GUIDANCE FOR STUDENT CONSULTATION VOLUNTEERS

What is Student Consultation?

Student Consultation is just one of the ways in which the University listens to and acts on student feedback. It enables students to contribute their views on University strategy, policies and decision-making relating to key aspects of the student experience.

We use a series of forums and meetings to gather student views on a range of topics. Forums can be found at https://learn1.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=100071. Consultation forums are usually open for around two weeks. After this, student views will be summarised and we will then report back about what we are doing to take action based on students' views, and where action is not possible, why not. Student Consultation Meetings usually take place in March each year focussed on topics relating to the student experience where student input can make a real difference.

More information is at http://www.open.ac.uk/students/consultation/how-consultation-works.

Your role

As a student volunteer you are expected to:

1. Contribute views constructively to the discussions as an individual volunteer, drawing on your experience as a student.

2. Help us to create an environment in which other students feel confident sharing their views about their student experience, recognising that these views may differ.

3. Adhere to University's Code of Practice for Student Discipline and the OU Student Computing Policy.

In relation to forums, the Study Skills section of StudentHome has lots of useful information on what makes forums successful and how to use them to your best advantage.

Our role

The overall role of The Open University in Student Consultation is to fulfil the Student Charter obligation to:

"actively support student engagement in University decision-making, ensuring the feedback loop is closed; and commit to building partnership between staff and students."

So we, listen, act and respond; and if your feedback is not acted on, we are committed to letting you know why not.

Other roles that it is useful to be aware of are:

1   The staff in the **Student Consultation Office** who manage communications and registrations.

2   **Moderators and facilitators**, impartial managers of the discussion, whose role is to encourage engagement and ensure compliance with the University's Code of Practice for Student Discipline and the Student Computing Code of Conduct. If you believe behaviour within Student Consultation has been unacceptable and not been addressed, please contact the Student Consultation Office.

3   **Staff 'in attendance'** are OU and Students Association staff who can provide role-specific knowledge, skills and experience if appropriate and feedback student views to their departments.

4   **Students Association representatives** − official student representatives appointed by the Open University Students Association who are generally present to support the discussion and provide information if needed.

Your data

The way in which the Open University Student Consultation Office handles your data is set out in our privacy notice.

Tips

− Please respect others' differing opinions as outlined in the OU Student Computing Policy.
− Don't worry about giving 'right' or 'wrong' answers: we are simply interested in your view, even if it's not as extensive or definite as others' may appear to be. Please don't be put off if you have a different view from what may appear to be the majority. In this case, contributing your view is all the more important! Equally, please do share your views even if you feel others have said all there is to say – it is useful to know what is important to you and where you agree.
− Try to keep your contributions to the point, addressing the questions put and try not to add excess information or repeat yourself. Use hyperlinks to direct participants to information held elsewhere on the internet.
− Be careful not to use acronyms and jargon which other students may not be familiar with.

Moderation and facilitation

While the University and the Students Association must be open to robust criticism from students, it is crucial to the success of Student Consultation that the online environment is welcoming and inclusive and that students feel able to share their views without fear of criticism, while accepting that not all students may share their views and being respectful of fellow students and staff.

Forums and meetings will usually be moderated or facilitated by members of staff or student volunteers, supported by staff in the OU's Student Consultation Office. Their role is to:

− Be visible, supporting and facilitating the discussion, encouraging contributions and keeping on topic.
− Be impartial and objective in their encouragement, answering of questions and summarising of discussion.
− Ensure compliance with the Code of Practice for Student Discipline and the OU Student Computing Policy, monitoring for transgressions and taking action where appropriate.

The sort of actions that you can expect facilitators or moderators to take in fulfilling this role include:

− Asking volunteers, individually or collectively, to stick to topic, to respect others' differing opinions or to contribute constructively in line with the OU Online Communications Principles.
− Private messages asking volunteers to respect others' differing opinions or to contribute constructively in line with the OU Online Communications Principles, making clear which behaviour potentially breaches these principles or other policy.
− Deletion of messages posted that are not in line with the OU Online Communications Principles, alongside a message informing the original poster of the message why it has been deleted.
− Forum threads will be locked if they go persistently off-topic.

If a Moderator or Facilitator believes that an individual contributor is persistently ignoring messages about their online behaviour about any unacceptable conduct or is openly abusive, removal of permissions or presence and/or action as outlined in the Code of Practice for Student Discipline will be considered.

What to do if you feel there has been a breach of codes, policy or guidance

OU staff will be at Student Consultation Meetings and moderating the online forums throughout the period they are open, but checks may not be so frequent in the evening and weekends as during working hours.

All students are required to comply with the University's Code of Practice for Student Discipline and the OU Student Computing Policy. If you have concerns about the behaviour of students or staff, including moderators, or a breach of these codes, please do contact student-consultation-office@open.ac.uk so that we can try and address your concerns.

