

Andy Evans: Hi there and welcome to episode 7 of The Association Conversation Station, the official podcast of The Open University Students Association. This month, our host Verity Robinson, the head of our Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Student Welfare team, talks about the Association's work in this area, and speaks to two members of our wonderfully diverse student community: Laura Cranstoun from our Disabled Students Group, and Sristi Sengupta from our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Students Group about their experience as part of the Students Association. We're also joined by Ciaragh Hubert, Director of Accessibility at The OU. She talks about the University's ongoing work in the accessibility arena, and how students can access support and get involved.

By the way, you can now find transcripts for our previous six podcast episodes at oustudents.com/podcast. The transcription for this episode will be available very soon.

Okay, let's get on it. Here's the podcast.

Verity Robinson: Hello everybody and welcome to this month's edition of The Association Conversation Station. My name is Verity Robinson, I'm your host for this episode. I am the head of EDI – that's Equality, Diversity, Inclusion – and Student Welfare at the Students Association. I am joined this month by three wonderful guests, Laura, Ciaragh and Sristi, and I will let them introduce themselves in turn. Let's go to Laura first.

Laura Cranstoun: Hi there, I am Laura Cranstoun and I joined The OU in February 2021. At the beginning of this year, I became a committee member for the Disabled Students Group. Thank you very much for inviting me today to join the podcast.

Verity: Absolute pleasure, Laura, and important there to say as well that you're (of course) a student.

Laura: I am a student, and I am a student volunteer as well, so I've got two hats on today.

Verity: Excellent. So many hats, so little time.

Laura: Yeah, exactly.

Verity: Joining us as well is Sristi from our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Group. Sristi, please introduce yourselves for us.

Sristi Sengupta: Hi, I am Sristi Sengupta. I am studying with The OU for the last two years on my degree for Creative Writing and English Literature. I volunteered for the BAME group back in 2020 as a committee member and then got co-opted as the International Students' Officer because I thought somebody who faces the challenges of studying overseas and distance would probably be able to represent the problems in a very efficient way. I don't know how I'm doing but I'm hoping to see how I'm doing and I am hoping to do better. I write for a living, which is not very amicable because, yeah, it's hard to adjust volunteer roles into a routine that basically doesn't exist. So I am an erratic writer, as I would say, but I love volunteering with the BAME group because of the amazing people that I have come through, especially Patrice. I love Patrice. She is the ex-VP and an amazing...

Verity: We miss Patrice.

Sristi: Yeah, we miss Patrice.

Verity: We do miss Patrice.

And next up, we have Ciaragh, a wonderful staff member who's with us today from The

Open University. Please, Ciaragh, introduce yourself.

Ciaragh Hubert: Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for the invite. I am Ciaragh Hubert, and I am the Director of Accessibility at The Open University. This is a brand new role and I started it just about three months ago, so still early days in this role.

Verity: Oh, that's amazing. That sounds incredible. Tell us a little bit about how your role there, Ciaragh, relates to what we do at the Students Association.

Ciaragh: So when it comes to accessibility, we have lots of great work going on across the University. What we need to ensure is that we always have the student voice involved in everything that we do. So that's where we make sure we're involved with the Students Association, giving the opinions of the students and ensuring the students voice is always taken into consideration.

Verity: Fab, and I bet, Laura, that's music to your ears. Tell us a little bit about the position that you have on the committee.

Laura: Absolutely. So obviously Ciaragh just mentioned the student voice there. So at the Disabled Students Group, we like to think that we're a bit of a link or a bridge between some of the issues that students may face, and we help to communicate those back to yourselves at the Association and at The OU as well. Would you like me to tell you a little bit about the Disabled Students Group?

Verity: Yeah, no time like the present – please go ahead.

Laura: So the Disabled Students Group is run by a committee of student volunteers like myself, who have personal and lived experience of disability, mental health, neuro-divergence, and/or other health conditions of which there are many, I'm sure you'll appreciate. We've got nearly 900 registered members at the moment, and we still connect with members who have left their studies on Facebook. The Disabled Students Group is a fabulous and diverse community of people whom I found to be very compassionate, respectful and incredibly supportive of one another. Our role as part of the committee is to create a bridge between the students and agencies like yourselves and The OU, and hoping to give the students a voice with what they need and what they're experiencing in order to improve their student experience.

Verity: Incredible work you guys do as well, so a personal thank you from myself and the other staff and students at the Students Association because what you do is such an incredible thing. Of course, we're sort of loosely talking today about a couple of topics – one of which, of course, is accessibility. I just want to bring Sristi into this part of the conversation here as well, because Sristi, as an international student, accessibility obviously has more than one meaning in lots of different contexts. Sristi, can you tell us a little bit about why accessibility is important for you as an international student?

