

## Best Practice in Student Support

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### Introduction

The Open SU Student Leadership Team (SLT) has identified Student Support as one of its key priorities because we believe that every Open University student deserves timely, accessible, and high-quality support throughout their learning journey. While we recognise that there is already some excellent practice across the University, we also know that the experience of accessing support can vary significantly. Our aim with this document is to promote a consistently high standard of student support across the OU, ensuring that all students, regardless of their circumstances, can rely on the same level of care and responsiveness.

This priority stems from our commitment to improving access to OU student support services and increasing their availability to meet the diverse needs of our student population. The Open University is unique in its scale and diversity, and its support systems must reflect the wide range of barriers students face in accessing study. That means offering more flexible ways for students to reach and interact with Student Support Teams, and developing personalised pathways that adapt to varying schedules, responsibilities, and backgrounds. This document will set out our best practice recommendations, split in six key areas:

1. Contacting the Student Support Team
2. Student Support Team knowledge
3. Support for disabled students
4. Student onboarding
5. Data sharing
6. Wider support services

By setting out best practice in this document, we aim to work constructively with the University to ensure that student support is not only available but consistently excellent, helping every student feel supported, valued, and empowered to succeed.

## Supporting evidence

This document 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
- Contributions from the Student Leadership Team
- Feedback from OU-led consultative activities
- Knowledge and experience from Open SU staff
- Engagement with OU staff

## Identified areas and best practice recommendations

### 1. Contacting the Student Support Team

#### Student Support Team opening hours

Students need support when it fits around their lives, but current Student Support Team hours make this difficult. They are no longer open in the evenings or on Saturdays, which is a challenge for those working full-time during the week. Support also is not available during many tutorial times, including weekends, meaning students cannot easily get help when they need it most. Overall, the hours seem designed around staff availability rather than student needs, creating unnecessary barriers to accessing timely support.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- The OU should pilot evening and Saturday opening hours for Student Support Teams to better accommodate students who work full-time or have other weekday commitments. This would also support international students in different time zones.
- Student Support Teams should extend their opening hours during peak periods, such as results days, end of module preparation weeks, registration deadlines and module start dates.

#### Accessibility of Student Support Teams for international students

International students often face unique barriers when trying to contact the OU Student Support Team. Time zone differences can make it difficult to reach support during UK office hours, especially when those hours are already limited. For students living overseas, the lack of evening or weekend availability means they may need to wait until late at night or early morning to speak to someone, leaving students feeling disconnected and unsupported at critical moments in their studies. Additionally, the cost of international calls might be prohibitive to some OU students.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Ensure international students can request a callback through the scheduled contact service, reducing the need for long waits and making support more accessible across time zones.
- Increase awareness of the OU's scheduled contact service through clear, proactive communication on the website, student emails, and tutorials, so international students know they can book a convenient time for support.

#### Methods of contacting the student support team

Students face challenges with the limited ways they can reach the Student Support Team. Web chat, which many find convenient, is only available for short periods, leaving phone calls or email as the main option. However, many students are reluctant to use the phone, particularly those with disabilities, communication difficulties, or anxiety, making this method inaccessible for some. These limitations can create unnecessary barriers and delays in getting the help students need.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Increase the availability of web chat support, taking inspiration from the OU Library's approach, which offers extended hours and responsive service.
- Investigate additional digital platforms, such as secure messaging apps or integrated support tools within the OU student portal, to give students more flexible and inclusive ways to reach the Student Support Team.

#### Queue times for phone calls and response times for emails

Students often face long waits when trying to contact the Student Support Team. Email responses can take up to five working days, which feels like a long time, especially when the issue is urgent. Phone calls are not always better, as students can be passed from one person to another without clear resolution. When tutors are unavailable, students would benefit from SSTs prioritising support for their tutees, but this does not always happen. These delays can leave students feeling frustrated and unsupported at critical moments in their studies.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Allocate additional staff or temporary support during high-demand periods such as end of year deadlines, module start dates, and exam weeks. This will help reduce long wait times and ensure urgent queries are handled promptly.
- Set a target for faster turnaround on emails, prioritising urgent cases. Consider introducing a triage system so critical issues are flagged and resolved quickly, rather than waiting the standard five working days.
- Enhance call handling processes to avoid students being passed from “pillar to post.” Implement clear routing and empower SST staff to resolve issues directly or escalate efficiently. Where tutors are unavailable, SSTs should prioritise support for their tutees to prevent delays.

