



The Open
University



Students
ASSOCIATION



THE HOOT

Student Newsletter

Issue 3 - June 2023

A copy of the latest newsletter will be posted to your facility every six months. For enquiries or comments, please ask your learning facilitator to get in touch with us at oustudents-media@open.ac.uk

Welcome to your newsletter!

Welcome to our fabulous third edition of The Hoot Newsletter. This edition is incredibly exciting with more bespoke articles, more input from you, our wonderful readers, and improved formatting and readability based on your feedback and the advice of the British Dyslexia Association you took the time to signpost us to.

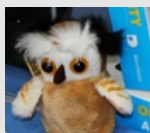
You'll find the results of our latest Annual Membership Survey as well as the priorities of our new Student Leadership Team, ideas of where to seek support and a range of articles from students navigating their own OU journeys.

We hope you enjoy this new edition, which is also available in colour on Virtual Campus. As always, we welcome you to send in any feedback, articles, and commentary via your education contact.

The back pages of this issue offer an insight into OU study and are ideal to share with those who may be inspired to follow in your footsteps.

Best of luck with your continuing studies and/or your summer results.

Vice President Engagement



The Hoot History

- The Hoot was founded in 2019 after OU students' hunger for content outgrew the Association's previous print and PDF magazine.
- Over 600 online articles have since been published.
- The name 'The Hoot' was inspired by the adorable owl we sell in the Shop.
- The Hoot's fourth birthday was celebrated on 8 April 2023.

Want to write an article for the next edition?

Find out how on the back cover!

Contents

- | | |
|---|---|
| 2 Student Leadership Team (SLT) priorities | 9 Focusing time and energy |
| 3 Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) survey | 11 Studying with bipolar, and mental health tips |
| 4 Studying in prison | 13 Platforms & paint recycling with social enterprise Seagulls |
| 5 How to access help and support during your studies | 15 Digital Communications team |
| 6 Environment and Sustainability Working Group | 16 Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) & Student Welfare team |
| 7 The Children's Book Project | 17 Start studying at the OU |

Student Leadership Team priorities

The OU Students Association Student Leadership Team are elected to represent the student views and develop initiatives that improve the experience of all OU students. These initiatives have been organised into four priorities and our Deputy President has written this article to introduce them to you.

When standing for election, each candidate puts forward a set of manifesto pledges that they hope to deliver, if elected, during their two-year term as part of the Student Leadership Team. However, the challenge was how to bring together 19 sets of ideas and pledges into a deliverable set of actions for the team to collaborate on as a group.

This was an important task, as to be effective as a team it is important that we are working cohesively and as a collective. Therefore, we decided to look at all of the manifesto ideas together and group those with similar themes, along with any new ideas we had developed since the elections.

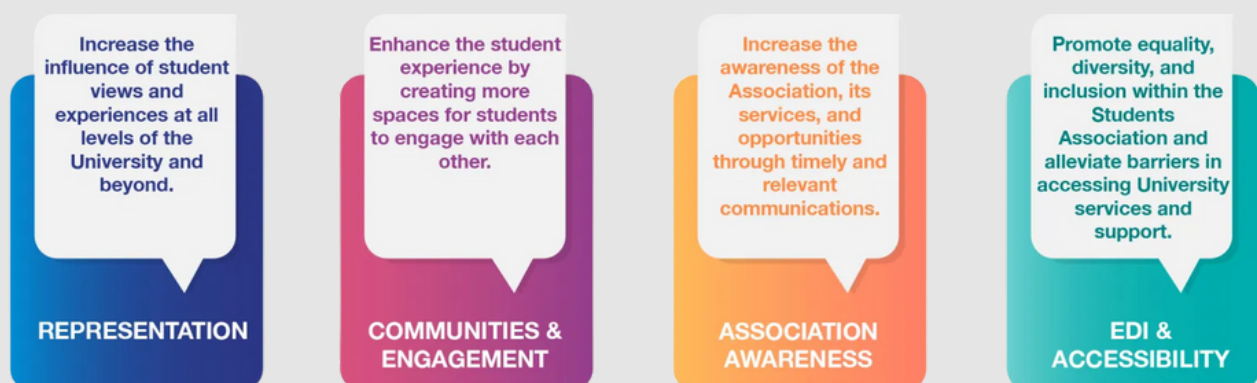
Ultimately, we ended up with four different strands, in which individual ideas then sat. These were:

1. Representation
2. Communities & Engagement
3. Association Awareness
4. Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) & Accessibility

Whilst having these strands helped us with organising and coordinating initiatives, we also developed supporting statements of intent to better demonstrate to our members what we hoped to achieve with this work. You can see this in the graphic below.

With the work to group the ideas together completed, we have now established smaller working groups with members of the Student Leadership Team and Students Association staff team in each. These groups develop the initial ideas into project ideas and present them to the wider Student Leadership Team for approval.