Sristi: Accessibility is one of the greatest challenges somebody studying overseas with the OU can face because of several reasons. I'm not even coming to the direct study material, the modules and everything – it's just the basic times of the tutorials. You don't have many study groups that you can meet on a day-to-day basis, or even in a week. You have so much planning to do before you can just gather around people from all corners of the world. Somewhere it's 10am in the morning, somewhere it's noon, and somewhere it's straight off like 11pm at night, and there's nothing you can do about it because that's the best part. You're getting so much culture, and you're getting so many people together. You're just making so many different kinds of acquaintances and just exposing yourself to the best in the world, and also having to sacrifice a little bit of your time, having to make adjustments,

and just straight up having to be available, even though it's sometimes really, really difficult.

And especially, when it comes to the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group – the name of which we're not very proud of, but that's the simplest way to let everybody know that we exist – is the fact that people are not finding our idea or concept very accessible. Like, we could go out there and we've tried putting ourselves on The Hoot, we've tried putting ourselves in social media, but the tension remains with sort of calling ourselves a minority because we're from a different culture. Our terminology is different. Our languages are obviously different. Again, coming to accessibility, we're not really sure how to access the virtual social platforms that the University and Association hosts.

Verity: Ah, that's fantastic. Thank you, Sristi. We're going to come on, I think, a little bit later to talk a little bit more about the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Group itself. Of course, we're in October, which is Black History Month, so we'd love to hear a little bit more about what your plans are for that. But keeping with the accessibility theme for now, Ciaragh, could you tell us a little bit more about what the University itself is currently doing for accessibility for students, and what the plans are for the future?

Ciaragh: Absolutely, yes. Now, I'm going to forget to mention so many things, so I'll try to pick out some of the key things that are going on in accessibility. So to call out some of the groups, we have an Accessibility Champions Network, which is made up of representatives from across the University. They're sharing ideas and advocating for accessibility. We have an amazing team called the Accessibility and Usability Evaluation team. They are a team of accessibility specialists focusing on the digital accessibility of our sites, our systems and our app. We have multiple groups of accessibility, people working on projects and initiatives. We have the Cross-Faculty Accessibility Working Group, the Securing Greater Accessibility Group – and they're working on specific initiatives that we're focusing in on.

We have a number of programmes. So we have a programme called the Foundations Programme. That is looking at our learning material and embedded in that is looking at accessibility and how we can embed accessibility right from the start. We have another program called the Student Experience Learning and Adjustments Programme, which is looking at how we can improve the way we provide additional formats to our students. There are so many different teams. There is the Student Additional Support office, which is made up of a number of teams that offer so much support to our students. I will have missed out on so much but that's just a flavour of some of the work that goes on in the accessibility space.

In terms of plans, so this is a brand new role. The idea of this role that I'm in is to try and bring all of those groups together and align what we're working on, and really prioritise exactly what will help our students the most. So focusing on fixing issues that we know we have, really focusing on creating an accessibility-by-design approach. What I mean by that is ensuring that accessibility is talked about right at the start of every single process, whether that be creating sites, creating apps or module material, our procurement process, really just embedding accessibility in from the start. So that's a bit of a flavour of what's going on. We're in the process of creating a new accessibility strategy and plan, which will be implemented across the University. Of course, the student voice will be absolutely embedded into that as well.

Verity: So you're not doing much then – just a couple of things!! You mentioned the student voice, which is exactly what we're all about here at the Students Association. How can students like Laura and Sristi feed into the work that you're doing – and other students, of course, not necessarily just volunteers – but how can students feed into the work that you're doing?

Ciaragh: Yeah, so I recognize this is a podcast so you may be listening to this podcast later on in the year, but I just want to do a little plug for Student Voice Week, if that's okay. So that starts, I believe, on the 7th of November (that's in 2022). On Thursday 10 November, there are a number of sessions that involve accessibility. So if you are free and available, there's one called 'How can we make OU study more accessible and inclusive'. That's a focus group session in which I'm going to be involved. There's another session called 'Help us shape the OU websites of the future', which is being run by the Accessibility and Usability Evaluation team. There's another session – all these three sessions are on Thursday – which is called 'Here to help: how to get additional support in your studies'. That's been run by the Personal Learning Advice Service. So that's some of the events that are coming up at the moment.

