

Student Consultation Meetings

Feedback on Strategic goals



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Background

Student consultation is a central part of the ongoing relationship between the University and its student body. As a part of this, a series of online meetings and other forums were conducted in March 2021. These were designed to cover both student reaction to the five strategic goals of the OU, and to explore tuition.

The following is a full overview of the emerging themes from this consultation, covering the area of **the strategic goals**

This feedback is based on the five goals:

- Extending our reach and offer to include even more people from all parts of society in lifelong learning
- Enabling the success of our students and learners through our expertise in supported online learning
- Achieving impact in the four UK nations and globally through research and the development of knowledge and skills
- Enacting our values to increase equality, diversity and inclusion
- Championing environmental sustainability

The consultation included multiple online forums dedicated to the strategic goals and tuition, and 12 online student meetings, covering a range from 'all students' to also: Wales, Ireland, Scotland, International, students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, Younger (under 25) students and PGR

Over 300 students were involved in the consultation process, across the forums and meetings, including International and PGR

The strategic goals as a whole

- There was no rejection of the concept of having strategic goals among students taking part – in general the goals presented were recognised as being close to the ethos of the OU they know
- PGR members were slightly more likely to believe the OU is already achieving the stated goals
- For some, the goals themselves were not seen as specific enough – and would be difficult to measure as they have no targets incorporated in them – to their detriment
- For others, the goals were not seen as being particularly ambitious (seen as what a university should do) – they were also not widely seen as unique to the OU and what it could offer
- The goal regarding enabling student success was understandably seen as the most student-centric goal
- There was a sense for a few that the stated inclusion of the four nations and ‘global’ within one goal was rather shoehorned in – all the goals should be applicable across the entire student body
- The goal regarding championing environmental sustainability was viewed more as a way of working across all aspects of the OU than a goal in itself – even though it was well received as a concept – the OU is seen as a learning organisation rather than an environmental champion
- A few students noted that there was no mention of academic excellence within the goals – which might help to improve reach and legitimacy

Extending our reach and offer to include even more people from all parts of society in lifelong learning

- This was felt to be an important goal and central to the ethos of the OU – although for some the institution is so well known for this that they questioned why it is being focused on

Key to its whole being is that it enables people to study ... who otherwise would not be able to

- To extend its appeal there is a need to remove the perceived stigma associated with the OU whereby it is seen by some as not a legitimate place to study – and there was no specific mention regarding academic excellence

The OU definitely has that stigma of not being a real university

- Awareness of the OU should be built in sixth forms and colleges – possibly even earlier in secondary schools

With the sixth forms I found that teachers didn't know what OU was

Perhaps the OU could raise its profile by providing some free A Level study materials

- The OU should collaborate with other universities and organisations (local and even the BBC) to extend its reach

My son has a disability adviser from the county council ... they did not even mention the OU as an alternative

- The OU should also reach out more visibly to employers, industry and disability groups

target ... groups which might not traditionally consider a university education ... disability groups

Extending our reach and offer to include even more people from all parts of society in lifelong learning

- Cost was seen as a potential barrier to study at the OU – even if financial support is outside of OU’s remit – this was sharply noted with International students
 - I know the OU is not in control of fees ...but engage students who may be unsure about taking a degree
 - The OU fees are something that should be highlighted as they are a lot cheaper than bricks and mortar university but this does not reflect the standard of learning
- International students were also viewed as a group where the OU could improve its reach given its strength in distance learning – if promoted more selectively
 - Different strategies for promoting its mission in different parts of the world ... promoting free courses in south Asian countries doesn't assimilate well
- The OU was felt to be good at advertising its name, but less at communicating what it does or stands for
 - It provides life changing qualifications ... very important the OU doesn't really draw attention to [this]
- The goal would be assisted by communicating the broad range of courses available from the OU
 - access courses .. There are lots of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who want to study ... this is where you can help
- It was felt that the OU could do more to attract certain groups of society to extend its reach – most notably Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students – but also seek to not deliberately exclude both younger and older students
 - I notice .. There are fewer B.A.M.E. students at the OU than elsewhere
- Any push to online learning at the expense of face-to-face could work against some parts of the goal - it needs to retain its provision of books – this is a clear indicator of inclusion
 - It's not a lifestyle choice ... some of us genuinely struggle with screens and fall behind as a result
 - The insistence on online only courses actually puts off those on lower incomes who don't have laptops and internet links

Achieving impact in the four UK nations and globally through research and the development of knowledge and skills

