Charon for Neurodiversity Celebration Week was successful, with discussions around signposting and resources. Alongside the decision tree, which was spearheaded by Pooja before she left, a signposting document is also being developed. There are also ongoing discussions about including the distinction between both mental health and neurodiversity in Associate Lecturers' training.
- Furthermore, priorities for the action plan include enhancing community support, creating videos to inform students on various topics, and adding neurodiversity to the student charter. The group is also looking at how to contribute to a government review on autism, led by Student Voice, and will focus on setting up a dedicated space for neurodivergent students on OU Students Connect, alongside regular meet-ups.

Update from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Students Group

3.1 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Students Group Committee

Chair – Danielle Bagnall
Vice-Chair – Florence Bull
Secretary – Navjot Sandhu
Comms Officer – Farah Javed
Events Officer – Monet McKenzie

3.2 Total number of official members – 169

3.3 Engagement on OU Students Connect

New Threads – 3 (1 started by Committee, 2 started by members)
Thread themes – Introduction, Committee Roles

3.4 Engagement on Facebook

New Threads – 7 (1 started by Committee, 6 started by members)
Thread themes – Ramadan, Politics, Student Charter

3.5 Key Messages from the Committee

- The committee has attended regular informal meetings, availability of members initially an issue, being overcome.
- Facebook membership has increased by 1 new member.
- The formation of a BAME Book and Movie Club is being implemented.
- Plans for an 'Inspirational People' project to be released, aligning Hoot articles with events.
- Informal Coffee Sessions for students under discussion, with ice breaker activities, quizzes and social elements.
- Social media post creation, regular topics, careers updates and share points planned.

Update from the Disabled Students Group

- 4.1 Disabled Students Group Committee
Chair – Clare Charlton
Vice-Chair – Becky Fowler-Monk
Secretary – Nicola Shrewsbury
Comms Officer – Felicity Burgess
Events Officer – Vacant
- 4.2 Total number of official members – 1009
- 4.3 Recent Drop-In Events
3 x monthly drop ins
1 x Welcome Week
1 x Student Voice/ Representation Special
1 x Mental Health Special
- 4.4 Engagement on OU Students Connect
New Threads – 26 (11 started by Committee, 15 started by members)
Thread themes – Social, OUSA, ND Support/queries, OUSC, Library and General OU Discussions
- 4.5 Engagement on Facebook
New Threads – 77 (53 started by Committee, 24 started by members)

Membership thread breakdown
26 % DSA/equipment/mentor queries,
27% general OU discussion,
14 % ND support/queries,
24% DSA/equipment/mentor queries,

12% disability support/queries and OUSA, also around exams/EMAs/TMAs/extension,
Other - social chat, MH/wellbeing support/queries and benefits/student finance, OUSA

Committee thread breakdown
46% ND/MH/disability support/queries,
13% OUSA/DSG,
37% Library,
1 thread on social chat

4.6 Key Messages from the Committee

- New secretary has had induction attending meetings and joining social media activities.
- All drop ins were busy, often running over time, good discussions.
- Key issue has been learning and studentship adaptations – how to work and how to study, how to reference, using the timetable / workplans, fitting in study with life
- AI has been a hot topic through the DSG, through drop ins and in the social media. Much confusion over what programmes can be used, DSA advising that Grammarly (paid version) and Scholarcy can be used, queries over the OU allowing them and where they can be used.
- DSG and EDI team members have met with a member of OU staff working on AI and a statement is now planned, once this statement has been released, the DSG will host a special drop-in session.
- Confusion over what tutors are there to do, what's required and how do their roles work. Some issues with tutors not contacting students with disability profiles and in some cases not messaging the students at all. We have advised all students to send an introduction email to their tutors at the start of the module, say hello and let them know how their ability works. The DSG are also developing a slide pack and document to accompany a special drop in which is planned for May.
- DSA again has caused some questions but these are less frequent now. DSG have created guidance documents and previous special events have been recorded and published online. Team will consider another special event, especially as there are changes with tutors and mentors at SfE level.
- Referencing – from both Undergraduate and access course issues. The library sessions are well advertised and students on the Facebook group advised to follow the library and check the library website to attend specific sessions and to ask the library for assistance.

Update from OU Pride

5.1 OU Pride Committee

Chair – Marli-Ann (Marli) Norman
Vice-Chair – Kit Renard
Secretary – Kellin (KJ) Daniels
Comms Officer – Vacant
Events Officer – Vacant

5.2 Total number of official members – 409

5.3 Recent Events

- Events Officer role has been vacant since as post holder has stepped down from role

Three events have been facilitated by OU Pride since previous SLT Report submitted:

- 28/01 — Welcome Week Event (approx 20 attendees)
- 28/02 — Drop-In: LGBTQ+ History Month (3 attendees)
- 31/03 — Drop-In: Int. Trans Day of Visibility (10 attendees)

Chair and Vice-Chair attended a meeting with a student member of Senate to discuss issues regarding the transgender community on 30/03

5.4 Engagement on OU Students Connect

New Threads – 10

Thread themes:

- 1 thread advertising Welcome Week event
- 6 threads in celebration of key events during LGBTQ+ History month
- 1 thread advertising LGBTQ+ History Month drop-in
- 1 thread advertising International Trans Day of Visibility drop-in
- 1 thread advertising International Lesbian Visibility Day drop-in

5.5 Engagement on Facebook

New Threads – 15

Thread Themes:

- threads advertising Welcome Week event

- 1 thread to follow-up on success of WW event
- 1 thread posting an interactive poll to get to know the community
- 4 threads in total, honouring LGBTQ+ History Month
- 1 thread advertising LGBTQ+ History Month drop-in event
- 1 thread from a student member seeking participants for LGBTQ+ safe space research
- 1 thread from a student member inquiring regarding alternative social media platform usage (Discord)
- threads advertising local Pride events for students to attend – Southend Winter Pride and Basingstoke Pride
- 1 thread sharing information regarding a peaceful counter-protest in Nottingham, regarding an anti-trans/gender-critical politician announcing their presence in the area
- 1 thread advertising International Trans Day of Visibility drop-in event

Verity Robinson
Head of EDI and Belonging