In terms of getting involved, there are lots of different panels, so the Accessibility and Usability Evaluation team has set up a new student research panel. The idea of that panel is that we have a group of students – and there's a high percentage of disabled students in that group that we can use to consult – and they can help us to inform the design of our websites and our apps. There are other panels – the Curriculum Design Student Panel, the Library Student Panel – and there's always opportunities to get involved in surveys and focus groups, panels. I'll just carry on if that's okay.

Verity: Yeah, please.

Ciaragh: We would love to hear from students. So if you are part of the Disabled Students Group, feel free to use that as a mechanism to come through to us. I'd love to hear from the students. If you're not part of that group – I hope this is okay, Verity – I'm sure students can get in touch with the Students Association and just feed any of their thoughts, concerns and ideas to us. That would be great.

Verity: Absolutely. Students can always just email our team – the email address is oustudents-support@open.ac.uk – and we can move things forward. Laura, do you want to tell us a little bit more about how students can feed the issues through the Disabled Students Group?

Laura: I was actually just wanting to feed back, Ciaragh, first of all, and say that it's fantastic to hear that there is so much work being done just now on accessibility because (especially at the beginning of the student year in October) some students are finding some difficulties with things like alternative formats. So I appreciate that she has actually shared some accessibility issues that I wasn't aware of because it doesn't come under any sort of community issues. So it's really positive to hear that there are so many things happening. I know that some committee members are actually involved in a couple of those groups, and I couldn't tell you which ones because it sounds like there's so many. So it sounds like there's great things happening and so many opportunities to get involved. So thank you so much for doing that.

But I see Verity was asking about us. So a lot of students are coming to us just now about things like alternative formats. So for instance, our chairperson is actually visually impaired and uses a screen reader. So that's something that she has great experience about, and I know that she uses her experiences to represent a group within our community, and feeds back often to the Association about some of the things that might need adapting and tweaked, which is excellent. So I think it's brilliant that the Association and the OU are so responsive to what people need. And like I said, before the recording started, we can't change everything overnight but if we just take steps in the right direction, then we will get there. So thank you very much.

Verity: Some great points raised there, Laura, and yes, we're so excited that, Ciaragh, you

say that it's a new role, but it's a role that means so much, I think. It has the potential to make a real impact on the lives of our students, and really improve the student experience. So we're really pleased that you're here, but we're also really pleased that you're here talking to us as well.

Of course, Laura, I know that there are many ways that members of the Disabled Students Group can either get in touch with the committee on Facebook or the forum, there's the email address on our website, oustudents.com, as well. So any issues that come through into yourselves, we take that back up through our Student Leadership Team or through our team itself. So yeah, there's always a way for students to raise any issues that they have sort of informally with us – it kind of helps us get a kind of broader picture of some of the things that are going on out there so that we can really represent the students in a more holistic fashion.

Speaking of, I mean, what we probably could have done at the beginning actually, and I don't know, Ciaragh, I'm sort of putting you on the spot a bit here – this may go one of two ways – but can we maybe put a kind of definition of accessibility together? Because we're talking about accessibility, but like we were saying earlier to Sristi, it means one thing, to Laura, it can mean another, and to you, it must be incredibly huge as an overarching principal. So what does accessibility mean? What's the scope of what you're actually doing?

Ciaragh: Such a good question, Verity. So if I put accessibility in very simple terms, I guess it's how easy something is to use and interact with. That's a very broad brush, simple statement. In terms of the scope of this particular role, and what we're trying to achieve, we are looking at digital accessibility. We're looking at student support and adjustments, our curriculum, our tuition, our assessment, and also staff-facing accessibility. When we talk about accessibility, absolutely, the key priority is ensuring that the essential needs of our disabled students are met. Absolutely – that's a top priority. But accessibility is about solving difficulties that we all face. Accessibility helps everyone have a better experience and an improved experience of interacting with The Open University. Would it be okay if I give an example of what I mean by that?

Verity: Absolutely.

Ciaragh: If we think about transcripts, so we provide transcripts for people who may have hearing impairments, but actually, transcripts help everybody. If you are sitting in a noisy location, in a cafe, or at home, actually transcripts are really useful. If you are tired, you're recovering from an illness, you've got a lot going on and you can't focus, transcripts are really helpful to focus your attention on what you're listening to if you're able to read them as well. So I think we need to understand that accessibility improves the experience for all our students, and that for me is what is so special about accessibility. It really feeds into the heart of the mission of the OU to be open to all.

Verity: That's fantastic. Thank you for that really nice little wrap-up of what is such a complicated thing, a complicated entity I suppose. It's as big as it is. It covers an awful lot of areas that you've just described. For students, what resources or services could they be looking into to kind of help them along the way? I mean, we've also obviously mentioned some of the work that the OU was doing, but where can the students get the help that they require?

