

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

# ACADEMIC STRATEGY



The Open  
University



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When The Open University was set up nearly 50 years ago, its mission was a radical one in the world of higher education (HE), helping the UK to make a shift from an elite to a mass system. As that mass HE moves to become a universal over the next few years we need to be radical again to secure our future and deliver our mission. Our commitment to create educational opportunities and social mobility for all who seek to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential – our primary purpose – remains as strong as ever, but we are no longer reaching as many learners as we would want to. That is the aim of the Students First strategy, and the excellence of our academic activities (our **Academic Excellence**) is an integral part of helping to achieve its goals. We will now use our Academic Excellence in new, more powerful ways to enable us to put students first.

This Academic Strategy sets the framework to achieving this. It will help focus our Academic Excellence through greater alignment and a more holistic expression of our strengths in teaching and learning, curriculum, research and scholarship and external engagement within our academic communities. We will champion the ways in which these strengths can be combined and brought together in support of each other to enhance our distinctiveness, reputation and, above all, student success across a broad base of activities. Our aim is to seek to concentrate resources where they can have the maximum positive impact across all areas of Academic Excellence. We seek to do this through six linked aims:

- **Aim 1** Our curriculum and innovative teaching will deliver our ambition for University growth and support a diverse community of learners within our student-focused academic communities, while upholding high academic standards.
- **Aim 2** We will add value to the educational opportunities we offer through collaborative outreach and partnerships that increase access, widen our reach and offer new and enhanced approaches to teaching and learning.
- **Aim 3** We will add value through using our research and scholarship to inform and enhance our teaching and learning and therefore student outcomes.
- **Aim 4** We will support and promote research in our academic communities where there is sustainable curriculum and where it is (or expected to become) substantially internationally excellent. We will also support research which meets other, student-focused strategic needs.
- **Aim 5** We will create new knowledge through research, scholarship and professional practice that meets the needs of external stakeholders and extends the reach and impact of our research on society, culture, economy and governments across the UK and internationally.
- **Aim 6** We will communicate and share our Academic Excellence providing opportunities for the public to engage, reflect and interact and for the University to attract and retain students.



## INTRODUCTION & VISION: ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR LIFE-CHANGING LEARNING

Over the first fifty years of the University's life, we have succeeded in creating educational opportunities for nearly two million people who have sought to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential and, through this, increased social mobility. This is our primary purpose.

To be open and to deliver our primary purpose successfully over the next fifty years, we now need with urgency and vision to reimagine our mission of being "*open to people, places, methods and ideas*" and dedicate ourselves to it for the 21st Century.

## BE OPEN... TO PEOPLE

Our students and other learners come to us from an unparalleled diversity of individual circumstances. Our aim is to ensure we meet their needs and promote their success. To do this, we will develop new and fresh approaches to open learning, using our Academic Excellence to deliver innovative and high quality teaching and learning<sup>1</sup>. We shall uphold and promote principles of equality and diversity throughout the implementation of this Academic Strategy.

## BE OPEN... TO PLACES

To best support our students to succeed, we will facilitate learning in the places in which they wish to study, whether at home, at work or on the move and shall engage with employers and other partners to extend our reach and impact. We will continue to draw great strength and value from our unique position as a UK-wide university operating in the increasingly distinctive policy environments and social contexts across the four UK nations and internationally.

## BE OPEN... TO METHODS

To meet the changing lifelong learning needs of our students, their employers and wider society, our curriculum will be accessible, designed for digital, and personalised in design and delivery. Being open to methods in future will mean that our curriculum, and teaching and learning, is built on the best of existing practice while also drawing on our intellectual leadership and pioneering new approaches to teaching, learning and technology. Our research and scholarship and our external partnerships will continue to drive the continuous development of our teaching methods. Our academic communities will be inclusive of and centred on our students, and where our academic staff continue to be focused on supporting student success.

## BE OPEN... TO IDEAS

We will use the intellectual leadership derived from our research and scholarship to support even more effectively our primary purpose of creating educational opportunities and increasing social mobility. Through supporting and promoting research that is internationally excellent in areas of sustainable curriculum, we will attract and retain high quality academic staff, enhance our reputation as a university and maximise the benefit for students. Our research and scholarship will also extend our position as a global leader in distance education, learning materials and as digital pioneers.

