Student Leadership Team Position Statements

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Introduction

The Open SU Student Leadership Team (SLT) regularly hear from students about the issues that are affecting them. This can take place in a variety of formats, including:

- Direct student interaction – including through forums, social media and emails
- The Open SU Student Issues page
- Discussions at meetings

They are also OU students themselves, and experience some of the same challenges directly. In conjunction with their agreed priority areas, the SLT have identified four key areas that they wish to provide their position on. These are:

1. The reintroduction of face-to-face exams
2. Graduation ceremonies
3. The use of generative artificial intelligence leading to academic misconduct issues
4. Changes to welfare support and the impact on OU students

The Reintroduction Face-to-Face Exams

Summary of the Issue

The SLT recognises growing concerns about maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity at the Open University (OU). Academic integrity is essential to protect the value of OU qualifications, and any compromise could lead to their devaluation. The SLT notes a significant increase in academic misconduct

investigations in recent years, which has prompted the OU to explore alternative assessment methods. These include remote invigilation for online exams and, in some cases, discussions about reintroducing face-to-face examinations for certain disciplines.

<u>SLT Position Statement on the Reintroduction of Face-to-Face Exams</u>

While Open SU is not opposed to face-to-face exams in principle, the SLT has outlined several key considerations and concerns:

1. **Accessibility**

   o If face-to-face exams are reintroduced, they must be fully accessible. This includes:

      - Venues that accommodate students with disabilities.

      - Locations within reasonable distance for all students, including international learners.

      - Scheduling that reflects the diverse circumstances of OU students. This includes those with work and/or caring responsibilities.

2. **Alternative Options for Disabled Students**

   o Students with declared disabilities that prevent attendance at a designated venue must be offered alternative assessment options.

3. **Relevance and Skills-Based Assessment**

   o Face-to-face exams should reflect current societal and educational contexts. They should go beyond recall and memorisation and focus on assessing skills and the application of knowledge.

4. **Not the Default Option**

   o Face-to-face exams should not automatically become the standard assessment method. Decisions should consider the requirements of each academic discipline and explore alternative approaches where appropriate.

Graduation Ceremonies

<u>Summary of the Issue</u>

Graduation ceremonies are an important milestone for students, offering the opportunity to celebrate their achievements and reflect on their educational

journey. However, each year, many students report being unable to attend a ceremony due to several barriers:

- **Limited availability**: Desired dates or venues often become fully booked shortly after registration opens, indicating demand exceeds capacity. This has a particular impact on students whose results are delayed.
- **Reduced locations**: Over recent years, the number of graduation venues has decreased, requiring students to travel further to attend.
- **Associated costs**: While student attendance is free, costs for guest tickets, photography, gown hire, and travel can make participation expensive.
- **Timing and accessibility**: Ceremony dates and times often conflict with the responsibilities of OU students, many of whom are parents, carers, or working professionals.

<u>SLT Position Statement on Graduation Ceremonies</u>

Open SU believes the following considerations should shape the OU's approach to graduation ceremonies:

1. **Increase Capacity**
   The OU should expand the number of spaces available at graduation ceremonies to meet demonstrated student demand.
2. **Broaden Venue Options**
   While current venues are in popular, central locations, the OU should explore a wider range of venues and operate them on a rotational basis. This may mean students wait longer for their preferred venue but will improve accessibility overall.
3. **Reintroduce Online Graduations**
   The OU should assess interest and feasibility for reinstating online graduation ceremonies. These were popular during the COVID-19 pandemic and offered a lower-cost, more flexible option that is currently unavailable.

The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Leading to Academic Misconduct Issues

<u>Summary of the Issue</u>

The rapid growth in the availability and use of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) presents significant challenges for society, particularly within the higher education sector. Understanding and managing the impact of Gen AI on teaching, learning, and assessment is proving complex.

While concerns about Gen AI use are understandable, it is clear that Gen AI is now a widely used tool. The challenge for the Open University (OU) is to incorporate Gen

AI in a way that is ethical, reflects its role in society and the workplace, and still ensures authentic assessment.

The rise in Gen AI awareness and usage has also coincided with an increase in academic misconduct referrals at the OU. This is concerning and requires action, but the OU should consider its approach to both Gen AI and its definition of academic misconduct when developing responses.

<u>SLT Position Statement on Gen AI and Academic Misconduct</u>

Open SU believes the OU should address this issue through the following principles:

1. **Differentiate Between Skills Gaps and Deliberate Cheating**
   The OU should distinguish between students who make mistakes and those who intentionally use Gen AI to replace their own work. Where skills gaps are identified, the focus should be on teaching correct methodology rather than punitive measures.
2. **Embrace AI in Teaching and Learning**
   AI is becoming an essential skill for workplaces and society. The OU should explore ways to integrate Gen AI into teaching and assessment, sustainably and ethically, preparing students for real-world contexts.
3. **Provide Regularly Updated Guidance**
   Gen AI is evolving rapidly. Guidance should be updated frequently to reflect developments and presented in a clear, accessible format, ensuring students know where to find it.
4. **Ensure Adequate Resourcing for Academic Misconduct Investigations**
   The OU must allocate sufficient resources to handle academic misconduct investigations promptly, including additional capacity during peak periods and timely resolution for in-year assessments.

Changes to Welfare Support and the Impact on OU Students

<u>Summary of the Issue</u>

Distance learning students at the Open University (OU) face significant challenges when changes are made to welfare benefits, capability assessments, and support services (such as Motability). All these inevitably impact their ability to study effectively. Many OU students rely on welfare benefits or disability-related support to manage living costs, mobility, and accessibility needs while pursuing their education. They should be supported and encouraged to study.

Recent changes to welfare systems and stricter capability assessments have created uncertainty and financial strain for some students. These changes can lead to:

- **Loss or reduction of benefits**, affecting students' ability to afford essential living expenses and study-related costs.

- **Impact on mobility support**, such as Motability schemes, which are crucial for students with disabilities who need reliable transport to attend tutorials, exams, or graduation ceremonies.

- **Increased stress and administrative burden**, as students navigate complex assessments and eligibility reviews while balancing study commitments.

- **Risk of exclusion**, where students with disabilities or health conditions may find it harder to access education if support is withdrawn or reduced.

These challenges highlight the need for the OU and relevant agencies to ensure that distance learners receive adequate guidance, advocacy, and flexibility in study arrangements when welfare or support systems change.

SLT Position Statement on Welfare Benefits, Capability Assessments, and Support for Distance Learning Students

Open SU believes the OU should adopt the following principles and actions:

1. **Advocacy and Representation**
   The OU should actively advocate for the needs of distance learning students in discussions with government and relevant agencies, ensuring that policy changes do not disadvantage students who rely on welfare or disability support.

2. **Clear Guidance and Communication**
   The OU should provide clear, accessible information to students about how changes to welfare benefits or capability assessments may affect them, including signposting to external support and advice services.

3. **Flexible Study Options**
   Where students experience disruption due to changes in benefits or support, the OU should offer flexible study arrangements, such as extensions, deferments, or alternative assessment options, to minimise the impact on academic progress.

4. **Support for Mobility and Accessibility**
   The OU should work to ensure that students who lose access to schemes like Motability are not excluded from in-person opportunities by exploring alternative transport support or remote participation options.

5. **Monitoring and Feedback**
   The OU should regularly monitor the impact of welfare and support changes

on students and engage with the Open SU Student Leadership Team to identify emerging issues and co-create solutions.