

## WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION PLAN 2023/24 – 2025/26

**Institutions are required to submit information under each of the headings below. Please see the guidance notes for help in completing this return.**

**1.1** Please provide a high-level outline of your institution's Widening Participation policy in Higher Education and how this fits in with the institution's strategic direction.

The Open University's institutional [Learn and Live Strategy](#) 2022-2027 aims to bring flexible, high-quality university education to even more people, achieving even greater societal impact as a social movement and not just a university. This strategy is built on 5 goals: greater reach, student success, societal impact, equity, and sustainability. The Learn and Live strategy recognises the need to offer learning which is accessible, flexible, high quality, engaging and relevant; to work on dismantling barriers students and potential students face, whether discrimination, wrong turns, disability or hardship.

Widening access to, and enhancing success in, Higher Education (HE) is at the heart of The Open University's (OU's) mission and the five goals of the Learn and Live strategy. The Open University's [Access, Participation and Success](#) (APS) Strategy ensures that the needs of students, identified through the four nations different funding body requirements and institutional and sector data as facing the most challenges to access HE or achieve equitable outcomes, are met alongside the delivery of the University's overarching strategic priorities.

The Open University is required to submit an [Access and Participation Plan](#) (APP) to the Office for Students in England. This outlines the OU's commitment to widening participation and to equitable outcomes for students. The plan sets out how the University will improve 'equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education'. While the APP is driven by our regulatory requirement in England, it reflects data for students across all four nations of the UK. Therefore, The Open University in Northern Ireland must contribute to meeting our widening participation commitments to both the Office for Students and the Department for the Economy.

The Open University in Northern Ireland's business plan articulates how we as a unit within The Open University, will implement our strategic objectives in Northern Ireland. The business plan is written with the period of the Learn and Live Strategy in mind but is reviewed on an annual basis. Within that, we have an objective "To enable individuals from backgrounds that face barriers to participating in higher education to access and succeed at Open University study".

To realise this objective, The Open University in Northern Ireland has developed an Access, Participation and Success Plan that will subsume or commitments to both the APP and the WAPP and ensure that colleagues across the OU in Northern Ireland are clear about our Widening Participation objectives. The plan is structured around:

- 1) Access and participation: Targets for the participation rate of new students with particular characteristics that we want to see by the end of the 2026/27 academic year, including those identified within the WAPP below.

- 2) Success: Targets for improvement in student success rates for students with particular characteristics where there is demonstrable inequity compared to the student population as a whole.
- 3) Progression: Targets with the aim of improving employment progression and career development for students with specific characteristics.

We are in the process of developing an annual action plan that outlines the activity that we will take across The OU in Northern Ireland to enable us to meet these objectives.

## 1.2 What is your view of the success record of your institution in relation to recruitment, retention and progression for Widening Participation students?

The Open University plays a unique role in society by making higher education open to all through affordable and flexible distance learning. This allows a wide-reaching approach in relation to widening participation.

### Recruitment

The Open University offers two main starting points for undergraduate study in each academic year: February and October. This allows prospective students two opportunities to commence their studies. Adult learners (21 and over) make up the majority of OU students: 96.1% (20/21) compared to 67.3 % at University of Ulster and 62.4% at Queens University. ([Higher education ad hoc tables | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)). In Northern Ireland in 21/22, 6597 adult learners registered to study.

The OU in Northern Ireland has a high proportion of students from MDM 1. In 21/22, students from MDM 1 totalled 1395 (19.3%) which was an increase from 20/21 (1208). In 20/21 the percentage of students studying with the OU in Northern Ireland from MDM 1 was 18.5%, compared with 15.1% for University of Ulster and 10.9% from Queens University ([Higher education ad hoc tables | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)). This currently stands at 19.4 % for the 23/24 academic year (February 2024).

The number of students with a disability in 21/22 was 1397 (19.4%) which also showed an increase from 20/21(1329). This currently stands at 19.0 % for the 23/24 academic year (February 2024). Increasing the proportion of students with a disability is one of the OU in Northern Ireland's targets for the next 3 years as the proportion of students declaring a disability is significantly higher within the student population across the rest of the UK.

The number of young males from MDM 1 in 21/22 was 79 (1.1%). Young males are a cohort for which the OU in Northern Ireland has commenced a targeted marketing campaign to attract more students and as a result we have seen a growth in this cohort to 2.7% in 23/24 (February 2024).

