

**Andy Evans:** Hi there, welcome to a special edition of the Association Conversation Station, the official podcast of the Open University Students Association. In this episode we'll be looking at Student Voice Week and the ways it can help our students to influence decision making at the Open University. Our host is Lou Robinson, who is our Vice President Engagement, and she's joined by Liz Marr, Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Open University, and our Deputy President, Gareth Jones. Lou, over to you.

**Lou Robinson:** Hello and welcome to this special edition of the Association Conversation Station, celebrating all things Student Voice Week. I'm Lou Robinson. I'm the Vice President Engagement at the Students Association, and I have two fabulous guests joining me today. I have Deputy President, Gareth Jones, and Pro-Vice Chancellor for students, Liz Marr. I'm just going to hand over to them to introduce themselves. Liz.

**Liz Marr:** Good morning, Lou. Good morning, Gareth, and good morning everybody. I'm Liz Marr, Pro-Vice Chancellor for students. I think the clue is in the name. So my responsibility is for all things student facing in the university.

**Gareth Jones:** Good morning, Lou. Good morning, Liz. Good morning everyone. So, as Lou said, I'm Gareth, I'm the Deputy President of the Students Association.

**Lou:** Thank you so much, and thank you for being here today. It's lovely to be joining you both again. So we're going to start by looking back at our recent Student Voice Week. Liz, can you explain to any new students or people who might not be aware what Student Voice Week is and how frequently it takes place?

**Liz:** Yeah, sure. So Student Voice Week is the opportunity for, well, first as an institution and an organization and an association to really focus in on the value of student voice for the university and for students themselves. Actually, it's an all year round thing. So Student Voice we want, and we'll probably touch on this later in our conversation, but Student Voice is something that we need as a university in order that we can focus on what students want and need, how we can make their experience better. Student Voice Week is designed to really focus in on that, to let people know, both the staff of the university as well as students, all the things that are going on in relation to student voice. At the moment, it happens annually. So I've been involved in a few since I took up my role as Pro-Vice Chancellor for students. We would probably like it to be more frequent, but as those of you who attended will probably appreciate there was a lot going on, and that takes a lot of organizing. But we're continuously talking about it and continuously thinking about how we can improve the experience for students and how we can make sure that that focus and that emphasis carries on throughout the whole year.

**Lou:** Fantastic, thank you. Gareth, which sessions did students seem to enjoy the most, and what do you think they took away from the events this year?

**Gareth:** Looking at how many people turned up and how many people interacted at the session, I think there was a clear appetite for finding out how to meet other students. In particular, the community event that was held on the Saturday afternoon was really well attended. Those who've missed out on that session, don't worry

about it, you can still find out more information on our website, [oustudents.com](http://oustudents.com). But I think there was definitely a demonstrated appetite to actually just interact with each other. I think whether that was finding out how to meet face to face or becoming a meter post, or whether that was just interacting online, I think the last couple of years have been particularly difficult for students and I think this was one of the opportunities to really start to get to know each other. In terms of what they took away from the event, I think as the name says of the week, I think the opportunity for students to have their voices heard, so to put across their ideas. I think I'll use one session in particular to highlight this, and that was the Students Association Sustainability event. I popped along to that event and to see how many people will throw in different ideas of how the association can address the issue of sustainability was really encouraging. I know that we use some interactive tools as part of that session and the responses coming in were just phenomenal. I think it just showed that people just wanted to have their say really.

**Lou:** I think sustainability's just really at the forefront of everybody's minds at the moment, and it's been a really popular topic to explore across the association. We've had such a positive response to a volunteer role we put out recently to grow the environmental and sustainability work of the association. We're just so grateful of all that feedback from Student Voice Week. It's been amazing going back through it all with the working group and using that information to really help build our initial policy. We're quite a new group within the association, and we're at very beginning of our sustainability journey. So having the student involvement right from the start and shaping how we set out on that journey is just absolutely amazing. We want to be able to involve students like that the whole way through so that it's a really student-led initiative and it's really an absolute joy to be a part of. I hope that I can share lots more opportunities in the coming months to help students get on board with that as well. So keep an eye out for those. I've really enjoyed being a huge part of Student Voice Week right from the planning when I took up my role on the 1st of August, there's been so much involvement. It's been a part of my week every single week, helping prepare these events, speaking with organizers, chairing the planning group, and just pulling together all those initial ideas. It was just so fantastic to see it in the flesh and running throughout that week and how much everybody got out of it. So it's been a really positive experience and I can't wait to see where it goes next year. So I've got another question for you, Gareth. So as deputy president, what role did you play in the week and did you have any highlights?

