

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR THE ECONOMY:  
ENERGY STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND: CONSULTATION ON POLICY  
OPTIONS.

Contact: Chrisanne English

Email: [chrisanne.english@open.ac.uk](mailto:chrisanne.english@open.ac.uk)

Context:

The Open University is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible distance learning. The University was founded with a clear purpose: to open up education to all. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than 2 million students, and it currently has over 168,000 students, including more than 7,000 overseas. The OU has more than 27,000 students with declared disabilities.

The Open University's operation within Northern Ireland is funded by the Department for the Economy, making it one of three universities here. We provide high quality distance learning to over 4,212 students in Northern Ireland most of whom study part-time. Students are supported by a team of Student Services staff in the Belfast office, in addition to Associate Lecturer and tutors.

Widening participation and social mobility is core to the OU's mission. Our part-time, flexible learning model plays a pivotal role by enabling individuals, regardless of their background, to fulfil their potential and earn a degree. Our 'open entry' policy means that no one is excluded, as traditional entry qualifications are not a prerequisite to study with us.

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**Q1. Do you agree with the overall goal of achieving net zero carbon energy no later than**

**2050?**

Yes. The Open University supports the overall goal to achieve net zero carbon energy by 2050, as a target aligned with the advice of the Climate Change Committee (CCC) and consistent with wider climate change action within Northern Ireland as well as the ambitions across the UK in the Republic of Ireland and EU.

**Q19: Do you agree with a focus on research mapping, research funding, business linkages and UK opportunity scanning to maximise the impact of the local research base with clean energy specialisms? Please identify specific opportunities in the local research base that could be progressed.**

Yes. As a four nation institution, and the only university that operates across the Island of Ireland, The Open University is well placed to deliver educational and social opportunities and develop commercial and partnership opportunities with regional employers and organisations where they are most needed.

The University's current Research and Enterprise Plan (2018 – 2023) encapsulates activity in the four nations and aligns with the Department for Economy's Knowledge Exchange priorities, thus ensuring local stakeholder needs are met. The plan includes key objectives to:

- Build our capacity in distinctive engaged, open research through increased and widened public and stakeholder engagement with OU research;
- Develop the number and significance of our large-scale, external research and enterprise and doctoral training partnerships.

We participate in the [Connected](#) project, funded by the Department of Economy, which is the first Knowledge Exchange programme delivered across HE and FE and aims to support SME's in Northern Ireland by exchanging knowledge and research ultimately benefiting the NI economy. It works by connecting industry particularly SMEs with academia and partnerships with HE and FE.

At the beginning of the year, The Open University, with the support of Connected, delivered a three-part online professional development course offering practical and supportive training for Creative Writing facilitators to learn more about teaching in a virtual environment.

Last month The Open University, in association with Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT), hosted a webinar together academics and transport and logistics professionals to discuss the delicate balance local businesses consider competing demands and manage resilient and sustainable operations, with a mix of academic insight and experienced practitioners discussing how it works in practice.

Transport and logistics in the context of supply chain are a key sector for growing brand awareness and driving new business.

**Q20: Do you believe that utilising and tailoring existing education and training routes can meet the short-term skills needs of the clean energy sector? How can activities within these routes be shaped to meet the needs of the sector?**

Existing educational and training routes must accommodate a diverse range of learners, to ensure a just transition to net zero by 2050.

If we are to have an appropriately skilled workforce, which can meet the needs of the clean energy sector, education and skills training must be accessible to all regardless of background and experience level.

Qualifications need to be able to be studied at a time, place, and delivery mode (whether

part-time or full-time) which suits the learner. They should be co-designed with industry and trade unions to help people move into well paid jobs.

The Open University has shown that people who don't have substantial pre-existing qualifications can succeed at Higher Education level provided they have a supportive and engaging learning environment. People don't necessarily have to follow a linear Level 1 to Level 2 to Level 3 etc progression route through qualification levels.

