

OCA Learning, teaching and assessment strategy 2020-23

Introduction

This document sets out OCA's current learning, teaching, and assessment strategies initiated through Periodic Review and Validation in 2019/20. Changes are being implemented in line with our **Student Migration Strategy**. Where possible, wider initiatives are available to all students to maximise their benefits.

Strategic overview

The **2020-23 Academic and Digital strategy** sets out a clear rationale to secure the future for OCA by embracing our role as leaders in digital pedagogy. Moving from a distance learning model to one supported primarily online ensures the sustainability of OCA but also provide a richer learner experience through a greater variety of approaches which increase opportunity for progression and attainment.

Vision and values

The Open College of the Arts (OCA) strategic vision is “to be at the forefront of student-led creative arts education through open, enhanced, & supported distance learning, for an evolving society”. OCA is a non-profit educational charity, whose purpose

is to widen participation in arts education through open flexible distance and online learning.

OCA's Open Learning Attributes translates our vision and values by outlining the underlying principles that inform approaches to learning, teaching, assessment, learning design, and wider academic related approaches. These are:

- **Openness** - being accessible, inclusive, adaptable, and flexible
- **Engaging** - creating active, enjoyable and meaningful educational experiences
- **Empowering** - widening access to arts education, building trust, sharing experiences, and being student-led
- **Social** - building learning communities, developing networks, and sharing our experiences
- **Sustainable** - building resilience, and integrating environmentally sound and sustainable creative practice
- **Evolving** - being relevant and responsive, and creating a positive social impact

Open Access

To give as many people as possible the opportunity to study creative arts subjects at higher level, OCA operates an open access policy for admission to all but one of our undergraduate course units¹. Students can therefore apply to study at Foundation or Stage One (HE4) regardless of their prior

¹ The only unit with entry requirements is Music 1: Composing Music.

qualifications. A 'getting started' meta course helps new students understand what is expected of them and how to access support.

Creative arts education

OCA has maintained a 34 year history as a leader and innovator of distance learning courses in the creative arts. During this time, OCA has offered course material that can be studied flexibly, supported by tutor feedback, and enhanced through study visits, and online resources. A key feature of this approach has been the one-to-one creative dialogue between tutors and students.

Since merging with UCA in 2016, OCA has implemented a **Digital Transformation Project** to increase use of online technology to help develop more agile, dynamic, creative and resilient approaches, and discipline specific skills relevant to the creative industries. This has enabled more inclusive and diverse approaches, with a stronger international outlook.

OCA's curriculum covers a range of visual and applied art and design subjects, including creative writing and music. We recognise that each discipline has its own distinct qualities and therefore at times require different approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment.

Adult learners

As OCA has evolved, its student profile has also changed. Increasingly we are attracting younger students, alongside those motivated by the subject or a change of career. Given most of

our students are adult learners, then principles of andragogy must come into play. Most notably, in recognising that adults are active learners ready to get involved, are looking for practical and problem-centered approaches to learning, and are intrinsically motivated.

Student led approaches

OCA aims to work with students in mutually beneficial and collaborative ways, both within learning & teaching, but also in institutional change & governance. Through this reciprocal relationship we aim to give students more autonomy over their own learning experience, allowing OCA to become more democratic, ethical and engaging; challenging traditional power structures and sharing accountability. This means building student led platforms through which meaningful interactions can be facilitated, and continued support of OCA Student Association, regional student groups, and study events.

As we move to more responsive and student-led learning & teaching models, **co-construction of the curricula** with students will become embedded in our learning design and our courses.

Learning and social change

While self-directed learning deals with the needs of the individual learner, self-directed learning can also be transformational, both for the student in recognising wider contexts for them and their learning, but also in seeing learning as a means of social action. As such, OCA courses need to provide some social, historical, or political context that surround

a given topic, encourage students to challenge any perceived wisdom, and to support them in establishing their own position.

Wellbeing

Studying at higher level is key to enhancing social mobility. For many OCA students, distance learning is their only viable route into higher education (HE). Distance learning brings its own risks, however, not least that of the isolation and insularity that can come from not studying on a campus with other students.

OCA has a duty of care to the mental and physical wellbeing students which includes:

- promoting study practices that make a positive impact on wellbeing
- taking action to reduce the risk and impact of studying practices with the potential to have a negative impact on mental and physical wellbeing.
- designing activities that encourage dialogue
- offering meaningful alternatives for those who may struggle with a given activity.
- Providing trigger warnings of potentially disturbing material and provide alternatives for those who do not wish to engage with this content.

Equality, diversity and Inclusivity

Since its inception OCA has stood for open access to the creative arts, and has promoted widening participation in HE. OCA's **Access and Participation Plan** (2021) sets out how we will

continue to improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in, and progress from HE study.

However, as the Black Lives Matter protests have shown us, there is more work to do in terms of equality, diversity and inclusivity. Course developers play an important role in delivering on this commitment by incorporating a more diverse range of voices, exemplars, and cultural viewpoints; and ensuring course materials are accessible and relevant to all students.