**Gareth:** So I played a few, I'd probably say minor roles in comparison to other people. I had the real privilege alongside Liz of delivering the opening address for Student Voice Week. And I think having the people turn up knowing that they were getting ready to engage with ourselves and the OU was really nice to see. I think the highlight for me was actually facilitating the event on the Sunday afternoon, talking about the association's student leadership team priorities. So a lot of work over the last couple of months has taken place with the new student leadership team at the association. And back at the end of October, we agreed our priorities for our term. So actually being able to talk about these and share them publicly was a real highlight for me. I think I do have to say, just being able to attend it. And I think a lot of praise has got to go to people like yourself and the rest of the Student Voice Week planning team for actually organizing such a great week. A particular shout out to our Student Voice Week ambassadors as well, who did such a great job of promoting the

week and just really making sure that people had the opportunity to take part through the awareness that they brought to the event.

**Lou:** Yeah. Thank you for that, Gareth. And I just want to echo that, thank you to those Student Voice ambassadors because they really helped us every step along the way. We met them for the first time in August, and they've been a huge part of that journey, all the way up to Student Voice Week and during the week itself, and we're really grateful of all their time and enthusiasm and energy that they put into that. It was fantastic, so huge thanks to them. I've got another question for Liz. So there were several sessions on ensuring OU Study is accessible. Could you impact what this means? Were there any highlights that stood out for you?

**Liz:** So I was thinking about this question earlier, Lou, because I always put accessibility and inclusion together because I think that being inclusive also makes things accessible. So it's quite a broad thing. I'd struggle to cover it in a few words, but I'll do my best. So for me, accessibility covers a whole range of aspects in relation to access to your teaching materials, being able to make your voice heard, being able to access all the support and information. Because we do such a lot online, it's making sure that that online provision is accessible. So probably what's not visible very much to students is that we have a team of people who are constantly looking at our web resources and our web estate to make sure that they meet all the accessibility guidelines so that we're getting the right color schemes, we're getting the right font sizes, and we're meeting the European regulatory standards as well. But actually, that's not the prime reason. It's a good reason, but the prime reason is because we want everything to be accessible for all our students.

There's also aspects of inclusion. I was also thinking about that because I am currently in Anglesey in North Wales and in the village that I'm in, in one half of the village, there's really good signal, there's really good Wi-Fi, in another part of the village, it's really slow and there's nothing you can do about it. It's the same provider, but it just seems to be that they're not prepared to dig up the roads in all parts of the village to make sure that that access is there. So there's a lot of issues around accessibility for people who live in remote and rural areas, particularly for those who find it difficult to afford the equipment, as well as getting the access to broadband. So there's a lot of work that we do around making sure that there is digital inclusion. Then I think the other thing that I would mention at this point, and this is a highlight for me because, I think it was Darren pull together a session on the inclusive curriculum tool, and what we've done there is to actually employ some students as student adVicers to people who are drawing up the curriculum to use the tool that we've developed and to make sure that all of our curriculum is inclusive in terms of students being able to see themselves in the curriculum and people like them. That's really important because you can't engage with stuff if you can't see yourself in it. So this recruitment of these student adVicers, student consultants as we're calling them, has been a really significant step in making sure that the student voice is there in an inclusive and accessible issue that we need to cover. So that for me is a big highlight. I'll stop there because I could talk about this for a very long time, but there's probably a limit to the podcast time available.

