THE OPEN LEARNING CHAMPIONS PROJECT

Evaluation 2016-2021

The Open University

SCOTLAND

Acknowledgements

Table of acronyms

OU	The Open University
BOC	Badged Open Courses – OpenLearn courses that award a digital badge on completion
OER	Open educational resources
MOOCs	Massive Online Open Courses – such as the courses on FutureLearn
AL	Associate Lecturer, a member of the Open University's teaching staff
OMIL	Open Media and Informal Learning team at the OU
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SIMD20	The 20% most deprived areas

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Introduction

The Open Learning Champions project has been running since 2015 and now has nearly 400 champions. Champions support learners to access open educational resources, particularly using the OU's free learning platform OpenLearn. Champions are drawn from partner organisations in the community and third sectors and have existing relationships with people in disadvantaged communities that the university is keen to engage with. This enables open learning resources to be introduced within a trusted, supportive relationship.

The project provides organisations with an Open Learning Champions workshop that covers an introduction to the free learning platforms of the OU, with a focus on navigating OpenLearn. It explores open educational resources of interest to their learners, draws on case studies of other champions and introduces tools to support learner journeys. These journeys may involve further informal learning, developing skills for employment, or a transition into formal study.

The project is run by the Access, Participation and Success team in the Open University (OU) in Scotland. Our vision is to make learning accessible to all of Scotland's communities and to support the OU's social mission.
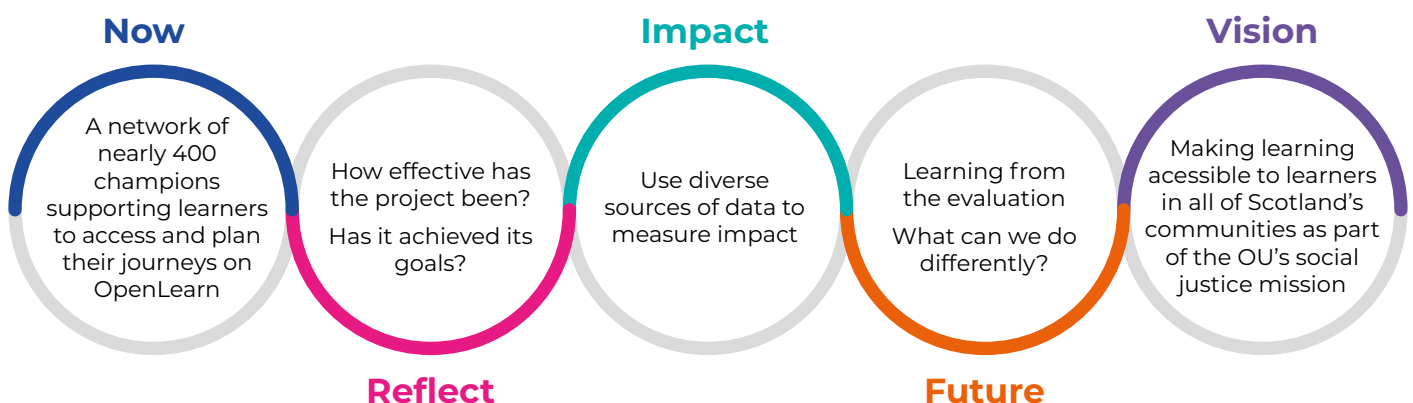
Aims of the evaluation

This evaluation has provided an opportunity to:

- tell the story of the project
- attempt to measure its impact in engaging third sector and community organisations and supporting learners to achieve their goals
- reflect on the project so far
- inform future development of the project

We have measured impact against the Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council and the university's Access and Participation Plan. We will use the findings to inform future provision.

Theory of change

Now

A network of nearly 400 champions supporting learners to access and plan their journeys on OpenLearn

Reflect

How effective has the project been?

Has it achieved its goals?

Impact

Use diverse sources of data to measure impact

Future

Learning from the evaluation

What can we do differently?

Vision

Making learning acessible to learners in all of Scotland's communities as part of the OU's social justice mission

Method

This evaluation took a 'multi-method' approach, collating and analysing data from a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative sources. To help build a fuller picture of the project, we referred to data collected to date as part of ongoing evaluation activity, including workshop evaluations, annual survey responses (see Appendix A), and OpenLearn user data reports. We also carried out a survey in March 2021 to determine the impact of Covid-19 for champions.

A history of the project

The project began in 2014-15 as a pilot in two sites – Shetland and Dumfries. These were both carers centres, using a reflection course with groups of carers using a blended approach. Learners came together at the start of the course, then studied online at home and met as a group to discuss their progress and do shared activities offline. These learners were more likely to complete a course than those accessing OpenLearn alone and online. The support of 'champions' made the difference. The findings from this pilot informed the development of the Open Learning Champions project. The OU in Wales had previously begun an OpenLearn Champions project and we worked closely with colleagues there to determine shared outcomes and evaluation models for the projects.

Our first Open Learning Champions workshop in 2015 was with a group drawn from carers centres across Scotland. With positive feedback from this, we rolled it out to other third sector and community organisations. Since then, the workshop has equipped a network of people with the knowledge and skills to use the OU's free learning resources to help learners in their communities. The model is based on trusted relationships, such as that between a support worker and carer. Champions use resources with learners and for staff and volunteer development. They can also help learners plan their learning journeys. These journeys may involve further informal learning, developing skills for employment, or a transition into formal study.

Some community organisations had previously partnered with the OU in Scotland, and they were keen to embrace OpenLearn as a stepping stone into higher education for learners. A recurring theme was "bring back openings". These were short, 10 credit modules at SCQF Level 7 with embedded study skills. They were perceived as a small 'chunk' of learning to get started with, whereas the Access modules that replaced them (60 credits at SCQF6) feel like a much bigger commitment. In response to this feedback, we developed Open Pathways, a resource to plan learner journeys from OpenLearn into formal study. This is accompanied by a guide for Open Learning Champions. More recently, the 30 credit (SCQF7) module Making Your Learning Count allows learners to convert their informal learning into credit.
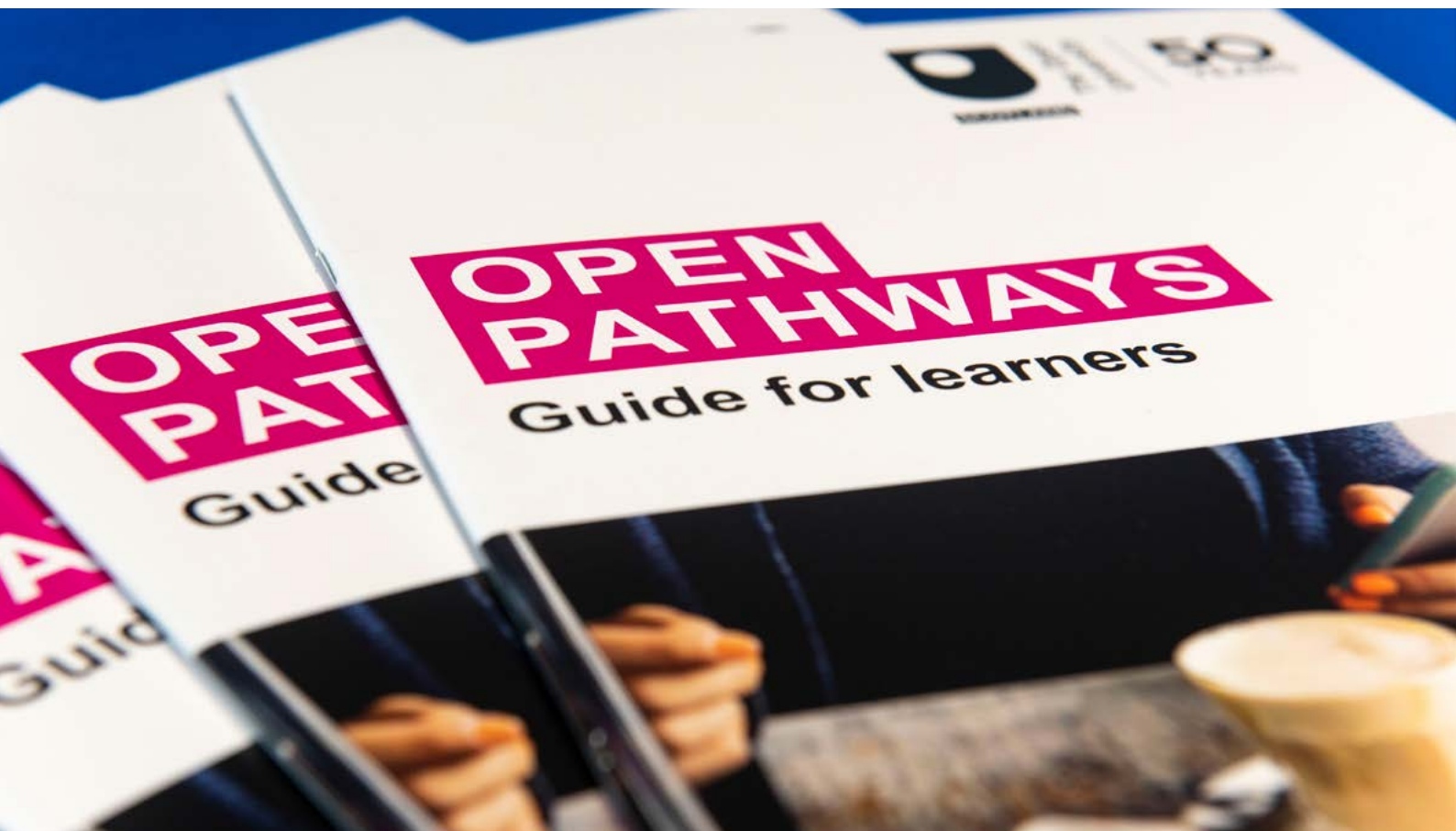
On completion of the workshop, participants receive a certificate. Champions asked if they could have something that they could use on their email signatures or on social media profiles, so we now provide an Open Learning Champions badge (pictured). In response to feedback in our annual survey, we offered champions an opportunity to meet and share practice at an annual networking event. The first took place in 2017.