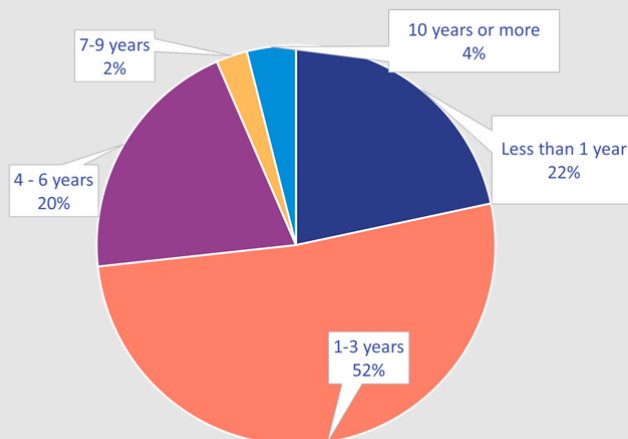
Once designed and approved, the real work begins on delivering the manifesto pledges the team was elected upon. Whilst it might seem like this has taken some time to get up and running, we wanted to make sure that we had firm foundations in place to support this work. We are also conscious that our time in the role is two years, and that this is a marathon and not a sprint.



SiSE survey highlights

In July 2022, the OU Students Association sent its Annual Membership Survey to all registered OU students currently in a secure environment. Following this, we shared a few highlights in the November edition of The Hoot, and because we found the results so interesting we wanted to share some more findings with you.

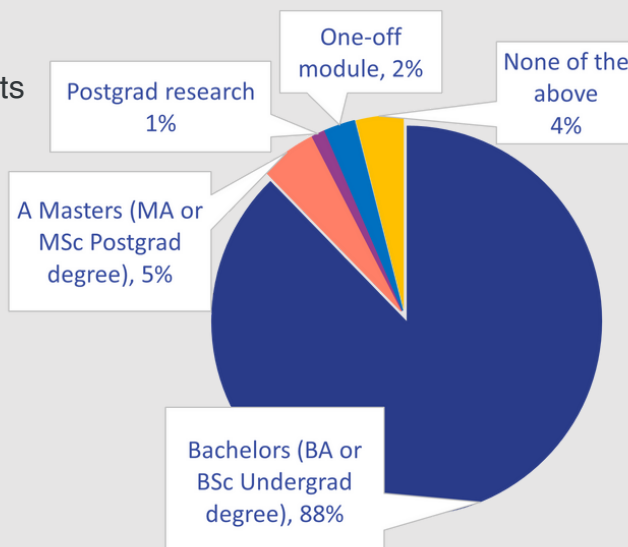
SISE Qn2: How long have you studied with The OU?



At 52%, the majority of Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) have studied for between one and three years, compared to 40% of the wider student population, as found in the Annual Membership Survey (AMS).

Far fewer SiSE have studied for less than a year at 22%, compared with 39% of the wider student body.

SISE Qn3: What are you studying towards?



Question 3 shows that the vast majority of SiSE are studying towards a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) undergraduate degree, which is around 9% higher than the wider student body.

Notably, 5% of SiSE are undertaking a Masters degree, whereas just 2% of the students who completed the wider student AMS are studying at postgraduate level.

What sort of topics would you like to see covered in future Hoot Student Newsletter editions? These could be related to your studies, skills-building, or personal interest.

Skills building and inspirational quotes as well as book recommendations.

How to make the best use of the SiSE team when in prison.

Success stories of those whom were once in secure environments; and what they went on to do.

Environmental science prospects and work-related opportunities.

Studying in prison

We always welcome your input into this newsletter and invite you to contribute articles to share with others. Here, one reader has done just that, sharing their experience of studying while in prison.

It is tough enough working on an OU degree while attempting to balance work, family and other distractions. Imagine trying to do it in the noisy environment of a prison, with limited access to IT, zero opportunity to research on the internet, no contact with other students on the course and inconsistent support from the prison authorities. As I prepare to take my finals of my BA (Hons) degree in Languages (French and Spanish) after six years of trials and tribulation, the OU Students Association have kindly allowed me to share my experiences with you.

Actually, hats off to the Association who have been brilliant in the final two years of the course by providing an invaluable library research facility for those of us in prison and other secure environments. My tutors, too, have all been professional, helpful and totally non-judgemental. My comments on the support from the OU itself are largely unprintable! I have been constantly frustrated by their lack of response.

We all study in our own way. I have always been an early morning learner, which helps in this environment as my learning period from 05:30 till 08:00 is about the only time



Photo: Stock image by congerdesign from Pixabay

of the day you are guaranteed peace and quiet. The time slot is nothing to do with the fact that I am approaching 70 years of age!

Getting books and other reference material is also far from easy, especially as there are huge problems in secure establishments with paper impregnated with spice being a common channel for drugs to be sent in. As always, the rules they bring in to deal with that issue impacts on the innocents who are just trying to improve themselves and wouldn't ever abuse an illegal substance.

I was supposed to have an official presentation for my Diploma of Higher Education, but, for some reason, that never happened. If I pass my finals in the next month or so, I will probably wait until my release in October next year before attending a graduation ceremony.

Studying in prison has been unbelievably tough but really, really rewarding.

