

These Minutes will remain subject to approval until the next meeting of the SLT



SLT 10/07/M

STUDENT LEADERSHIP TEAM (SLT) 7 October 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Student Leadership Team (SLT) held via the online space from 29 September – 6 Oct 2023 and via MS Teams on the 7 October 2023.

PRESENT

Margaret Greenaway – President (Chair)
Gareth Jones – Deputy President
Natalie Baker – Vice President Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)
Michael Bryan – Vice President Administration
Kelly Coker - Vice President Student Representation
Nichola Connolly – Faculty Representative for Wellbeing, Education & Lang. Studies (WELS)
Samantha Ferguson – Area Rep for Scotland
Cazz Flowers – Vice President Community
Isabelle Hoyet - Area Rep for International Students
Stephen Hughes – Ireland Representative (until 1pm)
Kaz Murphy – Faculty Representative for Open & Access
Nigel Patterson – Faculty Representative for Science, Tech, Engineering & Maths (STEM)
Matt Porterfield – Students Member of the OU Council
Pauline Robinson – Faculty Representative for Business & Law (FBL)
Mark Walker – Vice President Student Welfare

IN ATTENDANCE

Gabriella Cull – Head of Executive Support & Staff Welfare (live tweeting)
Beth Metcalf – Chief Executive
Ciara Lineham – Media and Admin Assistant
Alison Lunn - Associate Director: Finance & Compliance
Thomas Mitchell – Projects Manager (post lunch, Workshop)
Samantha Smeraglia – Executive Support Administrator (minutes)
Jessica Smith – Associate Director: Projects & Services

OBSERVER

Guarang Ghare – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Group Chair

INTRODUCTORY ITEMS

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

The President welcomed the SLT to the October meeting. She gave a special welcome to the new members of SLT attending their first SLT meeting since being appointed. She also gave special thanks to the observers who were in attendance.

ABSENCES

Jack Flaherty - Faculty Rep for Arts and Social Sciences
Eli London - VP Academic Student Voice (apologies received)
Dan Moloney – Chief Operating Officer (apologies received)
Lou Robinson – Vice President Engagement (apologies received)
Elizabeth Scully – England Representative (apologies received)
Raed Townsend – Wales Representative

C. MINUTES

C.1 The minutes from the July SLT meeting were approved on 17 July 2023, via the Teams space.

D. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES NOT COVERED ELSEWHERE ON THE AGENDA

D.1 None raised.

SECTION A: ITEMS FOR INFORMATION **Taken online between 29 September – 6 October 2023**

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|----|---|--------------------|
| 1. | RECEIVED: REPORT OF AFFILIATED SOCIETIES | SLT 10/07/1 |
| 2. | RECEIVED: EDI & STUDENT WELFARE UPDATE | SLT 10/07/2 |
| 3. | RECEIVED: REPORT OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES | SLT 10/07/3 |

SECTION B: ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION **Taken at the meeting on Saturday 7 October 2023**

4. GROUP UPDATES

4.1 VP EDI, provided an update on the DSG group. The DSG are still doing online meet-ups, which appear to be better attended now that the DSG have started to send more

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regular communications out about the meetings. The DSG's Freshers session ran successfully and was also well attended.

- 4.2 In June there will be a small social media campaign surrounding the DSGs 20th year anniversary. The SLT were asked to help share this campaign far and wide.
- 4.3 The next big event for the group will be the opening of elections for the Chair position. Once the Chair is elected, the DSG will then move to co-opting the new committee members.
- 4.4 The Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Group Chair provided an in-depth update on the Group. The Vice-Chair reported that the Freshers event was only attended by two people, which was much lower than expected. She was also concerned at the lack of representation of people from the Black demographic throughout Freshers, or across the range of committees.
- 4.5 The committee has published a Hoot article, that explains the significance of Black History Month in October. The Group will celebrate with publication of an interview recorded with one of the most successful OU graduates, to highlight their experience of how their OU degree helped them to prosper both academically and professionally.
- 4.6 The Group will be conducting their first drop-in session on Saturday 7 October and hope to conduct it on the 7th of each month. The session is joint with OU Pride, to celebrate the 35th anniversary of "National Coming Out Day".
- 4.7 The Group Secretary and moderator's positions remain unoccupied, so the Group Co-options page will need to be readvertised. The hope is to change the Group name, in line with UK government guidelines.

