

## **The withdrawal of Versailles from the annual programme of degree ceremonies: A joint statement by Keith Zimmerman, Director, Students and Ruth Tudor, OUSA President**

We recognise that a number of students have been disappointed by the withdrawal of Versailles from the Open University's annual programme of degree ceremonies. We are therefore issuing this joint statement to explain the ceremony planning process and the reason for this decision.

### **Ceremony planning**

Planning the Open University's ceremony programme for each year is a highly complex task, which has to be carried out at least 18 months in advance in order that the venues can be booked. One of the complexities is that the number of students who will graduate each year cannot be estimated with a high level of accuracy. Another is that the distribution of graduates across the regions and nations of the UK and elsewhere varies significantly from year to year as does the distribution of graduate preferences for which ceremony they wish to attend.

In addition, many of our graduates choose a ceremony that is far from their home region or nation for various reasons, for example, proximity to their close relatives, a holiday location or a place of historic interest etc. Also, every graduate attending a ceremony wishes to be accompanied by guests as part of their celebration. The number of guests also varies, and for some venues capacity is limited.

These factors taken together mean that the University's planning team has to cope with a large element of uncertainty in graduate and guest attendance and preferred venue. Cost is also a significant factor that has to be taken into account. Hiring venues and providing all the supporting services incurs large costs and significant over-provision of ceremony capacity overall needs to be avoided.

### **Versailles**

During 2013, an in-depth review of ceremony processes and performance was carried out which highlighted that the Versailles ceremony was extremely expensive and complex for the University to operate and that the costs of running it were much higher than for UK-based ceremonies.

The review recommendation was that the final Versailles ceremony should be held in 2014. The University currently has no plans to reinstate a Versailles ceremony although it will continually review the ceremony programme.

### **Future planning**

The University has processes in place for students to provide feedback about the ceremony programme and it takes this feedback very seriously. It does this through the OU's Graduate Survey, which is thoroughly analysed on an annual basis, and improvement activities are drawn from it. In 2014, the survey brought in more than 2,400 returns, with 88% of respondents expressing high levels of satisfaction with regard to the range of ceremony locations available.

In future, the University will ensure that the Open University Students Association (OUSA), as the representative of the student body, is consulted before it decides to no longer offer a ceremony in a particular region/nation, or to make other significant changes to the running of ceremonies, and that, if such a decision is taken, it will widely communicate the information to students in good time.

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