Photo 1: Annual networking event, Glasgow 2019. Photo 2: reaching our 250th Open Learning Champion in 2019.

In 2019, we reached our 250th champion at a workshop with Aberdeenshire Council's community learning and development team. At the end of 2020, in which workshops moved online due to Covid-19, we had 395 champions across 27 local authority areas in Scotland (see Map 1). This includes 65 participants in workshops offered in partnership with Scottish Union Learning, who do not use the title 'Open Learning Champion' (see section 2.6).
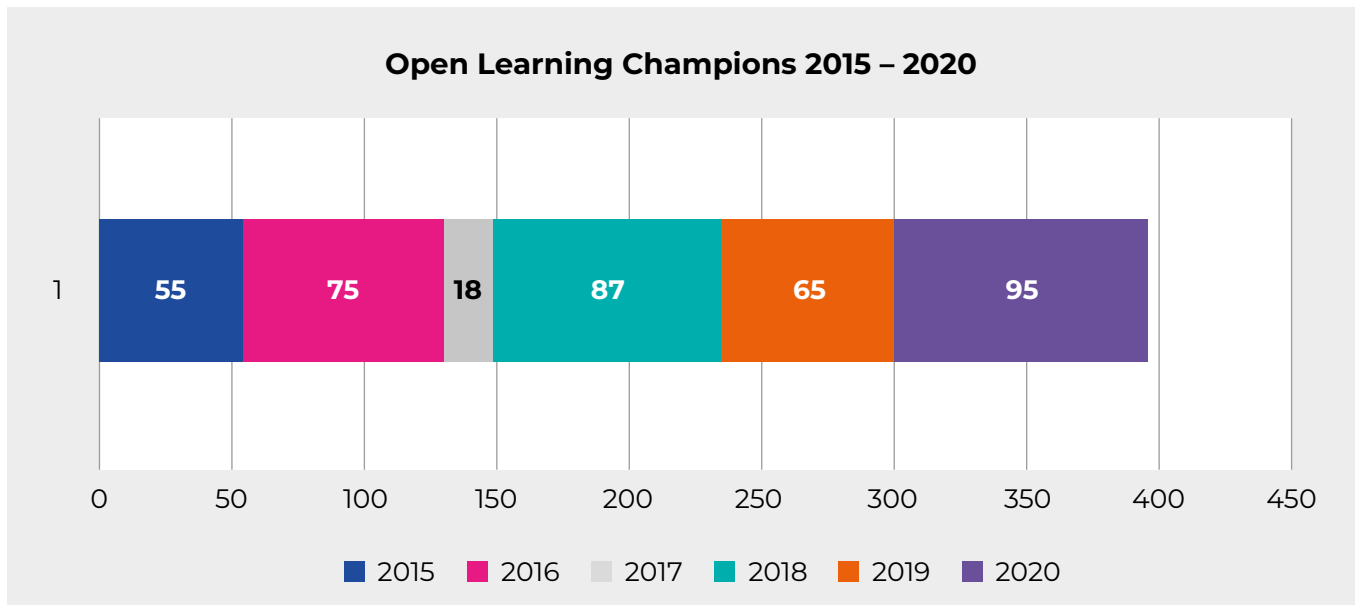

Chart 1: Number of Open Learning Champions, based on participation in workshops 2015-2020

Case study: Delivering and evaluating the Open Learning Champions project

Dorothy has been involved in the Open Learning Champions project from early on, using OpenLearn with learners in the community, delivering workshops with third sector organisations, carrying out evaluation activity, and participating in network events.

She has used open educational resources to develop community learning activities where the OpenLearn material was a core resource but with group activities designed around it. She has OpenLearn on screen while the session is running so she can show people what she was doing. She says: "*You can do this yourself, the materials are already here. You can go back to your organisation and run a session using these materials.*"

She sees the value of the Open Learning Champion role in conversations with learners about the breadth of OpenLearn resources and giving them the opportunity to see what is on there. Conversations with champions also generate new ideas about how the resources could be used in their organisation. "*Those are the conversations that can't be replaced by mailshots with links to OpenLearn. Those are human interactions.*"

She believes OpenLearn can support moving to formal study. '*It's having digital technology skills, a way in which to scaffold that so that they understood how to use a computer for formal learning.*'

While the hope is that engagement with OpenLearn leads to progress to formal study, it is challenging to evaluate this and the impact a champion may have.

Who are our Open Learning Champions?

Champions are drawn from partner organisations in the community and voluntary sectors and have existing relationships with people in disadvantaged communities that the university is keen to engage with. We have Open Learning Champions in 27 of Scotland's 32 local authorities.
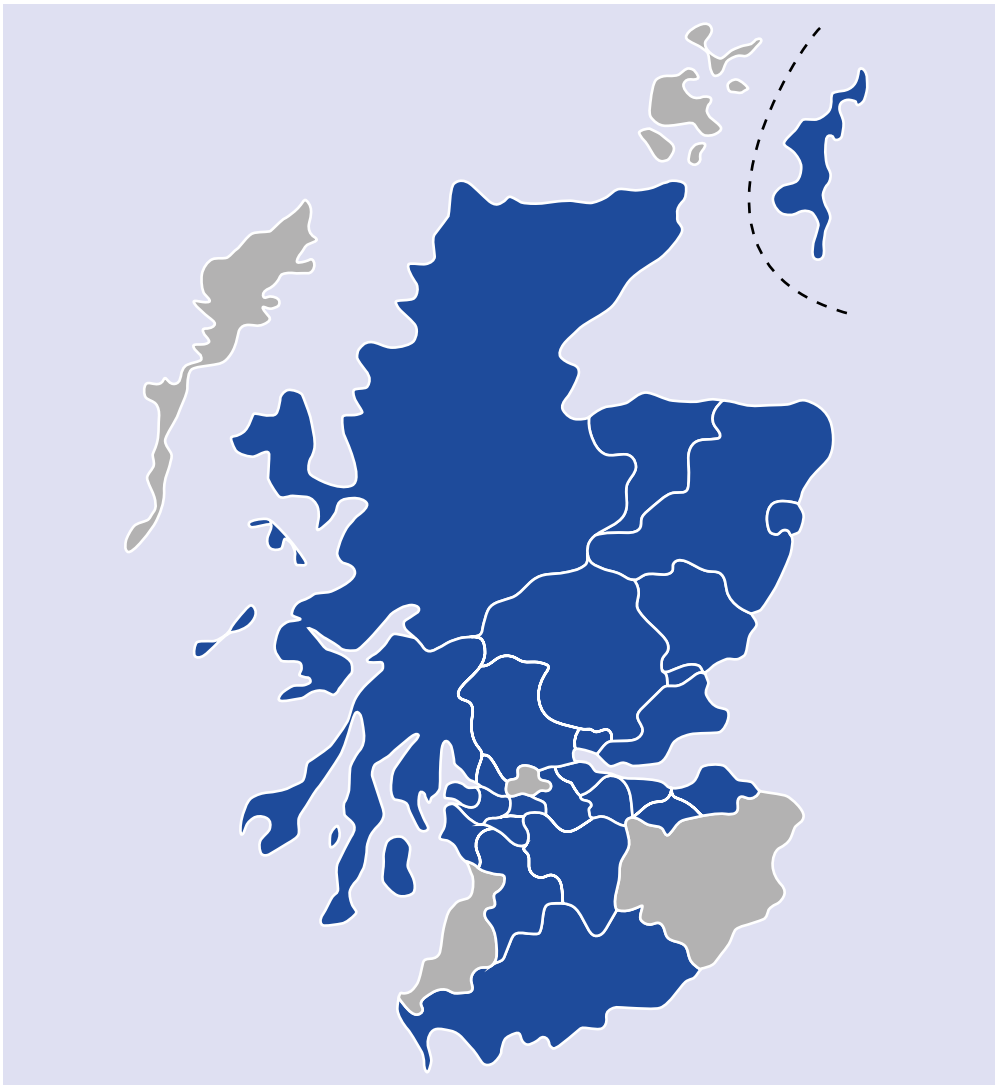
Map 1: Distribution of open learning champions across Scotland.

