Response to student consultation on Student Support Principles

Summary

This is a response to the consultation on Student Support Principles which took place between 17th October and 31st October on the University Students Consultative Forum. The summary of student feedback is published on the forum.

- The consultation was an opportunity to obtain student feedback on a set of proposed student support principles. The feedback was comprehensive and was a useful insight into how students felt about student support and how it might be articulated for future reference. However, it was also clear from the feedback that 'one size does not fit all'; there were a number of recurrent themes coming through the feedback but there were also opposing views or comments on some of them which means that responding fully to all the concerns highlighted will be difficult, if not impossible.

- The student consultation forum was part of an extensive stakeholder consultation with all parties across the University with an interest in Student Support including staff in Faculties, across Academic Services and Associate Lecturers.

- Since the forum the feedback has been considered in detail and a number of staff have been involved in using the feedback and further developing the approach to both the proposed principles themselves but also a proposed approach to implementing a wider Student Support Policy.

The headline comments from the student consultative forum in relation to what they want to see from the support offered includes the following:

- Help for all students to achieve their best and meet their aspirations.
- Increased awareness amongst students (and prospective students) of the support available (what it is and how it can help), with expectations managed about what support they are entitled to as independent learners.
- Support that is easier to access, particularly for students with extra requirements.
- Greater, faster, more agile improvements to student support
- Specific goals to improve student support, not just documenting what already exists.
- Assurances that emailers are not disadvantaged compared to callers.
- A 'Track your query' service so you can see any progress made and who is currently dealing with your issue, or similarly a form of 'raising a ticket' system.

- Live chat, Skype or OU Live used for student support. Having to wait on hold can be expensive for international students. It was mentioned that Live Chat was now offered but there was confusion about how to access it and whether it was your own SST 'on the other end'.
- Student Support that is approachable and that does not require a high level of assertiveness and awareness in students to ask for what they need.
- Proactive support for new students to ensure they are prepared for study.
- Support available outside of office hours.
- The option of having a student mentor.
- More proactive support from the OU for students to access Disabled Students Allowances and other support for students with additional requirements.
- Availability of scholarships to allow students to finish their study.
- More personalised, proactive support when a student is struggling although care should be taken with regard to how this is identified. A concern was raised that some comments, possibly out of context, could lead to unwanted contact.
- Should outline the shared goals of the policy, including student responsibilities.
- Well-trained staff who know how things work at least as well as students do.
- A feeling that there is someone at the OU who cares about students as individuals.
- Consistency in high quality tutor support.
- Support in the transition between levels of study.
- A printed student handbook for every student.
- An enforceable policy so that students are clear what they can expect.
- Early notice of tutorials and availability of module materials.

It will take some time for us to work through all of these suggestions and make the necessary improvements, but there are a number of things we can already point to that have been acted on, e.g.:

- Live chat is now available and its use has been growing
- A pilot of Progression Tutors is underway, assessing the benefits of a 'personal tutor' style approach to offering support and further discussions will be taking place at student face to face consultation events this spring
- Follow-up to discussions at face to face student consultations in 2016 about the opportunities for a system of student mentors
- The Entry Project is piloting more proactive support to students as they first enter their studies with the OU, through proactive phone calls from staff
- Additional support has been piloted for students in the early days of their studies with the OU but also for those moving between Levels through a series of Orientation Forums. These have been successful and have already demonstrated a number of benefits to students.
- Changes to the Group Tuition Project (GTP) mean that in the future students will receive early notice of tutorials and availability of module materials.
- Work around Student Home is currently being undertaken that will allow a more proactive and personalised approach to supporting students.
  The principles have been revised taking into account as much as possible of the feedback we received from both students and staff. The principles are therefore shorter in length, fewer in number and provide clearer statements about what students can expect

The next steps are to:

- *Continue to refine principles taking into account stakeholder feedback*

- Continue to make improvements by putting in place activities and initiatives or simply making changes to the way we do things that will directly respond to the headline comments above.
- We are also developing an approach to implementing the principles as part of a more comprehensive Student Support Policy. At this stage we view that as a way of pulling together and cross-referencing other policies and strategies that are already in place as a way of ensuring that what has been developed so far is meaningful and is not simply yet another policy or set of procedures. This is in response to the feedback we received about some students being frustrated by the volume of OU policies, wanting to ensure that any new policy would lead to a streamlining of others.
- Ideally we would like to work towards this being part of a more comprehensive strategy relating to the wider student experience but in the meantime we are focusing on ensuring that the principles and the way it is developed is meaningful to both students and staff.