Ciaragh: Yeah, absolutely, great question – and again, I apologise, because I may not cover everything on here, because there is so much on offer. So obviously, the students can get in contact with their Student Support team. First and foremost, go there and ask any questions that you may have. But if you look at StudentHome, there is so much advice and resources on StudentHome. So you can get advice with regards to disability support, or even in terms

of cost-of-living support, which is really relevant at this time. There is a section called 'Services for disabled students'. There is a computing guide, and in there there's a really good accessibility section on how to improve some of the accessibility within the modules. Obviously, speak to your tutor. Also on the StudentHome site is lots of resources from the library, there's a section called 'Library resources and helpdesk', and there's some great advice there, including conversations you can have around SensusAccess, which is a product that converts files into different formats. There is Disability Support that you can speak to, so really there is so much out there so people shouldn't feel like they haven't got somewhere to go to. There is always someone who can help. So please do reach out, if you have any issues that you need us to help with.

Verity: Absolutely, it's so important for students to seek those additional measures that they need. There's a lot of students out there who don't realise that there is support for them or that there is something that will make their lives a little bit easier. And of course, sometimes that realisation comes from interacting with their fellow students, joining a group or a club (whatever it might be), speaking to students in their other sort of tutor groups, and just finding out a little bit more about what's on offer out there, and being empowered to seek that help. That's why I might be a little bit biased, but that's why the support groups that we have at the Students Association – so just to go through because we've got two out of the three here, but of course, there's the Disabled Students Group, which Laura is a part of the committee for, the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Group, which Sristi is on the committee for, and then, of course, we've got OU Pride as well, which is our LGBT+ group – they are just such an amazing support network for students who fall under those sorts of protected characteristics.

There are other clubs and societies out there as well, and students who are maybe on the cusp, or new students who have just joined us that are thinking, "Well, I don't know whether... you know". Go find your tribe, you will find people out there who are going through exactly the same thing or have been through the same worries as yourself.

So we've heard a little bit about the Disabled Students Group. Sristi, would you like to tell us a little bit about the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group, and maybe a little bit about why October is such an important month?

Sristi: Absolutely, I would love to. I actually have so much to say in reflection to everything that everybody has put on the table – and especially when you point out that it's important that students get together virtually, even if not physically. We get together somehow and we discuss and share what we've been going through, because the best kind of encouragement is just knowing that somebody else is sharing the same problem that I'm going through.

I would say it's not just the entire year has a lot of ones that are very important – it's especially during summer when it's Pride Month for like ages and ages, and I really love all kinds of activism that go on right there. But right when the year starts to slow down and all the study and the semesters open up, and you just have so many TMAs bombarding you, October is important obviously because it is Black History Month, and we are doing so much in terms of representation, and not really 'heroic' sort of representation – very personal, realised representation because we're going forward and putting out the personal life experiences that we've gone through, and also the people who have inspired us in our lives, who may not be on news every other day, but are somebody from our mom's side of the family, or our postman, or just a random person we met on the grocery store, whose story managed to surprise us and enthral us. Basically, anybody who came up on a mundane day, and who just made our lives a little more inspired.

And we're doing this to our Facebook group, the OU Students Association BAME group. It's a huge name and it's also a Facebook personal group, it's a private group. So you actually

have to come and request us for membership, because we want to make sure it's a safe space for everybody to come together and put in their experiences, reflections, and just anecdotes without any judgement or bias, or any fear of judgement or bias. We're doing it with the other groups and societies, we're going out there and putting out chances of collaboration with several other clubs and groups. We've tried putting it out on Twitter, the different Twitter channels – I'm not sure if we have a personal Twitter channel for that, like for the OU group, because the most active group that we have right now is on Facebook because it's so widely accessible to every person studying from every other country.

Another thing is that we just crossed World Mental Health Day. I think that's the biggest role the OU has played ever since it was founded because the reason why so many people choose to study distance is also the reason that showcases how brave they are to come and face the challenges that have been keeping them from studying full time or part-time. So many people start studying at a later stage in the life when they're conscious of their age, and they don't know whether or not they would be belonging to a physical university where people from very younger age group go, and how it would look upon them – and if they even stand a chance, according to merit or IQ, or just social standards. And it's really good that there's a place where they can really come in their own pace, own comfort, and just be themselves and study at their own time, and then their own capabilities.

Another thing is that the lapse that you get between every module – the choice that you get to just enjoy a break, and just take it lightly and defer your modules – that's a really good opportunity for people to go out there and explore if they want to keep studying in the same stream, or they want to change streams. Basically, the elasticity and how flexible it is. But that, again, is ironically something that provides a sort of lethargy to people who are dealing with depression or anxiety because I personally am somebody who's dealing with depression and anxiety. And because I know I have the chance to defer this, there is always an imposter in my mind that keeps telling me that you have more time to do this. “Why do this now?” But that's where the accessibility and the student support come in.