Our champions have many different roles, some with an explicit remit for adult and community education and others who introduce learning as part of a role such as carer support or employability. Some champions are in paid roles and others are volunteers. Some champions have leadership roles and manage staff and volunteer development. We also know that we have champions in formal teaching settings, such as college and university, including the OU. Our most recent survey suggests that our champions' roles are fairly evenly distributed across these categories (see Chart 2). We also have 65 champions associated with Scottish Union Learning (see section 2.6).
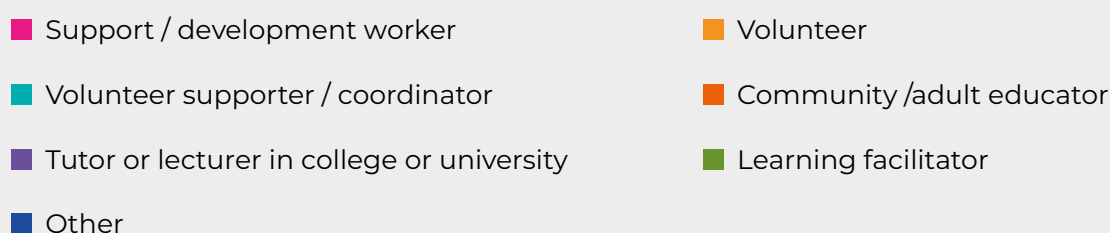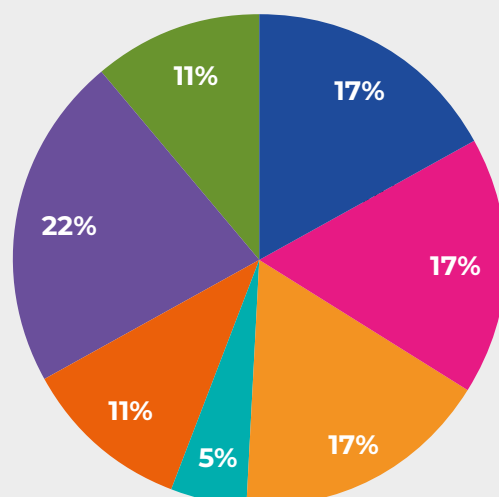
How would you describe your role?

■ Support / development worker	■ Volunteer
■ Volunteer supporter / coordinator	■ Community /adult educator
■ Tutor or lecturer in college or university	■ Learning facilitator
■ Other	

Pie chart values: 17% (Other), 17% (Support / development worker), 17% (Volunteer), 5% (Volunteer supporter / coordinator), 11% (Community /adult educator), 22% (Tutor or lecturer in college or university), 11% (Learning facilitator)

Chart 2: How open learning champions describe their role, survey 2021.

What does being an open learning champion mean?

Within these roles, what it means to be an open learning champion can vary depending on their relationship with learners and their learners' needs and goals. This can range from promoting OpenLearn to networks to one-to-one support to access relevant resources at the right level. Methods of delivery are discussed in more detail in section 2.1.

► *"It means promoting the OpenLearn material so that everyone has the opportunity to engage in some level of learning"* Open Learning Champion, 2021

► *"Engaging and enabling - particularly focusing on those with limited opportunities elsewhere."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

► *"My role as a champion involves a discussion around what courses are available and what might be of interest to them through to how to actually access the courses and choosing the course that is pitched at the right level for them."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

How effective has the project been?

1. Impact of the workshop

The project provides Open Learning Champions workshops that cover an introduction to the free learning platforms of the OU, with a focus on navigating OpenLearn. It explores open educational resources on subjects identified by participants as being of interest to their learners. It draws on case studies to illustrate how other champions have used the resources and introduces tools such as Open Pathways to support learner journeys. Usually these take place face-to-face but during 2020, they moved online. Instead of a half day, interactive workshop, we offered two 1.5 hour sessions – an introduction to OpenLearn and a follow-up on Open Pathways.

Comparing survey results over the past few years, as well as evaluations from the workshops, champions consistently report that the sessions improve their knowledge of open educational resources and confidence in navigating the OpenLearn platform.
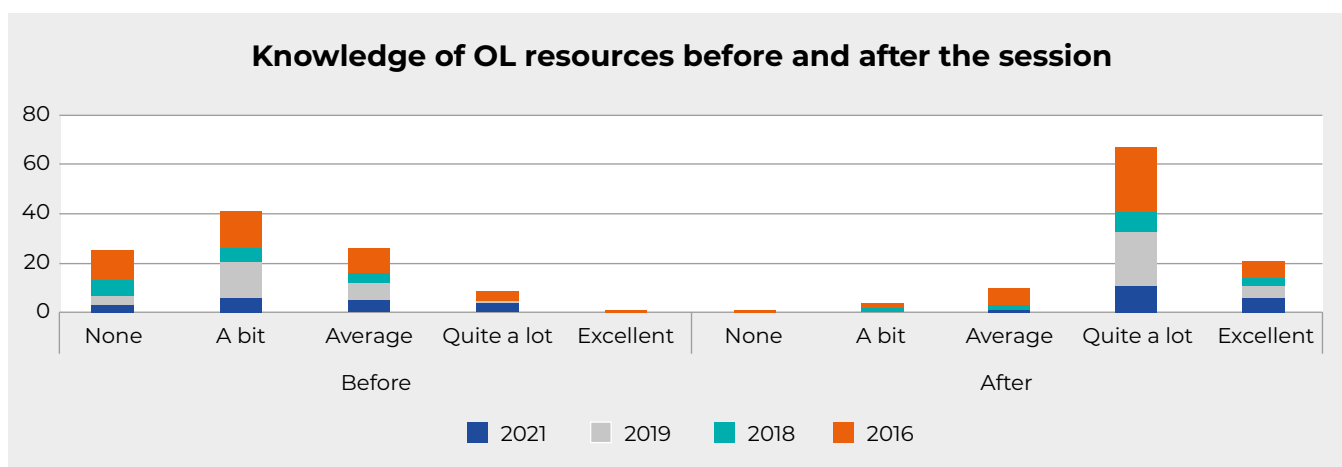

Chart 3: *Open Learning Champion knowledge of resources before and after session 2016-2020 (the chart illustrates numbers of champions responding to surveys in each year)*

Quotes from workshop evaluation

▶ *"Really enjoyed the workshop. Felt the pace was good with a balanced mix of interactive learning activities e.g. introduction, quiz, using the site, small group case study, discussion/ questions and handouts all worked well."* Open Learning Champion, 2018

▶ *"The flexibility of OpenLearn and achieving badges is a good start point for learners. So much content - can see a lot of potential for young people work with + CPD opportunities for myself"* Open Learning Champion 2019

▶ *"You can pretty much learn anything you want for free through the OU!"* Open Learning Champion, 2019

▶ *"I plan to signpost my service users to suitable courses. Also, I may use some content from the courses to deliver training to my groups"* Open Learning Champion, 2019

▶ *"I have more in-depth knowledge and understanding in how to navigate OpenLearn and OpenLearn Create."* Open Learning Champion, 2020

▶ *"Although I had used OpenLearn previously to study free courses and read articles I wasn't fully aware of all of the content available."* Open Learning Champion, 2020

Issues

In workshop evaluations, some champions felt that there was a lot of information to take in and that follow-up sessions would be useful. Some champions felt that it was difficult to keep track of the different levels of the resources, while others found the differences between the OU's free platforms (OpenLearn, OpenLearn Create, FutureLearn) confusing. We have produced graphics on each of these in response to this feedback (see Appendix B).