- There was a clear belief that the OU should highlight the area of research more prominently – including doing this among its own students
 - We do not have the access to research facilities and equipment as students at brick universities ... efforts to level up would be welcome
 - There is little known about what is currently going on
- There were some issues with the perceived use of jargon and understanding of the goal
 - I have read it several times and struggling to understand what is the aim of it
- There were concerns over what was meant by ‘achieving impact’
 - What does achieving impact mean? Whose knowledge and skills are being developed? The OU’s, its students or others?
- There was some confusion over referencing the nations and ‘globally’, as if it were being shoehorned into the goals
 - If we are already impacting on these nations it just seems like ... it’s not aligned properly
- Indeed, referencing the nations was disconcerting for a few – both distracting and drawing attention to a potential issue – inequality between the nations is noted too, in terms of funding and fees
 - Does it mean you want people in Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland to know about research or something else?
- Those more closely focused on research (PGR) believed the OU could focus on this more distinctively
 - The research could be given a more distinctive goal of its own
- This goal was the one that prompted the fewest comments among students taking part

Enacting our values to increase equality, diversity and inclusion

- This was widely recognised as being part of the DNA of the OU - a worthy and appropriate goal
- There was a desire from some for the focus to be on **equity**, rather than *equality* – treating students according to their needs rather than simply equally
- The goal was readily assisted by access to a wide-ranging set of study materials – including books
- Technology was also seen as a key means of delivering this goal – discussing it then leads to question marks over its role in tuition delivery
- Help and understanding of costs to study would aid in the delivery of the goal

I think the OU is already very inclusive

The OU is a place for all and that is well known to all students

Should be treating people according to their study needs rather than treating them all the same way

All module material should be presented in a variety of ways

Students should be able to access the study material in a way suitable to them

Better use of online chatrooms such as Zoom and Teams should ... encourage greater engagement

Financial options advice and how the OU might play an active part in the process ... should be part of a university inclusive approach

those on benefits and lower income may need to help understand what finance options they can take without affecting their benefits

Enacting our values to increase equality, diversity and inclusion

- A need to improve engagement with disabled students was recognised – this could include physical disability or the management of anxiety
- One to one support for disabled students was called out as something to be focused on – although this is delivered for some
- Among International students, more inclusive access would be welcomed
- Pre-availability of materials ahead of tutorials would help many to manage anxiety in delivering this goal – as well as clear communication from tutors
- With a warning for the OU to constantly be aware of inherent biases

Staff should be more aware and accommodating of those with disabilities

There should be ... especially contact tailored to the need of students who have a declared disability

Think about how to offer equity of free access to phone related student support [for International calling]

Ensure ... all students are able to access the information and material at the exact same time

Assumptions need to change ... That because a person has completed diversity training ... that they are free from bias

There is an alienating white male bias in the environmental sciences modules ... both in terms of staffing and content

Championing environmental sustainability

- There was a considerable degree of positivity about the sentiment behind the goal – and a broader sense of inevitability about this in life

Sadly we may all be forced to read, write, work exclusively online

The OU is a learning organisation first ... only when that objective is met can you look at how to reduce environmental impact, without affecting accessibility

- The OU was seen as a **learning organisation** first and foremost, not an environmental champion

The environment part should be secondary to support of student goals and needs

- Students pointed to many other areas the OU is involved in which are potentially counter to this goal – including merchandising

The OU make a lot of merchandise ... a lot of that has plastic in it

- To some, even if the idea is laudable, it was difficult to imagine as a measurable goal – however it could be intrinsic to everything the OU does

I don't believe this should be a separate goal ... it needs to be integrated into everything

It Isn't about people whereas the others are

- It was also not seen as a people-centric goal, more process driven, with occasional issues over the language

What does championing mean?

- To some it was slightly out of synch with the other proposed goals

Fine ... but doesn't seem to fit with the educational values of the others

It feels like a bit of a nice thing to have that might not lead to anything

Championing environmental sustainability

- The goal was seen by some as a signal of a shift to purely online study – which carries a myriad of negative issues, many of which work against the other goals

If this means the loss of printed books this is a step in the wrong direction

- To many students, books are not seen as waste, and still relatively environmentally friendly

If you use books they can be recycled

My printed books are not waste ... the carbon locked into them stays put

- Some suggested a more balanced approach, but there were still some concerns this is 'online only' in disguise

From a student perspective ... the new gift wrap for moving to online only

- Any belief this is a step toward 'online only' can work against the broader goals of inclusivity, flexibility, and equality

