



Response to student consultation on Transforming Student Policy

Summary

This is a response to the consultation on Transforming Student Policy (TSP) which took place between 1st February and 14th February on the Student Consultative Forum. The summary of student feedback is available at [<https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=13713>].

This consultation was carried out to learn about current experiences regarding student policies. Your feedback and suggestions for improvement were presented to the Steering Group for the TSP project on 25th May 2017, and your comments have been considered in the development of 1) new templates and guidance for use by authors when drafting future student policy, and 2) a framework for guiding the development and approval of student policy documentation.

Any feedback that we received which was out of scope to the TSP project but would be helpful elsewhere across the University, was passed on to the relevant University representatives or teams.

The TSP project is about to consult with students and staff across the OU, on the first draft of these new documents. The policy templates and framework will be further refined on the basis of consultation comments, before they are then tested with an example student policy.

Full response

Student Consultation said	Transforming Student Policy Team response	Next steps, if appropriate
<p><u>POLICY AWARENESS AND INDUCTION</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students should be able to understand student policies. • There should be an awareness amongst students that the policies were available to access if needed. • Induction should cover where to find the policies, what students might need them for, flagging up key items of content of the most important, particularly those that have an ongoing direct impact on study. • Many students will never or rarely need to access policies, and it was enough to know they were there. • Some students seem to have no idea about policies, including Special Circumstances, which is important. • The printed student handbook, with printed supplements highlighting changes, was a good way of raising awareness of policies and enabling easy access. • It was helpful to be provided with a direct link. • Information overload when you start studying is a potential issue. • That policies exist and where to find them should be part of induction. 	<p>Because this is out of scope of this project, we have sent your comments to those responsible for developing induction materials, for inclusion within their Induction Project and registration work for next year. There has been a positive response to these.</p> <p>We have included your comments in the development of a Template and framework for developing student policy, designed to make student policies more understandable e.g having a summary of the key points of a policy at the very beginning.</p>	<p>We are in the process of developing a business plan to develop a new system for storing and accessing policies, and will take into consideration all comments related to improving visibility.</p>
<p><u>SEARCHING FOR POLICIES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students should be able to find student policies. • A search function that would help students find the policy they need would be helpful. • Students would like a specific search for the A-Z policy list. • Some sort of flow chart / diagnostic would be useful leading students to the correct policy. • It was suggested an interactive tool or document might be helpful, where someone can select their specific circumstance and only information that pertains to them is displayed. • A simple search function would help. 	<p>We have requested an improved search function and sortable policy list within our specification for a new student facing webpage, to make it easier to find particular policies.</p> <p>Guidance in the template is to use clear titles so it is easier for students to find the policies that they need.</p>	<p>We are in the process of developing a business plan to develop a new system for storing and accessing policies, and will take into consideration all comments related to improving visibility.</p> <p>Once a market scan has taken place, we will be in a position to investigate whether any interactive tool might be feasible.</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow different sorting of policies – for example, most accessed as well as alphabetical. 		
<p><u>HIGHLIGHTING KEY POLICIES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some policies were more important than others for students to be aware of, for example, plagiarism policy. Some sort of overview that highlights the key policies as student is likely to need would be helpful. An overview of the most accessed / important policies would be useful. The basic components of distance learning, for example plagiarism, assessment, student support, should be emphasized. 	<p>We will take these requests into account when specifying a new system for storing and accessing policies. We have carried out work categorising policies by point in the student journey and will explore how to use this work to help students.</p>	
<p><u>TITLING</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes the names of policies do not make it clear what they contain. The ‘Student Policies’ title could be more user-friendly as it may sound a bit off-putting. 	<p>The new template being written for policy authors will provide guidance on how to produce clearer policy titles.</p>	
<p><u>STUDENT SUPPORT TEAMS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was important that students were able to access policies themselves as examples were given of when Student Support Teams or tutors had offered wrong advice. Sometimes it is useful to read policies for background information before contacting your SST for clarification, confirmation or further advice as needed. Wrong advice from SST: for example, one student being told that she would either have to study a course she didn’t want to and miss out on a course she did want to; or lose £1,000. Plus several other examples. Staff taking fee payments getting it wrong. Errors could creep in to policies and SSTs were not infallible. There is an issue with consistency of implementation of policies across faculties. This may or may not be for good 	<p>Because this is out of scope of this piece of work, we have forwarded your feedback to the appropriate teams within Academic Services, and this has also been passed back to the Quality Assurance area.</p> <p>We have clarified with tutors and OUSA that their role is to signpost to SSTs and not to provide detailed policy information themselves.</p> <p>Policies will include contact details of where to go for more information and guidance.</p> <p>Better policy templates should make clearer policy for frontline staff and students.</p> <p>The change log is being made more visible to ALs.</p>	