This student has reached out to the Students Association to support them with the issues they have raised regarding communications and support. If you are experiencing issues impacting your studies, please contact the EDI and Student Welfare Team at the Association:

**Email: oustudents-support@open.ac.uk
Post: PO Box 397, Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes MK7 6BE**

How you can access help and support during your studies

We think it is important for OU students studying in secure environments to understand how to request study support, and to be aware of where a query goes and how it reaches the relevant person at The Open University.

When you start studying at the OU you are allocated a tutor at the University. Within your facility you will be able to contact a staff member from the Education Department with any queries relating to your course at the OU.

On the right side of this page we have created a flow chart so you can visualise the process of your query reaching The Open University.

Funding through the Open University Students Educational Trust (Ouset)

Ouset is the student charity affiliated with the Open University Students Association, with the aim of helping students achieve their academic goals through funding, based on our criteria for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Funds raised by students are used to benefit students in financial hardship, for assistance with costs which relate directly to OU study.

Ouset funding is reserved for those students who have exhausted other potential sources of financial support and those that meet our criteria.

For information on the criteria please speak to your allocated facility staff member in the Education Department.

You share your query with a staff member in the Education Department at your facility.



Education Department staff member shares this query with your allocated OU tutor via email.



Tutor receives query and responds to the Education Department staff member.



Education Department staff member will provide you with the answer to your query.

The Environment and Sustainability Working Group

This working group was set up to recognise environmental and sustainability-related issues. Here they provide an update on the progress they are making.



What we do

As environmental and sustainability issues become a central concern for the world, the Students Association is no different and we now have a designated working group. This working group was set up to recognise environmental and sustainability-related issues, discuss what the Association and University can improve on, create events and campaigns, and so much more!

Who we are

The group was formed in September 2022. Currently, there is a mixture of both staff and student representatives who sit on this group and we have been very excited to announce that we have had six new members join the in the last few months, who have been successfully appointed in the student volunteer roles.

When we meet

The group meets monthly for a two hour meeting. We manage to squeeze a lot of discussion into these meetings, and most recently we have been developing our action plan.

Action Plan

Our action plan has four main strands – Impact, Engagement, Policy and The University. We have recently been looking at what we can do in the short-term, medium-term and long-term in relation to the following questions:

1. How can we reduce and mitigate the impact the Students Association has on environmental sustainability through its working practices? (Impact)
2. What can we do to get students to engage in, think about and contribute to our goals for this group, and environmental sustainability more broadly? (Engagement)
3. What is the Students Association's policy on Environmental Sustainability? (Policy)
4. What is the Association's position on the OU's actions relating to environmental sustainability? (The University)

We are really excited to work on the action plan and have come up with some great ideas and initiatives to help achieve the objectives. We're hoping to provide an ongoing programme of events, initiatives, campaigns and projects that will give students and staff the opportunity to learn more about environmental sustainability and the ways to improve it.

Sharing books with Children's Book Project

Tuesday, 14 February was International Book Giving Day, and to recognise it we collected books for the Children's Book Project. This charity redistributes books to children who need them, for example through food banks and prisons.

Book ownership for children is really important. The National Literacy Trust released their latest annual report on children's reading habits and access to reading material in August 2022, based on data from over 10,000 children. It makes for compelling reading, including that:

- Around one in five do not own a single book of their own. The reason is often, but not always, poverty.
- 78% of the children who own a book at home enjoy reading, compared to 66% of children who do not own a book.
- 8% say they never read at all, and just 52% read every day. 75% enjoy reading whereas just 5% don't at all.
- 92% said that there are lots of things they want to read.
- 81% of children with a book at home rate themselves as good at reading, compared to 70% of children who do not own one. Children who own a book are six times more likely to read above the level expected of them for their age.
- In terms of mental health, 64% of the children said that reading helps them relax, and 64% said that it makes them feel happy. 46% said that it makes them feel better when they are sad, and 36% said it helps them to deal with their problems.

The statistics show that as well as being influential on reading ability, book ownership is also important for reading confidence and enjoyment, and crucially, for their mental health. It also shows they want to read. Books are powerful!

The Children's Book Project collect pre-loved children's books, clean and check them, and if in good enough condition redistribute them to children who need them. They understand the power of books and get them into the hands of children who need them most in a compassionate, thoughtful and inspiring way. The work they do relates well to the business of the OU (i.e. education), so in the run up to International Book Giving Day, I decided to start a collection for the charity.

On campus in Milton Keynes, collection boxes were placed in different places and publicised, to maximise engagement. As reuse is the second rung in the waste hierarchy, the Go Green Centre, who advise on all things environmental, also agreed to host a collection box. The Association's elected Student Leadership Team (SLT) were also invited to contribute children's books at their quarterly meeting in Milton Keynes.

The engagement has been brilliant, touching and inspiring. There have been books quietly dropped off by people I didn't meet, while others have shared nice stories about the favourite books of their now older children that they were happy to pass on. We also had some brand new books donated too.

We had a great response, collecting 544 books, and have decided to continue to offer to collect books for the charity on an ongoing trial basis.

Children's Book Project work in prisons

As well as gifting through schools, community groups and food banks, the Children's Book Project also facilitates the gifting of books to children through prisons. To get more information, I met online with 'K', their Head of Corporate Partnerships.