Students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds totalled 238 (3.3%) in 21/22, an increase from 207 in 20/21. The OU in Northern Ireland has set a target to increase the proportion of students from a BAME background from 3% to 5% over the next 3 years; this currently stands at 4.9% for 23/24 (February 2024).

Students with carer status totalled 687 (9.5%) in 21/22, which showed an increase from 464 in 20/21. Students with care leaver status totalled 94 (1.3%) in 21/22 which increased from 62 in 20/21.

## **Retention**

OU students are more likely than full-time students attending campus-based courses to face additional challenges. Many students manage caring responsibilities, jobs and other commitments alongside with their studies. A Student Support Team in Belfast offers dedicated Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to all students to help them with their studies and encourage retention and progression.

The number of adult learners who passed their module first time in 21/22 was 69.9%, with 60.4% gaining a good overall module result (Grade 1 or 2). The number of students from MDM 1 who passed their module first time in 21/22 was 65.3%, with 61.6% gaining a good module result. 61.4 % of students with a disability in 21/22 also passed their module first time and 57.6% gained a good module result. 64.9% of students from BAME backgrounds also successfully passed their module first time in 21/22 and 44.9% gained a good module result. 62.4% of students with carer status and 64% care leaver students also passed their module first time in 21/22 and 62.6% gained a good module result. The percentage of care leavers achieving a good pass rate has increased year on year.

## **Progression**

Due to the nature of distance learning, progression for an OU student will at times need to be defined differently than for a student attending a traditional campus-based university. The flexible nature of OU study enables students who may be facing challenging personal circumstances or increased commitments to take necessary study breaks. Therefore, progression for one student can mean successfully moving from one module to another before taking a break, whilst another student may aim to complete a milestone qualification on route to their Honours degree.

Engagement with the OU Careers and Employability Service (CES) can enable students to remain focused on their study goals and progress. In 21/22, 25% of students engaging with the CES had a disability; 12% were carers, 6% were from BAME backgrounds and 22% were from MDM 1.

In 19/20, 65.9% of students from MDM 1 returned from Year 1 to Year 2 of their degree and 57.3% had completed 120 credits by Year 3 of their studies (equivalent to a Certificate of Higher Education). In 2022, 62.3% of students from MDM 1 had completed a good degree (1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 classification).

In 19/20, 71.1% of students who declared a disability progressed from Year 1 to Year 2 – compared with 69.1% for students without a disability. In 19/20, 62.3% of students with a disability had completed 120 credits by Year 3 of their studies. In 2022, 72.3% of students with a disability completed a good degree – compared with 66.8% for students without a disability.

In regard to students from BAME backgrounds, 63% had completed 120 credits by Year 3 of their studies in 19/20, compared with 62.5% for non-BAME students. Therefore, although numbers of students from BAME backgrounds are comparatively low in Northern Ireland, those that do choose to study with the OU in Ireland appear to perform better.

In 19/20, carer students outperformed non-carer students in terms of Year 1 to Year 2 return rate – 83.8% versus 68.8%. 72.2% of carer students had also completed 120 credits by Year 3 of their studies, compared with 61.8% of non-carer students. In 2022

carer students outperformed non-carer students in achieving a good degree – 77.8% compared to 66.9%. Unfortunately, the data for care leavers and young males from IMD 1 is not currently available due to too small of a sample size for both.

In 19/20, adult learners (21 plus) outperformed non-adult learners (under 21) students in terms of Year 1 to Year 2 return rate – 70% versus 62.3%. In 19/20, 62.7% of adult learners had also completed 120 credits by Year 3 of their studies compared with 60.7% of 77.8% non-adult learners.

### 1.3 Please outline the Widening Participation aims, objectives and targets for the next 3 years for your institution.

