

KAREN FOLEY: Hello and welcome back to Student Hub Live. Well, this session is called Making sure your Student Voice is heard. And I am joined by Fanni Zombor, who is the Vice President for Engagement for the Students Association, one of your elected student representatives. And James Mooney, who is the Access Participation and Success Manager for The Open University in Scotland. And Rachel Garnham, who is a Senior Manager for Student Voice in the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students). So welcome today.

We started today with Liz Marr, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Students, talking to us about Student Voice and why that was so important. So Rachel, can I start by asking you, what does that actually mean in terms of Student Voice? And why is it so important to the University? What will they do with it?

RACHEL GARNHAM: So Student Voice, how we describe it at the OU, is the multitude of different ways that students can get involved in changing the student experience. So, everything from completing a survey to telling us whether your experience with the Help Centre was helpful, right up to sitting on a committee, taking part in an online forum-based consultation. Or, working directly with staff on a project to improve the student experience.

And the reason it's so important is because only students really know what it's like to be a student. So it's really important that we hear from students how they're getting on with their student experience, where we could make a difference.

One of the main priorities for The Open University is making sure that all our students get the right opportunities to meet their study goals. And, we need to know how they want to do that, whether their student experience is working for them. And that's why it's really important for us to hear those views. But there's also benefits in terms of helping students feel part of a community and, also, some new skills to be learned from being involved in Student Voice activities.

KAREN FOLEY: Now we've heard from some colleagues, Rachel, today. Zoe was telling us about the VLE and online rooms. And we heard about ways that you could just use that little feedback when you were on your module website to tell us what you thought of something. We've also heard about various forums and areas people can get involved. But there is a specific Student Voice Week. So what makes that different, then, from the normal way in which we want students to contribute?

RACHEL GARNHAM: So there are opportunities all year round to be involved in these things. So, as you've pointed out, on the website, clicking a box or just filling in a survey. In Student Voice Week, there's going to be a whole load more other opportunities to get involved in different activities, be it some online conferencing, where you'll get to talk about, maybe, how your assessment practise works. Or how your tuition's going for you. Or different forums that'll pop up. There'll be some events on social media that people get involved in.

And we're bringing a lot of different activities, trying out some new things. And really want to hear from a diversity of students. Whether people have just started it, or whether they've been studying for six years or more, and reaching the end of their journey, everyone's got something to offer. And even if it's from the tiniest thing to the biggest thing that you'd really like The Open University to change and to do, there'll be opportunities to get involved in lots

of different things, different times of the day, online, and either a particular time or throughout the course of the week. Really excited about that opportunity.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So am I. Because we're going to have a Student Hub Live, Student Voice part of the week, because we'd like to know what students would like from us here. But there are other things, Rachel, aren't there, that people can suggest if they'd like some sort of discussion? Because it sounds to me that these are like focus discussions around particular areas. So you may not necessarily need to have a say. But you think, ah, I want to go and talk about assessments or tutorials, because I've done some of those things. So students could feed in. But they could also feed ideas about topics for discussion, couldn't they?

RACHEL GARNHAM: Yes. It's really important to us that students get involved in setting the agenda for our Student Voice activities. It's not just about what the University wants to hear from you. It's what do you think we should be changing? So yes, we're really looking for ideas from students about what they want to be involved in, and what sort of channels would suit students. Because we know that some people prefer to type. Some people prefer to talk. What times of day? That sort of thing. We'd love to hear from students about that and what sort -

KAREN FOLEY: And how do students tell us those things? How will they tell us those things, Rachel?

RACHEL GARNHAM: Well we're hoping they'll put some in the chat box here today. But they can also look at our Student Voice website. And we can have some opportunities there to make sure they can get in touch with us. And yeah, we'll be rolling out a whole programme of activity that people should look out for.

KAREN FOLEY: I'll tell you what they'll say, Rachel. They'll say, we're going to have a conversation about whether Jaffa Cakes are a type of cake or not. So that sort of conversation comes up, what are you going to do?