To celebrate more Asian and East Asian events, the committee has decided to run drop-in sessions and publish articles celebrating key Asian events, such as Diwali, and Eid as well as publish articles highlighting the significance of celebrating these events. The OU's Careers and Employability Services (OU CES) consultant has contacted the Group to discuss community-specific employment opportunities across the UK, so the Group plan to publish more and share these work opportunities.

- 4.8 SLT thanked Gaurang for the update. Staff support was offered to help with Group campaigns, graphics and online events.

5. STUDENT FACING ISSUES

- 5.1 To help close the loop on actions that come out of the student issues, the President outlined the protocol going forward; at each meeting there will be an update on the progress of the previous actions from the previously discussed student issues. Each action will also be assigned an owner who will take responsibility for the action, to ensure even distribution of the workload and accountability. The owner of each action will then update the rest of the SLT at the consecutive meeting on the progress of the action and feedback anything relevant. It was emphasised to the SLT that if you become an owner of an action, staff support will be provided.

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- 5.2 The issues discussed at the previous meeting were: consistency of tutors on modules, varying access to tutorials with your own tutor; and the language used in TMAs and EMAs. The actions that came out of these discussions are outlined below:

ACTIONS: Consistency of tutors on a module:

- Gather evidence on different experiences in the faculties
- Gather evidence on Tutor perspectives and insights
- Gather evidence on guidance/instructions given by faculties
- Share comms with students around avenues for support

ACTIONS: Access to tutorials with your own tutor:

- Seek involvement in the new process which is being developed by the OU
- Explore 'How to be an OU student' page on the website to help manage expectations including reminding students that they don't always have to attend tutorials with their tutor, and may find other tutors' delivery style more suited to them

ACTIONS: Languages used in TMA/EMAs:

- The SLT to push the OU to adopt the Plain English Policy

5.3 Consistency of tutors on a module

The STEM and WELS Faculty Reps agreed at the July meeting to get involved with the actions arising. They confirmed that the STEM Rep will examine the staff side of the issue and the WELS Rep will look at the student-facing side.

- 5.4 **ACTION:** Progress will be reported back at the February 2024 SLT.

- 5.5 The Chair further clarified that in discussions with Ian Pickup, PVC-Students, there is work being done as part of Tuition and Assessment Reform (TAR) to improve consistency of the delivery of tuition in line with the University's aims to improve student outcomes, the student experience and reduce inequalities.

5.6 Access to tutorials with your own tutor

ACTION: Exploring the 'How to be an OU student' page on the website was taken up by VP EDI, since it feeds into other work she is involved in, relating to OU web pages.

5.7 Language used in TMAs/EMAs

The action that came out of July's discussion was to push the OU to adopt the plain English policy. The SLT were made aware that the adoption of this policy was part of the Student Policy Working Group's remit, where they will be looking at all student policies and ensuring that every document is written in plain English. Additional measures would include adding a glossary and removing acronyms.

- 5.8 STEM Rep raised that in maths, statistics and the physical sciences, there are lots of terms used that are borrowed from everyday language but they do not mean the same thing. Such terms are required for TMAs and defined in the course materials, but it can still be confusing for students, given they might be everyday terms with a very different technical sense.

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- 5.9 **ACTION:** It was agreed that this issue falls into the work that the Accessibility Standards Working group cover; ensuring that texts for TMAs and EMAs are accessible to neurodiverse students. It also links with some of the other actions that came out of student issues in the April meeting.
- 5.10 The top two student issues voted for this meeting, via the student issues reporting tool were:
- Incorrect module descriptions on the website
 - Last minute errata changes on assignments
- 5.11 Incorrect Module descriptions on website
The issue raised was that descriptions for modules such as M813 are very specific that the specialist software will not work on anything other than a PC, forcing students to buy a laptop. The issue is complicated when some module descriptions list a Mac as acceptable however some resources or help guides are then designed exclusively for Windows. Some module descriptions also mention there are tutorials, when there are not. Misleading descriptions could leave the OU open to accusations of false advertising.
- 5.12 **ACTION:** STEM and FBL Reps volunteered ownership initially, with the first step to find out if it is the faculty, the module team or the OU's marketing team that write the descriptions. The STEM Rep and VP Academic Student Voice were allocated ownership after an initial meeting with the Deputy-President.
- 5.13 Last minute errata changes on assignments
This also covers assignment case studies. As distance learners, it is more likely that OU students need to study ahead due to health, work or other commitments. If students have already answered the TMA questions, last minute changes may mean that answers need to be rewritten, resulting in demotivated students (due to the work already put in). It was reported that there have been instances of incorrect questions, lack of data sheets, missing links in module material and even units being added.
- 5.14 SLT discussed that consideration should be given to a "No detriment" policy, so there is something in place that means an automatic extension will be granted if a mistake is not corrected until a certain point.
- 5.15 SLT recognised that the scale of the issue needs to be assessed first, before outlining the actions required to tackle the issue. The issue needs to be investigated further to see if there are any trends such as it affecting only certain faculties or the older modules.
- 5.16 **ACTION:** President and Faculty Rep FBL volunteered ownership of this issue, with staff support from the Head of Volunteering and the Representation team.

