Best Practice in Academic Experience

Introduction

The Open University (OU) consistently delivers a positive academic experience for its students, as evidenced by National Student Survey (NSS) scores that regularly exceed 80%. However, given the scale of the institution, even a 20% dissatisfaction rate represents tens of thousands of students whose academic experience falls short of expectations.

We recognise that inconsistency across faculties and disciplines can significantly impact student satisfaction. This is particularly relevant at the OU, where many students engage in cross-disciplinary study. In response, we have identified key areas that influence the academic experience and outlined what we believe constitutes best practice across the institution.

The areas addressed in this report include:

- Tutor engagement and support

- Quality and accessibility of tutorials

- Provision and clarity of study materials

- Assessment and feedback practices

- Academic conduct and integrity

- Opportunities for peer collaboration and interaction

While many of these practices are already in place, their implementation varies across the university. We therefore urge the OU to take steps to ensure a consistent and high-quality academic experience for all students, regardless of their faculty or programme.

Supporting evidence

This report is informed by a robust evidence base, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data from the following sources:

- National Student Survey (NSS) results

- Student consultation data

- Feedback from the Open SU Student Issues Tool

- Insights from the OU Brand Tracker survey

- Findings from the FASS EDIA 2024 Consultation

- Contributions from the Student Leadership Team

- Feedback from OU-led consultative activities

Defining Academic Student Experience

The Academic Student Experience encompasses every aspect of a student's journey that helps them successfully complete their studies. This includes:

1. Learning Environment: The ability to effectively and efficiently interact with peers, academics, support services, and materials in a manner that provides a consistent experience for all.

2. Quality of Teaching: Access to stimulating materials and tutoring that broadens knowledge and allows students to apply information beyond their studies.

3. Fair, but Challenging Assessment: Assessments should thoroughly test students' understanding of materials, delivered in a way that meets their needs without compromising the quality assurance required for higher education.

5. Academic Conduct: Encouraging students to maintain academic integrity with clear policies and procedures, ensuring consistency and balancing support with deterrents for future instances.

6. Feedback: Students are offered the opportunity to provide regular feedback on their academic experience that is acted upon in a timely manner.

Pastoral support has not been included in this document, due to this being within the scope of the Student Support Priority Project.

Identified areas

1) Tutor engagement and support

Tutor contact with students

Students expect regular and responsive communication with their tutors, particularly at key points such as the start of a module and around assessment deadlines. Consistent and proactive contact helps students feel supported and confident in their studies.

Best practice recommendations:

- Tutors should initiate contact at the beginning of each module, clearly outlining how students can get in touch and setting expectations for response times.

- If a tutor becomes unexpectedly unavailable, the OU should proactively inform affected students and provide alternative support arrangements.

Consistency across tutors

While students appreciate that tutors bring individual styles and experiences to their teaching, they also expect a consistent standard of support across the institution. Inconsistencies can lead to unequal experiences and confusion, especially for students studying across multiple disciplines.

Best practice recommendations:

- Provide tutors with time and resources to share best practices and collaborate across faculties.

- Monitor and address discrepancies in tutor support to ensure a uniform student experience.

- Ensure tutors receive regular training to stay aligned with current OU policies and procedures.

The role of the tutor

Students consistently value the human connection and subject expertise that tutors offer. While AI tools can support learning, they are not seen as a replacement for the personalised guidance and empathy that tutors provide.

Best practice recommendation:

- Use AI tools to complement tutor roles, such as automating administrative tasks, while preserving the tutor's central role in academic and pastoral support.

Student ability to challenge and provide feedback

Many students feel uncomfortable giving feedback or raising concerns about their tutors, fearing it may negatively affect their relationship or future support. This can prevent important insights from reaching the institution and hinder continuous improvement.

Best practice recommendations:

- Introduce secure, ongoing feedback mechanisms that allow students to share their experiences throughout the module, not just at the end.

- Clearly communicate that feedback will not impact academic support or assessment outcomes. Tutors should be trained to receive and respond to feedback constructively.

Support for students with additional needs

The OU has a high number of students with declared disabilities, reflecting its inclusive mission. However, students report that tutors often overlook disability profiles, requiring them to repeatedly explain their needs, adding unnecessary emotional strain.

Best practice recommendation:

- Tutors should be required to review and acknowledge each student's disability profile at the start of the module. This should be supported by training in inclusive teaching practices and monitored to ensure consistent application.