*You will need to provide details on key target groups within Access to Success, anticipated expenditure and the measures of success – your response should include a description of your approach to targeting, as well as the areas targeted for improvement over the next 3 years. You may wish to add to the projection tables below to report on your own institution's specified target groups if not already included in Access to Success.*

**The following areas have been identified for focus over the next 3 years. They are specifically based around areas where we feel that we can make further positive impact and meet our commitments both as part of the WAPP and the APP. Please note, these are draft and subject to change following internal consultation:**

#### **Access**

##### **We will:**

- Increase the proportion of students with a disability from 18% to 20%.
- Increase the proportion of students declaring a mental health issue from 8.5% to 10%.
- Increase the proportion of women studying STEM from 30% to 36%.
- Increase the proportion of students from a BAME background from 3% to 5%.
- Increase the proportion of U25 males from IMD 1 from 1% to 3%.
- Increase the % of students from IMD 1 from 18% to 25%.
- 
- 

##### **We will achieve this by:**

- Running targeted marketing campaigns.
- Entering into partnerships with other organisations to reach target students.
- Ensuring that Ireland-specific support is visible on the website and OU communication channels.
- Lobbying for policy change that removes barriers to part-time study in Northern Ireland.
- Enhanced promotion of Access modules.

#### **Success**

##### **We will:**

- Increase the proportion of students with a disability reaching the 25% fee liability point from 89% to 94%.
- Reduce the gap in good module passes between BAME and white students from 15.2% to 10%.

- Increase the proportion of disabled students in receipt of DSA from 17.1% to 20%.
- Increase the module completion rate for students with a mental health issue from 67% to 70%.
- Increase Year 1 to Year 2 return rate for students from IMD Quintile 1 from 50.8% to 60%.
- Increase the uptake in study-related costs funding from £25,000 to £50,000.
- 

**We will achieve this by:**

- Planning proactive and targeted communications to students throughout the year.
- Capturing the views of students to continuously improve the effectiveness our support.
- Ensuring that staff are trained to provide the best possible support to students from all backgrounds.
- Ensuring that ALs are aware of the APS Plan and referral mechanisms to the Student Support Team

**Progression**

**We will:**

- Increase the proportion of students with a disability engaging with CES from 19% to 30%.
- Increase the proportion of students from IMD Q1 who are engaging with CES from 18% to 30%.
- Increase the proportion of those participating in Achieving Your Goals from 25% of students with a disability to 35%.
- Increase the proportion of those participating in Achieving Your Goals from 43% of students from IMD Q1 and Q2 to 50%.
- 

**We will achieve this by:**

- Having closer collaboration between the Ireland Student Support Team and the Careers and Employability Service.
- Developing targeted communications to highlight the range of careers and employability support available.
- Promoting more employment and virtual internship opportunities to students.
- Partnering with organisations who value the diversity of OU students as a talent pool.
- Promoting postgraduate opportunities to Level 3 students.
- Promoting inclusive and relatable case studies of OU students who have achieved their personal and career goals through OU study.

### 1.3 (a) TARGETS

You will note that the tables numbered (i) to (vi) below have been pre populated with your institution’s average enrolment for the last 3 years. You are now required to insert numerical targets for each of the groups identified across the **3 years 2023/24 – 2025/26**. These groups are regarded as being under represented in Access to Success.

(i) Group: **MDM Quintile 1**

Outcome: **To increase participation of those from NI MDM Q1**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2018- 2021)	Targets/Outcome			
4 Year Average	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>853</b>		945	992	1042

(ii) Group: **Students with a Disability**

Outcome: **To increase the number of students who declare a disability**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2018- 2021)	Targets/Outcome			
4 Year Average	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>881</b>		966	1014	1065

(iii) Group: **Students with a Disability**

Outcome: **To increase the number of students in receipt of DSA**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2018- 2021)	Targets/Outcome			
	4 Year Average	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>135</b>	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	97	102	107

- (iv) Group: **Young Males from Quintile 1**  
Outcome: **To increase participation of young males from NI MDM Quintile 1**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2018- 2021)	Targets/Outcome			
	4 Year Average	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>43</b>	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	45	47	50

- (v) Group: **Adult Learners**  
Outcome: **To increase the number of adult learners participating in HE**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2018- 2021)	Targets/Outcome			
	4 Year Average	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>4410</b>	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	4415	4148	4180

As HESA data is largely incomplete for the following area, the figure that you provided in a previous WAPP for 2019/20 has been inserted as a base line.

- (vi) Group: **Number of Care Experienced enrolments**  
Outcome: **To increase the number of enrolments for those from a care background**

Open University – Widening Access and Participation Plan Part One

BASE YEAR	Targets/Outcome			
		2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
25	Number	25	26	27



**1.3(b)** The following tables have been provided for you to now insert any other ‘specific’ institutional targets. These may be different to those groups identified in 1.3(a) or may relate to targets other than enrolments. In all cases you will need to identify the group and highlight what the target outcome will be e.g. outreach, retention etc.