**Lou:** Thank you so much. It's so fascinating to hear about the inclusive tool and the

use of student advisors as well. What I love about the Open University is how they involve student voice in so many different levels. There's so many opportunities like that to get involved in shaping the website, the materials, just how they've adapted Adobe recently as well. I helped test that out. There's just so many opportunities to have your say, and everything's designed with the students in mind, which is wonderful. So I've got a question for you both now, and it's moving on from Student Voice Week to other student voice opportunities that we have. So Student Voice Week obviously provided a spotlight on getting your voice heard, but what we'd like to think about now is what happens for the rest of the year. So how can students get involved going forward? I'll go to Gareth first.

**Gareth:** Thanks, Lou. That's a really great question because like I said, Student Voice Week was a spotlight, but Student Voice happens nearly enough every day, all year round. Some particular things to point out. We've got our student consultations taking place in March. I know planning is already in full swing for that, so I believe there's going to be nine consultations in total with a mix of face-to-face and online. So I think the consultation's actually going around the region. So students have the opportunity to attend and give their feedback on particular topics that which are brought to the consultation meeting. At the association, so at the time that we're recording this, we've got our annual membership survey actually out at the moment, so students can provide feedback on how we're doing things as an association and how we can actually do things better. Very soon some students will start to receive the NSS survey, so the National students Survey. So again, this is a opportunity for students to feedback, but this is done on a national level with hundreds of thousands of students taking part. So there's that opportunity to provide scope on a different level as well for that. I'm sure there's so many other things, and I'm sure Liz can go through them as well. I don't want to steal them all.

**Lou:** Thank you so much, Gareth. I'm sure Liz has got many more to add. Liz.

**Liz:** Actually, I was going to say, I think the critical one at the moment for us is the National Student Survey. So that, as Gareth mentioned, that will be popping into some people's inboxes in the not too distant future. It's important because the Office for Students use it as a guide to ensure that universities are delivering what they should be delivering for students. Interesting, they're introducing two new questions, one around freedom of speech and one around mental health support. So that's on the way. The other I think quite exciting initiative is the survey of students on a module. So we did have, as you know, student experience on a module survey, which is at the end of the year, but we've been piloting three short, sharp surveys on modules, one at the beginning, one mid module, one towards the end so that we can make changes faster if there's something that's not working very well in a module for students. I would encourage everybody to complete those. They don't take very long. It just gives us an idea of the sorts of things that we need to do to make the experience of the curriculum or the assessment or whatever on a particular module better for students.

I was going to mention before that one of the things that I thought was really important in terms of both inclusion and accessibility is the work that we did around the new digital student experience. So this is the replacement for student home that we're working on at the moment. All of the requirements for that were determined by

student panels. So we had student input what was it that they wanted this to look like, what was it that was going to make life easier for them. That all fed into the requirements for the system that's now being built at the moment. So that's another important opportunity. But I'm also extremely conscious that we can ask a lot of students who are working maybe full-time, they've got children they've got to take care of and they're fitting studying around that, and then putting in more effort around contributing to student voice can be just that little bit as too far, particularly if we get a lot of really fantastic volunteers and then we think, "They can do a bit more, they can do a bit more," and that's not fair and it's not right.

So of course, as you know, Lou and Gareth, we've got the new process for appointing reps to project teams or to working groups to make sure that people aren't overwhelmed with what we're asking them to do. So that's an important thing to remember. But lots and lots of opportunities, even just filling in the survey on your module is an opportunity to feed back to us on Student Voice and give us information that we need to make things better for students.

**Gareth:** So before you speak, a second, Lou. I just want to quickly jump in and just mention whenever hang the Liz's reference there. So Liz's reference representative, I think it'd be wrong of me not to actually mention the fact that students can provide their voices on the OU Governance Committee. So we have over a hundred volunteer opportunities available, the students association as part of our relationship with the OU for students to sit on the different governance committees. That goes from the board of studies level where ideas for new modules are thought out and designed, all the way up to senate level, which is the highest academic governance committee at the OU and we're always looking for new volunteers for that. Again, at the time we're recording this podcast, one of the big emphasis that we got is actually getting post-grad research students to actually sit on our new faculty level research committees. So students that are interested in getting their voices heard on a more formal basis, they should really check out our website for any volunteering opportunities that are available there. I'm also conscious, Lou, that we've mentioned two different surveys as part of this conversation and I just want to make sure students understand the difference between them. So is there any chance that you could explain the difference between our annual membership survey and then the NSS survey?