The idea came about by chance during a meeting with Serco, exploring the possibility of their staff contributing some voluntary time to the charity. But the discussion moved on to the possibility of gifting books to the children of inmates in Serco prisons. K described how supportive Serco have been, donating a retired vehicle that prisoners helped repurpose into a mobile bookshop, now affectionately named Betsy. Piloting at HMP Ashfield, the scheme has now extended to four more prisons with many more in the pipeline, and an ambition to offer the service in all prisons.

Through the scheme, a parent or relative in prison can gift a child up to ten books a year. The charity and prisons facilitate this in three ways, depending on circumstances. For parents whose children are not able to visit them, bookshops are set up inside the prison. Prisoners can come and talk with a volunteer about the child they want to send a book to, such as their interests and how well they currently read. When they've made their selection, they can write a letter to be posted to the child with the book.



'Betsy'. Photo: Children's Book Project

Where children are able to visit in person, pop-up bookshops are set up in visiting halls with a sign encouraging children and parents to 'Have a look, take a book'. The visiting children can take their parent over to browse and discuss the books together, to perhaps sit on Dad's knee and to read a story together. This bonding time can be invaluable, and about as close to normal family time as is possible in the setting. The child can then take the book home.

Thirdly, a shelf of donated books may be set up in the prison library, where the parent can choose a book to send home to children on other occasions such as birthdays or at Christmas, when the charity will also send in Christmas themed books.

To date, 9,690 books have been gifted through prisons. The charity are working on ways to measure their impacts, but they can already see the value that the gifting program produces. As well as aiding children's literacy, additional benefits are significant. K tells me that: "When prisoners go inside, their instinctive reaction is to cut themselves off from their family because of feelings of shame or because they think their family will be better off without them, or as a coping mechanism. But actually, we know that the converse is true and that both prisoner and child can have better outcomes if the family connections stay, and with prisoners much less likely to reoffend". With limited opportunities for this connection to be nurtured while in prison, the books act as a facilitator to keep lines of communication and bonding opportunities open.

To contact the Children's Book Project, ask an appropriate officer to find out more at: www.childrensbookproject.co.uk

Understanding yourself:

Focusing your time and energy

This article, written by the Personal Learning Advice (PLA) Service, tells you about focusing your time and energy to help support you when you're studying and you've got lots of things to do and lots to think about!

In this article we would like to introduce to you an exercise called the 'Circle of Control, Influence and Concern' to support you when you're studying.

Circles of control, influence and concern

We can often spend many minutes, hours or even days dwelling upon things we can't control. An excessive focus on the factors we can't control, while neglecting to think about the things we are able to change, can lead to feeling overwhelmed. We might feel out of control and have decreased confidence – all of which can impact our studies.

If you want to regain control in your studies or life and feel more effective, it can help to look at the situation or issue and break things down into what you can or can't control.

Stephen Covey's 'Circle of Concern, Circle of Influence' looks at where we focus our time and energy and can help us to work on the things we can do something about, rather than worry or be concerned about the things we can't influence or control. It's important not to expect that we can control things that aren't actually totally under our control – often far easier said than done!



Photo: Stock image by Pexels from Pixabay

So how does it work...

- The circle of control represents everything we have total control over.
- The circle of influence represents everything we have some control of or we can affect things somehow.
- The circle of concern represents everything else that troubles or concerns us that we don't have any, or have very little control or influence over.

You can use this approach to help you when:

- You feel anxious or start getting worried over external events, to help you change your mindset to focus on things within your control.
- You feel overwhelmed, to start identifying your focus and priorities. It will allow you to stay focused on what's important to you.
- You experience anything unplanned or uncontrollable, to simply focus on what you can influence and control.

There are a number of benefits to being able to identify and concentrate on your circle of control. It can support you to adopt helpful beliefs and attitudes about events and take positive action in pursuit of a worthwhile goal as well as:

- Increasing your focus on your thoughts, words and actions.
- Increasing your productivity by limiting your distractions.
- Developing your self-confidence.

- Developing a positive mind-set.
- Improving your mental well-being.

Here's a short activity to help you...

Step one

Make a list of all the 'things' that occupy your mind. These could be things you are thinking about, things you have to do, worries or problems.

Step two

Have a look at the diagram and information at the bottom of the page.

Step three

Drawing the diagram out, look at your list and then place each item in one of the three areas. In the centre if you have control, in the inner ring if you have some control or influence, and in the outer ring of the circle if you have no control or influence.

Step four

Reflect on where you have placed all the things on your list and ask yourself the following questions:

- What is interesting or surprising about what you see?
- Do any of your circles have noticeably more or fewer items in them compared to the others?
- Which were easiest to think of answers for?
- Which circles do you tend to think about the most when you're feeling concerned or overwhelmed?
- How has this exercise helped you?
- Is there anything in the 'influence' circle/ring you can move to the 'control' circle/ring?
- What will you do differently now as a result of completing this exercise?
- What action(s) will you take in the next couple of days?