Another thing that I would really, really like to elaborate on here is the different kinds of social backgrounds that international students come from. I'm based in India, and there's basically nothing that's common with somebody who's learning from Wales or somebody who's learning from Britain. I have friends here who go to a physical university or a physical college, and I really can't discuss my problems and my module – my studying pattern with them. It's really important there are other people who are sharing the same problem, and I get to discuss it with them and have a chat and a laugh.

Based on that, I would say it's important that the Accessibility team working on making it more flexible and more inclusive also works. Obviously, you've been coming up with such great solutions. You also get to come up with a solution that is some sort of validation – that even though I or anybody else studying overseas belongs to a different societal background, it's okay that we don't feel insecure about it. There is enough representation on the main page and the website that just gives you the idea of how you can be one with the OU, even from a different lifestyle.

Another thing – we battle each day with so many things because we don't know how many resources are efficiently available for us – the employability resources. So usually the people who are studying from overseas are from my age group. Currently, there are over 1,000 overseas students studying at the OU across over 150 countries. So we are looking for opportunities that probably give us the experience of inter-cultural interpersonal and crossover work – just working with another country's system – and just not having to go there and face it right now and right here, because we're not ready for it because of all the other things that I have been talking about, but still have some sort of an employability opportunity that we can work with other companies and other organisations.

That's the main reason why I volunteered to work with the OU because I wanted to see how things go there because I already know how things go here. I just want a healthy comparison as to how we can do better, and organisations and companies can be more inclusive. So I think better publicity or better promotion of the employability services and what exactly is feasible for somebody studying overseas, I think that that would be a great add-on deal.

Verity: I think you've raised so many interesting and important things. I think it's really important to talk about these things and to hear those different experiences because I think sometimes we're all guilty, I think sometimes of being in our own little worlds, and just because the OU is global, I think it's so easy sometimes to have those kinds of... you lose your peripheral vision almost and just concentrate on what's in front of you. So it's really important and thank you so much for sharing some of your experiences there. Some of the things you brought up I think are really interesting.

I mean, the one thing that sort of struck me was actually the way you were describing The Open University, and we're talking about accessibility. It's almost like the organisation by its own nature is accessible and it caters to so many different accessible needs. I think that's why trying to improve where we can on the focuses that we have in some of the areas and trying to make it as accessible as possible for our students is so important. Would you agree, Ciaragh?

Ciaragh: Absolutely. That was so brilliant hearing all of that. I was making notes as you were talking. I thought I should mention, and I must admit, I haven't been involved in the implementation of these apps but there are two new OU apps that maybe we should mention because I think they might be helpful. So there is an app called 'The OU Wellbeing' app, which has just been launched for both students and staff. So that's now available. There is also another app called 'Talk Campus', which is an app designed for students, and that's designed for students across the world to be able to talk to each other. So I think some of those – the information that's Sristi has given to us – they might help in some way. But I've taken lots of notes and I'm going to be addressing some of those conversations that we're having now.

Verity: I'm just raising that we're making those connections here as well. Hopefully, this conversation will resonate with so many other students that are out there listening, and really interesting, I think, hearing Sristi's perspective as an international student because you're absolutely right. And talking again there about the importance of support from your fellow students because like you say, it is a unique experience (I'm sure) studying abroad in comparison to other students. But that feeling, Laura – correct me if I'm wrong – that feeling of "I'm a student but I'm not a 'brick uni on-campus' student, you don't know what I'm going through", that's got to be something that resonates with all the students out there.

Laura: Yeah, definitely. I think as well people often can feel quite isolated when they're studying at home. I know that myself, I'm a single parent, I have a health condition that I try to manage. So those things in themselves can be isolating, which was actually one of the reasons why I chose to go to the OU. So I had been to a brick uni in the past, so this is my second degree that I'm studying towards. And I chose the OU because it was accessible. I can sit here with my pyjamas on, in comfort with hot water bottles and my pets at my side, and I can fit it in with my routines and everything. It's great but there is a social element missing from it.

I've been listening to the previous podcasts that went out, and I noted in one of them that Sarah Jones mentioned that when she started studying with the OU, she wasn't really looking for a social life or anything like that. She just wanted to kind of concentrate on her studies. When I had previously gone to a brick uni, I was in my 20s at that point, so social life

was a lot different then than it is now that I'm 40! She said she wasn't looking for a community or anything, but she found one. She was so glad she did, and I felt that too.