6. PRIORITY AREAS UPDATES

- 6.1 At the last meeting, each Priority Area steering team confirmed their projects and goals for the upcoming year. The focus for this meeting was to now confirm who will be responsible for the progress of each project and goal identified. The SLT were

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asked to each express their interest and 'sponsor' a different project goal within the priority areas. With support from staff and other SLT, the sponsor will monitor a project and report back, so that SLT can receive an update on each area.

- 6.2 The first priority area to be discussed was **EDI & Accessibility**. Projects and goals for this priority area included:
- 1) EDI newsletter
 - 2) Assessments for Neurodivergent students
 - 3) Plan for general accessibility training
 - 4) Plan for supporting trans students
 - 5) Plan for supporting Neurodivergent students
 - 6) Present at conferences on EDI/Distance-learning issues
- 6.3 EDI newsletter. VP EDI confirmed that the groups newsletter is due to be finalised on 20 September and is planned for distribution by October 2023.
- 6.4 Assessments for Neurodivergent students. SLT proposed combining this and project 5 above, "Plan for supporting Neurodivergent students".
- 6.5 Plan for general accessibility training. Projects Officer (EDI) has already put this in place for when new volunteers join and is currently working on incorporating feedback from the first co-optees to go through the training.
- 6.6 **ACTION:** This will be moved from face-to-face training to an online resource, that can be accessed by volunteers at any time.
- 6.7 Plan for supporting trans students. VP EDI provided an update on a trans inclusion statement for the Association. After discussions with trans students, they have also chosen to trial staying a part of OU Pride. Work is also ongoing with the Trans Staff network.
- 6.8 **ACTION:** The Association will continue to work with the Trans network and any outcomes from the trial.
- 6.9 Present at conferences on EDI/Distance-learning issues. The Deputy President has compiled a list of potential events and will update, as well as engage with people with a potential interest as opportunities come in.
- 6.10 The next priority area to be discussed was **Association Awareness**.
- 6.11 Projects and goals set out previously for this priority area include:
- 1) Strategic signposting from frequently visited exam papers pages
 - 2) Highlight articles from SLT meetings
 - 3) Ensure that the SLT reporting page is signposted appropriately throughout the site
 - 4) Encourage stakeholders to engage with posts to "feed the algorithm"
 - 5) Refresh of "The Hoot" and its content categories
 - 6) Awareness plans due by July 2024 (end of SLT's term)
 - 7) Build Tutor awards and volunteer recognition events into Association cyclical calendar
- 6.12 SLT were updated on behalf of VP Engagement and the Head of Digi-comms.

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- 6.13 Strategic signposting from frequently visited exam papers pages. Some cross promotion work started during summer, such as volunteer recruitments and the co-option process, so students who visited the exam page were shown redirection links to some of the opportunities available.
- 6.14 Highlight articles from SLT meetings. A new approach will be trialled post-meeting, based on the live tweets from SLT. It will also be combined in one collective Hoot article, so students can find out what was discussed.
- 6.15 Ensure that the SLT reporting page is signposted throughout the site, where appropriate. A Hoot article is planned, to signpost to SLT's reporting page. There will also be additional news items redirecting to the reporting page.
- 6.16 Encourage stakeholders to engage with posts to "feed the algorithm". Digi-comms staff will analyse the activity of the algorithm that we use and ways in which the data can help to increase activity. EDI/Digicomms guidance is being created to facilitate social media takeovers, for when some of our groups take over pages at selected times of the year, or as part of a student voice week.
- 6.17 Refresh of "The Hoot" and its content categories. There will be an explicit visual link to the Association with the logo and links back to oustudents.com. The Hoot content creator roles are being created to encourage more student-led content and include features such as module reviews to improve traffic. There is also a plan to establish a way to measure the split between student submitted and other Hoot content, by January 2024.
- 6.18 Awareness plans due by July 2024 (end of SLT's term). To improve the Association's presence in Academic areas, a few ways to do so were identified; automatic inclusion of an Association information slide at ALs first welcome or tutorials; updating our presence on study or module web-pages, module forums and social media and finally being present on the study app. SLT were made aware that the PVC students suggested including information around becoming an automatic member of the Association at initial communications. A 4-minute video snapshot was trialled at the Wales induction to c.750 students.
- 6.19 **ACTION:** The Academic awareness project will be followed up with each Faculty to ensure consistency across all faculties.
- 6.20 **ACTION:** A separate strand will address the Onboarding work.
- 6.21 Build Tutor awards and volunteer recognition events into Association cyclical calendar
The SLT agreed to review this as part of the afternoon workshop on the cyclical calendar.
- 6.22 **ACTION:** SLT will retain oversight of how the two events might fit in the calendar and whether it makes sense to run them together or not.
- 6.23 The next priority area discussed was **Representation**, with an update from the Deputy President.