This Academic Strategy sets a framework for strengthening our Academic Excellence to deliver our mission, re-imagined for the world of tomorrow. To reach more students and change lives we need to survive and thrive, and to do that we will need to develop and meet new goals. In the context of an increasingly universal and competitive HE system – and the challenges posed to the University’s continued relevance and sustainability – we shall need to excel in ways that are more innovative, flexible and focused while retaining a commitment to quality.

Therefore, the vision of this Academic Strategy is simply **“Be Open”**. It is a vision that comes from our mission and is one that will help us onto a more sustainable track. In setting our Academic Strategy, however, we must not measure sustainability solely in financial terms but also human ones. We want to *stay open*, and financial sustainability is crucial for that. But we also want to innovate – to *create open* – and to do that we have to *be open* in all that we do and how we imagine our future and the future success in achieving our mission.

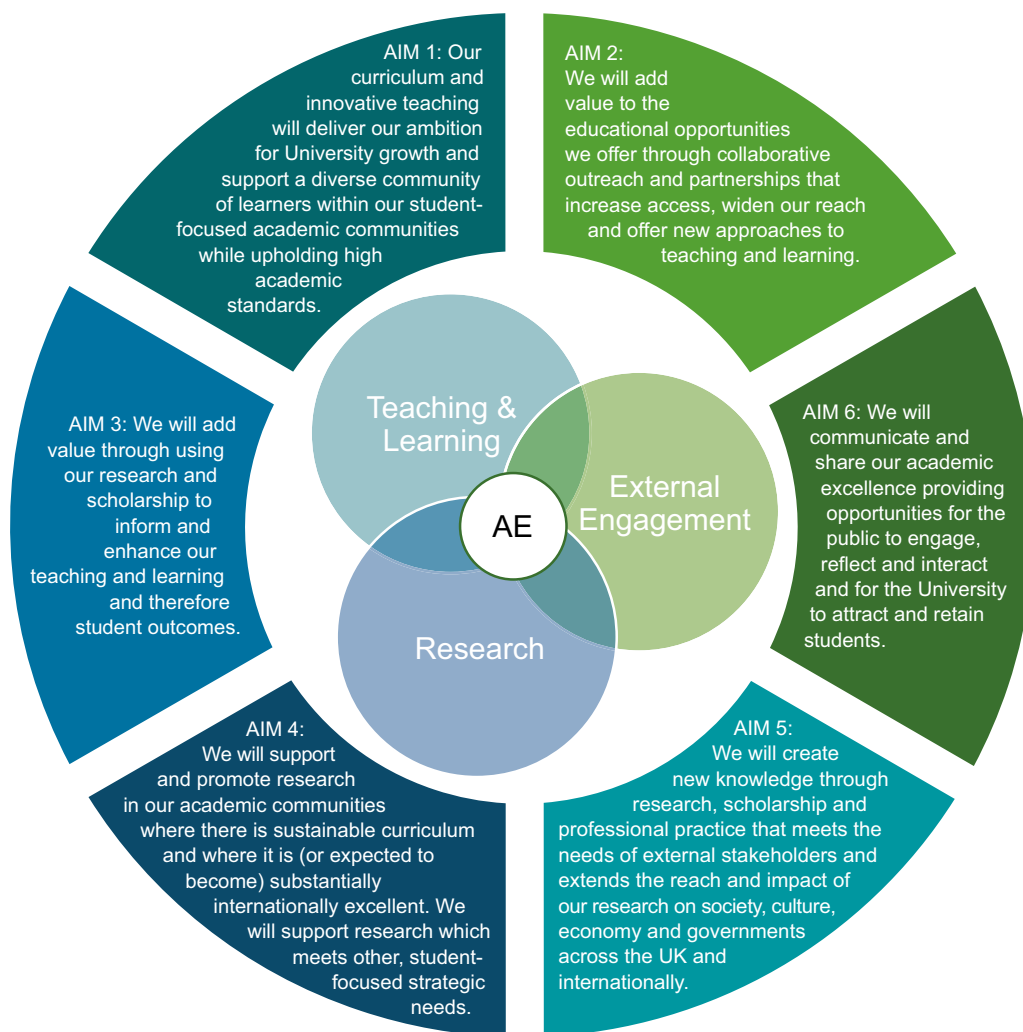
Through implementation of this Academic Strategy, we will create a stronger, more vibrant Open University, setting our priorities to achieve our ambition of more students qualifying, and being ready for the challenges and opportunities of the next fifty years.