I came across the Disabled Students Group just as I was looking for people like me. So I personally suffer from a health condition called endometriosis, which is quite unheard of and there's more sort of awareness being raised about it now, but I was looking for people who had similar sort of health conditions that I could get support and share my journey with. I encountered so much more than that by joining the Disabled Students Group. And I think it's great that actually, just to go back to something that Sristi said as well about mental health, I think the Disabled Students Group can be a tricky name because actually we represent so many different groups of people. So that also encapsulates people who have got disabilities, they've got impairments, they've got health conditions, neuro-divergence aspects.

Basically, we cover so much and we represent so many students, alongside the Black and Asian Minority Ethnic Group and with OU Pride, because I know that they had to rebrand because their name maybe didn't reflect their group as accurately as it could. I think that's something that our group should potentially look at in the future because when I found the Disabled Students Group, I thought, "I don't know if I can join that because I am able-bodied but I find it very difficult at times, and very challenging, living with this condition". I also felt I was worried about the sort of application process to join it as well, thinking "Oh no, is this like when I applied for this benefit or this thing", but actually, it wasn't and I want to put that out there to anybody listening – that everyone is welcome. We all have a range of sort of aspects to our bodies, our minds, our health – you're welcome here. We are so supportive as a community and compassionate with one another. We understand that studying can be such a challenging thing at the best of times, let alone with a condition or anxiety or whatever. So please join us, you're more than welcome. We're not looking for taking off a list of what your health conditions are. Just join us.

Verity: A great plug there for all the groups, I think, because the benefits for the students that join, I think, can be limitless. And you mentioned a couple of them there and particularly around building that community, and I'll ask the same sort of question to Sristi, but why is it important, Laura (do you think) to build that community of students?

Laura: I think it's absolutely essential. I think peer support is a wonderful thing. It's actually something that I've encountered through the OU and also in my personal life as well. Bringing people together with shared experiences is really powerful. You learn so much from one another, and like it's really positive as well teaching each other positive strategies and tips. We get that a lot through Facebook and the forum where people are sharing their study tips, or what to do if they're finding things particularly challenging, and I like that our community often has a very positive spin on things that can take a difficult situation and turn it into a positive. Also, I think as well for the way that our society is changing, and the OU is changing alongside that, where there's a lot of work being put into equality, diversity and inclusion, and I think that it is essential for groups like ours, our two main cohort groups, and all the other clubs and societies that you mentioned, as well, I think it's really important to give us a place, to give us a voice, and to give us an opportunity to learn and grow and develop alongside with one another and alongside the OU. I think it's fantastic.

Verity: Sristi, do you have anything to add there? Or maybe I could rephrase to ask what impact you think the support groups have had on students' experiences?

Sristi: I was actually expecting the same question because it would have been easier to answer.

Verity: I can ask the same question, that's fine.

Sristi: It's ok, I'm glad that you decided to rephrase it because now I get to add what the impact is – I love talking, as you may have noticed! The reason why I think it's important to have a consolidated space for students is to, one, we have so many wonderful resources, but so poor promotion of them that we don't know that they exist. So once you have a consolidated space for students to access the information, it's easier to put it out there and they can come back to it in terms of any accessibility issue and just solve it then and there. And I think the problem with the forums or The Hoot is I wouldn't say it's very orthodox in terms of what kind of people... how used somebody has been with spaces like these because we haven't been. Like people studying from India, or people studying from... I actually made a friend through the OU and she studies in Singapore, she's also studying the same module that I am in. The problem was that she wasn't feeling it very easy to access the spaces. Then when she was there, she was feeling very overwhelmed.

And B, I think the process that as Laura mentioned, as well, I think the process of application is also not so comfortable. Because when I was registering for my module this year, I asked the person specifically if I could somehow add depression as a sort of disability. I wouldn't say disability, just sort of causation, that I could get some more flexibility with studying. She said, "Yeah, of course – I'll send you the declaration form," where I couldn't find the word depression anyway. I didn't know what exactly to do with it, so I just thought of deferring it and just probably mention it, just probably talk to it with my tutor or the Student Support Group later.

I think that those are the two key technical reasons why it's important to have a consolidated space for students to come, and an open space. It shouldn't be a forum that you have to sign in and join. It could just be a space in the form of a news board or a bulletin board where it's just stuck there, like the main updates that we get on our module website on the right-hand side – something of that sort, probably an email group, I have been talking to the other people in the BAME group that we should open an email group as soon as we can. But then again, according to protocols, it's not very handy to get access to people's personal emails. Somehow we'll see how we can make it work – we're gonna have to make it work. And coming to the impact of it -- yes, sure, I'm sorry. Go on.