Cascade effect

From the earliest surveys, we have noted that many champions report supporting or signposting significant numbers of learners to OpenLearn. Initially we had a '20+' category in the survey question and in 2019 we introduced '50+' as champions were anecdotally reporting much higher numbers (see Chart 4). Analysis of learner groups (see section 2.2) suggests champions do not just promote the resources with their learners, but with family and friends. This suggests a 'cascade effect' with an impact beyond the numbers reported which we have no way of quantifying.

► *"You could track [numbers of champions], but what you can't track are the people who go home and say to their neighbours, 'Oh, you might find that on OpenLearn' and all those informal connections that people make."* Open Learning Champion, 2020
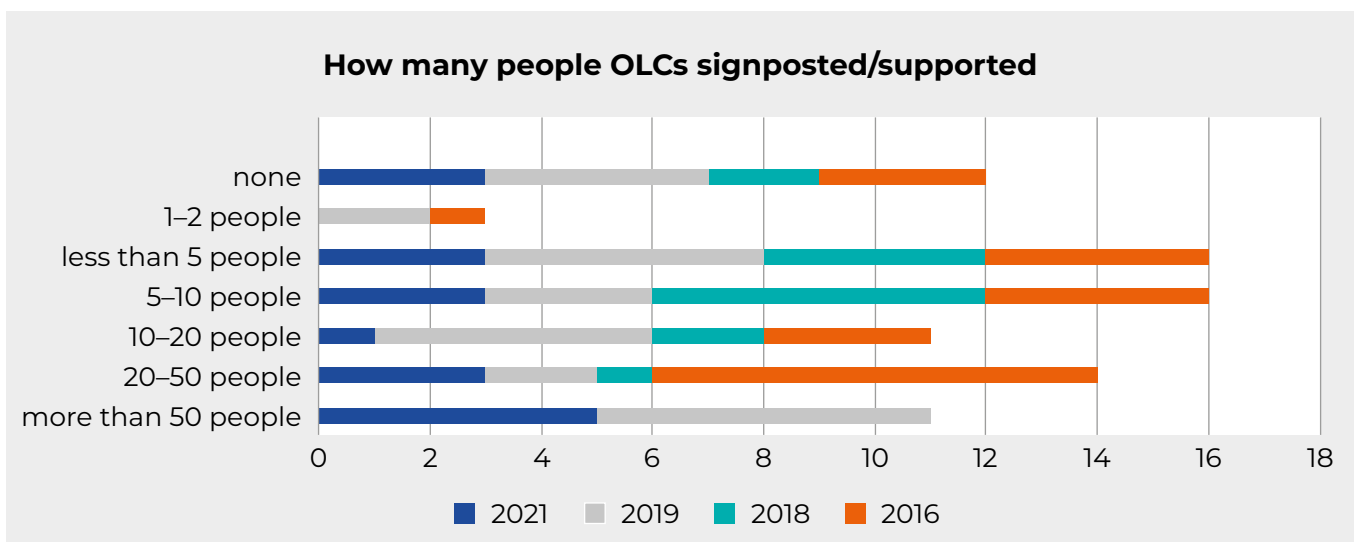
Chart 4: Numbers of people that OLC Open Learning Champions signpost or support to access OpenLearn 2016-2020 (as reported by champions reporting)

► *"I knew nothing about The Open University until I started working with you. And now that I'm working with you I just think everybody needs to know about it because I just think it's a hidden resource, you know what I mean, it's just, aye, it's just brilliant, absolutely great."* Open Learning Champion, 2020

2. Themes from the evaluation

For the purposes of the evaluation, we reviewed and analysed responses to Open Learning Champions surveys that have taken place between 2016 – 2021. We also analysed case studies from interviews with champions over the same period. The following themes emerged consistently across the responses to the four surveys and in the case studies.

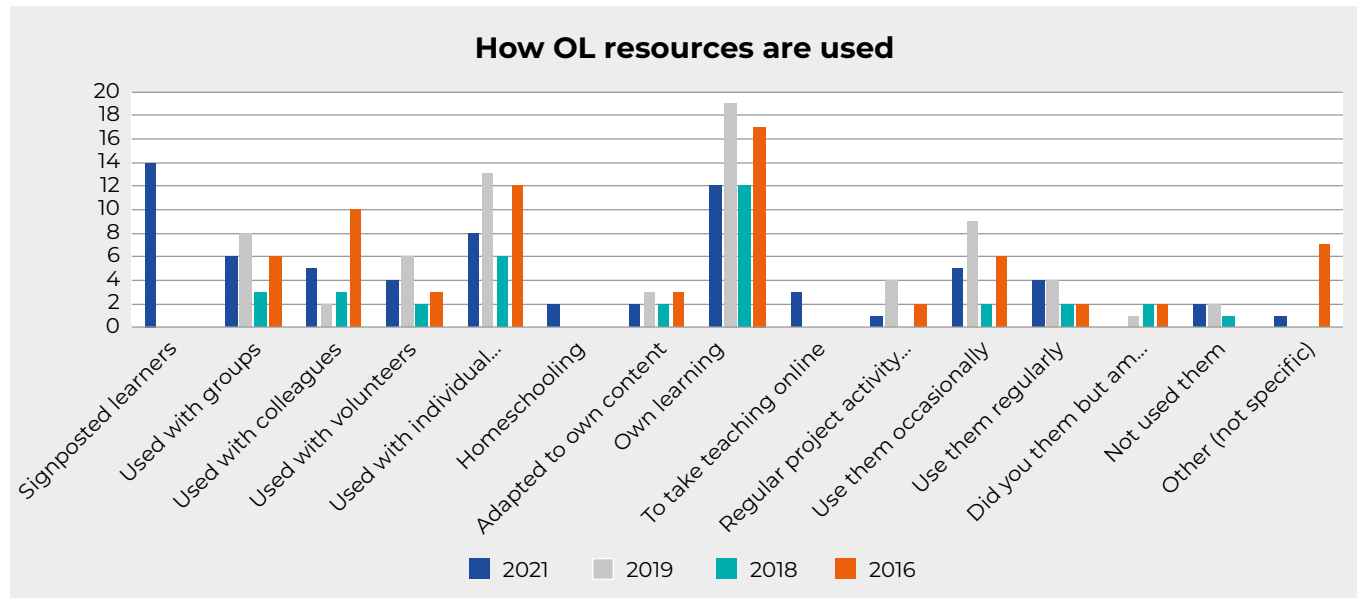## 2.1 Method of delivery

How OL resources are used

Chart 5: How Open Learning Champions use open learning resources 2016-2020. The numbers represent open learning champions reporting using the resources, not the total number of learners engaged with.

One-to-one support – Most of our champions report offering support for learners to access resources. They see their role as ensuring that the learner is matched to the appropriate resource at the right level for them. This involves support to navigate OpenLearn, particularly at the outset until they develop confidence. Digitally excluded learners may need a lot of support to be ready to access open learning, while more confident learners use OpenLearn to improve their digital skills.

Blended delivery – some champions take a blended approach, running OpenLearn or OpenLearn Create courses with groups. This involves a series of face-to-face group sessions with online learning in between. This enables learners to benefit from peer support as well as the support from a champion. Many of them stressed the importance of building relationships and connections which enable learning to take place.

Formats – some learners have opted to undertake courses entirely offline, as the resources are made available in downloadable and printable formats for accessibility. This also benefits digitally excluded communities and enables champions to adapt the content of courses and tailored it the learner group.

Own learning – A recurring response is that champions use the resources for their own learning and development (see also section 2.2), as well as with the learners they support. Home schooling appeared in the 2021 survey responses for the first time.