2) Quality and accessibility of tutorials

Tutorial format and content

OU students value the opportunity to interact with tutors and peers, particularly around assessment periods, as it helps deepen their understanding of the subject. However, many express frustrations when tutorials simply repeat content already covered in module materials, limiting time for discussion and exploration.

Students also engage in tutorials in different ways - some prefer active discussion, while others choose to listen quietly. Tutorials should be designed to accommodate these varying preferences.

Best practice recommendations:

- Provide pre-recorded "empty room" sessions that cover core module content. This ensures consistency and frees up tutorial time for more interactive learning.

- Design tutorials to focus on discussion, questioning, and assessment preparation, rather than re-teaching module content. This encourages deeper engagement and understanding.

- Use a variety of engagement methods, such as polls, chat functions, and breakout rooms, to ensure all students can participate in a way that suits them.

Access to recordings

Given the diverse commitments of OU students, flexibility is essential. Recorded tutorials allow students to engage with content at a time that suits them, and the current policy is generally well-received.

Best practice recommendation:

- Continue the current approach of offering at least one recorded and one unrecorded tutorial per module. Clearly indicate recording status during booking, and ensure that if a scheduled recording is unavailable, an alternative is provided promptly.

Use of cameras

Students appreciate seeing their tutors during tutorials, as it helps build rapport and supports accessibility - for example, enabling lip reading for those with hearing impairments.

Best practice recommendation:

- Encourage tutors to use their cameras during tutorials. If this is not possible, clearly indicate which sessions will be camera-on or camera-off at the time of booking.

Tutorial timing and frequency

Students' varied schedules mean that flexibility in tutorial timing is crucial. Many would also welcome more frequent opportunities to attend tutorials throughout the module.

Best practice recommendations:

- Where feasible, offer tutorials at a range of times - including daytime, evening, and weekends - to accommodate different student needs.

- Use tutor resources strategically to increase the frequency of tutorials. This may involve using pre-recorded content to free up tutor time for live sessions.

3) Provision and clarity of study materials

Accessibility

One of The Open University's USPs is that it is open to everyone. Students join the University from a range of backgrounds and with a variety of reasonable adjustments which need to be met.

Best practice recommendations:

- Materials must be easily available to meet a diverse range of needs (including compatibility with support software and mobile devices).
- A trusting approach must be used to make reasonable adjustments for people whose diagnoses haven't yet been finalised.

Timeliness and flexibility

Some students need to make a head start on their studies due to career and accessibility needs. This group can include students serving in the armed forces.

Best practice recommendations:

- Accessible formats must be delivered in good time (this includes print materials).
- There must be clear communication about what materials will be provided and when.

Quality and representation

Study materials should include diverse perspectives. Students need the University to provide high quality materials to ensure the best academic outcomes. Human oversight is essential to maintain quality and make robust ethical judgements.

Best practice recommendations:

- Inclusion of diverse perspectives and avoiding British and Eurocentric bias.
- Responsible use of AI in content creation, with proper vetting and accountability.

4) Assessment and feedback practices

Exam invigilation

Students understand the importance of maintaining academic integrity to ensure the credibility of their studies. However, many also have valid concerns about privacy when it comes to remote exam invigilation. Additionally, a significant number of students live in busy or shared environments, where finding a quiet, interruption-free space to take exams can be challenging.

Best practice recommendations:

- Remote exam monitoring should be as non-invasive as possible, respecting students' right to privacy in their own homes.
- Consider using alternative ways to confirm a student's identity and understanding - such as short video calls or other suitable formats - to build trust that submitted work is genuinely their own.
- The OU should help students access spaces that support their success. This could include offering flexibility or practical support to use alternative locations for taking exams.

Consistency of assessment feedback timescales

Students often feel frustrated when they don't know how long it will take to receive feedback and scores for their TMAs (Tutor-Marked Assignments). This uncertainty can increase anxiety, especially when they see other students on the same module receiving feedback earlier and benefiting from it. It's particularly disappointing when TMAs are not returned within the expected timeframe and no communication is provided.

Best practice recommendations:

- Feedback and scores should be returned to all students on a fixed date - ideally no more than 10 working days after the submission deadline.
- Students should be informed in advance when to expect their assignments back. If there's a delay, clear and timely communication should be provided to manage expectations.

Clear and consistent marking criteria

Some students have shared that they're unsure about what exactly they're being assessed on. They've noticed inconsistencies when discussing assignments with peers - students with different tutors are sometimes given conflicting guidance about what content to include.