**Lou:** So I think we've sort of covered this already. So the NSS, the National Student Survey is a national student survey. So it involves lots of different universities. A lot of universities use final year students for the OU because of our modular structure. It can be some that are during their level two and some in their level three. It asks a series of questions that are asked to universities across the country, and it gives the university a good overview of everything really. Everything to do with your course, your student experience. There's even questions in there that are association relevant as well. But it's circulated to a section of the student population. It'll be landing very, very shortly as Liz said earlier. So it's really important to look out for that. But that data's really important, because it gives us a perspective of what we're doing well and what we should keep doing well, but also areas where we can look to improve and develop. So that feedback is so important.

Now the annual membership survey comes straight from the student association, so

it's more of a student association based thing. That data is used by us as an association in a very similar way. We need to know what we're doing really well and what we want to carry on doing and also what we need to work on a little bit and develop. The great thing about the annual membership survey is we can actually tweak a lot of the question to our own purposes as well. So we've added a sustainability question which we can then use to kind of help us in developing our sustainability work. So it really informs the association on how we can best work for you, because as an association we work for the students and we're a full compliment of students as a team as well. But we want to make sure that we're representing everyone, not just the people that are there in the elected roles and what they think. We need to hear what you think as well to inform what we do. So they're both very, very important and both a great opportunity to get your voice heard. Fantastic. So we are zooming through these questions today. So I've got a final question for Gareth and Liz. I'd love to know, what do you think will be the future of Student Voice at the Open University and the association? I'm going to go to Liz first.

**Liz:** I'm tempted to say just more of the same because I'm not in favor of fixing something that isn't broken. We can improve it. So I think finding more opportunities for students to express their views and to feed into the things to shape the university, I think, which is what it's all about, and to help us to build the university further for its future. When I say it's not broken, so we don't need to fix it, but it does need more work because we need to reach out to more students, we need to engage more students. As I said earlier, it's really challenging because everybody's got lives and lives get in the way of a lot of things and you have to prioritize and for many it's earn the money, take care of the kids, and then study and then anything after that is a bonus, and occasionally you might like to go for a walk or go on holiday. So I'm very well aware of how challenging this is.

We need to try and find better ways I think, of getting that student voice and maybe also thinking about how we could spread Student Voice Week to Student Voice Year. So I'm not suggesting that we have the same volume of activity, but maybe if we could have more opportunities. One of the things that really struck me from the first event of Student Voice Week when we were asking students what they wanted from it, and the word cloud really threw a community as being really important. Then at the end of the week, asking people what they got from it and what did the word cloud show, community was really important. So I think that ways of generating community, but we can't do that on our own. It's an association thing, it's a university thing, it's a student thing. It's something we do together.

Actually, I was speaking at conference last week. I was in conversation about student experience at a times higher conference and I actually talked about Student Voice Week and about the aspect of community because personally, I really think that's such an important part of the journey as a student being part of a community, an academic community, a community of learners, a community of scholars, a community that you can identify with. So for me, the future of Student Voice is intimately integrated into that notion of community and how we create it. That has to be just through the opportunities for people to share, to come together to speak, to be heard, and to listen as much as we can. I didn't answer your question totally, what's the future? But there's lots of things I think that can happen.

**Lou:** Thank you. I think that's really great, and the community aspect is so important. A lot of the feedback that I was receiving myself at the end of the week was how much people had enjoyed things like the quiz or just engaging with other students or finding opportunities, clubs and societies they can join, where they can mix with like-minded students, because it's so important to have those people there, that understand what you're going through, especially peak TMA time or EMA and exams at the end of the year, to have those people that you're sharing this experience with. It's really nice to be able to connect with people that way. Gareth.

