Guidance for Athena SWAN Assessment Panels on Open University submissions

The Open University (OU) provides flexible open and distance learning that delivers nearly 200 qualifications and 400 modules, and as such the OU’s model of teaching, staffing structure and student body are different from that of a conventional university. This guidance gives additional background information to assist Athena SWAN panels in completing their assessment of OU submissions.

The Open University has its headquarters in Milton Keynes with national offices in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, and student support/administrative centres in Manchester and Nottingham. With students spread across the UK and 151 countries, the OU does not have a typical campus-based environment. Following the 2012 tuition fee increase and changes in the funding structure in England, student numbers have declined. Hence, the OU has gone through several changes in the recent years. In 2016, the university’s academic structure was changed, with seven central academic units merging to form four much larger faculties.

1. Open University Academic Staff

OU Academic staff fall into two categories: academic staff and Associate Lecturers (ALs). The majority of academic staff (Central Academics) are employed at the Milton Keynes campus. Regional Academics (also known as Staff Tutors) and Associate Lecturer (AL) staff are mainly home based. Most academic staff carry out research and scholarship as well as teaching and, together with Research Associates and Fellows, they form the OU’s research base. However, since the OU is a distance learning institution, the teaching role of academics is different from other universities. Regional Academics also have specific management and administrative duties and have less allocated time for research and scholarship.

Rather than directly teaching students, Central Academics develop teaching materials and manage the delivery and assessment of the modules they have written. Direct teaching of students is the responsibility of Associate Lecturers

Associate Lecturers (also called Tutors), support student learning through online and face to face tutorials and provide formative and summative feedback on assignments. Regional Academics are line managers to ALs; they lead AL recruitment and their professional development. The OU employs more than 4000 ALs to carry out direct teaching of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. They are located across the UK and play a vital role in the delivery of OU course material to our students. ALs are currently appointed on fixed term part-time contracts on a module-by-module basis with many holding substantive posts with other employers. However, the University is in the process of introducing a new AL contract which will change the nature of these appointments to ‘open ended’, aligning with the terms and conditions of our Central Academics. The AL role does not include production of course materials or research, and ALs are managed at Faculty level rather than by Schools, so there is limited scope for focusing on gender inequalities in promotion and progression for this staff group. As ALs are the main point of contact for students, we have provided gender composition data for ALs.
2. OU Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Students

The OU is the largest UK University, with 123329 students (UG and taught postgraduate students) based in all parts of the UK and beyond. The OU operates an open access policy, meaning it accepts all applicants who apply to study at UG level, without any academic prerequisites. Most OU students are in current employment and are mature students (only 6% are under 20). In addition, 20% of OU students have declared disabilities.

Study mode

Students are taught via the OU’s unique model of learning known as ‘supported open learning’. Course materials are mostly online with some printed material. Students are allocated an AL who provides academic guidance and feedback individually and in tutor groups. Tutor groups meet online as well as in face to face tutorials, which usually take place in the evenings or at weekends. Some modules include residential schools. Full time funded PhD students are based at the Milton Keynes campus while part-time research students (mostly self-funded) can attend supervision and seminars either face to face or remotely.

Modules and Qualifications

Historically, OU students registered on discrete modules to build up credits towards a qualification. In 2012, the OU started to move towards qualification-based, rather than module-based, degrees, with students registering for a named qualification from the outset. However, as students may take up to 10 years to complete an undergraduate degree there are still a number of students who are part way through a module-based pathway. Moreover, individual modules may be common to a number of different qualifications, as well as contribute to the interdisciplinary Open Degree. For these two reasons, panels should note that the Athena SWAN applications may consider and reflect on student data at module level, as well as on qualification outcomes in some sections.