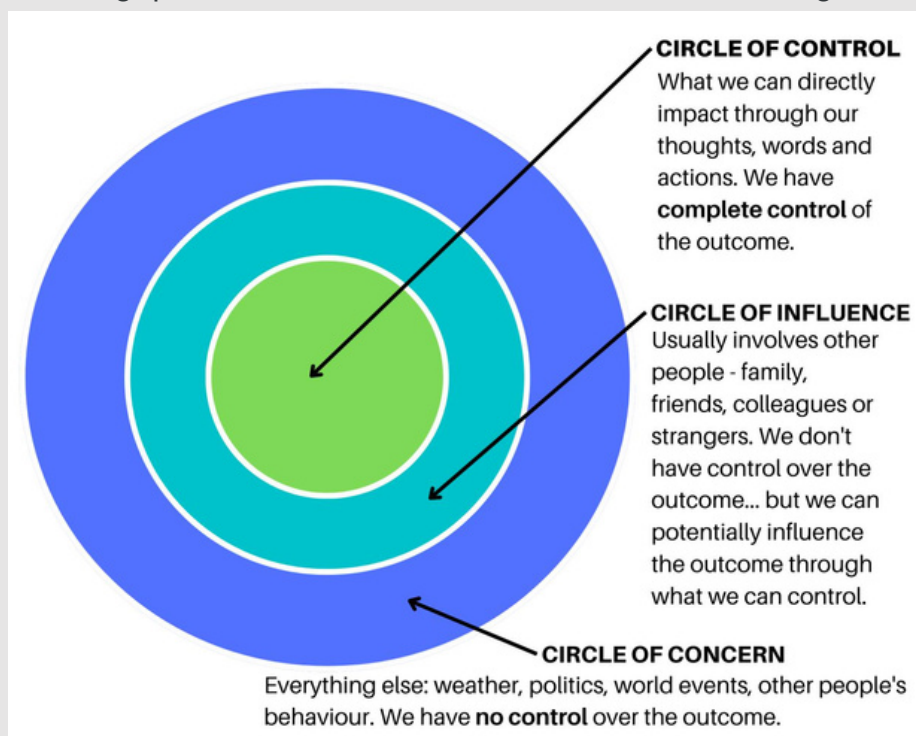
You can use this as a visual self-coaching tool to support your studies and to see where you're spending your time and energy.

You don't have to try to ignore the items in your outer circle (circle of concern), instead acknowledge them and then focus on the

items in your inner circle (circle of control), where you could be spending your time most productively.

This tool can be applied to almost any situation or feeling you're experiencing.

It can be an empowering way to manage your thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions.



Stephen Covey's Circles of Concern, Influence and Control

Studying with bipolar, and mental health tips while studying

I decided to keep my mind active by applying for my first OU module in 2015, and have embraced my student journey since, knowing it supports my wellbeing.

This article was written by one of our students at The Open University.

Content warning: suicide.

About me

I have Bipolar Type 2 (known as manic depression), a hearing impairment, Myers-Irlen Syndrome and various other complex health issues that affect both my mobility and physical dexterity. I have been a wheelchair user for five years and, as my physical health deteriorated, I found myself disorientated in my life.

I decided to keep my mind active by applying for my first OU module in 2015, and have embraced my student journey since, knowing it supports my wellbeing and self-esteem. I started volunteering for the OU Students Association within a few months of studying, which has also been a life-changing and rewarding aspect of my study experience.

Bipolar doesn't define me

I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder Type 2 in my early twenties and had a difficult experience coming to terms with the diagnosis. There was a stigma attached to mental health illnesses over three decades ago, and as a young mum, I was fearful of complications that would affect my family.

Medication and therapy treatments were not effective at first, and I was prescribed different types of medication (antidepressants and mood stabilisers); but it took years of trial and error before the right combination made a difference to my

symptoms. I was offered various therapy treatments over the years, including group bipolar meetings, one-on-one therapy sessions, psychiatric appointments, hospital stays and community visits from an array of psychiatric nurses.

Finally, by my late thirties, I felt I had found balance in my life, and learned to live with my mental health in a more effective way. When my bipolar was exacerbated, I learned to recognise triggers or patterns of behaviour that I needed to manage. I worked hard to replace them with positive behaviour, which gave me the tools to deal with flare-ups. I have transferred those skills and knowledge into my daily life and have found ways to live a normal life.

Bipolar and me

Hypomania – this could cause manic episodes, including elevated moods, intense irritability, and impulsive behaviour. When coupled with racing thoughts (overthinking things), insomnia, and hyperactivity, it causes a major lack of focus and affects the way a person functions.

Depression – this can occur soon after hypomania subsides, or much later. It may be a repeating cycle back and forth between hypomania and depression without breaks, or it can include long periods of normal mood between hypomania episodes. The depressive

mood with Bipolar Type 2 is like clinical depression, with low energy, reduced activity, feelings of low well-being and lack of self-worth.

Bipolar moods and behaviours can last weeks or even months, and when left untreated, can lead to psychosis or suicidal feelings.