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<p>reason but should always be transparent and not luck of the draw.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While students were encouraged to get in touch with their SST for clarification of particular policies, this was not always possible for example, if students were trying to sort out an issue at a weekend. 		
<p><u>NUMBER OF POLICIES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There may be too many policies, and too much time spent working on them rather than improving the student experience. As mentioned in other threads, the large number of policies can be overwhelming. 	<p>As part of the Transforming Student Policy project we have performed an audit of all current documents, to see whether any are similar and can be grouped together.</p>	
<p><u>REVIEW CYCLE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies should be rationalised and not rewritten so frequently. 	<p>We are defining a schedule for standardising the review of policies every 3 years or sooner depending on the policy. The framework and template being produced aims to ease the process of review and development, and suggest that all policies will follow an appropriate consultation and approval process.</p>	
<p><u>CHANGE LOG</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual overview could be sent out at module start including key policies and any recent changes. Or dates of most recent updates could be included with a precis of what changed. Changes to the substitution rules were an example of bad practice in changing policy without due publicity. Clearer upfront notice of when policies have changed and what those changes are was very important. This was very important for both staff and students as a number of examples were offered of where staff, including tutors, were not aware that policies had changed. 	<p>The project is trying to improve the visibility of policy changes, and internal monitoring of policy review.</p> <p>The new template will incorporate standard information regarding when the policy was last reviewed and when it is due for next review, so that readers can be fully informed at the time of reading. The policy template will list any significant changes made from the previous version.</p>	
<p><u>LENGTH AND SUMMARIES</u></p>	<p>Template guidance will propose that policies are short and concise, and will suggest methods to aid the author</p>	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some policies appear to be far too long and a summary of guiding principles would be helpful but this should include advice to read the full policy before making any important decisions. • Sometimes it appeared that too much depth of explanation was offered; others disagreed. • It would be helpful to have a summary at the start of a policy about what was contained. • A link to a simplified version and a full version of a policy under each policy heading. • Include key points of policies with a link to full version in a Student Handbook. • Some policies appear to be far too long. 	<p>in keeping the policy shorter. Policy and procedure to implement will be kept separate in the template.</p> <p>Templates will now include a short summary section at the front which will cover key points (with advice to read the full policy for detail).</p>	
<p><u>LANGUAGE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple, non-technical, student-centred language should be used wherever possible. • Several students found it easier to speak to their Student Support Team (SST) for clarification. • Too vague. • Sometimes the complexity of the wording has to be picked apart carefully, adding to stress. • Jargon should be avoided. • Policies should be in plain English and could contain examples. • Policies should be in Plain English as far as possible. • A point made elsewhere about writing policies in Plain English and avoiding jargon was reiterated, although it was important to be exact. • A glossary of key terms and acronyms would be useful within a policy. 	<p>The template and accompanying style guide will provide advice to the author on how to use appropriate plain English language and avoid jargon or technical language.</p> <p>A Glossary of Terms will be supplied with each policy for any more technical language.</p> <p>Guidance will recommend that authors review other policy documentation to use consistent language familiar to the student body.</p> <p>As the number of policies produced using the template and framework increases, these will be given as examples to follow to policy authors.</p> <p>Students and OUSA representatives are important members of working groups for producing and testing policy. Procedures for involving them in policy making are included in the framework.</p>	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students Association representatives should be involved in reading policies before they are put to Senate to ensure they are clear to students. Terminology can be a problem when different issues are lumped together under one header, for examples 'cancelled modules' on your study record could meant several different things. 		
<p><u>PROMOTION VIA MODULE SITES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module websites should include a link to an introduction to student policy highlighting key policies and where to find others Lots of students by-pass StudentHome so links from module websites are important, but may not be noticed here either. 	<p>We have forwarded feedback to representatives on our Steering Group who represent the faculties.</p>	
<p><u>SPECIFIC FEEDBACK WITH POLICIES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of areas that cause confusion are Deferral, Deferral with Assessment Banking, Discretionary Postponement, inability to submit an EMA and failing to turn up for an exam and the differing costs, which seemed to be spread over various policies. The biggest issue raised was around deferrals, cancellations and fee refunds or discounts, which many students found unclear, particularly around financial implications. Some modules allowing banked assessments to count in a future presentation while others don't is unfair. Refunds and deferrals was mentioned again as a policy students often have difficulty understanding. It was unfortunate that 'out-of-date' qualifications could not count towards credit transfer. The Complaints and Appeals Policy is unwieldy. Greater clarity of what can and can't be expected of a tutor would be helpful – an informal Facebook guide (link shared in 	<p>Specific feedback is out of scope for this project, however we have forwarded this feedback on specific policies or areas to those involved with these policies across the University.</p> <p>We are suggesting a three-yearly review cycle for policies, with monitoring and evaluation evidence collected during this period. This will be used to review and improve the policy next time round.</p>	