RACHEL GARNHAM: Well, we'd like them to talk specifically about their student experience. Because sadly, in this online world, we're not able to dictate biscuit choice or cake choice, indeed. But you know, we'd like to hear, you know, about tuition, about assessment, about online module materials, about the materials, how we communicate with students and whether that's working for them. And there's so many different aspects to the student experience that, yeah, we'd love to hear from students what they want to talk about and want to talk to us. Particularly for students who are just starting out. We'd love to hear, you know, how was that initial experience? Are you ready for study? Did we help you get ready for studies? Lots of different things we'd like to do.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Excellent. Well put those ideas in the chat, except the biscuits idea. But you can talk about that now if you'd like to. But, let us know if there's something that you think would be a really worthwhile topic. And if you don't want to put that in the chat now, but it comes to you in the middle of the night - which often, my best ideas do - you can email [studenthub@open.ac.uk](mailto:studenthub@open.ac.uk), and we'll ping that right over to Rachel's team.

So Fanni, I wonder if I could come to you now and talk a little bit about some of the ways that you've been involved? And also, some of the ways that other students can be involved in getting their voices heard.

FANNI ZOMBOR: So I think, for me, the main thing about Student Voice is that there has to be a variety of - because Rachel spoke about it as well - a variety of ways for people to be involved. And before I got elected, I was also still involved. And that included things like being on a conference organising committee, which meant that I could make sure that we had places funded for students to actually attend the conference that we were organising. Because obviously, our students are not all based around campus.

Another really good way is being a representative on University committees, which you can apply for every year. It's a relatively small commitment. It's about three to four days a year. Plus, training. And you get to really have a say in all the nitty gritty bits and find out everything that's going on within your qualifications.

You can also attend student consultative meetings, which James will obviously talk more about. But I think it's been a main highlight for me every time I got involved, because it actually means that you get to be together with other students, real time in normal times. But also, the forum allows you to dip in and out as you want to. So just to mention some of those.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Lots of different options. So you've been involved with those. How has it benefited you personally?

FANNI ZOMBOR: I think when I've started three years ago, you could say I was quite shy. Now nobody would say that, because I've stopped being shy. I think it really teaches you that if you want to make a difference, then if you speak up, and it is possible, then the OU, or the Association obviously, will do anything to, kind of, make it happen and listen to your voice. And even if they can't, then obviously, they will let you know why it's not possible at this time or consider it for the future.

And I think, especially when you're sitting on a committee, there is so many kind of complex papers, if you're going into the world of work, then it does provide you with a lot of skills in that way as well. And you know, you just get to, kind of, find out about everything that's going on. And if you're a nosy person, it's quite good to be part of that community.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. We've been asking people at home what sorts of activities they would like to see at Student Voice Week. So, let's take a look and see what ideas they've had. Top of the list here is mental health. That is a subject very close to many of our hearts. And it's something we're going to be talking about in the next, but next, session from here. So do stay tuned.

But there are other things here. Study tips. A virtual Halloween. So ideas about things that could be done. Jaffa Cakes. okay, yeah. Study advice, stress relief, projects guiding, networking, about forums, a Zoom party, club activities, a tips swap night. That's a brilliant idea. Discord servers. Writing, carriers, Society of the Future. HJ, any other ideas coming through in the chat from people?

HJ: Well, I just think the ideas about having a virtual Halloween is absolutely fantastic. I was a bit worried that Halloween wasn't going to be as good this year. But I think if we have a

virtual Halloween and everyone in the chat joins, it's going to be absolutely amazing. But we do reckon - we have some suggestions. Mainly, they revolve about having modules on cake. And we also reckon that there should be a degree on procrastination. But the problem is, the massive procrastinators will never enrol on it. So there's no point is there?

KAREN FOLEY: No there isn't. I love the idea of a virtual Halloween party. Tell me more about that and we'll see if there's a way, in some way, in the University of making something like that happen. Sounds much better than Halloweens here, always raining. So I always hate going out. But I guess one of the benefits of being stuck inside is we could maybe, be dry. So let us know about that.

James, I wonder if you can tell us more about the student consultation? Because this is another really interesting way that students can get involved in something. Sounds a bit sort of formal and stuff. What is a student consultation and why is it good to be a part of it?

