



Independent Review of Community Learning & Development

Submission

03.03.24

About the Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland supports people across Scotland to develop their knowledge, acquire new skills and achieve life-changing qualifications.

In 2022/23 we were proud to help over 19,500 students study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that worked for them. In 2021/22 (the last year for which HESA data is available) we were the fourth largest university in Scotland and by far the largest provider of flexible, part-time study.

Flexible study is core to our offer with 73% of our students working either full-time or part-time in 2022/23.

Most of our graduates (85%) remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefit local communities.

We offer high-quality distance learning to students, lifelong learners, communities, employees and businesses. Our students range from school age to 92. We have formal partnerships with 16 regional colleges and collaborate with local authorities, the NHS, social care, the third sector and employers across Scotland. Our innovative national schools programme, Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, helps S6 pupils access a broader curriculum and bridge school to university level study.

We are committed to widening access to higher education building on our founding principle of being open to everyone, regardless of age, income, geography and background. The majority of our undergraduates in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees. In 2022/23 28% of our undergraduates in Scotland declared a disability and 22% live in remote or rural areas. In the same year, 23% of our undergraduate entrants joined with qualifications below standard university entrance level and 21% were resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland.

As part of the UK's only four nations university, we are funded to teach students resident in Scotland by the Scottish Funding Council. Over 150 staff operate from our Edinburgh offices with over 400 associate lecturers working across the country.

OU research ranks in the top third of UK universities according to the Research Excellence Framework and we are a trusted partner of many leading organisations for teaching and research including the BBC, NASA, and the United Nations. Our free platform, OpenLearn, reaches over 300,000 learners in Scotland.

Find out more: open.ac.uk/scotland

Awareness and visibility. How visible is CLD, and the positive outcomes it can deliver?

At the Open University in Scotland we're passionate about the life-changing potential of community learning and development (CLD). With 19,500 students and almost half a million informal learners via our [OpenLearn](#) platform, we connect with people in every parliamentary constituency, and in every corner of the country from Dumfries and Galloway to the Shetland Islands. We are continually seeking new ways to match our core curriculum, microcredentials and free [OpenLearn](#) content to the learning needs of people across Scotland.

Awareness and visibility. Do you think there are clear career progression pathways in CLD for practitioners or volunteers?

Following discussions at the Scottish Adult Learning Forum we delivered a pilot workforce offer for the community learning and development sector in partnership with Education Scotland and the CLD Standards Council for Scotland. Funded by the Scottish Government the project addressed skills gaps identified during the pandemic. We delivered an online skills development portal, 200 funded microcredentials supporting CLD practitioners, and the development of a network of regional champions to deliver workshops and learning clubs. Regrettably the project was only funded for six months. A significant outcome was the strengthened relationship with Education Scotland with whom we are exploring a possible national workforce development offer.

Accessibility and availability If someone wants to do CLD learning, how likely are they to find the learning they need or want?

Our impression of CLD learning is that the offer is fragmented and variable across Scotland. There is an offer relevant to CLD learners on OU's freely available, whenever there is internet access on our Open Learn platform.

To ensure Open Learn is accessible to all learners we have established an Open Learning Champions offer. This has developed a Scotland-wide network of Open Learning Champions, drawn from community and third sector organisations, who have undertaken a workshop with us to develop the skills and confidence to support people to access online learning, with a particular focus on non-accredited learning on OpenLearn and other free OU platforms.

In South Lanarkshire we created a network of OpenLearn Champions by running sessions to build knowledge and awareness of the free courses available.

Practitioner feedback –

“The OpenLearn Champion workshops were pitched well, and we both left very confident of being able to introduce our learners to Open Learn”

“We will continue to use it as a great resource for our weekly group work.” (Youth Family and Community Learning Team)

“These sessions highlighted the need for adult educational opportunities within deprived communities. Especially for those who don’t have the confidence/self-esteem to do so.” (SLC Community Engagement Team)

Delegate feedback –

“It’s never too late to learn...given me hope and confidence”.

“If I can study from home and around the kids, at my own pace then what’s stopping me”

“These short courses will help my CV look like I’ve done something since leaving school. An employer might even look at me”

Accessibility and availability. Do you have any concerns or hopes about the CLD learning offer in the future?