Verity: No, I was gonna say tell us a little bit about the impact. Absolutely, please.

Sristi: The Facebook group had actually been open before the committee was formed. It had been open for over a year. There was nothing going on there. But when we formed a committee and we sort of started putting content out there, and we started promoting it on a very ground-level, we saw people wanting to join us. Now every week, we get at least two or three people requesting to join the group. I think that that talks a lot about the impact of how well the promotion has been, like just the idea of promoting who we are, what we do, and what is available with us. I'm not talking about the number or the quality, I'm just talking about the sort of change that it brings in the ideology of students studying distanced. You just have these things available, just, "You take a step, and we take a step".

Verity: I can see, Laura, you're chomping at the bit to come in here as well, and I'm guessing maybe you want to talk about the impact of the Disabled Students Group too?

Laura: I was actually just wanting to add to something Sristi was talking about, with engaging with students on different platforms as well. Often, in order to connect and communicate with people, we're relying on Facebook, which I don't personally use for many reasons. So I use the forums with the Disabled Students Group, that's one of my sort of duties that I've undertaken with it. As Sristi is saying, the more that you sort of post, and the more that you engage – and it has to be consistent – then you'll get people coming on board. You'll get more conversions and shared experiences, which is great.

I wonder if Sristi would agree with me here. It's quite a lot of hard work – being on the committee – to constantly create that engagement and those opportunities. There's a lot I don't know about, it would be lovely to have more opportunities to talk with the other groups. It's something that we've been planning to do, but it would be really interesting to share experiences between the committees. And I know the Association have got the... remind me what it is, Verity, the Student Support Reviews Group, is that right?

Verity: The Groups Review, yeah?

Laura: Yeah. So I know that's something that the Association sort of give opportunities for the committees to feed back about. But it would be really lovely if we had the opportunity to communicate and feed back between the different support groups as well because I think we could potentially learn a lot from each other, and find out hopefully that these sorts of things are not just us – it's not just us that's finding this difficult, or it's not just us that are feeling that so many hours and so much work goes in the background. I think sometimes... I mean, the best of everybody has that experience, but it's not always seen how much work actually goes in just to reach people and bring them in and support them. So I'm glad you agreed with that, Sristi. I wonder if there's anything else that you could add to help me out with that?

Sristi: I'm always a great hand at additions – last-minute additions, first-minute additions, love adding! But yeah, I think as Verity mentioned when we first met for the cognition – an introduction into the groups – as she said we do have a budget that we can spend to make things easier and more accessible for the people that we're trying to help. The problem is not how much the budget is, the problem is how to distribute the budget. Because I think it's best if we could do a few workshops with the staff, especially, and just somehow come across efficient budgeting and efficient ways to put in the budget, and bring in people because I'm pretty sure – instead of directly spending the budget on competitions and things like that, obviously as engaging as they are – we could actually put it first into promoting our platforms.

Laura: I agree with that, and I think that the EDI conference was a great opportunity to promote the groups and shared experiences between them, and I would love to be part of more opportunities like that.

Verity: You will be pleased to know that the EDI conference is officially annual, so we will definitely be having another one. You both mentioned there the different platforms, and I think with the groups that we've seen, and Sristi mentioned, there's always people joining. My team will see those memberships come through. We kind of manage the memberships for the groups because it's a boring admin task and you don't want to have to sort that out. Of course, you get into the realms, we mentioned earlier about the pain that GDPR is on everybody, and then the general data protection rules, and the bane of everybody's life that that brings. So it's obviously much easier when we keep that centrally as staff members as opposed to students, but I digress.

We see the numbers of new students coming through or people who have just discovered, and the membership number goes up and up and up every time I have to do the figures. For those that don't know, the groups put a report through to our Student Leadership Team, and I provide the figures for those, and they're going up all the time. It's definitely an instance of "Build it and they will come" because they are. We know that this is something that students want to be a part of because they're still coming and they're still wanting to get involved in various bits and pieces, and it's so difficult, I think, for the groups where you don't know where to be because there are so many platforms out there. You've got Facebook and a lot of people are being turned off of Facebook now for one reason or another. Particularly, the younger generation – Facebook's not a cool, hip place anymore. It is for us oldies.

Laura: We need to get on TikTok, Verity. Get us on TikTok – we'll get our dances down!

