Report on the Open Justice Centre Street Law UCAS Project

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Contributors:

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

As the background to the project, the Open Justice Centre had become aware that some potential law and legal studies students may be experiencing difficulties in writing successful Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) statements for university admission. With a view to improving public understanding of law and widening access to the legal profession, there is a role in producing or collating resources for a pilot project aimed at providing an information package for schools that the Open University (OU) could then look to promote further.

The Open Justice Centre (OJC) sought student volunteers for a research project designed to highlight how it may best mobilise and deliver that free advice and resources for those students. The exact project brief is included under **Annex A**.

The primary constraints imposed upon the project were temporal, with the deadline for its delivery being the 30th of April.

The project participants consist of both active and former OU law students. The participants have been coordinating their activities through platforms such as **WhatsApp**, which is used primarily for discussions relating to the project; **Confluence**, which is used as a repository for project inputs and outputs; and those provided by the OU, such as its **AdobeConnect** chatroom. The Group has met on six occasions as a small group to discuss direction but otherwise the Group has initiated and worked on its own or in small groups.

In addressing the overarching issues, this report will set out and present:

(1) Methodology;
(2) Findings and Recommendations, subdivided into:
    2.1. UCAS pre-application process;

2.2. UCAS form;

2.3. Refugees and asylum seekers;

2.4. Mental health;

2.5. Skills questionnaire;

2.6. Tutorial (good/bad personal statement);

2.7. Diversity and discrimination;

2.8. Criminal convictions; and

2.9. Video presentation.

(3) Summary.

For the purpose of the report, the participants will be referred to as 'the Group'.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of recommendations:

UCAS pre-application process

1. The Group recommends that further work be carried out to develop resources on how prospective students can access information if they do not have access to the internet. This could be explored further or, indeed, it could form part of feedback through the regular channels between the Open University (OU) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). There is also a possibility that an information package could be made available.

2. The Group recommends further research be carried out by the OU as a follow-up to this report to cover the following aspects:
   o To identify what the remit of the Government's university review is (see **2.1**);
   o To identify the timescales for reporting and consideration by the UK Government;
   o To develop upon the work undertaken in this report, as its findings have a crucial role to play in helping support students with the UCAS application process at present.

UCAS form

1. There are a number of sections on the form for which a support package could be designed and developed, in particular, sections 6 (employment) and 7 (statements);
   a. Considerations of personal statements and the skills that inform them are covered in **2.5** and **2.6**.

2. It is unknown how often UCAS engages in the review of their application forms or seeks feedback, so consideration can be given as to whether there is scope for the OU to engage with them to ascertain this information as part of any follow up work to the project. In addition, the Group recommends that there should also be several pathways of application forms for different levels of students;

    a. For example, refugees (see **2.3**) could benefit from alternative application routes (which the Group considered as an example)

3. There is also scope for the OU to approach UCAS about the issues identified in **Table 1**, such as failure to recognise home-schooling as an educational possibility. This is particularly relevant at present due to the impact of COVID-19 on schools' ability to deliver traditional classroom learning.

Refugees and asylum seekers

1. The Group recommends that further work be carried out to develop resources or support packages for students from refugee backgrounds to assist them with the application process;

    a. This could incorporate a checklist, guiding them through the steps that they should take when applying, such as that designed by the Group in **Appendix E**.

    b. As a starting point, the research should consider financing (and eligibility) and the alternative routes of its acquisition;

        i. Note should be taken to find appropriate ways of communicating this guidance to the target audience, which should involve simplifying existing guidance such as that found on the UKCISA website.

2. The Group further recommends that research be carried out into the effects of often traumatic experiences on the health and wellbeing of

such applicants, and how universities could account for this when making determinations of student suitability (see also **2.4** recommendations).

3. The Group recommends further research into issues of student finance for other categories of students that may not qualify under a 'home' fee structure.

4. The group considers that there may be a cross-over to explore with other specific groups of potential students.

Mental health

1. The Group recommends that further research be carried out by the OU to assess the impact of traumatic experiences (and mental health issues more broadly) can have on (1) the student's ability to carry out his or her studies; (2) the student's ability to engage with the UCAS application process. Further research can be carried out on (3) the level to which universities recognise the problem when considering admissions.

Skills development

1. The Group recommends that further research is done on developing skills resources for students whose first language is not English or who may not have had a traditional approach to university education;
   a. Aspect of this research should relate to consideration of refugees and how guidance could be tailored for them.

2. There is also scope for exploration of opportunities introduced by COVID-19 *qua* skills development, as restrictions on activities has meant that prospective students have had to adapt and adjust.