Signposting – in 2021, champions reported that they were signposting learners rather than supporting them to access resources due to Covid-19, though some were able to shift their support online (see section 3).

Resources used – The majority of champions report using OpenLearn resources, with badged open courses (BOCs) being used by more than half of the respondents. A similar number report using FutureLearn courses. While OpenLearn Create courses appear only in 2021, the reflection courses used by more than a third of champions, such as Caring Counts, sit on the OpenLearn Create platform. The survey responses suggest that champions use a range of open educational resources across open platforms.

A surprising finding is that Open Pathways, a resource designed for open learning champions to use with learners to plan their learning journeys, is used by less than a quarter of respondents. The Open Pathways page has had 368 visitors between August 2020 and May 2021, of whom 227 were from Scotland.
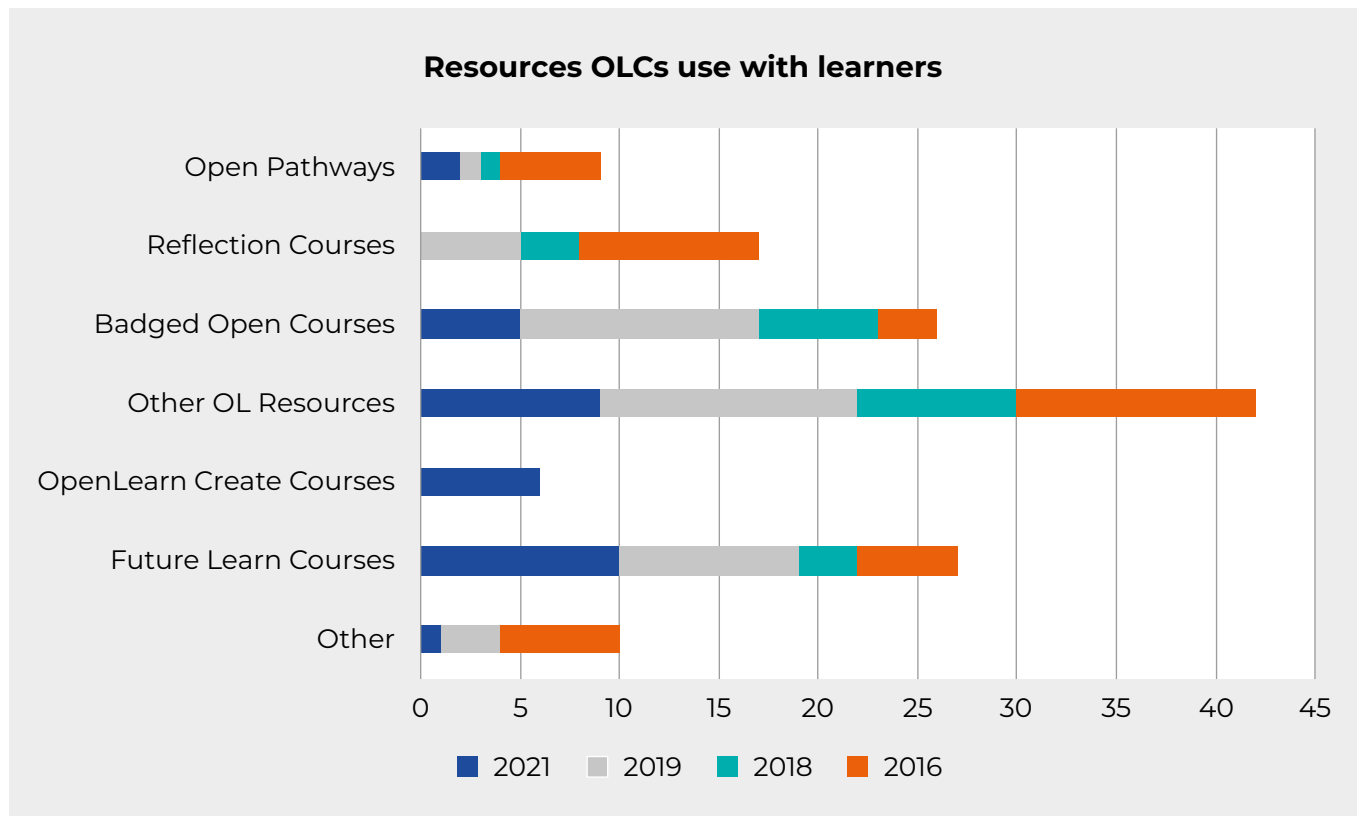
Resources OLCs use with learners

Chart 6: Resources used with learners 2016-2021. This represents the numbers of champions reporting having used the resources, not the number of learners who used them.

Case study: Glasgow Association for Mental Health

Glasgow Association for Mental Health (GAMH) supports people with mental health issues. When this case study was written in March 2019, they ran a support project for unpaid carers of people with mental health issues. This project is no longer funded but is presented as an example of one of the methods of delivery used by Open Learning Champions. A number of GAMH staff have done the champions workshop over the years.

The project used the Caring Counts reflection course on OpenLearn Create with people who have been caring for a long time, and don't realise the skills and qualities they've got can be transferred elsewhere in their lives. GAMH adapted the course to their context as many of their carers are older and do not intend to go back into work. They ran the course a couple of times a year with a small group of 4-6 people. Between sessions, people reflected on what they'd covered. The course was never the same twice, as they adapted it to each group. They also showed people how to access OpenLearn, set up an account, and what badges are. As they worked through the course, they identified what people are interested in, and signposted them to free resources on OpenLearn. They made sure courses were at the right level and length for the learner and provided a description for them. Some learners went on to FutureLearn courses.

Mental health carers can experience social isolation due to stigma. It can affect relationships with family and friends, so peer support was an important part of the project, to reduce loneliness and social isolation. Being in the group gave carers confidence, built resilience and provided a supportive environment where they could be honest about the good and bad times without judgement. The project reported a lot of positive outcomes with Caring Counts.

"We've seen transformations in people, and in a very short time. All the goals are very personal. One of our success stories is someone who initially wanted to be a comedian, and now she's an extra in River City. Another woman went on to organise a 'mental health walk' in Glasgow. My experience of using open learning resources has been really positive. What I found more than anything is that it helps to change people's mindset about themselves. It makes them more positive about what they've done with their life, and how they can change their life going forward. We've never had a bad session. We've only ever had really positive feedback from it."

2.2 Learner groups

In line with the targets in our Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council, and our own objectives outlined in our Access, Participation and Success plan, we are proactive about offering open learning champions workshops to third sector and community organisations working with particular learner groups, such as care experienced people and SIMD20 communities. It is no surprise to see these groups represented in our survey responses (see Chart 6).

We have had specific partnerships with national organisations supporting carers (Carers Trust Scotland), disabled learners (Lead Scotland) and volunteers (Volunteer Scotland). We have also provided tailored workshops to community learning and development teams in local authorities across the country.

▶ *"Excellent support available particularly for care-experienced and carers. The OU has a track record of supporting learners from all backgrounds to achieve their educational (and employment) potential."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