(i)

Group: BAME
Outcome: To increase participation of students from BAME ba

Baseline (statistical or % participation last year monitored)	Targets/Outcome			
		2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
148	Number	146	153	160
	Percentage	5%	5%	5%

(ii)

Group: Students declaring mental health conditions
Outcome: To increase numbers of students with mental health

Baseline (statistical or % participation last year monitored)	Targets/Outcome			
		2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
461	Number	453	476	500
	Percentage	5%	5%	5%

--	--	--	--

(iii) 

Group:	
Outcome:	

Baseline (statistical or % participation last year monitored)	Targets/Outcome			
		2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
	<b>Number</b>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>
	<b>Percentage</b>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 100%;" type="text"/>

**1.3(c)** Please now outline the estimated ‘direct’ expenditure required to meet the identified objectives in the table below. You may wish to refer to Part 2 of the guidance notes in “How to Complete your Widening Access and Participation Plan” for a definition of direct spend. Whilst we appreciate that figures for later years are only indicative we do require estimations inserted in each of the categories.

Activity	Estimated Spend 2023/24 (£)	Estimated Spend 2024/25 (£)	Estimated Spend 2025/26 (£)
Bursaries	<b>10,000</b>	<b>10,000</b>	<b>10,000</b>
Scholarships	10,000	10,000	10,000
Other financial Support	50,000	50,000	50,000
Outreach	10,000	10,000	10,000

Retention	N/A	N/A	N/A
Research Activity	N/A	N/A	N/A
Staffing/ Administration	£75,000	£75,000	£75,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£155,000</b>	<b>£155,000</b>	<b>£155,000</b>

- 1.4** List below the key programmes/projects financed from additional student fees that will contribute towards your institution’s performance.  
(Please refer to the appropriate section of the guidance notes before completing.)

The Open University does not charge the higher fee rate and therefore does not have higher additional fee income to spend on Widening Participation activities. However, the following contribute to the University’s institutional activities:

**The Community Partnerships Programme (CPP)**

The CCP was a 2-year DfE funded community-based, supported-learning intervention aimed at adults from widening participation backgrounds. The CPP recruited adult learners from a diverse range of widening participation backgrounds in line with the target groups stated in the DfE Access to Success strategy and the Open University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP). CPP is currently on a hiatus following the end of the funding period.

Participants studied our Access module ‘People, work and society’ (Y032) and as part of the programme were offered additional face-to-face study skills support via an Associate Lecturer in the centres, as well as wrap-around and follow-up support via their Student Support Team in Belfast. This programme had 12 community partners and 102 participants over the 2 years; 44% of the participants came from IMD1. 53% of the participants successfully passed the courses and 19% of those who passed progressed to OU UG study and 33 went on to other study/development opportunities or gained employment. A more in-depth review of the project can be found [here](#).

**Access Programme**

The Open University’s [Access Programme](#) provides a preparatory step into HE by offering three bespoke modules covering a wide range of subject areas. The modules are designed to: build skills and confidence in students, as well as preparing students for progression onto degree-level study. Students on low incomes or qualifying benefits can study Access modules for free. In 22/23, 173 students to date have registered to study an Access module in Northern Ireland.

**Free online educational resources**

The [OpenLearn](#) and [FutureLearn](#) websites offer over 1000 free educational courses for learners to develop their skills, knowledge and interest in HE, as well as providing

personal and career development opportunities. This includes a suite of Badged Open Courses (BOCs), which cover a range of core subjects and professional competencies essential for the modern workplace. OpenLearn receives over 100,000 unique visits a year from households in Northern Ireland. There are also several Learning Hub pages which have been developed for our partners, such as [Libraries NI](#) and the [Irish Congress of Trade Unions](#) with curated OpenLearn content.

### **Trade Union Partnerships**

OU modules and qualifications are promoted in relevant sectors and through partnerships with trade unions. The Open University continues to partake in a Memorandum of Understanding with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in Northern Ireland, and as part of this agreement a programme of training is offered to the Union Learning Representatives for the various Trade Unions represented by ICTU. A bespoke OpenLearn [Learning Hub](#) with relevant industry and developmental free content was launched in March 2023 and has had 544 visits and 366 unique visitors.