Our approach to diversifying course materials takes an intersectional focus i.e. utilise an analytical framework that draws from a range of interconnecting viewpoints spanning a wider range of genders, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. In this way, we will actively contribute to dismantling privilege, power and Western, most specifically Eurocentric, views and visual regimes.

In parallel to more diverse content, learning, teaching, and assessment practices have been evolving to create more student centred approaches in order to create learning spaces that are more open. Group work has provided opportunities for debate and discussion, and within our course activities, there is greater emphasis on students contextualising content in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them.

In making these changes, we are hoping to give students more control and involvement in how learning takes place. Indeed, where possible, students should be able to contribute to this body of knowledge from their own lived experiences and

viewpoints. As such, curriculum can be challenged, unburdened, and re-established as more dynamic, to better reflect the diverse experiences of students involved.

Learning & teaching models

Our learning model can be broadly seen as a triangulation between content, activity, and support. Content is provided in different formats to offer subject specific knowledge. Content provides a starting point for activities, through which students develop their understanding and application of skills. Support, offered by tutors and peers, provides the discursive platform to help connect, and make sense of, the content and activities.

Content will reflect current creative arts practices and ideas, be representative of a diverse range of lived experiences, and be delivered in engaging, well presented, accessible, and durable formats. Greater emphasis is being placed on **case studies** to capture current practice and diversity, both externally and as a way to showcase student experience and expertise.

Course welcomes place more emphasis on socially focused onboarding to help welcome new students. Fresher experiences, tutor welcome, and course welcomes from Programme Leaders (PLs) will help foster and support the development of learning communities. To help manage enrolment and induction processes, a monthly approach will be explored, with a regular cycle of onboarding and improved signposting.

Activities will provide creative, critical and reflective prompts, which are challenging enough to be meaningful, but achievable for students with a range of available resources. Activities should allow for interpretation and flexibility, to accommodate a range of learning styles, motivations, resources, and circumstances.

Critically reflecting on work through self-evaluation provides a valuable way for students to observe and learn from peers, to develop increasingly professional personal and graduate skills, and to develop a deepening recognition of subject boundaries. Students are encouraged to do this through their learning log, reflective assessment presentations, and by reflecting on formative feedback.

Support is offered by tutors through one-to-one formative feedback, tutorials, and group activities. The introduction of teaching schedules allows specific units to tailor the support on offer to meet the needs of the content and activities, and to provide greater variety, including peer led support.

Flexible tutors are experienced and qualified practitioners and educators. OCA academics work across the UK in other HE Institutions. As such, they offer a rich diversity of approaches to creative arts education. Tutors are employed as permanent flexible members of staff, and managed by PLs. They are supported through induction mentoring, and to undertake HE Academy Fellowships.

Feedback provides timely, well-grounded and constructive formative feedback that aims to stretch and challenge learners

at staged points within the unit, as well as being understandable and accessible for the student.

Study tempo is being supported by the introduction of ten projects to replace the existing five assignments within new units. This tempo provides more frequent feedback. It helps

improve retention, and supports the increasing number of younger students who wish to study at a faster part-time tempo.

Group activities offers opportunities to discuss and shape ideas, and share and support approaches to learning within video, webinar, study events, and/or forum activities. Group activities are offered to all students across all OCA subject areas.

Activities are made accessible through offering platforms for pre-activity materials, activity recordings, and post-activity discussion. Student feedback on group activities has been very positive, and they welcome more opportunities to work with peers. Student-led group activities are encouraged by making the technology and models available to run their own sessions.

The introduction of the **Programme Tutor**, as a permanent fraction role, will help to deliver group activities, and more complex teaching schedules. The role offers opportunities to be responsive to student feedback through quality improvements such as enhancing contents or additional support.

² <https://learn.oca.ac.uk/>

Teaching schedules provides an opportunity to develop subject specific pedagogies that match suitable support with the expectations of the content and activities within a unit.

The Creative Education short course provides a potential opportunity to support further scholarship, reflection, and teaching experience for academic staff.

OCA Learn

OCA's virtual learning environment (VLE), OCA Learn², provides an online platform for content, activities, and support associated with each unit, and other resources. In parallel to the VLE, OCA offers secure learning logs through OCA Spaces³.

Accessibility - OCA has a responsibility to ensure all learning environments, content, and communication are as accessible as possible for individuals who have sensory, cognitive, neurological, physical, or other disabilities, and to provide an inclusive learning environment that acknowledges the diversity of our students' experiences. OCA's **Student Engagement Strategy** (2021) places a key focus on accessibility, with provision for designing learning materials with enhanced operability for mobile devices, which conform to all appropriate accessibility standards.

The Library provides access to online texts, journals and other resources, alongside study and referencing guides, and *Ask the*

³ <https://spaces.oca.ac.uk/>

librarian support. All reading lists are provided electronically through Talis, as e-books or scans under the CLA⁴ licence.

Department Spaces have been established provide subject specialist spaces for content and support. These provide a platform to foster learning communities with contributions from academics and students.

OCA Discuss forum continues to provide a student led space for dialogue within subjects and across OCA wide. Integration within OCA Learn will help maintain this well established platform.