At the OU in Scotland we have experience of the transformational potential of learning. We know that community learning and development can be an accessible pathway to upskilling, reskilling, confidence building and learning journeys that enhance the lives of individuals and communities. Our concern is that accessibility and availability will decrease in the current funding environment. Our hope is that creative and innovative approaches are explored to ensure accessibility and availability is maximised.

The OU in Scotland provides learning that is accessible and available to every individual in Scotland through a digital offer, open entry and part-time fee grant to support those on low incomes. We would like to see community learning and development similarly open to all.

We also wish to increasingly see CLD learners aware of the many pathways available to them to continue their learning journeys. Our fear is that the current funding environment blocks aspirations. Our radical hope is that through removing duplication existing resources could achieve more impactful outcomes and we are keen to explore how that might be achieved.

Accessibility and availability. To what extent do you feel that CLD learning is available at a time and location that works for the learner?

While there is always a role for face-to-face provision there is the potential for a digital CLD offer, supported in the community to provide anytime, anywhere accessibility and availability. We would welcome the opportunity to explore how the OU in Scotland might partner to deliver this. Our hope is that more learners in Scotland are able to benefit from CLD that is relevant to them and that enables them to secure the benefits that CLD brings.

To better understand the barriers and challenges to learning faced by those in disadvantaged areas in Scotland we undertook independent research in 2022. We used the findings of the research to co-create interventions, which we tested in collaboration with the South Lanarkshire Community Planning Partnership.

Accessibility and availability Are you aware of any financial costs for learners in accessing CLD learning?

We're not best placed to comment on financial costs for CLD learning within local authorities and other providers. Learners can access a wealth of free provision via our OpenLearn platform. Dependent upon what learners want to undertake then there is a range of additional content available for a range of fees. Learners earning less than £25,000 can utilise the Part-Time Fee Grant via the Student Awards Agency Scotland to meet the cost of their fees when studying a minimum of 30 SCQF credits in an academic year. As well as our Upskilling Fund for learners to pick up one of our Microcredential or short courses.

Support and learning How 'joined-up' are CLD services to other related services, such as schools, mental health support, benefits/money advice, employability services, etc?

Our project in South Lanarkshire included building and supporting a network of open learn champions. Champions came from a range of areas across the local authority including, but not limited to, the Community Engagement Team; Support Workers; Employability Team; Literacy Champions; Youth, Family and Community Learning Staff; Library Staff (Springhall); Whitlawburn Resource Centre Staff; DWP; Voluntary Action South Lanarkshire (VASLAN).

Support and Learning What role do Colleges and Universities play in CLD?

We believe that colleges and universities play an integral role in the expansion of CLD provision outside of local authorities. Indeed, CLD is at the heart of the OU in Scotland. Our mission is to make education open to all. We're passionate about the life-changing potential of community learning and development and are keen to explore how we might optimise our support to CLD learners and practitioners.

Pathways and progression How are learners made aware of opportunities to take their learning to the next stage e.g. volunteering, more advanced learning, employability support, etc?

We continue to partner with all 16 regional colleges in Scotland, outside of UHI network, to provide college students with progression routes to flexible degree level study.

Partnerships and collaboration are building rich impacts that benefit society and business. Our work with Scottish Professional Football League clubs in Scotland, including Celtic, Dundee, Hibernian and Rangers, has piloted a range of innovative employability programmes for delivery in the community. Already young people, those re-entering the jobs market and refugees have benefited by achieving new skills and confidence. These bespoke delivery partnerships are tailored to the needs of the community associated with the individual

football clubs. Programmes are developed from conversations with partners where we understand their needs and develop solutions which work for them.

Charlie Bennett, then Chief Executive Officer, Hibernian Community Foundation described the work as the perfect coming together of the football club and its community foundation with the commitment of the Open University "to support upskilling across local communities through exciting employability programmes that will support people in their journey back into employment."

