# Open College of the ArtsStudent Engagement Strategy 2018-2021

### Introduction

Student engagement is commonly defined as the methods educational providers use to contact students, or alternatively the interaction that the student has with their institution. At OCA, we seek to take this understanding further and develop a strategy for engagement that is holistic and seeks to help drive continuous improvement to the student experience at the College.

Over the next three years OCA seeks to develop a range of initiatives which will enhance our approach to student support, learning design, IT infrastructure, and more.

The overall aim of this strategy will be to focus on the interaction between students and OCA, opening out channels for engagement and to redesign the approach to service provision, both from an academic perspective, enabling students to engage and succeed in their studies through applying concepts such as reflective learning, but also to give students the skills to succeed in their lives outside of study.

### Student-Led learning

In OCAs 30th birthday year, the College’s mission was changed to be “at the forefront of student-led creative arts education through open, enhanced, & supported distance learning, for an evolving society.”

The inclusion of student-led is significant. There is considerable research into the benefits of a student-centred approach to learning, with students therefore at the heart of the learning process, with greater control over the choice of subject matter, learning modes, and pace of study. Being student-led however, represents a greater involvement of students in determining the direction of their learning and dialogue with their tutors in order to develop meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, being student-led requires flexibility and openness form both students and OCA to develop approaches to student-led learning.

By being student-led rather than student-centred OCA is implicitly and actively empowering our student body. Rather than a top down approach to the organisation, College dictating to the student body, we are seeking to give students the responsibility to directly influence change through student representation on College management groups, and regular opportunities to provide feedback.

There is also greater onus on students to take responsibility for their own learning, to engage with their course and the support that the College provides. For students, this means engaging with their studies meaningfully, and through dialogue, finding ways to apply learning outcomes to their particular circumstances. For OCA, this means developing approaches to learning design that can adapt to a wide range of student needs and aspirations. Studying at university requires self-dedication, enthusiasm, and passion for the subject, traits which are even more important through distance-learning.

### The Student Voice

Key to our approach of being student-led, is to provide appropriate opportunities for students to feedback on their experiences of their course, the support they have received, and the quality of tuition.

The feedback from students is used in a number of ways and for a number of purposes. This is collected through surveys for formal uses, and also anecdotally as part of formal and/or informal conversations. Students are also free to contact OCA at any time through their tutors or to the team at HQ in Barnsley to discuss concerns and/or improvements.

Student feedback sits at the heart of our Annual Academic Monitoring (AAM) process; without accurate and honest feedback, OCA cannot grow for the better. This is gathered in two ways, through the Unit Evaluation Survey and the Level /Assessment Survey both of which are new for the 2018/19 academic year.

Both of these surveys are modelled on the National Student Survey and allows OCA to compare the results of these surveys with the overall national results.

The Unit Evaluation Survey is distributed three times each academic year to all students who are currently active on a given unit at the time, although a student will only be surveyed once (repeat populations are removed from the survey population at each point).

The Level Assessment Survey is distributed once per year to all students on each of the three levels of study available at OCA. The survey is distributed among all students currently undertaking, or have recently completed their final unit within a given level. As such students will receive the Level Assessment Survey three times during their studies with OCA.

These two new surveys have been developed for the 2018/19 academic year in order to give students more opportunity to have a direct impact upon the running of their course and to be able to give meaningful feedback at a level that assists OCA; for example, the Unit Evaluation Survey is tailored to the experiences that a student may face on their unit, whilst the Level Assessment Survey is a more reflective request, designed to gather views of the level as a whole. This approach enables OCA staff and tutors to better identify areas of weakness and design improvements to directly address these concerns.

In addition, a new MA survey has been launched in June 2018 to provide better opportunities for the MA cohorts to feedback on their course. This new survey is designed with the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) run by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in mind; this runs each year and by following a similar set of questions, allows OCA to compare directly with other providers around the UK.

In 2018 OCA has also launched a new Digital Transformation Project, designed to enhance the technology available for learning purposes and improve access for all students. A key element of this is the introduction of a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which is intended to replace the existing student site and works akin to Blackboard and other environments. The new VLE will retain the ability to host discussion forums for students, but in addition we will explore the opportunity of using capability within the VLE for straw poll activities

Furthermore we will expand our use of focus groups, particularly bringing the student voice in to work on specific projects that will help shape our approach. This will enable us to preempt and anticipate issues before they arise and fully involve the student body in the key decision making processes at OCA. Focus groups can be very valuable for specific aspects of consensus building - for example the production of new programmes (curriculum development) and learning activities (learning design), the development of new learning environments and technologies (digital transformation), the marketing of our courses (market research), and making changes to existing course materials (curriculum enhancement).

### Learning analytics

We will develop a set of feedback mechanisms across the online environments, in particular the Virtual learning Environment (VLE), to gather better information on how learners are progressing in their studies. We want to ensure that we consider all aspects of student engagements so we will be exploring more extrinsic mechanisms to measure and manage student motivation and behaviour as well as looking at the more practical aspects of feedback around study support, materials, activities and community. We will use different methods for collecting and assessing these aspects using our online environments, this may include quizzes, forums, chats, formative feedback through pop-up polls and surveys, apps as well as automated system level statistics and logs related to learning activity.

### Mental Health

Student mental health has been a hot topic in Higher Education for a number of years with work from the National Union of Students in 2016, in combination with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students, demonstrating that 87% of students experience stress at some point during their studies.