There are mental and physical costs to working electronically

Whilst the OU has a responsibility to reduce its carbon footprint it also has an aim to be an inclusive organisation ... shaming people to not want books may deter those who need printed material

- Students recognised there are ongoing costs for materials other than books – and were aware of the net impacts of moving online

there is a danger in reducing print material and putting resources online may lead to more students printing the same material at home, less efficiently

Book manufacture has a one off cost, whereas online interfaces 'run hot'

Enabling the success of our students and learners through our expertise in supported online learning: the reaction

- Students felt strongly that the OU is NOT necessarily a provider of *online* learning - its strength is **distance** learning - and the goal should be changed to reflect this
 - OU should be emphasising its strength as a provider of remote learning, not online learning
 - The OU is known for providing distance learning, is this a departure?
- Online as a word also misleads as it leaves out face to face interaction – they value the variety of access methods - the OU should talk more about the flexibility it offers rather than simply online learning
 - I picked the OU not because it was online but because I could fit it in around my working life
- Online learning also jarred because books are so highly valued, and students do not want to see them phased out – in their view removing books as study tools would work against the goals that have been put forward
 - The term online learning can be very daunting ... for those who do not feel they are tech savvy
 - The books are excellent and need to be kept
- Online also has a few negative connotations due to the perceived digital poverty of some parts of the UK
 - In Wales there is an issue with digital poverty
- Talking about online also does not offer the OU a unique proposition – it does not make the OU stand out
 - There are better online teaching models out there
- Mentioning enabling ‘success’ can also throw up issues for some where their experience has not been optimum

Enabling the success of our students and learners through our expertise in supported online learning: what needs to change

More specifically, what needs to change to deliver on the goal:

- Technology: Replace Adobe Connect – there were multiple strong comments about how much better Teams and Zoom are as a communication tool
 - Teams is much better this [Adobe Connect] is prehistoric
 - Teams is good for seeing people, would be good for tutorials
- Better engagement with tutors: more regular and more one-to-one, and the return of day schools when possible, will be hugely valued by many
 - A lot of the success comes from how much interaction you have with your tutor
 - More lecturer type learning would make it feel more inclusive and make you not feel you are alone
- More opportunities to engage with other students: mostly leveraging technology better – these student consultations show students this can be done
 - It can be hard to navigate
- Improvements to the website (although this was not flagged as a major issue)
- Improvements in tutorial delivery: including more consistent delivery by and of tutors
 - The OU needs to invest in technology that enables voice communication between students so they connect with one another
- Keep books and provide materials in other formats – these will help the delivery of other goals such as inclusivity and improving reach – including audio support like DAISY

Enabling the success of our students and learners through our expertise in supported online learning: what needs to be maintained

What needs to stay the same to deliver the goal covered many of the same areas highlighted under change: involving more consistency

- The mixture of delivery formats for both teaching and materials is hugely valued – it is what the OU and its distance learning strength is all about – and this helps to deliver the goals of inclusivity and enabling reach

Face to face was very much missed in the pandemic ... hope it will be re-instated

- The flexibility of how to learn and how it is delivered is also highly valued and needs to remain

- Students value having regular contact with tutors

We have spent this last year staring at screens, we need our books and we need our face-to-face tutorials even if we can't be at day schools at the moment

- The layout of the module website is felt to be excellent and user-friendly

Don't change the web platform interface it really works well from a learner perspective

- Students took the opportunity to remind the OU that they wanted to keep books ... removing these would signal that the OU is not listening to them

If I didn't have books I wouldn't be with the OU

The textbooks are so important to our learning experience, we are a remote learning university, not an online one

It's the one thing the OU does brilliantly, the written materials

Variations in feedback by student audience

There were relatively few variations in terms of key reactions highlighted between identifiable groups ... with the main differences being:

- Students from **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic** backgrounds clearly recognised that as a group they are under-represented at the OU compared to brick universities – they see this as an area of potential growth and a route to extend the OU's reach that is neither fully understood or leveraged
- Most variations in **Scotland** related to the OU properly appreciating differences in their education system, and the need for financial support - although this group was one of those to highlight how unspecific the goals were
- The peculiarity of the **Northern Irish** HE market impacted some of their perspective – there are only a couple of viable alternatives to the OU if students wish to remain in Northern Ireland
- In **Wales**, there appeared to be slightly more notice taken of variations in digital poverty among students – which framed their reactions to references to purely online learning and inclusion. This was also the region most likely to point out that awareness of OU advertising is high, without a clear understanding of what it stands for
- **International** students were more likely to be comfortable with online learning being referenced within the goals, given it is their main form of access (they are not missing face-to-face). The importance of flexibility of tutorial timings and broader access was slightly more prevalent here given varying time zones.
- **Younger students** (Under 25) were the most likely to identify that the OU needs to do more to reach out to potential students in sixth forms and colleges

Variations in feedback by student audience: PGR

Overall, the PGR workshop identified similar broad themes to other groups, with a few variations ...