Best practice recommendation:

- Assessment criteria should be clearly communicated and easy for students to understand. These criteria should be applied consistently across all tutors within the module for the same assignment.

Tailored assessment feedback

Students value feedback that reflects their individual learning and submission. They've expressed frustration when comments appear generic or reused across multiple students. At the OU, feedback is seen as a vital teaching tool, and students want it to feel personal and relevant to their work.

Best Practice Recommendation:

- Feedback should be specific to the student and their individual assignment. It should acknowledge the role of feedback in supporting the student's development and learning journey.

Assessment format inaccessible to some students

OU student come from a wide range of backgrounds with a diverse range of needs. Whilst assessment must adequately assess learning and understanding, there does not need to be a one-size fits all approach.

Best practice recommendation:

- Ensure that assessments are designed with accessibility in mind.
- Provide flexible options for assessment where the need is demonstrated, whilst maintaining academic integrity and rigour.

5) Academic conduct and integrity

Delays in academic misconduct investigation process

The Open SU Individual Representation service has noticed that some students are experiencing a delay in the investigation process. The delays seem to occur at the first stage when the student is notified of potential concerns with the assignment.

For many students the university is not meeting the above requirement. This issue is not only occurring during results period when there is a high number of students subject to investigations. This has been an issue that has been on-going for some time. The Individual Representation service have reached out to OU staff at ACQ in 2024 to highlight this concern.

For many students the only option is to raise a complaint, but the complaint process does not resolve the issue, often adds more distress as the responses are vague, and do not offer transparency on why the delay continues to happen.

Students attempt to contact their Student Support Team, who are unable to support students as they have no information on the academic conduct case. While Student Support Teams can escalate cases bases on student needs, the number of cases is too high for the escalation process to have any true impact.

The Code of Practice for Student Discipline policy states that:

"**The Open University aims to investigate allegations of misconduct promptly and where practicable within 90 calendar days of the identification of a concern**. In particularly complex cases, or where further information is needed from other parties as part of the investigation, an extension of this time limit may be required. Investigating authorities will provide updates to students where the timeframe cannot be met."

What is the impact on students?

- Students are unable to learn from errors flagged in the academic conduct review in a timely manner, resulting in repeated academic misconduct investigations
- Pending results affecting student morale to continue studying, impacting on overall academic performance
- Impact on student well-being due to the anxiety of waiting for further correspondence
- Student with existing mental health conditions report experiencing a decline in mental health
- Students unable to move forward with education or employment due to long wait

- Student Support Team are unable to provide support due to limited information on the investigation causing further investigations

Case Examples:

Student A: The student that is in their third year of study with the OU. The student has disclosed to have a disability. This is the first investigation the student has been subject to. The student was first contacted in January 2025 about concerns with an assignment. They have since receiving holding emails, informing that more time was needed to investigate their case. The only explanation received during this wait is that the university is experiencing a busy period.

The student has raised a stage 1 and stage 2 complaint, expressing the lack of clear communication and the extended uncertainty have had a serious impact on their mental health and academic progress. The student informed us that the "stress and anxiety caused by this situation has been significant, and they felt that the university has not considered the effect this has had on their well-being, especially considering their disability".

Student received an outcome to stage 2 complaint stating:

"They will aim to complete this review as quickly as possible, but it may take some time as each case that has been pended needs to be considered thoroughly to ensure the right outcome is reached. This is an important part of maintaining quality assurance and the high academic standards of the University. I understand your frustration about the length of time it has taken for the University to investigate your case and release your result. It is important that each case of potential plagiarism is investigated fully and in detail.

The University has seen a significant increase in potential plagiarism, and I apologise that this has meant that we have been unable to resolve your result within our usual expected timeframe. I am afraid I am unable to confirm the exact timeframe when your result will be released as this depends on several factors including whether any further investigation is required and whether your work needs to be remarked. However, the University is working towards releasing all pended module results as a matter of priority. I am unable to provide you with any details of the allegations as stated above. These are not available to me; you will be contacted by the Academic Conduct Officer once the investigation progresses."

Student B: Student is in their first year of studying with the OU, not having formally studied for many years. They received an initial email notifying of an academic conduct review of an assignment in February; this was after receiving their results. The student describes this experience as a massive demotivator to receive, "it was confusing, impersonal, no reasons or timeframes given for when I could expect an

outcome and I have been left worrying with no recourse as well as being unable to embrace the end of module results".