### **Microcredentials and short courses**

4,946 microcredentials were delivered between 2020/21 to 2022/23. Through the Department for the Economy's SkillUp funding, over 840 students started studying a wide range of accredited microcredentials and short courses in 22/23. These interventions supported individuals to upskill to progress their careers or to reskill to a new career path.

### **Libraries NI**

We have developed a partnership with Libraries NI which is formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding. We have developed a [Learning Hub](#) for Libraries NI on our OpenLearn platform that is showcased both on the Libraries NI website and is promoted on all PCs in Library facilities. This raises the visibility of these free courses and gives library users a free taster of what it is like to study at HE level.

### **Online induction programme**

This programme is available to all new students but can be particularly useful for students with Widening Participation characteristics, as the programme covers an introduction to OU study, accessing online materials, mechanisms for support and resources for successful study.

### **Open University Students Association**

The [OU Students Association](#) run an online peer support scheme using volunteer students. OUSA also operates a library study volunteer scheme for students studying in secure units. OUSA also offers a wellbeing app and access to Shout 85258 – a free, confidential and anonymous text message support service.

### **Bursary schemes**

The Open University offers several [bursaries and scholarships](#) across key widening participation groups, with a proportion allocated for students from Northern Ireland; including the NI-specific Step Up Carers and Care Experienced bursary, Carers'

Scholarships Fund, Sanctuary Scholarships, Open Futures for Black and Minority Ethnic Students Bursaries and the Disabled Veterans' Scholarships Fund.

### **FE validated partnerships**

The OU in Northern Ireland has developed validation partnerships with all Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland. This enables these colleges to award Open University approved qualifications across a range of subject areas. This widens the reach of the OU to a broader spectrum of learners and makes the OU in Northern Ireland more visible to learners who may wish to “top-up” a college Foundation Degree, to an Honours Degree. For the academic year 2022/23, there were 869 students on OU validated qualifications in FE colleges in Northern Ireland.

### **Student in Secure Environments**

The OU in Northern Ireland works in partnership with the Northern Ireland Prison Service to deliver HE to students studying in secure environments. In 21/22, 31 students registered to study. All 31 of the students passed their module/s and 31% achieved a distinction. In 22/23, 37 students registered to study.

**1.5** Please provide a short summary of how your activities link to the key actions within Access to Success.

**Key Action 2: The Department, working in conjunction with DE and the HE Institutions, will review and improve the mechanisms used to gather comprehensive and reliable data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education.**

The University provides reports on registration and module completion against several key widening access targets, including low socio-economic status, previous educational attainment, disability, location, age and ethnicity. The university has also developed an Access, Participation and Success (APS) analytic dashboard which allows all 4 nations to view their data, such as progression from Level 1 to Level 2, module completion, pass rates and achievement gaps for the key APS target groups – providing direct comparison between widening participation cohorts. This data allows the OU in Northern Ireland to develop an APS plan using NI-specific student data and run proactive contact campaigns for groups of students who appear to be experiencing barriers to progression or attainment.

**Key Action 3: The Department, working in conjunction with DE, the HE Institutions and other relevant stakeholders, will determine and agree a set of parameters for the identification of widening participation cohorts and individuals at each stage of the student/ learner experience based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs.**

Due to the diverse nature of students who choose to study with the OU there are a range of ways in which widening participation cohorts are identified. When a student registers for OU study they are asked a set of HESA questions. This information allows the University to send targeted interventions to specific cohorts to encourage retention and progression, as well as enabling the Student Support Team in Belfast to provide appropriate IAG,

including advice on additional funding, specialist support and study support relating to their individual needs. The Access Participation and Success dashboard also assists in determining cohorts of students who may require further input and support to achieve at certain points in their student journey.

**Key Action 4: The Department, in conjunction with the HE institutions, will develop and implement a single integrated regional awareness raising programme to increase the profile and relevance of higher education and skills in under-represented communities and in the workplace.**

The Open University in Northern Ireland works with a range of partners to raise awareness of OU study for both underrepresented communities and within the workplace, including through local trade unions such as Unison, a memorandum of understanding with ICTU and Libraries NI and disability support organisations.