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- 6.24 Projects set out or this priority area included:
1. Make changes to Senate Reference Group
 2. Campaign on Student Finance
 3. Engage with students around General Election
 4. See Confidential minutes
- 6.25 Make changes to Senate Reference Group. The group will now be called the Student Reference Group to delineate from the Senate Reference group and an associate lecture Centre Reference Group. All student reps can self-nominate to be a part of student Senate Reference Group and invitations will be sent to the groups to ask them to nominate a representative. Applications are open at the moment for non-student reps who would like to be a member of the Student Reference Group.
- 6.26 OU funding has been removed, so all Student Reference Group meetings will take place online. The Association will host an annual training event, in the New Year, for all Student Reference Group members to attend. A wider group of students can feed in to the six students that attend Senate, so they can have a more representative view. People can contribute to the meetings by commenting on the forums and staff papers for discussion, via the link: [OUSA-BUSINESS: Student Senate reference Group \(SSRG\) 2023-2025 \(open.ac.uk\)](#)
- 6.27 **ACTION:** VP Student Representation will work with the new chair of SRG and update SLT.
- 6.28 Campaign on Student Finance. SLT are currently in the midst of a campaign seeking financial parity between the nations, plus part-time and full-time students, with a particular emphasis on distance learners). This includes parity in the nations maintenance loans for childcare and parent learning, adult dependence and parent learning allowance.
- 6.29 An open letter from the Association, including over 50 signatories from 27 student unions, was forwarded to the DofE and Ministers. The Labour shadow response was more open to the idea and discussions, so to counter the government claim that “there is no issue”, the next step will be to gather evidence about this and develop a manifesto for distance-learning students.
- 6.30 **ACTION:** Next steps will be to gather case studies and quantitative data to support the campaign.
- 6.31 Engage with students around General Election The work above will also feed into the manifesto work that is being done, to continually highlight the financial and other issues. A lifelong learning manifesto has been a long-term project, covering topics from digital poverty to accessibility. Now the work is focused on the anticipated next General Election and topics such as voter registration and voter ID will tie in with the big campaign planned on these by the NUS. Once finalised, there is an opportunity to share the manifesto with 2000+ potential candidates, based on our direct engagement with candidates in all 650 constituencies.

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6.32 The next step will be to look at other areas the manifesto can be shared.

6.33 THIS ITEM IS CONFIDENTIAL AND NOT TO BE SHARED

Please see Confidential Minutes.

6.34 **ACTION:** Please see Confidential Minutes.

6.35 The final priority area discussed was **Communities and Engagement.**

6.36 Projects set out or this priority area included:

1. Illuminate student chat platform development and pilot
2. Isolation Awareness Month
3. Community events to be focused on faculty/school/theme
4. Celebrate long-standing Clubs and Societies

6.37 Illuminate student chat platform development and pilot. The Associate Director: Projects & Services updated the SLT on behalf of VP Community, who is the current sponsor of the operational work to date. The intention is to replace outdated and unwieldy forums with a safer, moderated space to connect student to student. The issue of single sign-on, which would allow students to sign-in with their OU credentials has caused delay. Once single sign-on has been resolved, the plan is to first trial a launch with the Association's Groups, incorporate any feedback and then share wider.

6.38 Isolation Awareness Month. The Project lead on the staff side is Projects Officer (Student Community) with Faculty Rep for Open & Access as SLT sponsor. This project is to build awareness about some of the ways that the Students Association can help you feel more connected and improve sense of belonging. Our research shows that isolation is a big problem for many students, while they study long-distance with the OU.

6.39 Community events to be focused on faculty/school/theme. Previous events have tended to focus on areas and we are keen to focus on more topic-based themes. The Freshers Environment and Sustainability event last week was joined by some fantastic academics and students were highly engaged in the topic. Meet the tutor and DSG themed drop-ins have also proved popular.