### Follow up on sensitive issues

When students contact the Student Support Team and there is no follow-up, it can create significant frustration, especially for sensitive issues. Students may have to repeat their situation to multiple people, which can feel uncomfortable and even distressing. For those dealing with personal or complex matters, having to explain themselves repeatedly can be a barrier to seeking help and may discourage them from reaching out again. Consistent follow-up is essential to ensure students feel heard, supported, and respected.

### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Ensure that when a student raises a query, especially on sensitive topics, a single staff member or team takes ownership of the case.
- Introduce a system for proactive follow-up, where students receive updates on their query and know who to contact if they have further questions.

### Calls triaged through Student Recruitment

When students try to contact the Student Support Team but are first routed through the Student Recruitment Team, it can lead to delays and frustration. Students often expect to speak directly with someone who understands their academic or personal support needs but instead find themselves explaining their situation to staff who may not be equipped to resolve it. This extra step can feel unnecessary and particularly stressful for those with urgent or sensitive issues, as it means repeating information and waiting longer for the right help. This can also have an impact on international students, where longer calls might incur higher call costs.

### **Best practice recommendation:**

- Ensure that current students are routed straight to the Student Support Team rather than through the Student Recruitment Team.

## **2. Student Support Team Knowledge**

## Knowledge gaps in support

When students contact the Student Support Team, they expect clear answers and guidance. However, if staff lack sufficient knowledge about the issue, students often end up being passed from one person to another. This not only delays resolution but can be frustrating and stressful, especially for urgent or complex queries. Repeating the same information multiple times can feel exhausting and discouraging, leaving students feeling unsupported and unsure where to turn for help.

### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Create a clear and efficient directory or routing system so students are connected to the right person or team on their first attempt.
- Regularly review and update the OU's Knowledge Management System to ensure staff have accurate, current information at their fingertips
- Ensure staff have dedicated time to read updates and familiarise themselves with changes in policies, processes, and resources.
- Provide comprehensive onboarding and ongoing training for Student Support Team staff so they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of OU students.

## Inconsistency of information provided

Students often report receiving conflicting information from different Student Support Team advisors, which creates confusion and frustration, especially when shared on social media. This inconsistency can happen when advisors are not fully up to date with the latest guidance or faculty-specific information. The accuracy of responses can also depend on the advisor's experience, meaning some queries are understood and resolved quickly while others are not. Over time, this erodes trust in the support provided and can make students feel that contacting the SST is a waste of time.

### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Develop clear, unified processes and guidance that apply consistently across all faculties and nations.
- Provide ongoing training and scheduled update sessions for advisors to ensure they are familiar with the latest policies, processes, and guidance.
- Give the right staff access to systems that record previous interactions and issues discussed with the student.

## Lack of awareness on the challenges facing OU students

When Student Support Team advisors are not fully aware of the unique challenges OU students face, such as balancing study with work, caring responsibilities, or studying in isolation, it can lead to advice that feels generic or unhelpful. Students often need

empathetic, practical guidance tailored to their circumstances, and when this understanding is missing, they may feel misunderstood or unsupported.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- Provide comprehensive training for Student Support Team advisors on the unique challenges OU students face
- Regularly gather feedback and case studies from students to inform training and service improvements.
- Ensure staff workloads and schedules allow enough time for genuine engagement with students.