I have learnt to live with bipolar, by understanding triggers and how they affect me, continually working on ways to deal with symptoms to minimise the episodes. I use the hyperactivity stage to study; the new information feeds my brain and slows my racing thoughts.

My depression and hypermania stages are less frequent or elevated. I haven't suffered flare-ups of psychosis or suicidal feelings for fifteen years. However, I am aware that I need to continue to take care of my mental health, and I will always be a 'work in progress', but bipolar does not define me.

Living with mental health issues

My coping mechanism, for both hypomania and depression, is to be proactive within the community and as a family member, keeping myself busy. This makes me feel valued, proactive and useful.

I also have a good support network of healthcare professionals, friends, and family. This helps me manage any depressive mood swings.

Studying with bipolar

When my physical health was deteriorating, I wanted to challenge myself and decided to study at The Open University. This helped keep my mind busy and it hasn't been a disappointment. I found new ways to

approach my studies to support good mental health and wellbeing and my love of learning has transferred over to my OU student journey.

Looking after your mental health while studying

- Set small goals

Smaller goals are easier to achieve. It allows you to pace yourself through the work, makes studying feel less overwhelming and can boost motivation when you see your to-do list get shorter as you tick each task.

- Planning ahead

I plan my weekly work and try to allocate study sessions (movable if necessary, depending on mental health lows or episodes). I use to-do lists to keep me motivated and I can see what I am achieving one day at a time.

- Contingency planning

I try to work at least a week or two ahead of the module calendar to give me leeway if my mental health or health issues cause me to feel unwell. This means I am less likely to fall behind with my studies.

I also work through break weeks in the module study calendar, which builds extra flexibility into my studies, in case I need to take extra time out later, to look after myself.

If you have low mental health, talk to someone; it could be a friend or family member, or an organisation such as Samaritans. You may also have access to a Samaritans Listener. These are prisoners trained by Samaritans who can provide confidential support to fellow prisoners.

Platforms and paint recycling at Seagulls

While listening to the BBC podcast 'The Big Green Money Show', I heard an interview with a co-founder of Seagulls, a social enterprise that recycles waste paint into new. When 'R', an ex-offender who runs courses and mixes colours was mentioned, I knew I had to try to get an interview for this edition of The Hoot.

After a few friendly emails back and forth with the Seagulls co-founder, I finally got to meet 'R' online in early February. R appears in various marketing videos for Seagulls, and even featured in The Guardian in 2019. Seagulls too feels like an organisation on the up and hugely relevant, winning best Environmental Social Enterprise in Yorkshire & Humber 2022, and of course, being interviewed by Dragon's Den star Deborah Meaden for her BBC podcast. Seagulls take those half-empty cans of paint we tend to have after a DIY job and blends them into new, full tins; everything from emulsion and gloss to decking and masonry paints. Diverted from landfill, through Seagulls these paints get to be painted onto someone else's walls, skirting boards or decking. Seagulls colour match too, so if you want 'Kermit the Frog Green' walls, Seagulls can make it for you.

R has been with Seagulls since 2007. Over this time he's been involved in everything, from paint mixing and running decorating courses for the public, to mentoring and guiding new employees and young people coming to Seagulls via Youth offending teams and Social Services. He describes this variation and the opportunities he has to help people as the reason he's lasted so long at Seagulls, "and still have that energy and enthusiasm".

R went into prison at the age of 23, before he'd even heard of Seagulls, and having served four years of his six year sentence,

was released at 27. Having never worked before, he wanted to learn a trade: "All I knew was a life of crime", he tells me, "I thought: I need to change this when I get out". On day release from open prison towards the end of his sentence he was able to study decorating by attending building college; "a privilege that can be given to you, and one that can be taken away". He describes this as one of the "platforms" he was given to make the change he'd decided to make. Platforms come up regularly in my discussion with R, both as recognition for the opportunities others have given to him, while simultaneously giving himself due credit for hunting them out and making the most of them.

R tells me none of it was easy; opportunities were limited and "there was a lot of politics involved". In open prison, he wrote over 100 letters asking for an opportunity and received just two replies, both of which kindly wished him good luck but offered no role. "As soon as they hear you're from prison that's it, game over", he tells me. So he decided that if letters weren't working, he'd have to get himself out into the world as best he could so that people could meet him, rather than just reading his words. Understandably, this wasn't simple: "There were very few opportunities back then. I had to make my own doors. It wasn't easy", he says. While at college and still in open prison, he was eventually able to find a volunteering

opportunity with an organisation called Canopy. Finally, Canopy introduced him to Seagulls, where he's been ever since.

These days, R uses his considerable communication and interpersonal skills as a means to connect with people from all backgrounds. Anyone can attend his courses or have paint mixed at Seagulls, and in the cost of living crisis they have seen more people who want to save money by learning DIY skills. I find R simultaneously inspirational, motivated, down to earth and funny, and I can quickly see how these qualities result in fun and highly effective courses. I ask whether teaching is something that has come naturally to him: "I've had to learn my basics, but I've always been a people type of person, always interested in people and talking; I can talk the arse off a donkey!", he tells me with a grin. "It's showing humility, being compassionate and just being a nice person. If you create a good energy around yourself, you project that energy onto others. If you're bitter about everything, you're going to have that aura about you". (At this point I mention a video I'd seen of him talking about positivity, where he says: "You can't be a sauerkraut!". With a big laugh he says: "I like that one... It's true!")