Learner Groups OLCs engage with
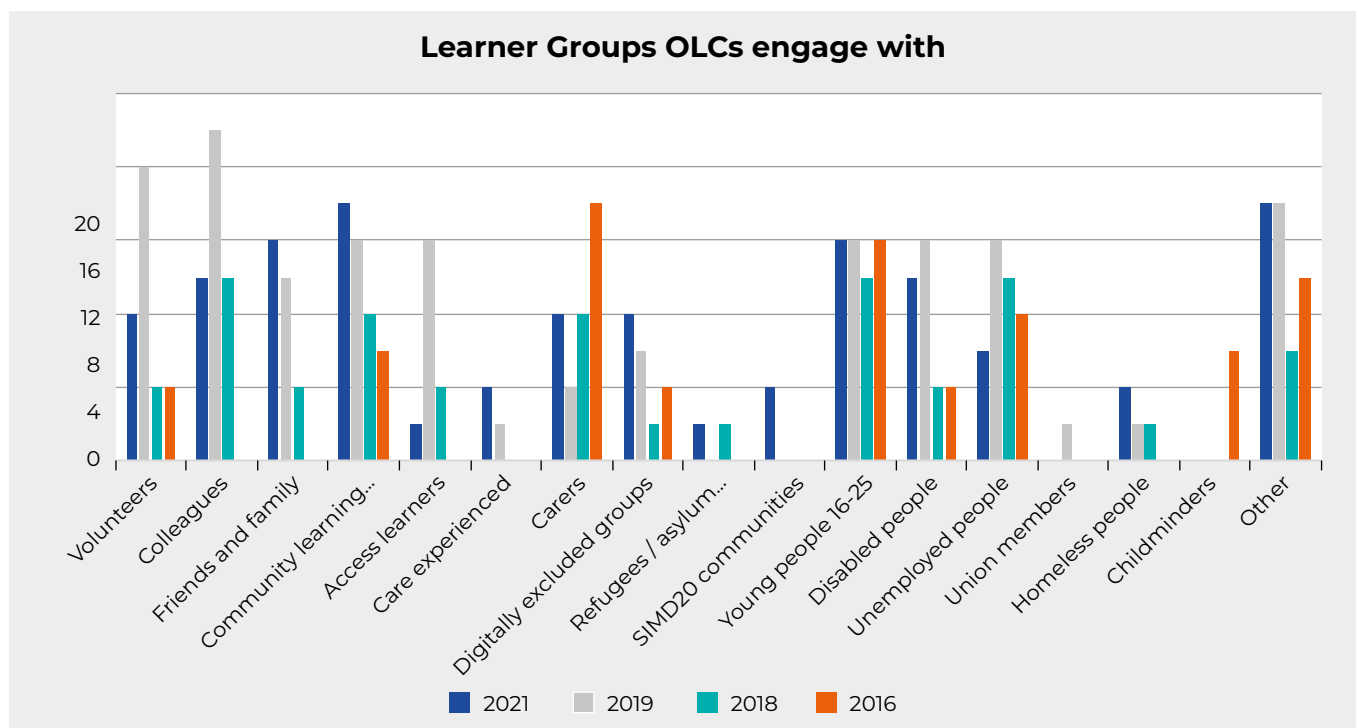
Chart 7: Learner groups Open Learning Champions engage with (source: surveys 2016-21). 'Other' includes parents, unions, colleges, staff in partner projects, OU and college students. The numbers represent open learning champions reporting engaging with this group, not the total number of learners engaged with.

▶ *"The Open University has hundreds of free courses across all areas of study and are a great place to begin studying. As the minimum age is 13, my son has also picked up a few courses."* Learner, 2020

OpenLearn data

Our colleagues in the Open Media and Informal Learning (OMIL) team provide an annual report on OpenLearn visitors from each of the nations in the previous academic year. While these are based on IP addresses rather than individual learners, and can be skewed by VPNs, they provide a useful snapshot of who is accessing OpenLearn, where they are in Scotland and what resources they access.

- There were 601,267 visitors from Scotland in 2019/20, with the largest number coming from Glasgow (135,207) and Edinburgh (93,199).

- Demographic information for learners doing Badged Open Courses (BOC) suggests the majority of learners are female, just over half are under 45 and a similar percentage have no previous higher education qualifications (see Chart 8). The pandemic appears to have had a negative impact on disabled learners' access to online learning, with half as many learners declaring a disability as they did the previous year (12% in 19/20, down from 24% in 18/19).

- The most popular badged open courses (BOCs) in Scotland last year were Understanding Autism, Forensic Psychology, and MoneySavingsExpert's Academy of Money (launched in 2020).

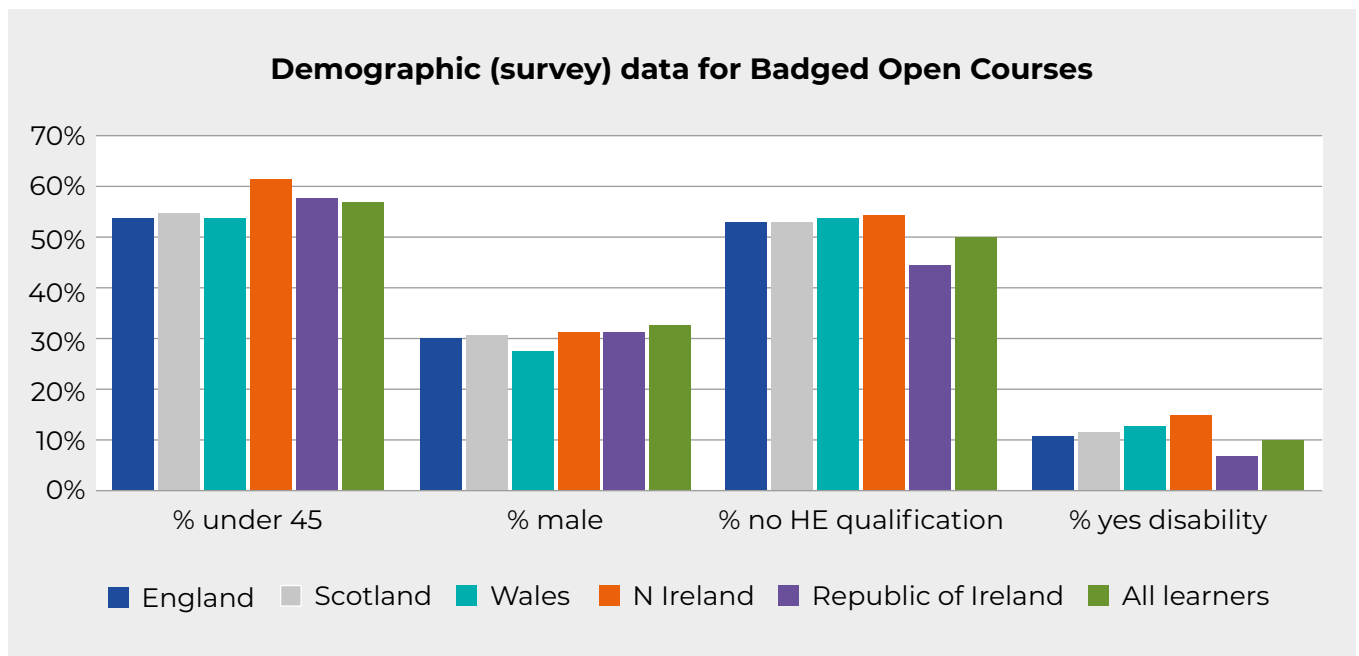**Demographic (survey) data for Badged Open Courses**

Chart 8: Demographic data on learners accessing badged open courses on OpenLearn in 19/20. This data comes from an optional survey of OpenLearn visitors (source: OMIL, 2020)

Case study: Community education

Lydia is a Community Engagement Officer with Progress Through Learning, a partnership of Midlothian Council and Edinburgh Napier University. She works with adult learners of all ages, particularly those with lower levels of educational attainment and living in SIMD20 postcodes.

"Open Learning Champions for me is about reaching out into the community. I work with community learning groups and we talk about OpenLearn as a next step. Supporting them to get online and use the materials is what makes the difference – I could bore people forever about how wonderful OpenLearn is, but until you actually sit them down and get them going on it, it doesn't really make sense. You can have an incredibly mixed group but OpenLearn has something for everybody.

Searching with learners for subjects they are interested in can show them how to explore the platform. It can be a bit overwhelming for learners so I like to jump straight to a starting point at the right level. Most of my learners don't have a computer or a laptop at home, so they use a tablet or a public library. That digital divide means they need support to get started, but once they get to a certain level OpenLearn is something fun and engaging that helps increase their digital skills but not in a boring IT class. Doing a wee thing in a subject that interests you makes you more comfortable in the digital space."

2.3 Learner outcomes

Our champions work with a diverse range of learner groups, and their learning needs and goals are also diverse. Some of them access OpenLearn in order to build confidence and get back into learning, while others may be working towards a specific learning or employment goal (see Chart 9). Champions told us that their learners had personal goals and may achieve positive destinations which for them do not involve formal study. Some of these goals relate to employability and building particular skills, including digital skills.

Study-related goals may relate to achievements like gaining a digital badge or completing additional courses on OpenLearn and FutureLearn. What constitutes a positive outcome is personal to the learner and what they can achieve. Some champions have reported working with groups who would not be in a position to progress to formal study, due to a learning disability or English as a second language.

Others work with learners who have an interest in returning to formal study but who may need a lot of support to get there. They reported that the accessibility of the resources (in different formats, including offline) made them suitable for working with disabled learners and digitally excluded communities.