Lack of knowledge about Open SU services

When OU staff are not familiar with the services and support offered by Open SU, students can miss valuable help and opportunities. Staff may fail to signpost students to resources such as support groups, engagement opportunities, representation, or wellbeing initiatives, leaving students feeling isolated or unaware of the options available to them.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- Ensure all Student Support Team staff receive training on the range of services offered by Open SU
- Invite Open SU to deliver regular presentations or briefing sessions to Student Support Team staff.

### 3. Support for Disabled Students

Lack of proactive contact for students who have declared a disability

Students who declare a disability often experience inconsistent proactive contact from the OU. Regular engagement from Student Support Teams is essential to check progress, wellbeing, identifying challenges early, and provide timely interventions. This will allow the university to identify when students are struggling and help to address concerns early.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- Reach out to disabled students periodically (particularly during key points in the academic year), offering a call booking system for those who might need support.
- Implement an automated process to trigger contact when students complete the Disability Support Form
- Train staff at all levels to have a person centred approach when communicating with students. This involves taking the time to review and understand students' needs before responding and not putting the onus on the students to declare their needs each time they make contact.

### Lack of signposting for students who might need to declare a disability (how to, where to look etc.)

The process for declaring a disability is currently unclear and overwhelming for many students. Information is scattered across multiple pages, lengthy, and only available in one format, which can be challenging for neurodivergent students or those with processing difficulties.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Create audio or video walkthroughs, explaining the process and steps taken when a student with a disability declares this with the OU.
- Ensure that the process is accessible for students with neurodivergent conditions.
- Consider breaking up instructions and next step information into smaller chunks for students who declare a difficulty processing larger portions of text.

### Ensure that processes for students are flexible to accommodate any appropriate reasonable adjustments required

Students can be left vulnerable and struggling while waiting for their Disabled Students Allowance to be processed and in some cases, this can be a significant period. The delays can mean that they must struggle through their first few months of study without any adjustments or support in place.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Adopt a proactive approach by informing students about interim support options while DSA is processed.
- Provide clear guidance on applying for DSA and avoid unnecessary delays through streamlined processes.
- Share information in multiple formats (written, audio, video) to ensure accessibility.

### Ensure a mechanism exists for understanding different contexts/circumstances of individual students and that we are meeting their needs

Students frequently have to repeat their circumstances to different staff members, which is frustrating and inefficient. Better internal information sharing is needed to ensure continuity of support.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Use AI tools to summarise and share student needs across relevant staff securely.
- Allocate a dedicated staff member for students with complex needs to provide consistent support.

#### 4. Student Onboarding

Ensure that students have a mechanism for sharing their needs during onboarding and that this is followed up

Students have emphasised the importance of creating a clear and consistent process for students to declare any specific needs (such as disabilities, caring responsibilities, or other circumstances) during onboarding. The current approach lacks uniformity in response, which can lead to gaps in support.

**Best practice recommendations:**

Induction process that requires student to sign and declare that they have read the information.

- Provide students with confirmation that their needs have been recorded and outline next steps for support.
- The induction process should integrate a structured mechanism that allows students to understand and confirm key information as they progress through registration. This would include:
  - Step-by-step guidance: At each stage of registration, students are shown relevant information about processes such as declaring a disability or other needs, including what details are required and what the next steps will be.
  - Active acknowledgment: Students manually confirm that they have read and understood the information before moving to the next stage.
  - Additional resources: Provide links for students to read further or bookmark content for later reference.
  - Dedicated web page: Centralised location where students can revisit this information at any time.
- Ensure that students are contacted to discuss their needs at least two weeks before their first assessment is due.

Ensure that students are clearly signposted to support mechanism as part of onboarding

Students need to be clearly and consistently signposted to available support services as part of the onboarding process. This ensures they are aware of resources such as disability support, mental health services, financial assistance, and academic guidance from the outset. Lack of clear signposting can lead to students missing essential help, particularly those with additional needs.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- Include clear, accessible details about all available support services within the induction process, using multiple formats (text, video, links).
- Send tailored emails to students with relevant support based on their declarations.

## 5. Data Sharing

Ensure that the right staff have the right access to information to support students when they need to access it.