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forum) was seen as more helpful than the official very formal Tutor Support Statement.		
<p>ORGANISATION ONLINE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies should be published in one place and linked to in order to avoid conflicting versions being found. • Different versions of the same document. • Having policies listed twice under different headings on Essential Documents is helpful but confusing. • Some policies seem unnecessarily broken down – for example the Computing Policy requires students to download four different documents. • Leading with ‘How could we help you?’ and a different tone may be more reassuring. • Some FAQs might be helpful. 	<p>The project aims to develop a new website and storage system for hosting student facing policies in one place. We have requested that any system will allow older policies to be removed or hidden from view where relevant, to ensure policies that are visible are relevant to students.</p> <p>As part of our audit, we plan to bring together groups of related policies.</p> <p>We will include student feedback on tone and signposting as we develop the Essential Documents site further.</p> <p>We have suggested including FAQs within the Style Guide for authors.</p>	<p>We are in the process of developing a business plan to develop a new system for storing and accessing policies. Once we have progressed with this, we will be in a position to consider comments regarding language presented on the student-facing home page.</p>
<p>POLICY NAVIGATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least a searchable e-copy of all policies would be good. • Policy ‘jumps around’ and could be more clearly laid out and navigable. • It was acknowledged that policy documents necessarily have to include all of the information on the subject when only a subsection may be relevant to any student. At very least, good contents listing with links was important • It would be useful to see policies wholly online rather than as a PDF with a navigation bar (although PDFs should also remain). 	<p>At present, the format of policy is being discussed with the website development team, including a web-based version.</p> <p>We have taken on board your comments regarding navigation and will put these forward when making suggestions regarding the webpage design.</p> <p>The current template design includes a clickable contents page and suitable subheadings for navigational purposes.</p>	
<p>Difficulty often lies in defining a ‘general’ OU policy and a departmental policy. For example, in terms of referencing, the Arts modules have a specific policy on how to reference page</p>	<p>The new framework and template include definitions of what is policy and what is guidance to help students understand what they are reading.</p>	

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<p>numbers. These differences can be easily lost. It might be easier to direct a student to their subject area in the first instance.</p>	<p>This feedback has been passed on to faculties since it is outside the scope of this project.</p>	
<p><u>STUDENTHOME AND HELPCENTRE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of links on the left-hand side of StudentHome can be overwhelming and a bit random. It would be useful to categorise these. • Using different colours to highlight links would be helpful. • There was a question about whether StudentHome and the dashboard should be merged. • A short ‘Get to know StudentHome’ video as part of induction should include how and why to find policies. • Policies could be included under a ‘Student Resources’ classification in the same way as ‘Study Resources.’ • There were mixed views about the Help Centre with some finding it an excellent alternative way to access policies and others experiencing difficulties in finding the information needed. 	<p>Feedback regarding StudentHome and Help Centre has been forwarded to relevant teams in Academic Services.</p>	
<p><u>INTERACTIVITY</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The formal interface could be off-putting in a crisis; perhaps some pictures or animation could help. • Worked examples, diagrams and case studies, possibly in different formats or including interactive tools, might help with policy clarity. 	<p>The accompanying style guide will suggest that authors consider more interactive methods of displaying procedural information within their policies. We have requested that such interactivity would be made possible within the new policy webpage.</p>	
<p><u>AUDIENCE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students who work abroad should be remembered. • Policies need to take their students who live outside of the UK more into consideration. • International students sometimes required documentation to show the status of the OU in languages other than English but these appeared to be no longer available. 	<p>The policy templates will include guidance to remind authors to consider the audience they are writing for, including those not living within the UK. A number of questions will be asked to authors, which will help them produce clearer policy.</p>	
<p><u>STUDENT INVOLVEMENT</u></p>	<p>Feedback regarding ALs has been forwarded to relevant teams.</p>	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a small portion of tutorial time to get student input via tutors (others disagreed with this suggestion). • Asking ALs for input based on their knowledge of issues raised with them by students. • Through Students Association representatives, supported by University publicity to improve awareness. For example, enabling Faculty Representatives to post a ‘guest thread’ on qualification forums or module forums as a route for student feedback or publicising reps’ names and contact details on module websites. • Student consultation – opened up to a wider body of students. • Surveys. • Invitation to comment by email. • Student representation on working groups developing policy, and inputting into development of the framework for wider student consultation. This required better facilitation by the University including remote or out-of-hours meetings and student-friendly presentation of issues. • Exploring new methods of hearing from students. • Circulating issues through module teams. • Open dialogue between staff, including tutors, and students, both newer and more experienced to explore issues in detail and understand different perspectives. • Efforts should be made to include a diversity of views from the breadth of the student body. • Smaller changes to policy could be tested with a smaller group of students whereas more significant change should include a larger body of students. • There may be policies where student input was not so important or would not be able to have a great impact, for example implementation of government policies. 	<p>We understand the importance of consulting with students as part of the policy development and review process, and we have included this as a step within the policy framework. Your suggestions regarding methods of involvement have been taken on board when writing this section.</p> <p>We have a member of OUSA on the steering group for the Transforming Student Policy project and have been working with them closely to ensure they are fully involved e.g. in helping organise the student focus groups.</p>	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closing the feedback loop was very important when involving student, especially when decisions appeared to be contrary to the student input received. Evidence was needed that student input had an effect in order to maintain involvement. • There was a balance to be struck between involving experienced and less experienced students in policy-making. Experienced students understood the jargon and knew what to look out for but less experienced students may have more of an eye for what the wider student body's perception and understanding might be. • Students should be involved in how policies are implemented. 		

Date: 20.07.17