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<sup>1</sup> Teaching and learning is used throughout as an all-encompassing term, inclusive of assessment.

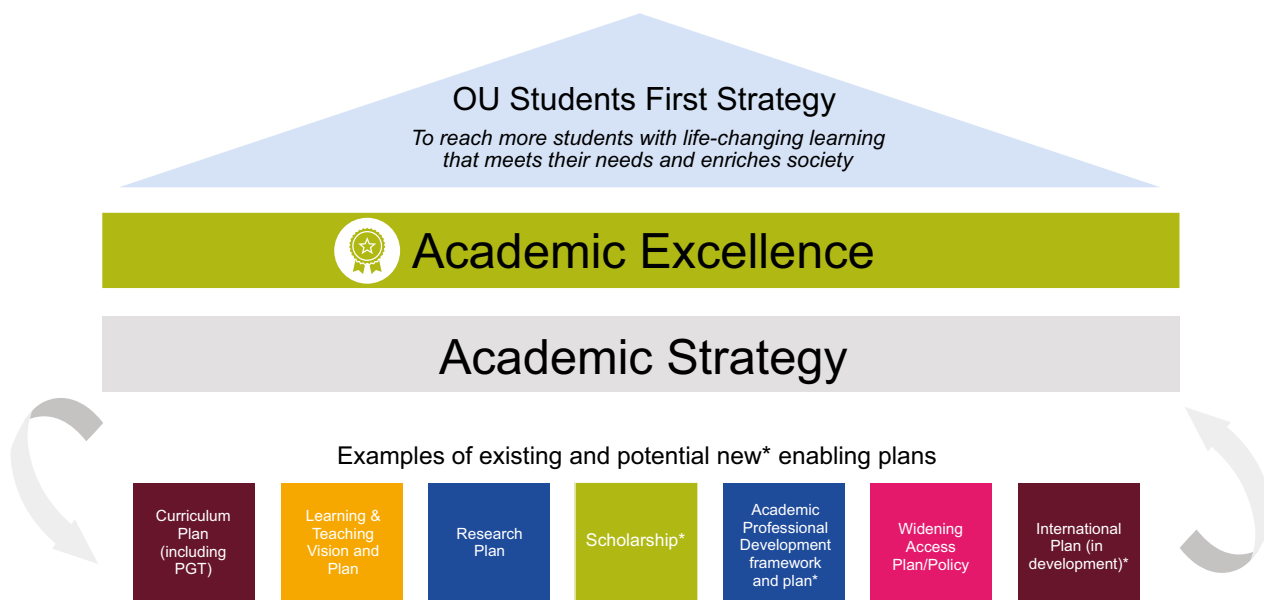
# A FRAMEWORK FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Academic Excellence is understood here as the **collective outcome** of success across our teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and external engagement. Within our academic communities, we will enhance our Academic Excellence through greater alignment and a more holistic expression of the strengths of these different facets of academic work. We will direct resources so that they can be combined and brought together in support of each other to enhance our distinctiveness, reputation and, above all, student success. This Academic Strategy sets out six aims to enable the University to derive the value it needs from the components of Academic Excellence and their interactions in order to deliver on the objectives of the Students First Strategy (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Six aims for enhancing our Academic Excellence through our Teaching & Learning, Research & Scholarship and External Engagement

Guided by these six aims, this Academic Strategy provides the basis for the review, refresh and/or development of more detailed “middle tier” enabling plans and policies which will be aligned with the aims established here (see Figure 2). The arrangements for doing so will be set out in the implementation plan for the Strategy. We will define and agree a set of indicators to measure our success in sustaining and enhancing our Academic Excellence.



