



Quality Enhancement Review of The Open University

Outcome Report

March 2021

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About the Quality Enhancement Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Quality Enhancement Review \(QER\)](#) and has links to the QER handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find more information about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).²

About this review

This is the draft Outcome Report of the QER conducted by QAA at The Open University. The review took place as follows: First Team Visit on 16 February 2021 and Review Visit on 15 to 19 March 2021. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Professor Gary Campbell (Reviewer)
- Ms Lesley Davis (Reviewer)
- Associate Professor Christine M Jones (Reviewer)
- Emeritus Professor Diane Meehan (Reviewer)
- Dr Oliver Wannell (Student Reviewer).

QAA reviews are evidence-based processes. Review judgements result from the documents review teams see, the meetings they hold, and drawing upon their experience as peer reviewers and student reviewers.

In this report, and based on the information presented, the QER team makes judgements on:

- the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) Part 1 for internal quality assurance
- the relevant baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.

It is possible for the overarching judgement to be expressed in three levels which indicate whether the provider 'meets these requirements', 'meets them with conditions', or 'does not meet requirements'. More detail on these categories is provided in the QER Handbook.

The overarching judgement for this report can be found on page 4, followed by any commendations, affirmations and recommendations.

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review.³ The Technical Report sets out the team's findings under each heading in the QER method.

¹ About QER: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us

³ Technical Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Open-University

About The Open University

The mission of The Open University (OU) is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, and aims to reach more students with life-changing learning through inclusivity, innovation and responsiveness. The OU is unique in operating in all four nations of the UK and is distinctive among higher education providers in providing a flexible distance-based model of supported open learning that enables students to integrate their learning with their other work and life commitments.

The OU was founded in 1969 and has since taught 2.1 million students. In 2018-19 there were 168,116 students - 118,027 directly-registered students studying at undergraduate level; 9565 directly-registered students studying at taught postgraduate level; 38,526 students studying in partner organisations for undergraduate and taught postgraduate qualifications validated by the OU; and 910 directly-registered and Affiliated Research Centre students.

Alongside its named undergraduate qualifications, the University continues to offer its long-standing Open degree within which students can choose modules from across the undergraduate curriculum, subject to credit and progression rules, to create a unique blend of subject knowledge. OU collaborative provision (validated, collaborative, collaborative presentation and collaborative research degrees) provides wider access to higher education and broadens the University's curriculum.

There are currently 1096 OU academic staff, around 4000 associate lecturers (ALs) and practice tutors, 1953 academic-related staff and 1575 support staff. Almost three-quarters of academic staff are located at the OU's headquarters in Milton Keynes - where most of the University's administrative and support staff are based and where qualifications and modules are planned, with the assistance of some homeworkers and staff working in other OU offices.

While many students study for 60 credits in a year, there is an increasing number of students studying at higher intensity (defined as between 90 and 120 credits per year). Work to implement a robust, flexible, study-intensity model - making it easier for students to vary their rate of progress through their qualifications - is part of the student success initiatives and a range of resources has been developed to enable staff and students to support these students.

Major changes since the last review include: the re-organisation of the OU into four faculties - the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL), the Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS), with schools within each faculty; an increase in learning analytics to understand more fully the factors that drive retention and progression for OU students that are also used within the annual monitoring process; recent changes to OU regulations to enable student success to be recognised more effectively; further comprehensive mapping against the newly-revised Quality Code for Higher Education; compliance with the new Welsh Language Standards regulations; the reconfiguration of national and regional centres; the development of an institution-wide Graduate School; the establishment of Scholarship Centres in all faculties, following the model of the OU Centre for STEM Pedagogy (eSTEEeM); the introduction of a new Quality Monitoring and Enhancement (QME) process; and the development of degree apprenticeships.

Key challenges identified by the University include the need to work within the changing regulations of the four nations, to update the curriculum, and to use data more effectively to enhance teaching and learning, and support access to enable greater student success.

The University has extensive collaborative provision arrangements that include partnerships with other degree-awarding providers through collaborative curriculum and collaborative presentation and Doctoral Training Partnerships.

The University was last reviewed by QAA in December 2015 under the Higher Education Review (HER) methodology and received a positive judgement in all areas. There were five features of good practice, three recommendations and seven affirmations. A HER Action Plan was approved by the Academic Quality and Governance Committee (AQGC) in February 2016, and by the Students' Association Central Executive Committee in March 2016. It was published on the OU public website on 20 May 2016, and work was undertaken against the Action Plan throughout 2016 and 2017, with progress reports and an action tracker considered regularly by AQGC.

A full report/action tracker was presented to AQGC in October 2017 to reflect progress to date, particularly in light of recent changes to the University's structures and processes. The report indicated that the three recommendations had been addressed and that actions relating to three of the five features of good practice and six of the seven affirmations had been completed or were near completion.

In May 2019, AQGC received a final progress report confirming that the action regarding the outstanding affirmation had been concluded and provided further explanation of developments in relation to the two remaining features of good practice. Further action on the second example of good practice was subsumed into the 'Student Learning Adjustments Strategy' (SLAS) programme in January 2020.

Judgements about The Open University

Based on the information presented, the review team judges that:

- The Open University **meets** the requirements of the ESG Part 1 for internal quality assurance
- The Open University **meets** the relevant baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.

This is a positive judgement, which means the provider has robust arrangements for securing academic standards, managing academic quality and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

Commendations

The QER has identified several commendations, which are summarised below.

- The flexible and effective provision of Access modules that prepare a diverse range of students for higher education study methods (paragraph 58).
- The effective approach to the engagement and support of staff in delivering the mission of the University, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the provision of online seminars and training (paragraph 59).
- The strategic, proactive and effective use of data which enhances learning and teaching, supports access, and underpins the delivery of the University's mission to enable greater student success (paragraph 80).
- The comprehensive and effective support provided by the University to its partners, that assures and enhances its collaborative provision (paragraph 155).

Affirmations

The QER has identified two affirmations, which are summarised below.

- The action being taken to develop the virtual learning environment that improves accessibility and supports an enhanced digital teaching and learning experience (paragraph 64).
- The action being taken to develop and formalise the processes that will support the establishment, management and oversight of Curriculum Partnerships and ensure consistency across all faculties (paragraph 151).

Recommendations

The QER makes several recommendations. The review team recommends that the provider:

- Revises the use of the Relationship Agreement, in order to enable student representatives to communicate the closing of feedback loops more readily with the student body (paragraph 45).
- Works with the Students' Association to develop and implement an effective mechanism for capturing and responding to the postgraduate research student voice (paragraph 46).

- Ensures the timely delivery of teaching materials in alternative formats so that students who require them are not disadvantaged (paragraph 51).
- Confirms its future intentions to deliver a digital pedagogy and clearly communicates the future accessibility of learning resources to existing and prospective students (paragraph 77).

Further information

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) will also be available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the team's findings under each heading in the QER method.

This review and its findings relate to the provider as a whole and do not supply information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the provider or [visit its website](#).

Further information about QAA and QER can be found on the [QAA website](#).

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