

The Open University (OU) and the Open University Students Association Partnership Agreement

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1. About this Agreement

This Partnership Agreement between the OU and OU Students Association is a statement of intent that each party is committed to honour and sets out how we will work together.

Our shared values are set out in the Student Charter.

This agreement refers to students, which includes all students directly registered with the OU across four nations and internationally, undergraduate, taught and research postgraduates. It does not encompass learners who are studying micro-credentials or students registered with partner institutions. It complies with the statutory requirements for the Code of Practice under Section 22(3) of the Education Act 1994.

This agreement will be reviewed annually. Any changes to this Agreement or anything covered by it must be agreed by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) of the OU and the OU Students Association President and submitted for approval by the Council of The Open University every two years.

2. Background

Clause 18 of The Open University's Charter says that 'there shall be an organisation of students of the University whose constitution, powers and funding shall be prescribed by Ordinance'. This requirement led to an Ordinance establishing the Open University Students Association.

Following incorporation on 1 August 2019, the OU Students Association's governing document is its Articles of Association, which have taken the place of its constitution. The Charter and Ordinance still refer to a constitution and require updating at their next review point.

At its Conference in June 2024, the OU Students Association voted to rebrand as the Open University Student Union (OpenSU). This had not been implemented at the time of the 2024 review and will therefore be changed in future updates. The Articles of Association and Charter and Ordinance continue to refer to the OU Students' Association.

3. Our vision: a student-centred strategic partnership

Students are at the centre of the partnership between the OU and the OU Students Association. We share a commitment to developing and improving the student experience, working towards improved outcomes, equity and sustainability; and we ensure each party can contribute to the strategic direction of both organisations.

The OU is a unique university, operating in all four nations of the United Kingdom and around the world. The OU and the OU Students Association acknowledge and value the breadth of experiences and circumstances of all OU students, as well as the differences across our four nations and beyond.

We aim to embed the principles of this Agreement in the development of University strategies, policies, procedures, programmes and projects that relate to the student experience and success.

We are committed to securing the University's mission of being open to people, places, methods and ideas; and to promoting the University's values of being inclusive, innovative and responsive.

We work together to achieve the OU Students Association's objectives for the advancement of OU students' education, as set out in their Articles of Association, by:

- defending the principles of equal opportunity and of open access to the Open University regardless of academic qualifications or financial circumstances;
- promoting the interests and welfare of students at the Open University during their course of study and representing and supporting students;
- acknowledging the OU Students Association as the recognised representative channel between Students and the Open University and any other external bodies;
- asserting that all students studying with the Open University have the right to have their views heard and acknowledged by the Open University; and
- supporting the OU Students Association's role in providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its students.

We jointly ensure that the OU Students Association operates in a fair and democratic manner and is **accountable** for its finances.

The OU and the OU Students Association have a shared commitment to **equality, diversity and inclusion** as outlined in the Student Charter.

4. How our relationship works

The OU and the OU Students Association work in partnership but are separate organisations with our own distinctive roles – this is understood and valued by both parties.

- The OU provides an academic community for students across four nations and beyond, enabling equitable learning and advancing knowledge and understanding through research, providing a high-quality student experience and ensuring every student is supported to achieve their goals.
- The OU Students Association is focused on building an inclusive, vibrant and engaged student community, providing relevant, quality services which enhance the student experience, and a strong, diverse and representative, student voice throughout the University and beyond.

Our **independence** as separate organisations with distinct roles may sometimes lead to differences of views. When this occurs, both parties recognise the benefits of working together to resolve those differences wherever possible as part of an ongoing healthy partnership based on **respect and understanding**.

We believe that an effective working relationship is based on full, open and regular two-way communication, and our values set out in the Student Charter.

In order to build and sustain a culture of **openness and trust**, we share a commitment to approach matters jointly wherever possible, discussing concerns and agreeing actions wherever possible.

The OU and the OU Students Association both recognise that we can fulfil our roles more effectively if we work together to support students with **mutual support and commitment**.

We commit to dedicating the necessary time and resources to build effective formal and informal relationships and to work together on key priorities such as effective student representation, Student Consultation and the Student Charter.

5. Supporting OU Students Association operations

The OU and the OU Students Association work together to ensure that the Association is fair, democratic and accountable; and is resourced by the OU to engage with its members, to foster a vibrant student community and to promote student interests.

The OU Students Association operates under Articles of Association approved by the OU Council. The Articles of Association set out the objects and powers of the Association, the rights of members, and the processes for electing officers, making decisions and conducting business. The Association will review its Articles of Association at least every five years, subject to approval by the Council, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

A. Opting out of membership

All Open University students are members of the OU Students Association, unless they have chosen to opt out. A student who opts out of OU Students Association membership is not entitled to participate in its decision making processes or to stand for office or a representative position. However, the OU Students Association undertakes to allow access for students who are non-members to all other OU Students Association facilities, including participation in societies, welfare provision and commercial activities.