R is passionate about his teaching: "I feel strongly about it and I feel I can help a lot of people", particularly when it comes to using decorating as "a platform [that word again, but this time used for R offering others a platform] to help others". He uses his background to his advantage, as a means to communicate with people who perhaps wouldn't respond were it not for his own lived experiences. "Words are powerful, but with the people I come into contact with it's more about setting a good example,

especially with the young people I meet, who may have been lost for some time. They might be dabbling in drugs or are with the wrong people, and they don't see light at the end of the tunnel. With my back story, I see that slowly I'm getting into them because I've been there, worn the t-shirt."

R lives by his words and by his experience, recognising the value in the opportunities he worked so hard for, and seeing that others may also need that type of hand-up (he dislikes the word 'handouts'). "What seagulls did for me is they gave me a platform to grow and to mature, but they didn't do it for me; you've got to make your own path. It's giving people a chance, see the potential in people and nurturing that potential so it can grow."

Asked if he has any advice for anyone reading his story, who may be studying or thinking of studying he tells me: "Believe in yourself and in your ability. Don't give up. Doors will be closed in front of you. I had to fight for it. It wasn't easy. If you believe in whatever you want to do, whether it be building or studying, go for it. Go all out."



Photo: Seagulls

What does the Students Association do?

The Digital Communications team

We want OU students living in secure environments to understand more about the OU Students Association, the work we do and all the ways we help students. Over the next few editions of this newsletter, we will be giving you a spotlight overview of each of our Association teams, with the Digital Communications team up first.



The Digital Communications or 'Digi Comms' team are responsible for passing along information from the Association to students. They communicate in a variety of ways to make sure the Association's messages reach as many students as possible. Information is shared along various channels including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and on our website.

One of the major projects the Digi Comms team worked on in the last year was the launch of a new website which was an exciting new development for the Association, as it enabled us to build a totally new site to reflect our values, who we are and what we offer. The Digi Comms team's Optimisation Officer describes the website as our shop window displaying what the Association has to offer. It is therefore important for the Digi Comms team to keep this tidy and in order so that students are able to navigate it with ease.

Another site we manage is The Hoot, our online student magazine that is alive with new articles from students, Association staff and OU staff too. The Hoot covers so

many topics and students can write and submit articles about absolutely anything that interests them. If you are reading this and thinking that you would like to submit an article for The Hoot, you absolutely can! Simply handwrite your article on a piece of paper and send it to us using the pre-paid envelope that was sent to your facility, or email it to oustudents-media@open.ac.uk. We would love to read what you write and other students would too.

The Digi Comms team also do lots of important work collaborating with other teams collecting content (at graduation ceremonies, Freshers, Student Leadership Team events and more), promoting awareness days and managing the Association brand.

Based on feedback from the last issue, we know that readers wanted to learn more about the Students Association and what our amazing teams do for students. We hope that this article has given you an insight into the work done by the Digital Communications team. In the next article in this edition you can read about another of our teams: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) & Student Welfare.



Who are the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) & Student Welfare team?

We are a passionate team that strives to empower and support students. We do this by working with volunteers, delivering vital services and raising awareness of barriers and challenges experienced by students. To give you an insight into our work, here's a summary of what we've worked on over the last six months.

Within the EDI and Student Welfare team, we run an Individual Representation service for students who have an existing complaint. The service was set up in 2021 as a pilot, and following the success of the pilot, the service will be continued. Due to the growing demand for support, a new Student Advisor was recruited.

Before this article went to print, the team had processed 442 Library Study Requests.

We have worked collaboratively with the Digital Communications team and Vice President Engagement to produce this Newsletter, The Hoot for Students in Secure Environments (SiSE).

A big part of our work includes supporting volunteers to run Student Support Groups. The Groups include a Disabled Students Group, an LGBTQIA+ Group called OU Pride and a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Students Group. There has been a project to review the way these Groups operate, to ensure they are running as effectively as possible for the benefit of students. Two of the Groups have just been through elections and therefore the team has been busy training new volunteers.

Tuesday, 14 February was International Book Giving Day, and to celebrate it we collected 544 books for the Children's Book Project.

February was also when several members of our team attended a kick-off meeting with colleagues from each team at the OU Students Association to discuss Accessibility standards for students. Our aim is to ensure that the Association provides equal access to all students, especially those who may face barriers when getting involved in Association activities.



On Thursday, 9 March University Mental Health Day (UMHD) was celebrated across the UK bringing the university community together to make mental health a university-wide priority and create ongoing change to the future of student and staff mental health. We got involved by running a Mindapples session to discuss with students how the environment can affect our minds, and we also covered positive steps that can be taken to stay healthy and happy. In addition to this, we shared tips submitted by staff and students to help with saving money as the cost of living increases! We also signposted students to resources that might help them with their studies or any challenges they may be facing.

Want to study with The Open University?