Verity: Yeah, but it is. It's TikTok, it was Snapchat for a while, but that's sort of gone away, Instagram, Twitter. I know this will be cut out if I'm not allowed to say it, but the contract is signed, so I think it's fine. The OU Students Association... we've got a deal with a new platform that will be solely for students that will have a... they call it 'single sign-on'. It's essentially where you log into your OU login and you will immediately get access to this new platform. It will be a students-only community space, which we are hoping...

Sristi: And it has nothing to do with Microsoft?

Verity: It has nothing to do with Microsoft! I promise, nothing to do with Microsoft. Because students do struggle, of course, to get into their accounts as it is. This is a separate platform. You get access to the browser and I believe there's an app as well – somebody will correct me on that, I'm sure. It's going to be that space where hopefully we can then have it as a community hub. Rather than trying to be everywhere in so many different spaces, we can concentrate on this one here.

Laura: I think that's fantastic because I know that students – and within modules as well – are desperate to connect with one another for support, and having to use Facebook and WhatsApp. Obviously, the OU has got advice out there asking us not to do that and to use the module forums instead, but there's quite a bit of anxiety and reluctance to use the forums. We do need something more daring and relaxed and informal, but with WhatsApp and Facebook, sometimes just things can get out of hand there and out of control, and it would be great...

Verity: Yes, not a moderated space.

Laura: Well, that's what I was just gonna say. It would be great to have a moderated space, which is why I do love the Disabled Students Group forum and the other support group forums as well because it is moderated, it is within our safe space, but it would be lovely to make those more attractive and modern and pretty and beautiful!

Verity: Well, everybody out there and for the students in the room here, watch this space and hopefully there will be shiny new things coming in the new year. I might get told off for telling you all about it, but I'll take that on the... I just get so excited that there's new things for students that will make their lives easier, so I'll blame it on that.

So we've talked about accessibility, we've talked about Black History Month, we've talked about the groups and what everybody here does and how amazing you all are. Ciaragh, we've not heard from you for a while because we've obviously been talking about the groups but is there anything that you've kind of reflected on that you would like to ask further about? Did you know about the groups before?

Ciaragh: I have just been scribbling so many notes as Laura and Sristi have been talking. It just made me reflect on the fact that we need more of these types of conversations. I was not aware of half of the things that you were talking about, and it was absolutely fascinating.

I just wanted to pick up on a point that Sristi made about a consolidated space. I don't think this covers all of the points that we were talking about, but we do have an Accessibility Hub. So if you type in 'accessibility at the OU', there is an Accessibility Hub, which links to lots of services and resource and support. But what I'm thinking through these conversations, there's more we can do together in this space. There's just so much we can do together, so I'm really excited. We were talking about social media, and I just wanted to mention that the Accessibility and Usability Evaluation Team is planning to create some nice little videos to go

on TikTok and Instagram with regards to accessibility – things like how to use assistive technology and browser settings. So we are starting to try and look at different ways of communicating about accessibility, but I have found this conversation utterly fascinating. Honestly, I've made hundreds of post-it note points as you've all been talking, so thank you so much.

Verity: I'm very happy to bring everybody together, and like you say, we will always gather these conversations and try and get as many students because the Students Association is all about getting that student voice. I think I mentioned earlier but again, we want the OU to listen to the students and to hear what they have to say because we're all here, and we're all trying to do the same job. Really, we're all trying to provide the same function and improve that student experience for those OU students out there. I mean, I haven't even got into really what The Students Association – what me and my team – will do for students as well. But I think there's so many amazing things and topics that we've covered here. And I think these conversations are the more important ones that we need to have. So what I will do is do a Hoot article on some of the things that we've been working on recently just to let everybody know, because I think I'm not sure we're very good at telling all the students out there what we actually get up to, and how we are working behind the scenes for them all.

But I just wanted to say a massive, massive thank you to everybody that's come along today. Laura, Sristi, Ciaragh, you're all amazing. Thank you for everything that you do. Particular thanks, of course, to Laura and Sristi who are wonderful volunteers that do what they do as well as study, and have their own lives which is busy enough as it is. So thank you again. I've been Verity Robinson for the Association's Conversation Station, October edition. Thank you very much for listening and I hope you all have a wonderful, wonderful day. Take care.

Andy: Thanks to Verity, Laura, Sristi and Ciaragh for their inspirational words. We hope that you feel inspired too.

By the way, we're inviting students to take part in our Annual Membership Survey which is open now until Sunday 11 December. As part of the survey, you will be able to enter our prize draw to win some fantastic prizes, including Samsung Galaxy tablets, and a laptop worth up to £900. Just visit oustudents.com/ams to take part.

This has been the Association Conversation Station. It was hosted by Verity Robinson and produced by Andy Evans. Thanks for listening and see you next time.

[END]