

Update on student consultation on Widening Access and Success Policy

This is a response to the consultation on the OU's Widening Access and Success (WAS) Policy which took place between 7th and 21st December 2016 on the Student Consultation Forum. The summary of student feedback is at

https://learn1.open.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/400404/mod_forumng/attachment/1074945/Consultation-on-WAS-summary.pdf.

Students were asked to consider how they felt about the current groups that the OU identifies as requiring additional support to access and be successful in HE; whether targets were appropriate for these groups and whether the OU should be prioritising other groups in the next WAS policy.

The feedback received has been considered as part of the wider consultation with colleagues across the OU by the WAS Steering Group and is helping to frame the new WAS policy.

There is an obvious tension between the need of the institution to use demographic data to identify differences in access and success and the need to treat students as individuals at the point of enquiry. It was generally felt that the identified groups potentially exclude some students who require additional support and include others that don't. The consultation also revealed a concern over the use of quotas for particular groups of students.

Issues were raised regarding multiple characteristics that some students may present and students questioned whether the groups that have been identified in the past were appropriate. This is something that the WAS team at the OU have been exploring, as one of the areas that the UK government are keen for institutions to acknowledge is what they term 'multiple factors of disadvantage'. As a result of this, work is being undertaken with the data modelling team at the OU, to investigate this in relation to OU students. The aim is to identify the main factors that appear to affect attainment with a view to targeting any institutional response to those specific factors.

There was concern over the use of targets and a perception that targets were seen as a quota to fill rather than a way of providing equality of opportunity. The OU sets a target for the recruitment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in line with government requirements to encourage students from these backgrounds to enter in higher education (HE). We have consistently met and exceeded this recruitment target and we monitor the data to ensure that the numbers do not drop below the baseline figure set at 2010-11 prior to changes to fees and funding. This is the only external target that the OU sets but we do measure attainment of groups of students including BME and disabled students. This enables the OU to identify where there are issues that may need addressing although it does not offer a solution as to how to overcome them.

The feedback from this student consultation and wider university will be collated and a draft policy document developed that enables the OU to meet government requirements and reflects the needs of individuals rather than the perceived needs of a group. It is intended that the policy will identify specific

actions to be progressed through the establishment of small working groups with a view to exploring and piloting approaches to support student success. These actions will be captured in an action plan which will sit alongside the main policy document. The more detailed feedback received from the student consultation will be considered as actions are identified and developed.

The policy will be presented to the WAS Steering Group in July and circulated within the University. It will then be taken through the formal governance processes of the University for approval in autumn 2017.

Date: 28th April 2017