3. In creating a skills resource pack, the Open University should seek to incorporate its existing assets, such as Open Learn modules;

a. The group has put together a list of modules that could assist students with skills development (**Appendix I**).

Tutorial development

1. The Group recommends that the OU develop a resource pack which (1) aggregates the various guidance, potentially including that presented in **Appendix J**; and (2) contains an example of a 'model' personal statement that is contrasted with a 'bad' personal statement;
    b. This could connect to the recommendations raised in **2.5** and contribute to the formation of a comprehensive personal statement resource pack.
2. The resource pack could incorporate or promote existing OU assets, such as its Open Learn modules (**Appendix I**)

Diversity and discrimination

1. The Group proposes that the OU carries out further research as a follow up to the Independent article to ascertain the following aspects:
    a. Whether the UCAS application process is not name-blind, despite the Prime Minister's pledge;
    b. Explore the Human Rights issue identified further and the questions it raises;
    c. Whether UCAS has invited organisations representing Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups to work with them to improve the experience for all applicants, as they suggested they would; and, if so, what the outcome of this meeting and work has been;
    d. To what extent there is evidence of forward movement from universities regarding an open-door policy where ethnicity is

concerned and welcoming applications from ethnic minority students; and

e. Whether organisations representing minority groups have seen any positive changes from their perspective.

Criminal convictions

1. The Group recommends that further work be carried out to develop resources or part of resource package on this aspect of the UCAS application form, potentially covering and incorporating the above findings;
   o The aim and focus of this work would be on resolving worries experienced by students faced with those questions.

Video presentation

1. The Group recommends that some of the research materials/resource packs, such as those governing effective personal statement writing, be packaged in a video format as many students resonate with this format. Furthermore, the Open University utilises this format extensively in its delivery of module materials;
   a. The group believes that some of this content should be delivered by the students themselves.
2. The Group is keen to present its conclusion to the Open Justice team in a Q & A session as they feel that they have learnt so much from the project.

BIOGRAPHIES

Gemma Routledge

I am currently studying my BA (Honours) Open Degree with the OU on a part-time basis. I am completing Exploring Legal Boundaries and Making a Difference: working with children and young people this academic year. I have a background in education and an interest in working with families and schools to widen participation. I am currently working on a multi-agency project looking in to emotion-based school avoidance. I bring experience of project management, developing resources and delivering sessions to schools, colleges and universities to the project.

Jacqueline Howard

I am a final year BA (Hons) Criminology and Law student. I began my studies in September 2018. My previous qualifications include a diploma in Childcare, an NVQ and HNC in Health and Social Care. I have previous and new experience with providing support for all age groups whether it is personal, legal or academic needs. As a student with a disability and mental health issues, I know the importance of supporting those who are seeking assistance and reassurance, especially those who require extra support. Participating in this project gives me the chance to explore new ways of using my expertise to help others. My role is to work together with her team to complete their aims and support those applying trough UCAS with the correct support they need.

Katrina Velez

I am in my penultimate year studying for a Batchelor of Laws with the OU on a part time basis. I am qualified in therapeutic counselling and am interested in using this in a wider context. I have worked for CRUISE (bereavement counselling), Samaritans Helpine, and for the probation service, specifically in the rehabilitation of sex offenders. I believe in working with others to help them improve their self-esteem, and in providing practical and

empathetic support to enable them to progress. This project is an ideal proving ground for me where I can both contribute to a worthwhile cause and hone my administrative, research and communication skills. My ambition is to qualify as a solicitor and to specialise in the area of civil law.

Kirsty Lewington

I am currently an undergraduate at The Open University studying the Bachelor of Laws (Honours) LLB full time and this is my penultimate year. I am an aspiring Solicitors Advocate in criminal law with a keen interest in human rights. I have had many years of working within the Health and Social Care sector including the NHS as a Healthcare Assistant. I also have an interest in mental health and am currently studying a short course about it. I am a volunteer for Citizens Advice and participate in the Freedom of Law Clinic, undertaken speed moots, different competitions, and debates. By participating in this project I can bring to it some current skills of being a student and communication and research skills. I am also hoping to gain some new skills in the process.

Zed Jovic

I am a graduate of the Open University, where I studied law between 2012 and 2017. As a former child refugee, I have a strong professional interest in law, IT, and project management, as well as a strong personal interest in mental health and researching ways young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be helped to overcome challenges introduced by the lack of support and stability in their lives. Along with helping draft the research brief, I have also been playing an active role in contributing to the project objectives and finding appropriate technological solutions to collaboratively manage the project with my peers. By taking part in this project, I hope to utilise my IT and communication skills and contribute towards bridging the information gap between those who have ready access to help and resources and those who do not.