**Figure 2:** Academic Strategy relationship with Students First Strategy<sup>2</sup> and enabling plans

This Academic Strategy will empower our Faculties and their Schools, and Learning & Teaching Innovation (LTI) Academic, to take decisions on their academic activities and prioritisation of resources (within the framework of this Academic Strategy and overall University business parameters and operating model) so that they can reach more students, learners and partners and deliver even greater value to them. Each will share the collective goal of more students qualifying and our academic communities are at the forefront of enabling the University to realise this across all four nations and internationally. As a result of this Academic Strategy, we will be concentrating our resources where they can have maximum impact for students and the University’s wider success, through all of our teaching and learning, research and scholarship and academic external engagement.

<sup>2</sup> The “OU Students First Strategy” is used here to refer to both the overall University strategy and nation specific versions approved by the Council.





## TEACHING AND LEARNING

### AIM 1

Our curriculum and innovative teaching will deliver our ambition for University growth and support a diverse community of learners within our student-focused academic communities, while upholding high academic standards.

### AIM 2

We will add value to the educational opportunities we offer through collaborative outreach and partnerships that increase access, widen our reach and offer new and enhanced approaches to teaching and learning.

## RATIONALE

The pressure on the HE sector to become both more innovative and more effective is unceasing, challenging the University to rethink how we deliver our mission. As the UK Government seeks to open up HE to new providers on a more commercial basis, there is increasing divergence in HE policy and priorities across the four UK nations. Being open to people, places, methods and ideas is our greatest strength and this Academic Strategy seeks to mobilise this through greater alignment and a more holistic expression of our strengths in teaching and learning, curriculum, research and scholarship and external engagement. We will use this to create new opportunities that will empower the University to achieve the growth we seek, improve student success and thereby deliver, across the four nations of the UK and internationally, on our primary purpose of providing educational opportunities and increasing social mobility for all who seek to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.