B. Budgets and resources

The OU and the OU Students Association operate a procedure for **funding** an Association budget that provides reasonable resources to enable it to carry out its plans and conduct its activities in an effective, efficient and economic manner. This procedure includes:

- confirmation that the planned activities are within OU Students Association objects, have been properly arrived at within its rules and are consistent with the plans set out in its Annual Report;

- ensuring that the resources are sufficient to enable the OU Students Association to meet its formal obligations and any exceptional requirements that are agreed between the OU and the OU Students Association;
- a procedure to be followed in the event that any variation in the budget is sought by either party;
- a mechanism to be utilised for discussing and agreeing new services and other activities which may be initiated by either party.

The OU will provide access to resources to the OU Students Association in kind or without charge to support their operational needs, for example, currently, to: payroll, office and meeting accommodation, telephone and IT systems, technical and some human resources support.

The OU Students Association must satisfy the OU that it has in place appropriate and robust systems of financial management and control, including a regular forecast of income and expenditure.

The OU Students Association has written procedures for allocating resources to its registered groups and affiliated societies that are seen to be fair and reasonable. The existence and availability of such procedures will be published on the OU Students Association website.

The Council will approve each year the University's overall budget, which will include the allocation to the OU Students Association determined in accordance with this clause.

C. Annual report to Council

The Annual Report to Council is the means by which the OU Students Association reports on its activities for the year and formally satisfies its members and the OU Council that it is operating fairly and democratically, and is accountable for how it has managed and used its resources. The report will be published on the OU Students Association's website.

In addition, the Annual Report to Council must include:

- I. A formal statement by the Chief Executive and President that any elections held during the period covered by the report have been conducted fairly and in accordance with the requirements of governance arrangements;
- II. A report on the OU Students Association activities during the period covered, including how its work for the year has taken account of the breadth of experiences and circumstances of all OU students, as well as the diversity of and differences in the four UK nations;
- III. Audited accounts and a financial report for the period, which shall be presented to the University's Finance Committee before being presented to Council, and which include:
 - a list of the external organisations to which the OU Students Association has made donations (if any) and details of those donations;
 - where the OU Students Association is currently affiliated to any external organisations, a list of these external organisations (if any) and details of subscriptions or similar fees paid, or donations made, to such organisations;
 - if the OU Students Association decides to affiliate to an external organisation, a notice of its decision stating the name of the organisation and details of any subscriptions or similar fees paid or proposed to be paid, and of any donations made or proposed to be made to them.

D. Complaints about the OU Students Association

The OU Students Association will provide a complaints procedure for any student who wishes to raise a complaint or concern about any aspect of the Association's operation or services. If the OU Students Association process has been exhausted, a complaint may be made to the OU under the procedure set out on the Student Complaints and Appeals website by a student or groups of students who are dissatisfied in their dealings with the OU Students Association, or who claim to be unfairly disadvantaged because of exercising their right to opt out of membership.

E. Communicating with OU Students Association members

The OU undertakes to provide the OU Students Association with access to OU systems and student data to enable communication with its members in compliance with relevant legislation. This includes the ability to send electronic communications to all of its members or any section of them, access to forums and other relevant platforms to enable the OU Students Association and its members to communicate with each other. Details are covered in the Data Sharing Agreement between the OU and the OU Students Association.

F. Promotion of the OU Students Association

The OU recognises the value of having a strong and independent representative body for its students. It actively promotes the role of the OU Students Association with staff, students and enquirers. This includes distribution of OU Students Association promotional material with module packs and hosting or signposting a comprehensive website that supports the fulfilment of the OU Students Association's objectives.

6. Supporting Student Representation

The Open University and the OU Students Association have a shared commitment to effective student representation. The OU values the OU Students Association, led by students for students, as the single official representative body for the student voice both within the OU and externally.

Elected officers and other representatives of the OU Students Association are protected by and subject to student policies and codes of practice, regardless of whether or not they are current students of the University as defined by the academic regulations.

A. Executive partnering

The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) and the OU Students Association President are the senior representatives of the OU and the OU Students Association respectively who are responsible for managing the development of the relationship between the organisations.

To support partnership working, opportunities will be provided for regular meetings between OU Students Association staff and members of the Student Leadership Team and their counterparts in the senior management of the OU. Meetings should take place where it is of mutual benefit, or of benefit to the wider student body.

The OU and the OU Students Association will also work together proactively to respond to sector developments across the four nations to advocate for OU students and ensure OU students are considered in policymaking and implementation.

B. Appointment to OU Committees

The OU Students Association has the right to appoint members of the Council and the Senate as set out in the OU Charter and Ordinances; and to appoint members to any committee whose terms of reference affect the student experience. The number and qualification of such members will be approved by the Council or the Senate as appropriate and set out in the Terms of Reference for that committee. Student representatives will be included on all senior executive appointment panels as standard.

C. Status of OU Students Association appointees

An OU Students Association appointed member will be a full member of a committee, with the same rights and responsibilities as any other full member, as set out in the applicable Standing Orders and Codes of Conduct.