**Key Action 5: The Department will make additional funding available to support the expansion of the range of aspiration and attainment raising programmes at school, college, community and the workplace.**

The OU in Northern Ireland works closely with trade unions to raise its profile to people in the workplace who may need to access HE study to progress or change their career; this includes a Memorandum of Understanding with the ICTU. In Northern Ireland the OU has a strong community presence via local marketing campaigns, events, information sessions and attendance at community-led events. The Community Partnerships Project also firmly embedded a community presence for the University and aims to raise attainment and engagement within areas of multiple deprivation. The Open University in Northern Ireland has also participated in several online learning festivals/events to raise the profile of distance learning. Our validated partnerships with FE colleges also ensures that groups of students studying within an FE context have options to progress to flexible university-level study.

**Key Action 6: The Department will work in partnership with universities, FE colleges and employer representatives to increase the number of enrolments in Foundation Degrees each year to 2,500 by 2015.**

The OU in Northern Ireland has developed validation partnerships with all 6 FE colleges. This enables these colleges to deliver Open University approved qualifications across a range of subject areas, including Cyber Security, Cloud Computing, Biological and Pharmaceutical Science, Digital Construction, Sport and Exercise and Motorsport Engineering. This widens the reach of the OU to a broader spectrum of learners and makes the OU in Northern Ireland more visible to learners who may wish to “top-up” a college Foundation Degree to an Honours Degree. For the academic year 2022/23, there are 869 students on OU validated qualifications in FE colleges in Northern Ireland.

The OU also has a well-established credit transfer process that enables students to transfer credit from qualifications or academic credit achieved elsewhere and top up to a degree – this allows students who may have had to pause their studies due to personal circumstances or employability/financial needs, to be able to return to study – often in a way that fits around their personal circumstances. We are in the process of mapping existing HE in FE provision across each of the six colleges with the aim of creating precedent awards for each qualification. This will mean that students on each of those programmes will know exactly what point of entry of OU study that they can progress to

following successful completion of their level 4 or 5 qualification, rather than having to go through the full credit transfer process.

**Key Action 7: The Department will encourage HE institutions to develop agreed regional programmes for a standardised route of exceptional application to higher education.**

The OU operates an open-entry policy to undergraduate degree-level study, apart from a few professional qualifications, such as Nursing and Social Work. Therefore, an application route which is an exception to the standard UCAS admission system is not a requirement.

**Key Action 8: The Department will require HE institutions to actively monitor the attendance of all students in receipt of widening participation support.**

Attendance must be assessed in a different way for OU students. This is because the nature of distance learning makes capturing and assessing the validity of this information more complicated. Many students may not visibly engage with their online tutorials or their module forums on a regular basis but still be studying successfully. A large proportion of our students have a low profile in regard to engagement in student events and online activities. This is especially true for those students studying whilst in employment and, in fact, there being no formal requirement to engage with these types of activities is often the reason that the majority of our students choose to study with the OU. This does not usually hamper their ability to succeed with their studies and progress.

One method the OU does use to monitor attendance is through system reports on students logging on to their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which allows them to access their module materials, library, and other online resources. Non-engagement with the VLE can flag up possible issues with attendance which enables proactive contact by the Student Support Team in Belfast. Our Associate Lecturers will also flag non-submission of assignments up to staff in the Student Support Team in Belfast. Certain cohorts of widening participation students, for example the students studying on the Community Partnerships Project, students studying in secure environments or those in receipt of a specific university bursary also receive scheduled proactive contact via a named contact/s within their Student Support Team/education unit.

**Key Action 9: The Department will support HE institutions to develop additional support measures for students to sustain continuing participation.**

Dedicated teams across the nations ensure that all students, from whatever background, are supported to begin their journey with the University in the right place and to be successful as they progress. Students are also encouraged to access comprehensive IAG from our Student Support Team in Belfast through dedicated student contact campaigns and ongoing promotion of the Student Support Team services. This includes advice on study strategies, access to additional study support sessions, disability support, funding advice and information on changing their chosen course. Students are also able to access the Careers and Employability Service to be able to plan ahead and maintain their study goals.

Students who declare a disability are offered a personal disability profile which ensures that the OU can support them appropriately throughout their study journey. This is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that we are still meeting students' needs appropriately.

**Key Action 10: The Department will work with local communities to develop and pilot philanthropic bursary / scholarship programmes across Northern Ireland.**

The University offers financial support for students on low income/qualifying benefits wishing to study on the Access programme as a stepping-stone onto degree-level study. Eligible students can also apply for additional funding, including a Support Fund, Student Assistance Fund and various specific bursaries and scholarship opportunities. Students can access information on any of these options via StudentHome or their Student Support Team in Belfast.