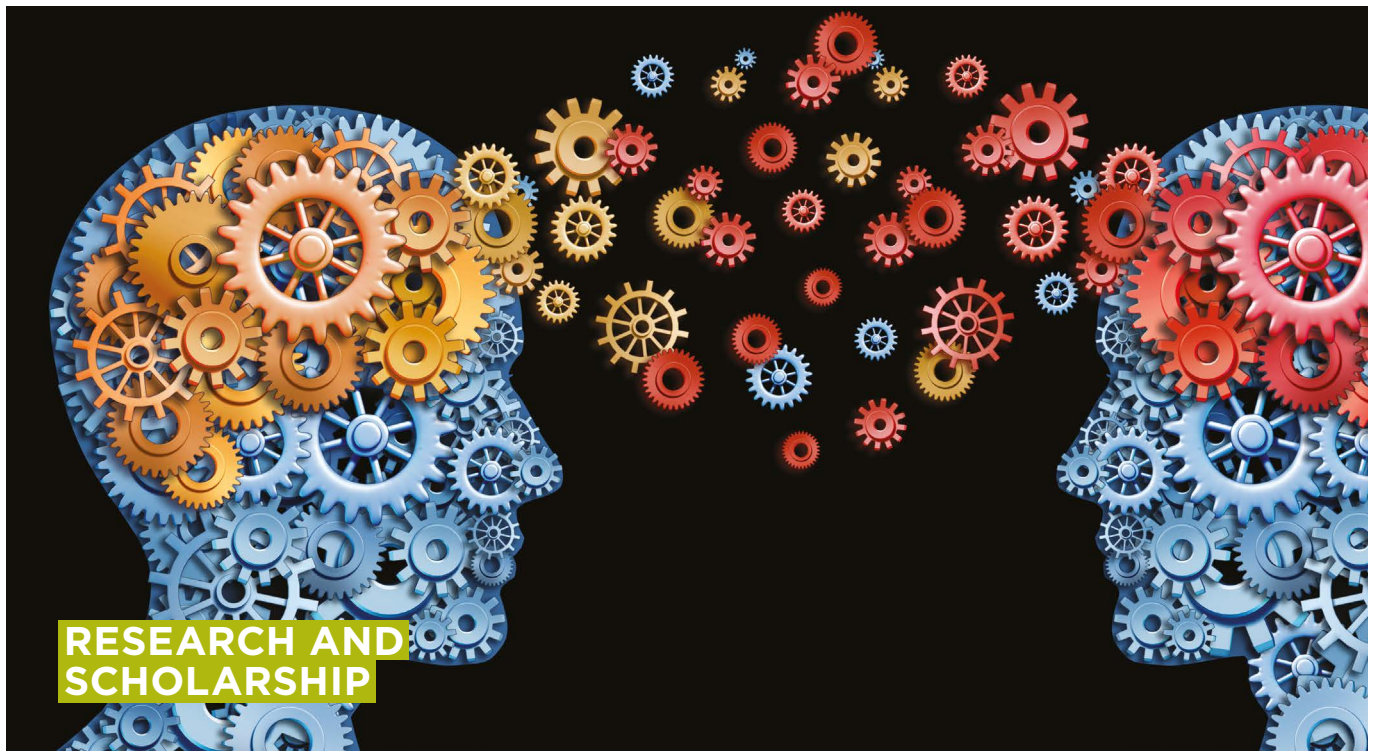


## RE-ENVISIONING TEACHING AND LEARNING

- We will excel further in personalised open learning, where our curriculum is accessible, is designed to meet the changing lifelong learning needs of individuals and society, and is capable of reaching students in all locations at all stages of their lives and careers.
- We will make sure that our curriculum is more consistently informed in its development by our students. We will prioritise curriculum that attracts learners and employers, and is of benefit to students and the University as a whole.
- Our design, delivery and support decisions will be driven by pedagogical and student need. Our leadership in digital innovation will support a more engaged, responsive, student-centred and collaborative approach to learning.
- We will establish centres for scholarship and innovation in each Faculty and LTI Academic that will work in partnership with each other, our professional services and across all four nations. The centres will increase collaboratively-developed, research-informed, knowledge exchange and teaching that meets the needs of students.
- We will become a sector leader in the creation of a rewarding, scholarship-focused and student-facing world-class teaching academic career path. In implementing this pathway, we shall be mindful of potential impact on equality and diversity and the need for mitigation of any risks.
- The skills and experience of our associate lecturer community will more consistently contribute to curriculum development and enhancement through their involvement in academic communities, including in curriculum production and presentation (see Sustainable Academic Communities for more detail).
- We will embrace new curriculum business opportunities across all four nations and internationally that will diversify our income generation and support the urgent action required to meet the skills and social mobility needs of each of the UK's four nations.

## BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

- We will remain a university with Academic Excellence at the heart of our teaching and learning.
- We shall maintain a broad curriculum offer across the four nations of the UK and beyond. Through a more agile and sustainable curriculum we will prioritise delivering an outstanding academic experience to our student community, one that is attractive to potential learners and represents a compelling offer to employers and students seeking to enhance their employability.
- We will continue to intensify our role as leaders of widening participation in HE. We will use recognition of academic or experiential learning and collaborations with institutions in the Further Education (FE) and HE sectors, and with employers, across the four UK nations, internationally and through informal learning to provide educational opportunity and, through that, enhance social mobility.
- Our curriculum offer will incorporate work-based learning and traditional academic study, and will ensure the same expectations of high quality and rigorous standards are applied across the whole, and aim to ensure parity of status across the range of qualifications in the wider world.



### AIM 3

We will add value through using our research and scholarship to inform and enhance our teaching and learning and therefore student outcomes.

### AIM 4

We will support and promote research in our academic communities where there is sustainable curriculum and where it is (or expected to become) substantially internationally excellent. We will also support research which meets other, student-focused strategic needs.

### AIM 5

We will create new knowledge through research, scholarship and professional practice that meets the needs of external stakeholders and extends the reach and impact of our research on society, culture, economy and governments across the UK and internationally.

## RATIONALE

Our research benefits our students directly by informing our curriculum, opening up new opportunities in our teaching and learning, and driving forward the University's learning technologies. It also helps us to champion externally our knowledge creation and social mission.

Our teaching-related scholarship continues to create new educational opportunities and increased social mobility by delivering innovation and enhancing our pedagogical approaches and understanding of how students learn in an open and distance learning context.