The Student handbook will migrate to OCA Learn to make it easier for students to find support and guidance on study skills, wellbeing, finance and other learning support issues. One to many communication, through FAQs and webinars, will enhance individual telephone and email support.

Academic support provides a shared resource for academic reading, research, writing, reflective, and presentation skills. Support for critical reviews and dissertations is offered by specialist tutors.

The Enterprise hub provides a shared resource for external projects, collaborations, and to encourage sustainable practices.

Alternative formats, such as paper-based versions of these resources, will continue to be used to support our students in secure environments.

Learning community

Feedback from the 2019 National Student Survey (NSS) results highlights the perceived lack of learning community at OCA. This maybe a general symptom of distance learning experiences, which by its nature can leave students feeling isolated. The visibility of students, to one another, and to academics, is one of the first steps in building a learning community.

Onboarding should focus on the following key themes:

- **Social** - helping students connect with each other
- **Study** - giving students the means to study effectively
- **Support** - offering easily accessed support when required

OCA Student Association provides opportunities for student-led study events, and provides feedback to help improve OCA's student communications and learning platforms.

WeAreOCA provides a platform for dialogue across OCA, and to celebrate student and staff successes. Blog and social media posts have provided prompts for discussion and activities. This can be extended into OCA Learn, to help support grassroots initiatives such as publications or exhibitions.

⁴ <https://www.cla.co.uk/>

Group activities have been introduced as a core offer to all student from 2021, including Foundations. Group activities, Department Spaces, and programme email groups all offer peer visibility and opportunities for interaction.

Exhibitions and publications provide opportunities to showcase student work, and to offer meaningful collaborative opportunities. Student-led activities are encouraged.

Creative conversations provides cross-curriculum group activities to support Stage Three students.

Assessment Strategy

OCA's assessment strategy is based on an assessment for learning model which emphasises assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Therefore, assessment is seen as an integrated and meaningful part of the learning journey.

Assessment outcomes encourage learners to critically reflect on their progress and to articulate ideas and outcomes effectively through appropriate presentation formats.

Assessment criteria are mapped across all subjects, and presented at each stage through an accessible set of range statements. The criteria focus on the extent to which **knowledge** of relevant concepts, practices, theories, and contexts are demonstrated, the level of **understanding** demonstrated through the testing and application of knowledge, and the degree to which knowledge and understanding are demonstrated through the **application** of technical, communication, personal, transferable, and graduate skills.

Assessment guidance will be provided through a shared OCA Learn resource that supports students to understand assessment, and prepare and submit their work.

Summative assessment takes place through tutor team marking overseen by PLs. Assessment briefings and meetings enable support and dialogue around assessment practices to take place.

Digital assessment has been introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has brought benefits to students, by encouraging more reflection, and making assessment more affordable. Some aspects may return to a physical assessment event, particularly at Stage Three (HE6). Physical assessment continues for students in secure environments.

Quality assurance is provided through moderation of marks, internal verification of the assessment process, parity checks to ensure marks are consistent across OCA, plagiarism checks, and scrutiny by External Examiners. Students will be provided with summative marks and feedback at the end of each unit.

Learning design

OCA uses a learning design process to consider the content, activities, and support needed to deliver course aims. This flexible approach recognises and supports a diverse range of student experiences, ambitions, and needs.

The Learning Design Framework (LDF) provides a scaffold to translate course aims, and the open learning attributes, into robust and high quality content and activities, and teaching schedules to provide appropriate support. Learning materials are developed by experienced educators and practitioners from within OCA, and external where necessary. The LDF considers how to encourage more open, empowering, engaging, social, sustainable and evolving approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment. Our learning design should be:

- **Open** enough to give as many people as possible the opportunity to study creative arts subjects. This means making them understandable by using the principles of plain English, and testing the quality of materials.
- **Co-constructed** with students. For learning design to be effective, it is vital we know who our students are, their motivations, and how they want to learn.
- **Accessible** to all students with unnecessary barriers designed out for everyone.
- Promoting a positive **Equality, Diversity & Inclusion** agenda by representing a broader range of lived experience, questioning received wisdom and power structures, and attracting a more diverse tutor body.

Who informs the strategy?

The Learning, teaching & assessment strategy has been shaped by student and staff feedback, and scholarship in creative arts education and practice. Student feedback was gathered through the NSS, internal student surveys and metrics, and through ongoing dialogue with OCA's Student association. Staff feedback was gathered through annual academic monitoring and tutor team meetings.

An evidence based approach continues to inform learning, teaching and assessment decisions throughout OCA, supported by ongoing engagement with sector wide research and scholarship into creative arts education, adult learning, social change, intersectionality, accessibility, and other core themes.

Strategy success measures

The success of the strategy will be measured through student satisfaction, retention, and progression. Quantitatively, this will be done through student metrics gathered via OCA Learn analytics and other enrolment, retention, and progression data.

Narrative on students' experiences and learning journeys will be gathered through existing surveys, at a programme level, and in dialogue with OCA Student Association.