6.40 Celebrate long-standing Clubs and Societies. SLT discussed the need to expand the project to a campaign raising awareness of how to set up a club, how students can get involved and finding ways to work with existing societies to get more people into some of them. There are a couple of societies that are only a few people away from folding, so the focus needs to be more about getting people in to the clubs as they offer a great way to connect with students with similar interests. It would help to clarify the difference between a club and a society and how being less formalised than the societies can make it more challenging to promote club events or help them to access grants to run things for students.

6.41 SLT discussed how best to inject new membership for the sustainability of old clubs and societies.

SECTION C: CYCLICAL CALENDAR AND PROJECTS WORKSHOP

7. This section of the meeting was given over to a workshop, to look at major events happening each month and the potential to build a conference into this so that the calendar interlinks. The idea is quality over quantity of events, with the aim of improving flow and making sense to students, rather than being a series of one-off events. Discussions were meaningful and thorough amongst the SLT.

SECTION D: ITEMS TO NOTE

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

8.1 OU / Jo Phoenix tribunal

Attendees discussed and the Deputy President shared guidance on the SLT seeing or receiving any negative comments in online spaces:

“As an Association, our primary concern is to ensure students know how they can access the support they need. It is not appropriate for us to comment on the details of the case. We’ll be publishing a short statement on our website tomorrow (now published) which outlines this.”

- 8.2 **ACTION:** The Association will keep a close eye on our social media and forum spaces, and the SLT were asked to flag anything concerning to the Deputy President, Head of Digi-Comms, or the Head of EDI. All media enquiries should be directed to the Chief Executive, President, or Chair of the Board of Trustees.

8.3 International student queries

Area Rep for International Students noted that she has received some reports from international students who have problems with their studies and wanted to know where to direct these queries. The Deputy President clarified that it is important for students to log their own issues with the OU, so that the OU are aware there are issues present (although it can be difficult for these students to contact someone at the OU). Student Leaders do not have capacity to take on individual issues, so students should be encouraged to log their own issues with the University.

- 8.4 The SLT noted that Laura Marulanda-Carter is finishing her role as VP Education and has done a fantastic job. The SLT collectively thanked her for all of her hard work.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

- 9.1 The next meeting will take place **face-to-face** in the Milton Keynes area, over the weekend of the **2 – 4 February 2024**.

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Item in the Minutes	Action Log
5.4	<u>Consistency of tutors on a module:</u> WELS Rep to examine the staff side of the issue and STEM Rep to look at the student-facing side, then report back.
5.6	<u>Consistency of tutors on a module:</u> Explore relevance of information on the OU's 'How to be an OU student" web-page.
5.9	<u>Language used in TMAs/EMAs</u> This issue falls under the work that the Accessibility Standards Working group cover, ensuring texts for TMA and EMAs are accessible to neurodiverse students.
5.12	<u>Incorrect Module descriptions on website</u> To establish if it is the faculty, the module team or the OU's marketing team that write the descriptions.
5.16	<u>Last minute errata changes on assignments</u> Scale of the issue needs to be assessed first, before outlining the actions required to tackle the issue. To identify any trends such as the issue affecting only certain faculties or the older modules.
6.6	<u>Plan for general accessibility training</u> Will move from face-to-face training to an online resource, that can be accessed by volunteers at any time.
6.8	<u>Plan for supporting trans students</u> Continue to work with the Trans network and any outcomes from the Jo Phoenix trial.
6.19	Association Awareness priority - <u>Awareness plans due by July 2024</u> All Faculty Reps will work on the project to improve the Association's presence in Academic areas, to ensure consistency across all faculties.
6.20	<u>Awareness plans due by July 2024</u> Onboarding work for automatic inclusion of an Association information slide or 4-minute video snapshot at ALs first welcome, for PVC and student inductions.
6.22	<u>Build Tutor awards and volunteer recognition events into Association cyclical calendar</u> SLT will retain oversight of how the two events might fit in the calendar and whether it makes sense to run them together or not.
6.27	Representation priority - <u>Make changes to Senate Reference Group</u> VP Student Rep will become chair of SRG and update SLT on Group and student invitations.

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6.30	<u>Campaign on Student Finance</u> Next steps are to gather case studies and quantitative data to support the campaign.
6.34	See CONFIDENTIAL Minutes
8.2	<u>OU / Jo Phoenix tribunal</u> An Association statement has been posted and SLT will flag any negative comments in online spaces, forums, or social media. All media enquiries should be directed to senior management.