Learner outcomes reported by OLCs
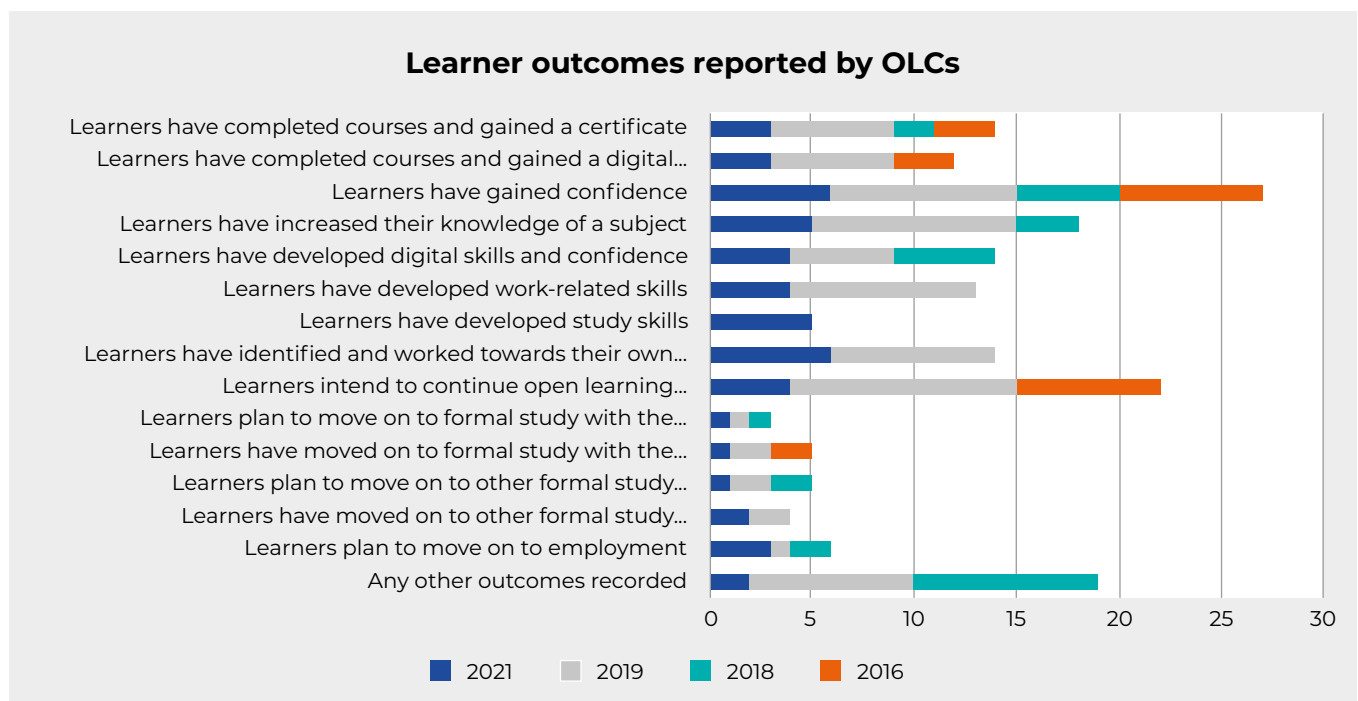
Chart 9: Learner outcomes reported by Open Learning Champions (source: surveys 2016-21).

▶ *"When I first met you, I couldn't even send an email! Now on Saturday nights instead of sitting down in front of the telly I'm sat on the computer and learning stuff."* Learner, 2020

▶ *"Once people have completed any courses, I encourage them to download their certificate or badge and add the course to their CV including the learning outcomes of that course which will help employers."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

Case study: Learning in hospital

Katie works as a volunteer coordinator at a psychiatric hospital for both short and long stay patients. Her initial contact with Open Learning Champions came through a workshop hosted by Volunteer Edinburgh network and her interest is in seeking out open educational resources she could share with learners.

Matching open educational resources to the learner: 'Learners are in hospital for various time periods, from a few weeks to a year or more. NHS staff are keen for people to be able to maintain and develop their interests and skills which supports self-esteem and confidence and can be transferable to life outside the hospital. Our focus is on getting to know the learner as an individual. We discuss what might be of interest to the learner, then investigate suitable open educational resources on various platforms, including OpenLearn, FutureLearn, Coursera, YouTube, Khan Academy. Many patients struggle with concentration and motivation for learning and this may impact on the selection of material. For some patients, dealing with the volume of text is an issue so video material can be a good place to start. Short resources are often more achievable, though a few people have now completed badged open courses (24 hours) successfully.'

Relationship between learner and volunteer: Learners are matched to a volunteer who they then see regularly. The aim of the volunteer is to support the learner's access to open educational resources, to develop their interest and focus, digital literacy and social interaction. Volunteers aim to help people recapture the joy of learning for those who have a bad experience of school. The volunteer and learner usually meet in the library once a week and work together on a laptop for about an hour at a time. For social distancing, we have set up a projector screen, enabling two people to engage with materials in a cinema style from 2 metres apart.

Some learners may not have the digital skills for navigating open learning resources, so the volunteer provides ICT support. We aim to spark excitement about learning and then build in study and tech skills as we go along. Volunteers and learners can have a conversation about the learning material and the process which makes the social interaction more focused and supportive. It also helps to shift something that could be quite a passive experience into active learning.

Outcomes for learners: 'Hospital routine can be quite restrictive and regimented and people can spend a lot of time dwelling on their own thoughts. Open learning can provide an escape from this and allows people to take their minds to Ancient China, the Solar System or wherever else for an hour, and puts the learner in charge. When learners complete a course, or even a section, there is a good sense of achievement. OpenLearn gives them a link with the community and something they can continue when they return to life outside the hospital.'

"Now that we have been running our programme for a number of years, we are able to proudly report that one of our first participants will soon qualify as a nurse, having applied to college and then university after leaving the hospital."

2.4 Transition to formal study

A recurring theme in annual survey responses and case studies is the challenge of measuring outcomes for learners. Many champions only engage with learners for a short time and are not in a position to track longer-term outcomes such as progression to formal study.

▶ *"I don't know whether that [transition to formal learning] is happening and the unfortunate thing is that I would never know that."* Open Learning Champion, 2020

Some projects engage with learners over a longer period and are in a position to report on outcomes, but even they report that the journey from OpenLearn to formal study can take a long time as the groups our champions work with can be very distant from higher education and may need a lot of support to build confidence and skills for study (see sections 2.2, 2.3).

OpenLearn to OU study

Responses to our surveys suggest that champions report that they are significantly likely to signpost their learners to formal study with the OU (see Chart 10). Champions' confidence in supporting learners to access formal OU study is also consistently high, as is their awareness of the Part-time Fee Grant, which fully funds OU modules for Scottish residents with a personal income of up to £25,000 per year.

▶ *"At least one person has worked towards a degree following my recommendation."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

Likelihood of OLCs signposting learners to formal study with the OU
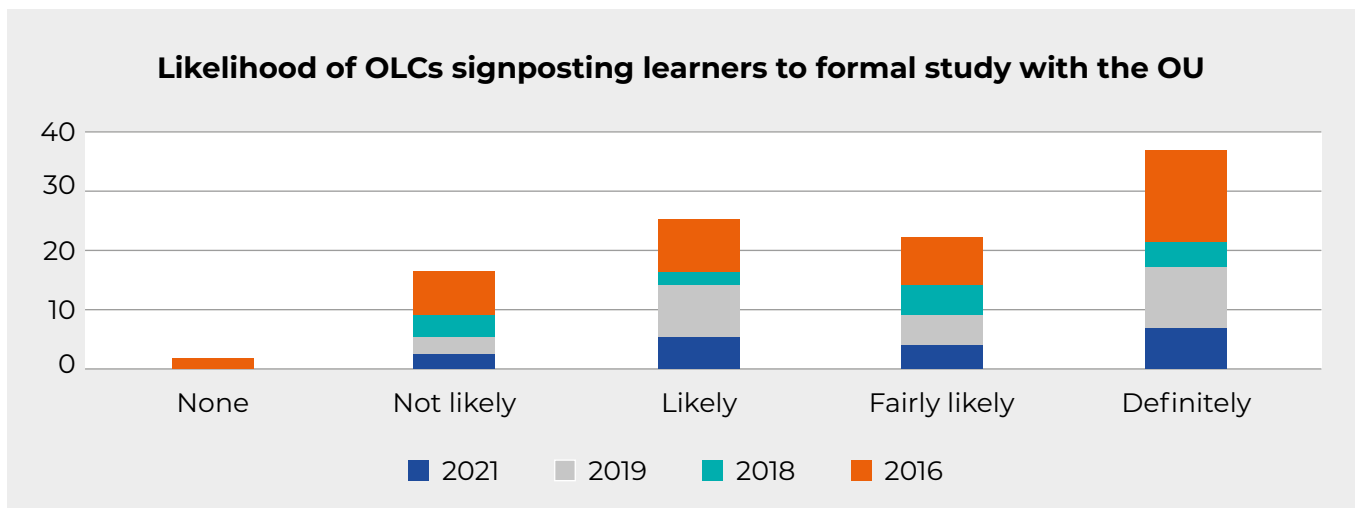

Chart 10: Likelihood of Open Learning Champions signposting learner to formal OU study (source: surveys 2016-21). Numbers represent champions reporting intention to signpost learners to formal study, not the number of learners signposted.