We are aware that data access varies significantly across staff roles, which can limit timely support for students. There is a need to balance safeguarding sensitive information with enabling staff to act effectively.

For example, a student supported by the Individual Representation Service was experiencing ongoing issues with their studies and struggling to engage, leading to frequent contact with the Student Support Team. The student had declared their disability by completing the disability form. When they later made a complaint about feeling unsupported and that their disability profile was being ignored, the university acknowledged that “different data and information about an individual student is provided by the Open University to a Student Support Adviser, tutors, and a Student Experience Manager to reflect their different roles.” The Student Experience Manager responding to the student’s complaint and had been involved in efforts to help the student move forward admitted they were unaware of the student’s disability support needs and expected them to declare it to them. The manager noted they are “exploring whether these can be shared without breaching data protection.”

### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Review current restrictions on data sharing to limit the barriers to timely access, which has an impact on the support students receive.
- Implement secure but streamlined systems for requesting additional access when necessary.
- Provide training on data protection and ethical use of student information to maintain compliance and trust.

Provide support and capacity for staff to be able to access, and act on, the information provided.

Concerns were raised about staff failing to respond within a reasonable timeframe, often due to workload pressures or lack of clarity on responsibilities. Though we appreciate that the university are looking to make cuts, increasing resources and support is essential.

### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Ensure that student support demands are met and maintain these moving forward.
- Offer guidance and escalation routes for staff who cannot respond promptly, ensuring students are not left unsupported.

Information needs to be accurate, with regular opportunities to update the information

Missed opportunities to support struggling students often stem from outdated or incomplete data. Proactive engagement at key points in the student journey can help mitigate this.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

Start of each module to check what went well or anything changed.

- Encourage students to update their profiles and circumstances through simple, accessible processes.
- Send notifications to students at the start of each module to prompt them to contact SST if any of their circumstances have changed, responding with useful signposts if students do declare changes.
- Use predictive analytics or early warning indicators to identify students who may need additional support before issues escalate.

## **6 Wider Support Services**

#### Signposting the wider support services available

Our SLT voiced the importance of ensuring new students are made aware of wider support services available to OU students. Some of these were previously signposted through Student Hub Live, which has been discontinued.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- New students should be consistently signposted to support services such as the library and careers.
- Student should be encouraged to take part in induction training such as OU Ready.

#### Providing clear support for carers

The SLT would like reassurance that funding for Carers is being suitably promoted. Plus, there must be additional support information available. Before it was discontinued, Student hub Live included content for Carers in their programme of student content.

#### **Best practice recommendations:**

- Students with 'Carer' marked in their profile could be contacted via email with relevant information regarding support that they are eligible for
- Tutors of student-carers should be actively made aware of the fact, so that this acknowledged.

#### Ensuring that Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) have access to support

We know that Students in Secure Environments do not always know how to contact their Student Support Team. In some cases, this can be because they have moved location. We

have also found that some SiSE have not been informed on what would happen to their studies once they have been released. This needs to be considered earlier on in the process. Signposting could also be improved to ensure these students are aware of support available including local services and Library Study Volunteers.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- Educational Advisors need to be given concise and relevant information to share with SiSE, to streamline signposting from the perspective of these individuals who tend to have heavy caseloads.
- SiSE should be provided with the postal address of their SST when they do not have access to the internet/email, or their Educational Advisor should be able to advocate for them.
- An Educational Advisor's briefing from the University should include mention of Library Study Volunteers and local services.

Providing access to appropriate wellbeing resources

Our SLT feel that the Wellbeing resources currently available to OU students are quite generic and that signposting is not always appropriate. Local services are not always included in the range of services a student may be able to access, depending on their geographical location.

**Best practice recommendations:**

- A wider array of appropriate support resources needs to be available to OU students.
- More tailored signposting to relevant support services is needed, instead of a generic approach to wellbeing.
- Students should have access to a dedicated space where they can self-select from regional support services when appropriate, while acknowledging that many students are based outside of the UK and Ireland.