**Key Action 11: The Department will amalgamate Access Agreements and Widening Participation Strategic Assessments into a single Widening Access and Participation Plan which will be submitted annually for approval by all funded fee charging institutions offering higher education courses.**

The OU in Northern Ireland submits a Widening Participation Plan each year to the DfE and also contributes to a university-wide Access and Participation Plan to meet the requirements of the university's Access, Participation and Success strategy 2020 – 2025. The Open University in Northern Ireland has also developed a Access, Participation and Success Plan with specific NI-based targets.

**1.6 How do you plan to communicate information on the availability of financial and other assistance to students?**

Open University students in Northern Ireland can access information on the availability of financial support and other funding assistance schemes via the [OU Fees and Funding](#) webpage. This includes information on the Part-Time Fee Grants and loans options offered by Student Finance Northern Ireland and OU specific funds and bursaries. Once a student has a student record, they can access more comprehensive personalised information and advice on financial support from their StudentHome page and from the Student Recruitment and Fees Team in Belfast. The university also communicates information on financial support and other assistance through a variety of methods, including targeted marketing.

Students experiencing unexpected financial hardship in Northern Ireland can apply to the Student's Assistance Fund. From 1 October 2022, the scheme expanded to include applications relating to general cost of living increases, including electricity, fuel and food, which are causing students serious financial hardship and affecting their ability to study. In addition, students can also apply to the Study-Related Costs Fund for support with costs such as internet access, ICT equipment, diagnostic assessments, childcare and travel.

Students who disclose a disability or additional need during the registration process will be provided advice on applying for Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA) via Student Finance Northern Ireland. They are also able to access information on DSA via StudentHome and the Student Support Team in Belfast, which includes a dedicated Senior Disability Support Officer.

Eligible students from specific underrepresented cohorts can also apply for additional financial support: <https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding>



**1.7** How do you plan to monitor progress against the targets and the achievement of outcomes?

The OU's [Access, Participation and Success \(APS\) Strategy 2020 - 2025](#) outlines internal governance arrangements, processes and mechanisms; including the requirement for regular updates to university VCE and Council, through the Student Success priorities monitoring by an APS Steering Group with nation specific targets reported in line with funding body requirements. Each nation feeds into the Steering Group via quarterly highlight reports. Performance reports are disseminated across the OU to inform future planning, disaggregated by student characteristic and nation. The APS dashboard also allows us to measure performance for the different target groups. The OU in Northern Ireland is currently developing an APS plan which will be focused on NI-specific priority areas and targets. Part of this process also includes the establishment of an NI APS Steering Group to further develop and monitor this plan.

The OU's Strategy and Information Office produces an annual report on module completions. This report includes data presented according to a wide variety of categories, including level of study, curriculum, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status and by geographical region. This report provides an overview of performance for different cohorts of students and allows a three-year comparison. This facilitates monitoring of module completion.

As part of the Equality Objectives, the University monitors participation, completion, and academic attainment of undergraduate students across the 4 nations, providing information on the percentage of new students with different characteristics who proceed to the next module.

The Centre for Learning and Teaching Innovation collates data on the use of Open Educational Resources, completion of Access modules and subsequent progression, and recruitment and retention of students with widening participation characteristics.

**1.8** Please provide an additional evaluation on how you think your institution is performing or provide us with relevant documents in line with section 1.8 of the guidance document.

*(Full details on how to complete this section are in the guidance notes)*

In order to ensure consistency across institutions we would ask that you use the Kirkpatrick Model for this exercise. The concept is that individual institutions will learn from this self-evaluation and obtain evidence to influence future widening participation activity and plans. You may evaluate the institution's widening participation activity as a whole, or evaluate individual projects.

The following sub headings should help focus your response. The Department expects that most institutions will be able to evaluate widening participation activity to at least Level 3 (as below).

**Level 1 Evaluation – Reactions**

*What participants thought and felt about the programme*

**Level 2 Evaluation - Learning**

*The resulting increase in knowledge or capability*

**Level 3 Evaluation – Transfer**

*Behaviour - extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application*

**Level 4 Evaluation- Results**

*Results- the effects resulting from performance*