The environment in which we undertake research and scholarship, however, is challenging with major external uncertainties (e.g. Brexit, changes to the Research Excellence Framework (REF)) and internal challenges of improving the sustainability of our research activities. Through a more holistic approach to Academic Excellence within the Faculties, Schools and LTI Academic - that own our academic communities - we will bring greater focus to the synergies between our research and scholarship, our teaching and learning and external engagement in support of our primary purpose of creating educational opportunity and social mobility.

## RE-ENVISIONING RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

- Research in our student-focused academic communities will be supported where there is sustainable curriculum (or there is demonstrable evidence that it will be a sustainable area in future) and where it is – or is expected to become – substantially internationally excellent. This will maximise our performance in units of assessment in the REF and allow long-term investment in them. Research will also be supported where it supports other strategic needs (such as accreditation), enhancing our intellectual leadership and distinctiveness as a global pioneer in distance education.
- We will invest in research and scholarship where it supports our primary purpose of creating educational opportunities and where its benefits can be felt by the largest number of students (for example research and scholarship that informs teaching and learning, student experience and student needs).
- We will harness further our research infrastructure so that our students have unique access to cutting edge, subject-related technologies, practices and knowledge and will benefit from the research and scholarship that drives forward the University's learning technologies.
- We will take a holistic, institution-wide approach to scholarship in order to establish, share and adopt the best practice possible to enhance the student experience and improve learning gain.

## BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

- We will be a university with a mission-driven approach to Academic Excellence at the heart of our research and scholarship.
- Our research and scholarship will connect our academic staff and our students with new perspectives and cultures as they evolve, and lead to radical innovation in curriculum design.
- We will continue to develop fruitful partnerships with research collaborators and funders across the UK and internationally, working together to address the major challenges facing society in the 21st Century.
- Our academic environment will enable us to attract and retain the highest calibre of academic staff who believe passionately in the mission of the University.
- Our academic environment will nurture and develop early-career academic staff, post-doctoral and post-graduate researchers and we will promote the University's principles of equality and diversity through our commitment to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.



Aims for external engagement in conjunction with teaching and learning, and research and scholarship, including knowledge exchange and partnership, have been outlined above (**AIMS 2 AND 5**). In addition:

### AIM 6

We will communicate and share our Academic Excellence providing opportunities for the public to engage, reflect and interact and for the University to attract and retain students.

## RATIONALE

Engagement with organisations, institutions and individuals has always been an integral part of the University's mission, supporting our primary purpose of creating educational opportunity and increasing social mobility for all who seek to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through working in partnership with others, our Academic Excellence has enabled us to promote social justice and ensure that millions of people across the world have engaged with us. This Academic Strategy seeks to embed the principle of engagement to ensure that we can demonstrate the positive impacts our teaching and learning and research and scholarship have on society across the four nations and internationally through working with relevant stakeholders, user communities and members of the public to achieve mutual benefits, effects and changes.

## RE-ENVISIONING EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

- Through the implementation of this Academic Strategy we will embed the principles and practices of engagement within our teaching and learning and research and scholarship, including measures for quality and for evidencing our social, cultural and economic impacts.
- We will embed enterprise and knowledge exchange across the breadth of our academic activities and communities supporting activities that enrich our academic communities, generate income and deliver innovations in support of our primary purpose and our wider impact on society.
- We will develop new, and strengthen existing, strategic alliances with organisations and institutions (including in the FE and HE sectors), with employers, and across the four nations and internationally, to create more cooperative, flexible, and systematic alliances in support of social mobility and the creation of new knowledge and enterprise.
- We will instigate new work on communicating our Academic Excellence to support a proactive approach to improving and sustaining our reputation.

## BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

- We will remain committed to, and enhance, the fundamental role of our commercial activities in the UK nations and internationally in generating financial resources which can support our mission-driven activity and help us better serve our students.
- We shall continue to exploit the distribution of our staff across the UK to the benefit of academic external engagement activities.





Sustainable, student-focused academic communities at The Open University are owned by the Schools (or combinations of Schools) which form our Faculties, and by LTI Academic, recognising that academics may also be part of wider subject communities to which they contribute. Our aim is to empower our academic communities to take decisions on their academic activities and their prioritisation of resources within the framework of this Academic Strategy and overall University business parameters and operating model.