The Open University has changed the lives of more than 2 million people, bringing them new knowledge, skills, interests and inspiration, and helping them achieve goals. If you have picked up this newsletter but are not a student then read on, as the SiSE (Students in Secure Environments) team write about where to start.

Why The 'Open' University?

The reason we're called The Open University is that we are open to people based on their potential rather than their prior qualifications. You simply need the determination to succeed. Whatever the change you want to make, whatever your goal, it starts here.

Where to start - Access modules

If you haven't studied at university level before, or it's been a long time since you last studied, you may prefer to begin with an Access module. They are specially designed to help you find out what it's like to study with the OU, get a taste of a subject area, develop your study skills, and build your confidence. Evidence indicates that students who start with an Access module are more likely to be successful when they advance to Stage 1 of their undergraduate qualification.

There are three Access module options:

- Arts and languages
- Science, technology and maths
- Psychology, social science and wellbeing

These modules are 30 weeks long, starting in February, May or October. All study materials are provided, including books and printed materials. Most students study for about nine hours a week and work is assessed through short written assignments and other smaller pieces of assessed work. There is no exam.

Funding Access modules

There are various methods of funding, but in England and Wales you may be able to study an Access module free of charge through special funding arrangements with the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET). Although there are no OU entry requirements, PET requires that you have Level 2 Literacy and in some cases Level 2 Numeracy before funding Higher Education studies. In Northern Ireland or Scotland your OU national office will be able to advise on the funding available in your nation.

Undergraduate qualifications

If you feel confident about going straight into one of our undergraduate qualifications then you can choose from a broad range of subject areas:

- Arts and Humanities
- Business and Management
- Environment
- Health and Social Care
- Languages
- Law
- Mathematics
- Psychology
- Science
- Social Sciences
- Sport, Fitness and Coaching

Many undergraduate courses do not require any prior knowledge of the subject, but you will normally be expected to show that you can study successfully at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 2 or

its equivalent. In Scotland, you must have studied successfully at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 6 in a relevant subject such as English (Scottish Highers equate to SCQF Level 6). In the Republic of Ireland, you must have studied successfully to Leaving Certificate level or QQI Level 5 in at least two subjects.

Funding Undergraduate qualifications

The arrangements for the funding of higher education are different across the four nations of the UK and internationally. The fees and funding available to you are based on where you're ordinarily resident, rather than on the location of your prison. Your education department can provide you with further information about funding options.

Interested in studying with us?

Please contact your education department for further advice and information about all OU study.



OU Regional Manager (right) congratulates a student at graduation. Photo: OU SiSE team

Prison graduation ceremonies - a celebration of success

Many people would perhaps be surprised to find out that prisoners have the possibility of studying towards a university level qualification such as a Higher Education Diploma, an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Even fewer people will know that upon successful completion of their studies, students can request a prison graduation ceremony to celebrate that achievement.

Prison graduation ceremonies are usually hosted in the prison chapel or similar space within the prison. The Order of Ceremony follows the same formalities as those used during our public graduation ceremonies held up and down the country. It is a formal event where graduates get to wear academic robes which denotes their new status whilst celebrating their achievements with family members and friends, invited dignitaries, prison service staff, OU academics and staff, and other OU students. Many prisons will facilitate photographs and provide a buffet for guests and staff on the day.

How to request a prison graduation ceremony

To request an Open University prison graduation ceremony to celebrate your academic achievements, you simply need to contact your Education Department and complete an Expression of Interest form. The information provided will help the Education Department and the Open University's SiSE team to facilitate and organise your ceremony. These events can take time to arrange, so make sure you submit your request as soon as you receive confirmation of your award from the University.



About the OU Students Association

All Open University students are automatically members of the OU Students Association.

The OU Students Association was born in 1972, just a few years after The Open University was established by Royal Charter.

Our mission

We're on a mission to make a positive difference for all OU students. This is a mission we believe in and that we use to make all of our decisions.

We work together. We genuinely care about each other, offering compassion and safety. Our best ideas, projects and events are born from truly listening to one another. We work collaboratively with integrity, openness, kindness and compassion.

We celebrate our differences. We understand that we will never all agree. Some conversations are hard, but they need to be had. So long as we share our individual perspectives respectfully and with acknowledgement for others' hardships, journeys and barriers, there is always something we can learn from one another.

Our vision

To support, encourage and empower OU students by:

- Offering students the support services that they need.
- Creating opportunities for students to engage in a vibrant and inclusive student community.
- Being a strong, effective and accountable representative body.
- Working in partnership with the OU to enhance all aspects of the student experience.

Our values

Integrity - Equality and inclusivity - Openness - Collaboration - Kindness and compassion

Write an article for the next edition!

If you would like to contribute an article for the next edition in November then we would love to feature your writing. You can submit articles of up to 500 words on any topic of your choice. Send it to us using the pre-paid envelope we have enclosed, addressed to: The Hoot (SiSE edition)

PO Box 397, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6BE

Alternatively, articles can be emailed to us at: oustudents-media@open.ac.uk

Deadline for submissions: Monday, 14 August 2023