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 the 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, Ireland 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 many organisational changes in recent years. In 2016, the University’s academic structure was changed, with the seven former faculties, plus two institutes, merging to form four much larger faculties made up of several schools (of which we informed Athena SWAN); and in 2017, the People Services Transformation involved a restructure of HR functions. Regional offices in England closed in 2016 where England-based regional academics became homeworkers.

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 and research 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 teaching students directly, Central Academics develop teaching materials (usually working in module teams) 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, and they also lead the AL recruitment and their professional development. The OU employs more than 4,000 ALs to carry out direct teaching of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. They are located across the UK and Ireland 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 separate gender composition data for ALs, and the most of our academic data presented is for Central and Regional Academics given they are on academic contracts.

2. OU Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Students

The OU is the largest UK university, with 128,322 students (undergraduate and postgraduate students), based in all parts of the UK, Ireland and beyond. The OU operates an open access policy, meaning there are no traditional university entry qualifications for the majority of our its courses. Most Open University students are in employment and are mature students (only 6% are under 20). In addition, twenty per cent 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 a blend of printed texts, online readings, interactive and audio-visual resources. 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 supervisions, and often 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 several different qualifications, as well as contributing to the interdisciplinary Open Degree (which is studied by around one-fifth of all students). 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.