Our **sustainable student-focused academic communities** will:

- be intellectually vibrant across all areas of Academic Excellence, economically viable, dynamic and resilient to change in terms of size and resources;
- be inclusive of and centred on our students and focussed on Academic Excellence for student benefit;
- be inclusive of our central, regional and national academics and associate lecturers, ensuring that homeworkers are as much part of the community as those based at University sites;
- balance a long-term perspective with the need for agility to meet the needs of present and future students;
- uphold the University's principles of equality and diversity.

Our **students** will have greater involvement in our academic communities and the academic life of the University, including through:

- engagement through our teaching, learning and assessment practices, including improved collaborative learning activities with other students and staff, and through extra-curricular activities;
- increased opportunities for student-staff partnership in academic development (building on existing mechanisms for listening and responding to the student voice);
- engagement in the development of our institutional enabling plans, through the OU Students Association (see Figure 2);
- academic communities that are visible to our students, and with which they identify.

For our **staff**, contributions to students' success will be recognised more effectively than ever before, with career paths available that empower and motivate all academic staff, at all career stages, help them develop their leadership skills and that promote the University's principles of equality and diversity. We will give equal status to teaching and scholarship, research and knowledge exchange career paths and ensure these are used effectively, and in collaboration, to deliver the strategic objectives of the University. The pathways will be supported by an outstanding academic professional development programme and by our promotion criteria.

As well as nurturing and developing all academic staff, recognising and valuing their contributions and supporting their career progression, we will achieve a step change in the number of academics following a progressive and attractive, teaching-focused career-path through the full range of academic salary scales up to and including Band 3 Professor. Staff focusing primarily on teaching will be given the opportunity to undertake scholarship, attend relevant conferences and engage in professional development appropriate to their needs and aspirations.

Our **associate lecturer** community will be more fully and consistently integrated within their Schools, ensuring they contribute to, and are recognised for their significant contributions to, the overall Academic Excellence of the University and our students' success. As well as current, core teaching and assessment responsibilities, their involvement will include:

- more consistent application of their skills and experience to curriculum development, production and presentation;
- greater and regular participation in staff meetings, in staff/student discussions and in facilitating student consultation forums, as well as through Boards of Studies already in place;
- improved opportunities for professional development that will enhance their teaching and learning activities;
- regular on-line community engagement.



## HOW WILL DECISIONS ON ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE PRIORITIES BE REACHED?

Key decisions on curriculum, teaching and learning, research and academic external engagement priorities are expected to be taken at the following levels:

### *Institutional:*

- Development or revision of institutional plans including curriculum, teaching and learning, and research, and oversight of their implementation
- Decisions on the overall University operating model as it relates to academic activities
- Investment in scholarship to inform the overall University approach to teaching and learning
- Decisions on exceptions to the standard aims of this Academic Strategy
- Decisions on the development of disciplines completely new to the institution
- Review of policies and decisions on amendments where necessary to align with this Academic Strategy
- Decisions on the level of sustainable institutional investment in research

### *Faculty/LTI Academic:*

- Decisions on discipline areas and overall strategic priorities for curriculum, research and subject-based scholarship within the framework of this Academic Strategy and overall University business parameters and operating model

### *Schools/LTI Academic:*

- Detailed decisions on academic activities, staff workload planning and management, curriculum development, research and scholarship within the framework of this Academic Strategy and overall University business parameters and operating model
- Decisions on professional development of academic staff in their School.

Standard academic governance will also apply (for example, to qualification approval).

## IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING IMPACT

The implementation of this Academic Strategy will prioritise the provision of an institutional framework for supporting and enabling Faculties and their Schools, and LTI Academic to navigate and develop prioritised action plans, including strategic, targeted investment where necessary. Each Faculty, and LTI Academic, may need to respond differently to fully realise the aspirations of this Academic Strategy. At institutional level, enabling plans (e.g. the Research Plan) will be revised or developed as appropriate, and any required institution-wide change initiatives will be delivered.

The Strategy will be accompanied by a full implementation plan.

A number of measures of our Academic Excellence have already been identified and set out in the Students First Strategy as agreed by the University's Council. We will supplement this with a range of complementary indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, and targets where appropriate, across each of the Aims set out in this Academic Strategy to enable us to measure our progress in enhancing our Academic Excellence.