**Gareth:** I think Liz is right. I think it's more of the same. I think if I had to pick a word to summarize it, I'd almost be looking at adapting. I think I've been volunteering now with the association for nearly four years and it's almost unrecognizable, the relationship in the last four years. We've been through a pandemic. Liz has quite rightly mentioned, obviously the value that we place on the volunteer's time. So I think one of the things that's changed over the last couple of years is, our representatives have got into a lot more different meetings. I think that we need to make sure that we're making the best use of their time in the meetings. So looking at the impact they're having, whether they need to be in that meeting and so on. But I think again, the pandemic almost accelerated a shift towards online, which has provided great opportunities as well.

So whilst it's given us the opportunities to be in more meetings, it's also given the opportunity for more volunteers to be involved with the association and involved in Student Voice at the OU. Sometimes in the past where a lot of meetings were held physically on the campus in Milton Keynes, that could have been a barrier for some people taking part. Now that a lot of meetings are held online, they actually provides that opportunity for a more wide range of student voices to be heard as well. Again, as I mentioned, I've only been involved in the association four years and the challenges that we've had, so responding to the pandemic over the last couple of years. It's taught me not to look too far ahead as well. So we now need to look to how we adapt to meet the new challenges coming up. So wherever that is, looking up to the sustainability issues that we need to face, or the cost of living crisis, which is impacting so many students as well. I think it's hard to look too far in the future this, but I think we're on the right track with it in the end.

**Lou:** Definitely. It's really exciting time as well with us having our new priorities out and possible changes that we can make as a fairly new team as well, which is great. Leading on from what both of you said, just those opportunities to get more people involved on a smaller scale, we're always kind of looking at micro volunteering and how we can grow those smaller opportunities so that you are giving as much time as you can, but also leaving some time for yourself as well between all the studying and work and family life as well.

**Gareth:** Lou, so can I just say one last thing?

**Lou:** You may. Yeah.

**Gareth:** That is a massive thanks to Liz, actually. So for those of you who don't know, Liz is actually retiring next year. The work that Liz has done over the last couple of years with the association, with the OU has been immense. Whoever

succeeds Liz in the role of Pro-Vice Chancellor for students has got massive shoes to fill. So I just wanted to really take this opportunity to thank Liz for everything that she's done for OU students.

**Liz:** Thank you, Gareth. You've made me cry. It's been an absolute pleasure to be involved and I'm passionate about the student experience and I always will be and I should be watching from my retirement. But thank you for that.

**Lou:** What a lovely note to end on, and thank you Liz for everything you have done to help students across the university the last years. Gareth as well, thank you for your contribution as a rep for so many years as well. It's very hard as a new person coming in. I feel for the person that's replacing you Liz, because my goodness, they have some big boots to fill. Thank you so much for you both being here today. It's fantastic to hear from you both. You're both so passionate about Student Voice and it's an absolute joy to chat to you some more about it. So thank you so much for being here and for your fantastic contributions all about Student Voice. I really hope that it encourages more students to get involved, be that filling out their module survey, filling out the NSS when that lands, or even just go logging on and doing our annual membership survey, there's so many opportunities to just take a little breather, have a cup of tea, and fill out a quick survey, which really does help. Or if you might want to explore the volunteering opportunities on the association website or reach out to the Student Voice website and see if there's any further opportunities that you might enjoy post Student Voice Week. But thank you so much for both being here today. So I just want to end by saying a final thank you to Liz and Gareth for joining us today. Thank you to everyone for listening and if you are eager to have your student voice heard, if you head to [oustudents.com/ams](http://oustudents.com/ams), you have until the 11th of December, Sunday the 11th of December to fill out our annual membership survey.

**Andy:** Thank you to Lou, Liz, and Gareth for taking part in this special podcast. Oh, and by the way, remember to take part in our annual membership survey. It's still open until Sunday, the 11th of December. As part of the survey, you'll be able to enter our prize draw to win some fantastic prizes, including Samsung Galaxy tablets and a laptop worth up to 900 pounds. Please visit [oustudents.com/ams](http://oustudents.com/ams). This has been the Association Conversation Station. It was hosted by Lou Robinson and produced by Andy Evans. Thanks for listening and see you next time.