On the forums, you can also use the 'Report Post' button beneath each post, if you feel there has been a breach. Finally, if you do not feel the issue has been adequately addressed, you can find out more about the University's complaints procedure via the Help Centre.

Forum posting guidelines for accessibility

We would be grateful if contributors to the forum would try to follow these guidelines because some contributors have difficulty reading text on a screen; use screen reader software (which reads out loud everything as it is printed); and others have visual cognitive difficulties like Dyslexia. Therefore, we would be grateful if you could take account of the following:

1. If you use acronyms like T M A (Tutor Marked Assignment), please put spaces between the acronym letters and spell out what the acronym stands for when you first use it.

2. Please don't use 'text speak'.

3. If you post links to useful information; a picture; or charts of statistics; a brief text introduction would be appreciated.

4. Please consider including a little more information when replying to someone else to enable screen reader users to follow the discussion thread. For example, instead of just replying 'I agree' you might put 'I agree with John that transcripts are wonderful'.

5. Try not to include repeated punctuation - such as ? ? ? to emphasise 'why'.

6. Screen readers read emoticons, so please use them instead of e.g. colon, dash, bracket for a smiley face. Emoticons are behind the smiley face on your system. Left click on that, and then left click on the emotion of your choice.

7. Try to avoid long blocks of text. Spaces between paragraphs would be appreciated because some contributors can't comfortably read long blocks of text.

8. Please use numbering rather than bullet points as numbers are easier to refer back to.

9. Message threads are difficult to follow if a post is off topic.

And finally, if in doubt, please ask.

Student volunteers who are also members of OU staff

If you are a student volunteer who is also a member of OU staff, please:

1. Ensure that you always abide by all OU policies, including the Behaviours and Standards at Work Policy.

2. Do not post confidential, personal or commercial information. See the University's Information Security policies for more information.

3. Bear in mind that, depending on the topic under discussion and your role in the University, you may have access to additional information not available to other students. Please consider carefully whether using that information in your posts will be a constructive contribution to the discussion.

4. Consider whether mentioning that you are a member of staff as well as a student would provide a helpful context for your posts.

5. Contribute your views as a student member of the community only. There is a Yammer community channel open to all Open University staff to help with your work, develop working relationships and connect with colleagues.

6. Be especially careful not to use acronyms and jargon which other students may not be familiar with.

Appendix 1

Online Communications Principles

These principles describe the way in which OU staff and students are asked to work together online to support learning, research, administration and participation in all aspects of the University community.

Principle 1: The benefits of 'Digital Professionalism'

Good online communication skills cannot be assumed, but they can be learned and are essential for effective engagement in learning and work. The development of 'digital professionalism' and skills in online communication has positive benefits for staff, for students and for employability.

Principle 2: Developing our skills

We will support each other to learn, develop and enhance our online communications skills, through advice, guidance, learning resources and working together.

Principle 3: Communicating effectively

We will support and encourage clear and effective communication in online situations and the use of language, style and tone which is relevant and appropriate to the circumstances and the purpose of the communication.

Principle 4: Managing our online image

We will ensure that we are all aware of the importance of managing our digital footprint and support each other to raise awareness of the benefits of creating a positive online image and how to achieve it. We will be mindful of maintaining our own confidentiality and personal security.

Principle 5: Freedom of speech and ideas

We will promote the open exchange of ideas and uphold the fundamental principle of freedom of speech and thought. We acknowledge that people have the right, within the law, to hold and to express ideas that others may find challenging. We will not allow views to be presented in a way that is hostile or degrading to others.

Principle 6: Dignity and respect

We will treat each other with dignity and respect, even where we disagree with each other, and be sensitive to the impact our conduct may have on other students and staff. We recognise that good manners aid effective communication. We aim to be welcoming and inclusive and do not provide a platform for threats, personal abuse, derogatory comments, unreasonable behaviour that causes offence, discrimination, victimisation, bullying or harassment.

Principle 7: Criticising others and accepting criticism

We should be prepared to accept legitimate criticism, provided it is within the law, based on accurate facts, measured and in an appropriate forum. It is rarely appropriate for named individuals to be criticised in public or anywhere that they have no right or opportunity to reply.

Principle 8: Confidentiality, privacy and copyright

We will respect each other's confidentiality and privacy and we will not share personal details or distribute ideas, words and images that belong to others without their express or implied permission and without acknowledgement. We will not tolerate plagiarism or activities which encourage or enable it.

Principle 9: Responsibility and consequences

We will accept responsibility for our own actions and encourage others to do so. We should be aware that poor communication skills and unacceptable behaviour may have a negative impact on others.

Principle 10: Moderation and control

Moderators and other controllers of online communication spaces, whether they are staff or students, have a responsibility to uphold these principles. The aim of moderation or control is to provide an environment within which meaningful, relevant and effective communication can take place. Moderators' decisions should be open, transparent and consistent with any relevant guidelines, which should be available to all participants. Moderators have the right to expect reasonable decisions to be respected but must be prepared for some decisions to be challenged, through appropriate channels.