The OU and OU Students Association will provide induction, training and ongoing support for OU Students Association appointed members to ensure that they are prepared for their role as a member of an OU committee and to enable them to make a full and effective contribution.

All student members of OU Committees will be entitled to claim reasonable expenses for in-person attendance where appropriate and to access the papers they need to be an effective student representative.

More information about how the OU and OU Students Association work together to ensure effective student representation, enable sharing of papers, and endeavour to overcome any barriers to student participation in committees is set out in the Code of Practice for Student Representation on OU Committees.

D. Student representation beyond governance

Whenever the OU conducts business relating to aspects of the student experience through a project, working group or informal committee, it is expected that students will be represented on the relevant group. The OU Students Association will support an agreed mechanism for allocating students to participate in that work or advising of alternative ways of seeking student voice, such as Student Consultation or the OU Students Association's Student Voice Forum.

All such meetings, working groups or project/programme groups where there is student representation will include provision for student representatives to physically attend any 'in person' or hybrid meetings, in parity with OU staff, including covering reasonable expenses with prior agreement.

We recognise that in many cases remote attendance at hybrid or online events will be most accessible for students and every effort will be made to organise activities on this basis or offer alternative, equitable modes of engagement, with individual student circumstances taken into consideration. Participation in the meetings will be supported through timely production and circulation of any papers to be considered.

7. Engaging students in quality enhancement

The Open University and the OU Students Association have a shared commitment to authentic student engagement in University decision-making going beyond effective student representation within our governance structures. We commit to building partnership between staff and students, to ensuring that the student voice is heard throughout the University and to closing the feedback loop. We aim to ensure that the student voice is engaged in a dialogue at every level of the decision-making processes in both organisations and that the outcomes are widely communicated.

A. Student Engagement and Satisfaction Steering Group

The Student Engagement and Satisfaction Steering Group (SESSG) provides overall guidance and strategic direction for student engagement in quality enhancement activities, including student representation, Student Consultation, partnership activities and student feedback, as well as monitoring and addressing student satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

SESSG is jointly chaired by the OU Students Association President and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) and operated on partnership principles.

B. Student Consultation

The OU maintains formal processes to consult with and engage students that have been agreed jointly between the OU and OU Students Association. These processes include arrangements for consultation with and through OU Students Association representatives, and for direct Student Consultation with the wider student body. The OU Students Association acknowledges that such consultation is with the wider student body and is represented on the Student Consultation Management Group, which is a partnership between the OU and the OU Students Association and oversees Student Consultation.

C. Quality processes

Students play a key role in the OU's internal quality processes, and there is close working between the OU and the OU Students Association in this area. For example in Periodic Quality Reviews, student reviewers are appointed as well as students contributing to the review more broadly.

8. Building an inclusive, equitable student community

The Open University and the OU Students Association have a shared commitment to building an inclusive, vibrant student community based on the values set out in the Student Charter. We work together to promote an environment where staff and students treat each other with dignity and respect, where bullying and harassment is challenged and reported, and where we proactively remove barriers to success.

The OU and the OU Students Association are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech which are fundamental to university life; and encourage the use of OU facilities for a wide range of internal and external events and activities.

Both the OU and the OU Students Association agree to comply with the Code of Practice for Open University Events which ensures that OU events are compliant with the Prevent (Counter-Terrorism) Duty, Equality and Diversity, and Health and Safety legislation, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech and) Act 2023 and the OU's Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom.

9. Our partnership commitments for 2024/25

We are committed to working closely together to ensure that there is collaboration on both organisations' strategic priorities and on the new Student Leadership Team's priorities where possible. The priorities on which the OU and OU Students Association have agreed to work together are updated annually and are detailed below:

A. Student Voice

We will implement the Student Voice Action Plan including demonstrating impact and closing the feedback loop; listening to and engaging marginalised and under-represented students; and working to increase survey response rates.

We will work closely to ensure student representatives are in the right place and supported and empowered to be effective, while promoting alternatives where appropriate.

We will work together to advocate for best practice in teaching delivery to create a consistent academic experience and ensure students are consulted and involved in work related to activities such as the Future of Learning and Assessment, Campus 2030, improving equitable student outcomes and the Student Services Portfolio.

B. Student community and wellbeing

We will continue to promote a sense of belonging, community and engagement across the OU community, working together on sustainability priorities, and to increase the profile and impact of the Student Charter.

C. An equitable student experience

We will work in partnership to promote equality, diversity, inclusion and accessibility across both organisations, for example collaborating on initiatives such as Black History Month, World Mental Health Day and Disability History Month, embedding the Access, Participation and Success strategy, and removing barriers. This term the Association are particularly focused on understanding and campaigning for improvements to the neurodivergent student experience.

D. Beyond the OU

We will continue to work together to respond to sector developments and influence governments across the four nations, to ensure OU students are considered in policy-making and implementation.

We will work together to promote the Disabled Student Commitment, to influence developments around the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and to ensure OU and OU Students Association policies and procedures are compliant with legislation and guidance around freedom of speech and academic freedom.

Document Information

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