FAQs: The Open University Transformation Programme

What does ‘digital by design’ mean for students? Will they still have face-to-face tutorials?

Digital by design means that your learning experience will be constructed around the digital, rather than print, medium. This allows us to be more dynamic and responsive with our learning activities. The proposed teaching model still provides for face-to-face contact, though much more emphasis is placed on online tutorials.

The University is not banning books or face-to-face, but is looking at the best way that books can be used and where it’s most appropriate to have printed materials. Some face-to-face relationship between the University and the students is also going to be essential, but the University may need to do that in different ways to make sure that it works for all students.

Streamlining the curriculum would mean less choice for students – how is this putting students first?

The future curriculum offer must be attractive to students and colleagues, ensure an excellent student experience, maintain the University’s reputation, and be based on wise use of resources for ongoing sustainability.

The review of the curriculum will take place in the context of development of our overall curriculum plan, with those aims in mind as well as the more detailed objectives of the OU’s Academic Strategy. That Strategy commits us to retaining a broad and relevant curriculum. However, we will need to make choices to ensure our curriculum can be sustained – for the benefit of students and colleagues – and that we have capacity to respond swiftly to new opportunities in future.

It’s early days in the process of planning, so we can’t yet provide more detail on the anticipated outcomes of the review.

Does streamlining mean dumbing down?

The University must retain its academic reputation and the recently approved OU Academic Strategy makes clear that high academic standards will be retained. The University has frameworks, aligned with external expectations, which ensure that academic standards are upheld through any changes to curriculum and our teaching and learning model.

We are proposing the development of a core set of standards and a “freedom within a framework” approach to learning design, ensuring we provide students with a consistent, high-quality learning experience while still providing ample scope for subject-specific pedagogies to be applied. Any proposed ‘one size fits all’ approach will need to allow for exceptions based on, for example, curriculum requirements at the very least.
When will students know if their course is being withdrawn?

If we withdraw qualifications and/or modules, we will follow our agreed procedures for “teach-out” arrangements so that students are not disadvantaged by the changes. This will ensure that all existing enrolled students can either complete their course, within a reasonable timeframe, or be transferred to a mutually agreed alternative.

Couldn’t digital by design exclude some students – some being the very ones who the OU was set up to serve?

1. Students first: Our design, delivery and support decisions will be driven by pedagogical and student need. We must ensure we are delivering an excellent digital experience to ensure our students develop digital skills, are better connected with colleagues and other students, and to get the best possible learning support.

2. Students with disabilities and students in prison: For those students who require study materials in alternative formats, the University will continue to ensure teaching and services are accessible through the provision of alternative formats. A print on demand mechanism is included in the proposed teaching model to assist with this provision.

3. Access to IT: Our own research shows that most students already own a device which would be compatible to the digital by design requirements. We do appreciate however that not all students do own devices and in order to remain accessible to a broad student base - including the socially disadvantaged - other study support funds are available for students experiencing hardship, and a full setup of tablet PC (Windows 10), external monitor, keyboard and mouse can be purchased for £320 - a fraction of the cost of a single module. We are working to ensure students get access to Microsoft Office 365 and Eduroam access, providing them with wifi on any UK university campus (including many international sites).

Are you going to balance the needs of employers with the needs of students?

The University will stand by its founding principles; we will continue to offer higher education to anyone who wants it, regardless of background or previous qualification.

It is important that we also look to diversify our income. We believe that expanding our already strong links with employers is one way of doing that, particularly with the development of degree apprenticeships and the UK Government’s apprenticeship levy. Satisfied employers, will drive more students to receive life-changing learning from the OU.