In June 2018, Sam Gyimah, Minister of State (Universities and Science) announced a new charter that recognises excellence in University provision for mental health support and introduces new minimum standards.

OCA will be at the forefront of this movement and commit to enhancing the support that we offer to students. We will review and consider how OCA is open to students with mental health issues, and consider the pathway that students take to access support. We will work to identify robust approaches to identifying at-risk students and ensure that pro-active support is available to resolve need.

### Virtual Learning Environment

Under the College Digital Transformation project, published in line with the OCA Academic Strategy 2018-21, OCA is changing a number of systems in order to improve and enhance the experience of studying with OCA.

One key element of this is the development and introduction of a new Virtual Learning Environment to replace the existing student site. This will come with enhanced capabilities and interactive digital content, designed to enhance the student learning experience.

The VLE will also have a key focus on accessibility, with provision made in the design for enhanced operability through mobile devices, and will conform to all appropriate standards and best practice for engagement with all demographics of learners.

We will test changes to our online environment(s) with our students through a process of user centered design (or student centred design) to ensure that they improve the learning experience and to iron out any issues. We will also test our online resources with students with a range of disabilities to ensure that our materials are accessible and inclusive.

### Learning design

For OCA, learning design encompasses our course material and activities, student/tutor interactions, and any additional materials or narratives around learning. To ensure OCA can support a student-led approach, a Learning Design Framework has been developed to help structure and review learning materials and activities. This Framework includes a set of learning activities definitions, guidelines on study intensities, and Open Learning Attributes. The Framework will be applied to new degrees in development from 2018, and retrospectively to existing course material when the opportunity to amend them arises.

Defined learning activities helps develop a balanced learning experience and provides more opportunities for student-led initiatives. These are broadly themed around: Research, Apply, Create, Critique, and Communicate. These apply to existing research tasks, exercises, and assignments, and to the newly established independent learning tasks.

We will explore the development of study intensities along the lines of full time (three years, part-time (six years), and flexible (nine years) within our existing Academic Regulatory Framework which sets out 12 years maximum for degree study. This will allow course units to be modelled against learning hours per week, which helps to set realistic expectations and goals for students.

**Open Learning Attributes:**

***Openness*** *- accessible, inclusive, adaptable, flexible*

***Engaging*** *- active, enjoyable and meaningful educational experiences*

***Empowering*** *- widening access, student-led, building trust, sharing experiences*

***Social*** *- building learning communities, learning together, developing networks, sharing*

***Sustainable*** *- building resilience, integrating practice, environmental sound*

***Evolving*** *- creating a positive social impact, relevant, responsive*

In identifying a set of Open Learning Attributes that reflect OCA aims, through its mission statement and commitment to student engagement, we have developed a mechanism by which we can encourage and test these values through our learning design options.

### Careers & Student Enterprise

At OCA we strive to ensure that our students receive the best outcome from their time with us, in the qualifications received upon completion of a degree, but also in personal development in skills and/or new ways of thinking or ambitions.

We recognise that a large proportion of our current student body come to study with OCA with established careers and often seek to learn and study something that interests them. We also have students for whom a degree in creative arts represents a change in career direction. In all scenarios we seek to support students to develop and continue their practice in the creative arts post-degree.

Over the next three years, as part of the Curriculum Innovation project led by the Director of Curriculum & Quality we will review the Sustaining Your Practice unit, present on a number of programmes, and the principles of this embedded into other units, to ensure that students obtain the skills needed to carry on with creative arts.

In the new mission for OCA, we have made a commitment in line with our charitable status to work for all “in an evolving society.” Our charitable status underpins all that OCA is and stands for.

The Higher Education sector as a whole looks at graduate employment as a key indicator of the importance of degree-level study and the benefits the qualification brings. This remains a benchmark that OCA measures, however, in addition to our focus on encouraging sustaining practice, we will work to encourage social enterprise.

Rather than focussing upon entrepreneurship, which implies creation of new business, OCA will encourage enterprise, which includes the possibility of setting up new businesses and business opportunities, but also suggests development of practice within a career; one of the definitions of enterprise is an “eagerness to do something new and clever.”

As a charity, we support action and projects that have a positive impact upon people’s lives and society as a whole, and will encourage in engagement with enterprise the consideration of approaches that will have a clear societal impact.

We will strive to develop the OCA alumni community in several specific ways, firstly to engage more specifically with this community to ensure that they continue to benefit from resources and information to improve their practice and guide their careers, secondly to encourage them to develop cohorts that help to enhance their professional networks, thirdly to encourage them to share their stories with the next generation of learners and to support new students to succeed.

We will explore all available opportunities, including engaging with external organisations to identify openings for students of OCA to develop. This may include the creation and setup of a business incubator to allow students to set up their own businesses, through which we would also explore mentoring options and access to seed-funding. Engagement with external organisations will be explored to open up avenues such as internship opportunities in order to gain relevant experience in specific areas.

### Review

In order to ascertain progress on this strategy, the Strategy Lead will conduct six monthly reviews to determine progress made, in addition to such meetings and monitoring structures as appropriate to ascertain the effectiveness of the strategy. Furthermore, the Strategy Lead will prepare and present to the OCA Strategic Development Group in the first instance, and to the OCA Board of Trustees in the second instance, a report on the progress made on the project each academic year.