Diversity, inclusion, and accessibility to learning, training, upskilling within the workplace should be a priority. Age limits on Level 3 apprenticeships and colleges being discouraged from delivering Level 6, which disadvantages lifelong learning in more rural communities, should be reviewed.

Paid virtual internships have proven successful for Open University students and graduates, those with a disability, caring commitments, requiring flexible working hours etc. The virtual internships have provided students and graduates with their first professional role or given them the opportunity to return to work which has led to a permanent post or given the student/graduate confidence to secure a better job with another employer at the end of the internship. It's also a good opportunity for those living in rural locations to gain employment with a Belfast based employer.

Enabling greater use of modular study, will also mainstream green skills by allowing workers to pick up small batches of skills and knowledge without having to commit to a full three/four-year degree.

Incentivising low carbon SMEs to invest in skills development for their staff would address a key weakness in our economy. This needs to extend beyond apprenticeships, which primarily are used as an entrance tool into an industry, to measures that create a culture of lifelong learning. Creating opportunities for on-the-job training could make a real impact. Incentives would also go some way to address the specific barriers smaller employers face in delivering training, including scalability and lack of capacity.

Consideration should be given to utilising The Open University as the only cross-border university on the island and one which proactively collaborates with its peer universities across the island through its [FutureLearn](#) platform as well as having active partnerships across the FE sector in Northern 4 Ireland. In the context of Brexit this will be crucial moving forward and would also go some way to addressing skills issues faced in rural communities in border counties.

**Q21: Do you agree with the proposal to establish an Energy Skills Forum to shape the future skills needs of clean energy sector? If so, what do you believe the role, remit and membership of such a group should be?**

We support the establishment of skills advisory and governance structures that complement and integrate with other skills, innovation, economic and education policy. Specifically, the Department for the Economy's Skills Strategy, and Economic Action Plan, the Department for Education's 14-19 Strategy, the Executive Office's Programme for Government, the work of the Skills Advisory Group, and the recently proposed Skills Council.

We believe that it is important that the voice of the part-time, flexible and distance learning sector is represented in all skills advisory and governance structures, for the essential role it plays in supporting social mobility, lifelong learning and a just transition to a greener economy.

**Q22: Do you believe that there is a need for specific measures aimed at ensuring a just transition in Northern Ireland? If so, please advise on what the focus of these should be in addition to the education and training routes already proposed for a low carbon workforce.**

Yes. As the consultation document identifies: Measures focused on re-skilling and re-training our existing workforce into a low carbon workforce are essential to ensuring a just transition. The role of part-time, flexible distance learning in this context cannot be underestimated.

Part-time distance learning empowers those that may not be able to access full-time education to upskill or reskill while they work. Flexible and distance learning can support a diverse and inclusive workforce and ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to benefit from the employment opportunities created by the growth of a green economy.

The role of lifelong learning is instrumental in enhancing skills at all levels, lifting age limits to learning is a key component. We need to move away from the outdated notion that you study a degree and move into a career in the industry in which we have studied about. We need to reinforce from school through to university and the Careers Service that you must continuously engage in learning to have a successful career within the modern economy. The working world has drastically changed with an increase in automated jobs and increased technology. It is now essential for many people to re-train and upskill if they want to remain in the workforce and if they want to achieve a higher salary or be promoted.

Improving digital infrastructure should be a key priority. This is hugely important to allowing everyone to reach their potential and continue lifelong learning. Digital poverty and poor broadband access will be major barriers to enabling people to meet their potential, particularly given the acceleration of digitisation during the pandemic.

**Q33: Do you agree that information, awareness and behavioural change should be a key strand of future energy efficiency support? If so, what are the key behaviours that should be targeted?**

Education is hugely important going forward. Sustainability must be a core part of primary, post-primary, FE, HE curricula as well as through focussed public awareness. The Open University offers significant climate change related curriculum at both [undergraduate](#) and postgraduate level. Careers relating to environment and climate change are promoted to OU graduates on our [careers website](#).