In April 2021 we re-affirmed our Memorandum of Understanding with the STUC setting out a range of collaborative activity which will open up training opportunities for the 540,000 Scottish workers who are trade unionists, the members of 39 affiliated trade unions and 20 Trades Union Councils. Shared goals include applying learning in the workplace through upskilling or reskilling; enhancing career development; and providing opportunities to those who have previously benefited least from education and training.

We work in partnership with Scottish Council Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and many third sector organisations to reach people from the most deprived areas, people with disabilities and chronic health conditions, carers, ethnic minority groups, and people with care experience. We embed support into our curriculum design and delivery at every stage of the student's learning journey, including mental health support.

Our OL Champions online programme includes a section called "Future Pathways" and this covers next steps." We have worked in partnership with community, third sector organisations and local authorities to co-create

bespoke, open educational resources with learners on our OpenLearn Create platform and curated collections and portals on OpenLearn.

Pathways and progression How are learners supported with their learning to transition to the next stage?

Our Open Pathways resource is designed for learners to plan their pathways into accredited learning from informal and online learning, including a specific pathway for those undertaking the Adult Achievement Award (SCQF6). We also have a module called Making Your Learning Count (SCQF7) which allows learners to convert 150 hours of informal, online and community-based learning into credit through reflection and group activities while developing skills for formal study. We have three Access modules (SCQF6) to prepare people for undergraduate study.

We make many of our open educational resources available with a creative commons licence so practitioners can use, share and adapt them to their learners' needs and contexts. We also make them available, as standard, in a range of formats (Word, PDF, Kindle) for accessibility and offline use. Examples include:

- Everyday computer skills – a beginner level digital skills course co-created with disabled people, in partnership with Lead Scotland
- Caring Counts – a reflection and planning course for carers, co-created with carers and young adult carers, in partnership with Carers Trust Scotland

- Reflecting on Transitions – a reflection and planning course for refugees, migrants and other New Scots, in partnership with Bridges Programmes, Glasgow
- Volunteer Scotland have used the platform to develop a range of resources for volunteers and volunteer managers in collaboration with the OU's Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership
- Skills Portal for Community Councils – a curated portal of free courses to upskill Scotland's community councillors

Pathways and progression How do we know if CLD learning is delivering positive/good outcomes for the learners?

In 2022 we undertook independent research into the barriers and challenges accessing informal and formal education for those living in disadvantaged areas in Scotland. We used the findings to co-create interventions, which we tested in collaboration with the South Lanarkshire Community Planning Partnership.

A network of OpenLearn Champions was created, and we promoted and ran a series of OpenLearn Taster and Access Sessions in Springhall and Rutherglen, South Lanarkshire.

We estimate that there were around 265 enrolments on OpenLearn courses and over 100 course completions the most popular subjects were mental health, children's wellbeing and employability. Although the numbers are small, Access course registrations for the area have increased at a greater rate than the rest of Scotland (+43% vs +20%).

One of the key benefits of the project has been the strength of the relationship with local intermediaries, allowing us to capture the longer-term benefits of taking that first step into informal learning, for example one individual who is now in employment as a result –

“a very worthwhile, life changing event for him and his family.”

“One customer signed up and registered for courses in Learning and Dealing with Autism. He was successful and attained his certificate. He had been unemployed for a few years due to medical grounds and had worked in construction from the age of 17 and felt he had nothing else to offer an employer now at over 50.

“He discovered as a result of his OpenLearn course and participating in the MTW here in Cambuslang Job Centre Plus, that this was not the case.”

“He is now in fulltime employment within the Care Sector and helps at his granddaughter’s nursery for children with special needs too. It has all been a very worthwhile life changing event for him and his family.” (Employment Advisor Department of Work and Pensions)

Please use the space below to provide any further thoughts or evidence about Community Learning & Development.

We believe OU in Scotland has the potential to build on its experience with Open Learn, Open Learn Champions; pathway development; and CLD practitioner workforce development. We also have strong national partnerships of relevance to the CLD sector for example delivery of our young applications programmes in all Scotland's local authorities as well as our work with Volunteer Scotland and LEAD Scotland to name just two examples. We would welcome an opportunity to explore further how we might develop an innovative, collaborative partnership to provide a national digital offering in support of CLD learners and practitioners.