The student received communication in that time, informing them of the need for more time to investigate their case. It is now 7 months later, and no further progress on the investigation.

During this time, the student has spent considerable time speaking with both Student Support Team and their employer on what they should do about registering for the next module with the deadline being 11th September. The student was advised they could register; , this became a problem due to the pending results.

The student raised a complaint; however, the stage 1 complaint has not been successful. The response received states, "The work to resolve your case is continuing and we apologise for the delay in processing your case. I appreciate that this is frustrating and stressful. As student assignment(s) are generally being reviewed individually, we are still investigating a number of cases. However, we are working hard to ensure that the cases get processed as soon as we can. Please be assured that you will be contacted in due course, and the team will confirm what, if any, action is appropriate."

The student has decided to escalate the complaint to stage 2.

The Individual Representation service did reach out to the Director of Student Support for Operations on behalf of one of the students. The response received was "Unfortunately, I don't think there is anything I can do to speed up the outcome for this student, at this stage. It is not an issue that is unique to this student – rather there is a backlog because of us seeing a surge in students being referred for academic conduct. What I can say is that there is a spotlight on this process at a very high level within the University. This being the case I'm hoping we might see some improvements in the near future to speed up the time to resolution for students."

Best practice recommendations:

The delays continue to have a significant impact on students. It is important that this is addressed as soon as possible, as it is not only disadvantaging students, it also has a negative impact on the university's reputation. The recommendations we propose are:

- Consistent time scales across faculties
- Transparency on reasons for delays when students raise complaints
- Compensation to be considered where students experience a delay of more than the recommended 90 days, keeping the university accountable

- Preventative actions to help reduce the number of students flagged for academic misconduct
- Increase resources – there is a need for more Academic Conduct Officers
- Initial emails to be improved to provide more clarity and more information
- Escalation process to be of real benefit to students who are significantly impacted

Increase in the number of students flagged for academic misconduct

The university continues to experience an increase in academic misconduct cases, which further exacerbates the problem of delays in the investigation process. The misuse of Gen AI and automated tool has been identified as one area that has led to an increase in Academic Misconduct cases.

Issues that have been identified in this area are:

- Student awareness of the guidance around AI usage is very low
- Student awareness of what constitutes as good academic practice is poor
- Resources available on improving referencing are not easily accessible from the beginning
- Not enough time is spent preparing students on what good academic practice looks like through their study journey
- Tutors are not aware of on-going concerns, and do not have time to provide relevant support
- Letters are not always clear on what the student may have done wrong

Best practice recommendations

It is to be accepted that academic misconduct cases will happen, however, preventative measures can be taken to help reduce number of students flagged for academic misconduct and the number of students that result in repeated investigations resulting in poor academic performance and referrals to Central Disciplinary Hearings. The following resolutions will need to be considered for the benefit of students:

- Mandatory completion of Academic Conduct Training and reading of policy from the beginning of the course
- Better training for tutors to identify students who through their assignments are deemed to be at risk of future academic misconduct
- Better training for tutors to support students who undergo an investigation and recommendations are made for study skills support
- Recognise that not all students find it easy to access or make sense of university resources available

- Letters of initial investigation and marking reports to have a clear indication of where the student has gone wrong and outcome letters to clearly explain what students need to do to improve
- Signpost effectively to Individual Representation service, for students to receive support from the first stage of investigation process

6) Opportunities for peer collaboration and interaction

Tutorial attendees being sufficiently informed about modes of interaction ahead of time

Many students, including neurodivergent students, appreciate being given an impression of how they are expected to interact during a tutorial. This can build the confidence of attendees and encourage interaction and collaboration.

Best practice recommendation:

- Tutors should make sufficient use of tutorial descriptions to clarify what is expected from tutorial attendees in terms of interaction, so that students know what to expect (e.g. camera-on, questions encouraged, discussion/collaboration between attendees expected).

Please see 'Tutorial format and content' under topic 2 for more on best practice for interaction in tutorials.

Spaces fit for purpose for students to interact outside of tutorials

Some students report a lack of opportunity to interact with peers outside of tutorials, with current spaces not fit for purpose, meaning some students create their own un-moderated spaces.

Best practice recommendation:

- Encourage students to use the most reliable available resources and ensure OU monitored platforms are kept up-to-date and fit for purpose for students.