JAMES MOONEY: Yeah, of course. Well, student consultations are just one of many ways in which students can get involved. And they tend to take place during the springtime each year. And there's a mixture of face-to-face consultation events, and online consultation events. And I was lucky enough, back in March this year - lost track of what's happening this year. But back in March -

KAREN FOLEY: I know, I know. It's nearly over.

JAMES MOONEY: Well, just before lockdown, we were lucky enough to have an event in Glasgow with around twenty OU students who travelled from all around Scotland. And it was brilliant to be able to meet them face-to-face. It was fantastic that they gave up the time to come and talk to us and make things better for themselves, and for everyone else.

And there was a mixture of students who were brand new to the OU, and some of whom had been studying with us for a huge amount of time. And they came together with some OU in Scotland staff, including art director, Susan Stewart, some Students Association staff and representatives. We had lunch and we had discussions on a range of different topics. A couple of the main ones were on tuition.

So we really wanted to find out more about what students felt about tuition and how it could be made better. And about the ways in which the OU communicates with its students. And we got some absolutely fantastic feedback at that event. And it was really meaningful and will really feed into changing things for everyone.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Now those are topics that, I guess, make sense. You'd expect to see those as topics for conversation. But James, I wonder if you could tell us about something that was key on that word cloud, mental health. Because in the nations, we often pick specific projects or things that we want to pilot in different areas of the UK. Or we look at particular need. Now you've been doing some really interesting work around mental health and the mental health strategy in Scotland. Can you tell briefly about that? And again, why that dialogue with students has helped implement some of those ideas.

JAMES MOONEY: Yeah, I can. So, up here in Scotland, in the OU, we have a Student Mental Health Agreement that we're due to be launching next month on World Mental Health Day, appropriately. And it's really, really important to us, that, that agreement was the result

of partnership working between ourselves, The Open University in Scotland, our Students Association, and with NUS Scotland as well.

And it really helped to have the student voice in there right from the very beginning. So that we're sure that the objectives that we're working towards are the things that people really need and the things that people are really, really interested in. So, with so much more of a meaningful exercise with that involvement, all the way through, in a true kind of partnership.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. That sounds absolutely amazing. Thank you so much. And students can find out more about the student consultation and Student Voice. Rachel, can you just sort of highlight again where students might find that? And the one thing I wanted to end with, Rachel, was to ask, you know, now that you've seen this word cloud of, may I say, excellent ideas - although they are talking about the merits of virtual apple bobbing now for Halloween. But we did have some wonderful ideas there. What are you going to do with some of those ideas? And again, how can students reconnect with both the Student Voice Week and student consultations James has been focusing on?

RACHEL GARNHAM: Yeah. So all the opportunities that we offer to be involved as, sort of, Fanni outlined, just from the tiniest to committing quite a few hours to work in partnership projects, we offer through the Student Voice website, which, if students click on the Community tab on Student Home, that'll give you a link into the Student Voice website.

So not only do we have opportunities on there. We also explain our approach overall. And we also - we close the feedback loop so students can tell that, actually, what they've said, has made a difference with a whole series of 'you said, we did's' from across the departments, which say, because you told us this, we have changed that. And it will make a difference to improve the student experience.

So I'm really excited to look at the word cloud to see what people have proposed. Really interesting. We have consulted on how we support students better with mental health before. And we will definitely want to do so again. Because we want to know if what we're doing works, and only students can tell us if what we're offering works for them. So, yeah. Really looking forward to that. And, and interesting that some of the community ideas are coming through as well. Because the OU, although we are all over the world, all over the UK, we are a community of students and staff. And it'll be nice to really underline that during Student Voice Week. And I think that's a great opportunity to do that.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well Rachel, James and Fanni, thank you so much for coming along. Fanni, we're going to talk about opportunity to get involved with the OU Students Association in the next session. So I'm going to claw back a bit of time, due to our technical gremlins today. But thank you all so much. It's been a really, really interesting session.

I hope you at home realise, not only the importance that your voice has, but also how you can get involved and let us know what you think. In particular, if you're brand new to The Open University, we'd love to hear from you. So, any thoughts, any feedback on that. But also, any ideas, do email [studenthub@open.ac.uk](mailto:studenthub@open.ac.uk).