[OpenLearn](#) is the OU's free to use learning platform with over 15,000 hours of online courses and content available to all. Around 10 million people visit this site every year. With over 950 short courses (varying from 1-1000 hours of study), learners can explore a vast array of subjects, get inspiration, build skills and confidence and earn recognition if they wish (via badged open courses), all for free.

The Open University has, in partnership with the BBC, produced large scale television and online assets, to highlight environmental and sustainability issues through initiatives like Blue Planet, Frozen Planet and A Perfect Planet. We recognise our responsibility to ensure environmental responsibilities are met.

Short courses such as badged-open courses and microcredentials can quickly help educators and staff gain the skills and knowledge needed to provide sustainability education. OpenLearn, for example, provides over 90 free resources and courses on the environment including our [Sustainability Hub](#) which has courses in renewable energy, transport and sustainability and waste management.

As a distance learning provider, our students study with us in their homes or workplaces, rather than being present on a campus. By its very nature, our model of delivery is inherently environmentally sustainable, and the University is striving to achieve even higher standards.

Overall, it has been estimated that online learning consumes nearly 90 per cent less energy and produces 85 per cent fewer carbon dioxide emissions than campus-based learning, largely due to far less student travel, economies of scale and no additional energy consumption by student housing<sup>1</sup>. High quality on-line learning is therefore an important way in which to deliver 'greener' reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

The University has exceeded its target of cutting CO2 emissions by 34% in 2020 against a 2005/06 2005 baseline, in fact we have cut CO2 by almost 54% since 2005 across all sites. As of 1st June 2020, all the OU's electricity across all nations and locations now comes from sustainable sources i.e. solar, wind and hydro. The University's Go Green programme aims to achieve environmental and financial savings across the University by empowering staff to take action on energy, waste, water and travel. Go Green is intended to be an integral part of staff behaviours in the future to enable the University to manage its energy needs and energy costs.

HEPI: [Beyond Business as Usual: Higher Education in the era of climate change](#) recommends that universities and colleges should reconfigure their day-to day operations to achieve urgent, substantial and monitored climate change mitigation and biodiversity enhancement action, and should develop a clear operational plan for implementing climate change adaptation measures developed in partnership with local communities.

We are open to a cross-University working group, with SU and student representation, to devise and monitor progress on such an action plan across the Higher Education sector.

Post-Covid there will be opportunities to explore maximising the environmental benefits of our working patterns e.g. 10-20% fewer commuters can have a massive impact. The opportunity to further explore agile working should not be lost.

1. Robin; Potter, Stephen and Yarrow, Karen (2008). *Designing low carbon higher education systems: Environmental impacts of campus and distance learning systems*.

**Q34: What measures do you think can have the most impact to support people to reduce the miles they travel in private vehicles? Please explain your rationale**

Travel a major source of pollution at universities. It could be reduced through more home-based open and distance learning.

- Compared to full-time campus-based courses, students undertaking part-time, face to face study at campus universities reduce energy use and CO2 emissions by 65% and 61% respectively per student. This was due to 1) reduction in residential energy for students who live at their main home whilst studying 2) a reduction in travel 3) More intense utilisation of campus resources.
- Distance learning courses on average involved 87% less energy consumption and produced 85% fewer CO2 emissions per student than full time, face-to-face campus-based university courses
- For part-time students, travel related emissions were cut to 47% that of full-time students, and that of distance taught students was even less, averaging 11% of full-time campus students
- The key three factors of transport, campus site and residential energy account for most of the almost 90% difference in energy and emissions between the full-time campus based and the distance taught HE courses.
- Mainly or partly online courses showed a 20% reduction in energy and a 12% reduction in CO2 emissions compared to the mainly print-based courses.<sup>1</sup>

1. Roy, Robin; Potter, Stephen and Yarrow, Karen (2008). *Designing low carbon higher education systems: Environmental impacts of campus and distance learning systems*

**Any other comments:**

We welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the above and how The Open University can support the Energy Strategy development.