

The Open University in Ireland
Consultation Response to Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework

19th March 2021

The following document outlines The Open University's response to the outcomes most applicable to our work. We are happy to discuss this response and any other issues further.

For any queries please contact our Policy and Public Affairs Manager at megan.fearon@open.ac.uk

Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment

- **Natural Environment**
- **Green Economy**
- **Built Environment**
- **Housing**
- **Active and Sustainable Transport**
- **Waste Management**
- **Water and Wastewater Management**

The first step to taking action to achieve this outcome is to declare a Climate and Ecological Emergency with a commitment to become carbon neutral.

We need to sustain our future by what we do now, for the future generations. We should be guided by and shaped *through the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals*.

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 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. The Open University recognises our responsibility to ensure environmental responsibilities are met. Indeed, there are many 'green' benefits of a non-campus model of Higher Education.

We are open to a cross-University working group, with SU and student representation, to devise and monitor progress on 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.

Outcome 3: We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect

- **Inclusion and Tackling Disadvantage**
- **Rights and Equality**
- **Legacy**
- **Tackling Sectarianism, Building Respect, and Identity**

This is fundamental to everything we do. We must ensure that actions taken across all government departments are diverse, inclusive, and respectful. This will require those at a decision-making level to be reflective of the society we live in. Cognitive diversity is key to achieving this outcome.

In terms of Higher Education (HE), creating policy that will embed and deliver equality, diversity, and inclusion in the HE sector must contain enablers and motivators, which in turn requires resource. Resource and capacity building are key issues to ensure adequate investment across all protected characteristics, to ensure posts can be created to carry out the work required to transform culture.

Improved data collection, processes, and procedures (particularly for ethnicity) are required to enable staff to monitor and analyse student trends, and to create evidence-based decision making for institution and public policy.

Having Higher and Further Education Institutions sign up to a common charter on Rights, Equality and Inclusion would bring a range of benefits to individual institutions, and across the sector.

Charters are proven to provide robust frameworks within which to examine EDI data and issues, and to benchmark against the sector to set further measures and targets to improve. It also enables institutional strategy to be evidence-based. A Charter must, however, be enabled by resource.

The Open University is proud of the work we do to ensure the principles of equality and inclusion across all department and we currently hold the Institutional Athena SWAN Bronze Award. Education and training is essential to tackling disadvantage and allowing people to realise their full potential.

Part time students have less access to student financial support than full time students. The experience in Wales, where part-time students are now able to benefit from maintenance support, indicates that this can significantly reduce the barriers that adult learners face to participating in higher education.

Access to funding is often the biggest barrier for learners particularly those who are unemployed, underemployed, have a disability, are economically inactive, or have caring responsibilities.

To these learners, higher education can be viewed as expensive and a luxury. Many people are in lower paid, skilled job roles which do not allow staff to also study. It is a “vicious circle” for those who are prevented from further study and improving their skillset due to the above circumstances.

We should not penalise people for whom traditional education didn't work or for whose life circumstances meant that they were unable to successfully engage in education when they were younger. In fact, we should consciously make it easier for them to engage in education when they are ready to and incentivise it.

Each Department should review existing policies and identify where policies disincentivise creating a culture of lifelong learning and take measures to rectify any issues. A meaningful collaborative approach which is both co-ordinated and flexible is needed.

The OU has successfully implemented its obligations under the Welsh Language Act 1993, predominantly within The OU in Wales but also across the institution at a UK level. This experience will enable The OU to work with the Northern Ireland Executive on the development and implementation of Irish Language and Ulster Scots developments here. The OU's Ireland Director was involved in this work during his time as interim OU Director in Wales.

Understanding and reconciling our past is key to tackling sectarianism and building respect. The Open University has worked with the BBC on a range of programmes such as Languages of Ulster and a forthcoming programme on Partition scheduled for broadcast in May 2021. The OU has also developed a digital archive around its work in British and Irish prisons during the years of conflict 1972-2000. The archive includes interviews with Loyalist and Republican ex-prisoners who studied in prison, OU tutors and staff, prison education staff and OU students who worked in prisons. As well as offering reflections on the power of education as a facilitator of understanding and dialogue in difficult circumstances, the archive has been a foundation for new course materials including a free online course 'Coping in Isolation'.

Outcome 5: Everyone can reach their potential

- **Capability and Resilience**
- **Better Jobs**
- **Skills and Attainment**
- **Sports, Arts and Culture**

For the Key Priority Area **Capability and Resilience** "*Supporting personal development opportunities for everyone and building confidence and capacity.*" This could be considerably strengthened by replacing "personal development" with "lifelong learning". This is more ambitious and meaningful. There are also existing measures around lifelong learning as outlined in the [OECD Skills Strategy paper](#).

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. The only current mention of this relates solely to business in Outcome 6, but 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 in a Post-Covid-world.

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

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.

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.

If we are to have an appropriately skilled workforce, which can meet the needs of local companies and multi-nationals based in Northern Ireland, education must be accessible to all regardless of background and experience level.

There must be a focus on industry relevant skills to fill current gaps in our economy and to help create new enterprises in the private, public, and social economy sector. Qualifications can and should be co-designed with industry and trade unions to help people move into well paid jobs.

Incentivising SMEs to invest in skills development for their staff would address a key weakness in our economy. This needs to be beyond just apprenticeships which primarily are used as an entrance tool into an industry, rather than something that creates a lifelong learning culture in an organisation. Creating opportunities for on the job training could make a real impact.

Incentives would also go some way to address the specific barriers small employers face in delivering training, including scalability and lack of capacity.

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.

Outcome 8: We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives

- Disability
- Housing
- Inclusion and Tackling Disadvantage
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Older people

The Open University has a stellar reputation as a leading provider of education for learners with disabilities. Nearly 20% of our students declare as having a disability.

We provide these students with the additional help and support they need through our Belfast and Dublin offices in Disability Support Allowance. We also work with various disability organisations and carer support groups in Northern Ireland, such as Action on Hearing Loss and Autism NI, to promote the opportunities and services available to students with additional needs.

The language for the key priority area **Disability** *Improving the quality of life for those of us with disabilities, empowering people to have more influence over their own lives and providing opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them* could be more ambitious and positive. Rather than empowering people to have "more influence" over their lives, this outcome could empower them to play a full and active role in society with support provided, where appropriate.

Consideration must also be given to those with hidden disabilities and how education can be shaped around the individual to provide them with the best possible outcome. JAM Cards have done fantastic work in this area and should be mainstreamed for those with hidden disabilities in the workplace and when receiving public services. They allow people with any communication barrier tell others they need 'Just A Minute' discreetly and easily.

Workforce issues within health and social care should be made a key priority area, particularly skills gaps across both the statutory and independent sectors which are having a significant impact on the delivery of care, particularly for **older people**. There is currently deficit of qualified nurses with over 1,600 current nursing vacancies in the HSC and a similar vacancy rate estimated in the independent sector. This outcome should be closely linked with the Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026

In terms of **Inclusion and Tackling Disadvantage**, the Open University were recently awarded funding for our Widening Access Programme which is in place across the region in the lowest areas of deprivation. We run a bespoke partnership programme with a number of women's centres in Northern Ireland. The pilot programme started in 2012 with Falls Women's Centre in West Belfast and has developed into a long-term collaborative partnership, resulting in a group of women undertaking study each year.

The OU's partnerships with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Libraries Northern Ireland will provide innovative routes to citizen engagement.

OpenLearn content is also being rolled out as part of the support job seekers receive from the UK Government's Jobcentre Plus.