

# Engaging students as partners from a distance

## The Open University Curriculum Design Student Panel

In July 2016, the Learning and Teaching Innovation portfolio at The Open University launched its first Curriculum Design Student Panel as part of a partnership approach to student engagement in the development of learning and teaching activities, tools and services. The panel consists of 461 students from across a range of faculties who have volunteered to take part in up to four activities a year.

In both the 2014/15 Student Consultation round and the first OU Staff-Student Hack Day in January 2016, students enthusiastically expressed their desire to be involved in curriculum and learning design. Similarly, academic related staff in both IET and Translation expressed a desire to be able to work with students more directly and easily in the early development of activities, materials and tools, in both a planned and ad hoc way.

Students can volunteer to take part in activities such as workshops, surveys, and various kinds of usability and experience testing. The interaction is very much intended to mimic face-to-face student-teacher informal discussions. Activities are run face-to-face, through OU Live, and via the panel's We Learn workspace.

Partnerships with students in curriculum development give the OU the chance to co-create and co-design engaging learning and teaching experiences with them. For students it provides the opportunity to have a direct impact on early development work and to experience professional engagement with a large institution, which may be used as evidence of collaborative professional experience in portfolios, job applications or continuing professional development.

## Outcomes

So far, members of the 2016/17 panel have completed an in depth survey on their Study Behaviours and Hacks for the OpenCreate project, taken part in focus groups on both Accessibility Policy and Learning Design, tested the workload on parts of DD310 Counselling and forensic psychology, contributed to the definition of themes for E309 Comparative studies in primary education, and completed usability testing of the U116 Carbon Calculator prototype, as well as the Open Degree calculator prototype.

## Students have shared feedback that highlights the value of this kind of engagement:

*I really enjoyed participation. As a student on my last psychology module and as a trained counsellor it was interesting to preview material for a new module and see how the Open University estimate the time it takes to complete reading and activities.*

*Thank you for such an interesting and engaging session today. It was very well organised and I think demonstrated how seriously OU students take their studies.*

Students who attended a face-to-face session contributed a wealth of ideas and insights into their own learning, for example:

*Can the work be split into bite size pieces? Attention goes stale after about 20 mins...*

*Can students be told explicitly from day one how to extract the course material to get a distinction?*

*Could students be asked to do a variety of assignments/tasks rather than an even number of TMAs that are all about 2000 words? Variety may boost motivation, and it is vocational.*

## Lessons learnt / top tips

Engaging students in curriculum design – at a distance – can be logistically tricky! Ensuring ad hoc activities are kept to a minimum of 45 minutes to an hour ensures that they can take part in depth, without worrying about lost study time.

Students given the chance to visit Walton Hall campus will jump at it if arrangements can be made.

Activities need to be planned carefully to take into account clashes with assessment periods or times of high workload, especially when targeting a cohort from within a particular qualification area.

An evaluation of the approach taken by the Student Curriculum Design Panel to engage students, including lessons learned, will be available in May 2017.

