

Letter from the Chair May 2018

When I was elected to Chair a year ago we were already in the early stages of what we anticipated to be a difficult few years. As you will know in 2012 the government announced the removal of subsidies from universities in England and as these bit deeper with the end of transitional arrangements, the cost of studying became impossible to either reach or justify for many students. This was particularly devastating in the case of the OU where so many students studied out of interest and enjoyment compared to other universities where most studied towards career goals. Consequently the university reported a 30% fall in student numbers between 2012 and 2017. This percentage was even higher in Psychology, the largest student group in the university. Along with the introduction of the new degree structure that essentially removed exams from the psychology degree (only two courses, DE200 and DD317, now have exams), this had a direct and almost catastrophic effect on OUPS. We saw an immediate and savage drop in numbers at all our module-related events.

However our financial performance was quite a bit better than we had anticipated in that the loss we made was less than we had forecast. Our costs are relatively fixed - for example accommodation costs are largely out of our control and we can only reduce the numbers of tutors or speakers so far without compromising quality. This means the cost-per-head of our events depends on the numbers of people we can attract. So this "loss" is simply the difference between what it cost OUPS for each person who attended our events and what we charged them to come along. The previous trustees, anticipating this decline in numbers and hence income, had built up a reserve fund to help smooth this out, and as planned we drew on this to fill this gap again this year.

We also put a lot of effort into reviewing and reducing our costs, and re-thinking the events that we offer to increase attendance. Although numbers at module-related events have declined, we see much more interest in our conferences and seminars and have offered more of these than ever before. While it is still an enormously challenging time, we seem to be seeing some light at the end of the tunnel now.

Financial review

As a committee we carried out a detailed review of our financial situation and we have made significant savings without compromising the service we give our members. This has included reducing committee attendance for our events, removing the costs of printing and delivery for our event materials through our Paperless programme, reviewing the costs and locations of our regional events and for the first time, gaining financial support from the OU itself.

We have also trialled a number of new payment systems to test whether being able to spread the cost of our weekends over a number of payments rather than pay in full would make it easier for people to budget and hence increase bookings. However the OUPS Credits savings scheme attracted zero deposits over twelve months so we withdrew it to remove the maintenance overhead, and OUPS PayPlan, despite its simplicity (send our

standing order form to your bank six months in advance and then just turn up in Warwick) has only been used by a small number of attendees but we'll run it a few more times before deciding on its fate.

In contrast the ability to pay online by credit and debit card that we introduced now accounts for more revenue than all other methods combined, and has reduced the cost of taking card payments by phone substantially. Our analysis shows that the vast majority of bookings for most events are in the month immediately beforehand, so this might explain why spreading payments is not as big a problem as we thought.

Faculty liaison

As a priority this year we created an OUPS Faculty Liaison team, headed by Abi Robbins, to build on the excellent work that Abi has done over the past years in building awareness of OUPS within the OU and making contacts in the School of Psychology. We sometimes hear from students in their final year who wish they'd heard of OUPS in their first one, so it seemed that we were not reaching as many students as we could. In the first of our meetings with the department heads they told us that they had an estimated 19,000 registered students, so in fact with 700 members we were only visible to around 5% of the cohort ! Years ago the University used to include an OUPS flier in each box of books sent to students at the beginning of each psychology course, and it was clear that the University could do much to promote OUPS to students now, but we needed to demonstrate that working with us would be in their interest too, and that we were aligned with their values and ethos.

The team has now rebuilt a positive working relationship with the Heads of the OU School of Psychology, who are now committed to promoting OUPS to all new students and to helping us understand their plans and the content of future modules, which helps us build events to support these. We are seeing rising numbers of students who tell us in post-event feedback that they heard of OUPS through the module websites and forums, and we are holding events that are jointly-funded (and hence cheaper or even free to students). With direct faculty input we are able to plan the dates of our events better so that they offer topics relevant to the stage of the module that students have reached, and that are less likely to conflict with coursework or dayschools. Without this close faculty engagement, OUPS will quickly become unable to function effectively, and we look forward to further collaboration in the coming years.

Governance

On a different front, we started the first significant overhaul of OUPS governance in many years, reviewing our Constitution for approval at the AGM and introducing codes of conduct for our society and policies for equality, diversity and complaints management. There is still quite a bit of work to do in this area and we'll continue to do this in the coming year.

We also completed a six-month programme of work to ensure that our data protection and information security was ready for the introduction of the new GDPR data protection regulation in May 2018. We reviewed all of our manual and systems business processes and

made the changes necessary to ensure that all personal information is treated confidentially, responsibly and securely.

Regional structure

The current regional structure is idealistic but not fit for purpose as it relies completely on dedicated individuals to establish and keep a region open. We've been exceptionally lucky in the past with strong regional teams in the North, in London, Cambridge and in the South/South East. However while the number of members in London means we can replace committee members who move on, in other parts it's been really difficult and no committee has meant no events.

So we are slowly changing this but need to accelerate - there's no point in having a structure that actively prevents us holding regional events.

We are quite a way through the planning of an event in Scotland for the first time in many years, and are also holding events in London, Cambridge and Brighton in the coming months.

We've held our first event in partnership with the OU (London Postgraduate Seminar) and have a second arranged to run in parallel with our "Thinking of Postgrad" weekend in Warwick September. This will be a Research Showcase featuring a number of the research team at the OU presenting on their work. We're also discussing a number of approaches with the OU for bringing events to new parts of the UK.

Finally

I have found the current committee to be a great team who I enjoy working with very much and would like to thank them for their energy and effort this year. Without volunteers (and they are all volunteers with the sole exception of our dedicated Business Administrator, Irene), OUPS could not function. I welcome the opportunity to continue our work together to keep OUPS strong and relevant.

I'd also like to thank all our volunteers who helped arrange and run our regional events, and those who are helping us investigate new events in new regions - please keep those thinking caps on and send all ideas through to Faye our Regional Representative.

And finally, I would like to thank all of you who have supported us over the year by coming to our events, engaging with our Facebook pages, and taking the time to send us your feedback and to tell us how much you've enjoyed OUPS - you make it all worthwhile :)