- PGR opinions were slightly more positive towards the OU and the strategic goals than other groups
- They also identified the fact that very little of their work is truly 'distance' or 'online' and reference to this under the enabling goal jars slightly – it should refer to the success of all students ...
- The goal referencing research naturally attracted some comment from this group and was viewed as being important: although they recognised that the research the OU does is incredibly varied
- The PGR suggested there was no need to change the goals on their behalf, merely that they would need interpreting and communicating specifically for their community
- This group also was the most likely to point out that the enablers were more inward-looking, compared to the opposite for the strategic goals – in PGR experience there is much engagement in the wider world

A lot of it seems to be continuing what the OU does well

I did wonder how it relates to PGR ... it's the online learning bit that's not so much relevant

The flexibility and the distance offer ... that doesn't really work when Postgrads have to live within 40 miles of Milton Keynes and there is an expectation they are on site all the time

It's more about understanding what kind of research

I don't think we can go for clauses and sub clauses [within the goals]

We just need to think about how we articulate that [for us]

The enablers need to do more than look at how the OU runs its business ... there needs to be more about looking outwards

It is worth having something in the goals in terms of engaging with the public because that is something the OU does that other universities don't do

Tuition and its impact on the goals

Although student views on tuition are being reported separately from their input into these strategic goals, these views often played a significant part in their interpretation of the goals ... most notably ...

- Consistency of tutoring and tutorial delivery are concerns and should be addressed in order to be able to achieve the goals
- There is still an undercurrent of suspicion over the removal of books – these even cloud the interpretation of the goals (particularly where online learning is referenced) – it is strongly believed that taking away books works against the goals and what the OU is about - or what they signed up to
- The desire for as much face-to-face delivery as possible also shapes their view of the goals – it speaks again to enabling their success, is inclusive and extends reach
- Technological improvements that are deemed necessary in delivery (removing Adobe Connect, adding Audio materials, the recording and accessibility of tutorials) are required to achieve most of the goals
- Students are also keen to interact where appropriate with other students more – they see the value of this consultation exercise and often are keen for something similar in format in their study

Views on enablers

The enablers were discussed at limited times across the sessions ...

- Investment in people: This was seen as a clear requirement to deliver on any goal, for any organisation
- Innovation in technology: Felt to be necessary – although innovation is only useful when it delivers improvement – the downsides of Adobe Connect as a communications tool were widely pointed out and the requirement is not necessarily for *innovation*, more *catching up with the times* (MS Teams or Zoom)
- Use of evidence and insight: Regarded as important, and the consultation process was seen as a means of doing this
- Optimisation of our processes: This was recognised as largely not being about people, which is one of the strengths of the OU
- Management of financial resources: Obviously important for any organisation – although any mention tended to prompt discussion of fees, their appropriate levels and any support the OU might be able to provide

Where explored in any depth, the enablers tended to be seen as inward-looking, whilst the goals were more appropriately outward-looking – so the enablers listed could be augmented by external elements – such as the wider community and stakeholders

Concluding Summary

- Broadly speaking the goals were welcomed, with some small concerns over the definitions
- The key objection came to the reference to ‘online learning’, which has negative connotations – ‘distance learning’ is more appropriate for the OU
- There were some thoughts that one goal shoehorned the nations and International students into the strategy – they should be present across everything
- ‘Equity’ rather than equality (where this was discussed in depth) was seen as more appropriate: delivering to the specific needs of all rather than treating all the same
- There is a desire for the OU to reach out further – to sixth forms, colleges, industry and the broader population (not just regarding its research) in order to help achieve the goals and then tell the world about it - they still feel the OU is a well-kept secret
- There is still a belief among a minority of students that the OU can do more to help/lobby on their behalf regarding financial support for students (although many recognise the OU is not well placed to do this)
- Delivering on concerns over tuition and the provision of materials (especially maintaining printed books) will clearly aid the enactment of these strategic goals and crucially the belief that students are being listened to

THANK YOU