OpenLearn data

The Open Media and Informal Learning team's nations report indicates that at least 905 students registering in 18/19 (as at 31 July 2019) and 850 students in 19/20 in Scotland began their journey on OpenLearn (as at 31 July 2020). This represents nearly 5% of new undergraduate students registering in 19/20. We would expect to see this increase in 20/21 in response to the dramatic increase in OpenLearn visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic (see section 3).

A tool for widening access

Some of our champions work for widening access programmes or in colleges or universities.

The resources were considered useful to help prepare learners for formal study, as induction, to develop study skills and maintain motivation. One Open Learning Champion described using the resources with students who had signed up for study but not yet started their course as "keeping warm". Others described using the resources on-course to support student retention, to develop study skills and subject knowledge, and with students who had withdrawn from formal study but weren't ready to give up on learning.

► "This is university but it's not terrifying." *Open Learning Champion, 2019*

Case study: Access programme

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) supports access to higher education for adult learners. It works with partner organisations that offer a variety of programmes supporting adult returners. They use Open University resources in two ways:

- Signposting people to OpenLearn resources to get an initial taste of what it's like to study, to find out subjects that they might be interested in and build their study skills while they are waiting for places at university.

- For some university programmes, students are required to have studied chemistry and biology prior but if they don't have Highers, SWAP will direct students to OU Level One modules.

According to Kenny, manager of SWAP West, "During the pandemic, the open learning champions community was an incredible resource both for staff and students. Particularly useful were the mental health resources which we woven into our own student wellbeing tips. The science at home experiments were shared with our science students. Everyday computer skills was shared as part of our induction pack for new SWAP students. Students were encouraged to explore the open resources. One student was able to use the open university resources to enhance her SWAP student profile, enabling her to progress to UWS to study law.

For staff, the additional resources were useful, especially with the shift to online learning. With our network of college tutors, we were able to highlight the assistance and expertise of the OU. For example, the Online educator: people and pedagogy course and the blog by Maha Bali on care being very received. Certainly, in terms of widening access, the OU has got a really good reputation amongst us all in terms of the work that we do."

2.5 Ongoing challenges

Navigating platforms

Many of the challenges reported by champions relate to the navigation of the platforms. Champions primarily use OpenLearn, but there are courses on its sister platform OpenLearn Create – which allows partner organisations to create their own open educational resources – that are of particular interest to learners, such as Caring Counts (a reflection course for carers) and Everyday Computer Skills (a digital skills course for beginners). Champions also use FutureLearn, a platform for massive online open courses (MOOCs), as a next step from OpenLearn as it offers courses in real time and with other learners. This gives learners a free taste of formal study with a short-term commitment, though there is a cost for certificates or accredited courses. Different champions have reported issues with each of the platforms.

▶ *"Navigation of the OpenLearn Create site can be confusing"* Open Learning Champion, 2021

▶ *"I find Futurelearn really easy to use but OpenLearn not so much"* Open Learning Champion, 2021

▶ *"OpenLearn… has been very helpful and pitched at the right level for our users. FutureLearn is more hit and miss, with lots of good online courses and variety but sometimes the level is not clear from the start."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

Levels

Champions also reported issues with the levels of OpenLearn resources, particularly those who support learners for whom English is a second language, or who have learning disabilities. Most OpenLearn resources are introductory (level 1), suitable for most people with a secondary school education, with a small number of basic (level 0) resources in Maths and English.

▶ *"They only suit the most advanced of my students. The others need pre-access resources."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

▶ *"People with learning disabilities still need a fair bit of support to complete these courses"* Open Learning Champion, 2021

Tracking learner outcomes

As the OU in Scotland doesn't have a direct relationship with learners, it is a challenge to track learner outcomes and we rely on champions reporting this to us through the annual survey and case studies. One of the surprising themes emerging from this evaluation has been that champions also find this challenging. They are more likely to report short-term outcomes, such as completing a course, gaining a badge, growing confidence, than longer-term ones such as accessing employment and education as they may not have an ongoing relationship with their learners.

Third sector funding

A challenge noted by the project team is the short-term nature of funding for the sector, which can impact on staff turnover and project continuity. Some of our most impactful case studies have subsequently lost their funding despite their projects achieving impressive outcomes with learners. Every open learning champions mailing we send out receives a significant number of 'bounce backs' as people no longer work in the organisation. This means we lose up to 5% of our mailing list every month. Some champions get in touch with their new contact details, and others ask that colleagues receive the mailing instead.

2.6 Future opportunities

Scaling the project

When asked about developing the OpenLearn Champions project, our case studies made the following suggestions:

- Offering the Open Learning Champion workshop to OU Associate Lecturers (ALs) so they can signpost students to study skills resources on OpenLearn to improve student retention.

- Offering the workshop to OU student representatives and to graduating students. This could help engage student networks and support their future employability.

- Expanding the project to different community hubs such as clubs, places of worship, community halls, libraries and schools.

- Promoting OpenLearn to third sector and local authority HR teams to support staff and volunteer development.

- Extending the capacity and resources of the project to support training and delivery of workshops by open learning champions and ALs to broaden our reach.

A model to be shared

The Open Learning Champions project is a model that continues to evolve and it has been adopted by other teams in the OU in Scotland. Our colleagues in the External Engagement and Partnerships (EEP) team have adopted it for use with their partner organisations, such as Scottish Union Learning and local authorities.

Case study: The OU in Scotland and Scottish Union Learning

Scottish Union Learning have hosted a number of open learning champions workshops, representing about 16% of all OLC Open Learning Champions. They have received their certificates for participation, use OpenLearn resources and are encouraged to sign up for the Open Learning Champion newsletter which they can share with their members.

Khadija is Partnership Manager with the EEP team and works closely with trade unions. She regularly suggests relevant OpenLearn resources, noting that *"it enhances learning in the workplace through union-led facilitated workshops, and learners can explore what is available on Open Learn that is relevant to them. From this, familiarity with OU studies and other areas of interest can be also be developed, creating opportunities for people to learn together through work, home and community settings."*

A key role for a Union Learning Rep or Learning Organiser who has done the Open Learning Champion workshop is to ensure that the union members they work with have a good awareness of study options available to them and to offer them guidance. The conversations between learner and champion may progress from discussing OpenLearn to pursuing accredited learning and funding.

"OpenLearn is a good starting place for informal workplace learning for those new to study or returning to learning, as confidence with study and digital skills can be key barriers for this group. OpenLearn helps to break these barriers down... [It] provides upskilling and reskilling opportunities that they can apply to their practice straight away or for lifelong learning. The Champion ... will guide learners to resources that meet their needs."

Some of the Open Learning Champion workshops have been delivered cross-union, where different unions will come together, with the benefit that learning reps can share suggestions for OpenLearn materials, and unions learn from each other's practice. By being an Open Learning Champion the Union Learning Reps/ Learning Organisers are able to talk confidently about OpenLearn and the OU's commitment to being flexible and accessible to all, and encourage the take up of learning relevant to the workplace.

Case study: OU in Scotland partnerships with local authorities

Diane, who managed the EEP team, offers Open Learning Champions workshops to local authorities as part of a range of collaborative activities to support learning and development for staff and the communities they work with, particularly themed around employability and community learning and development. She views the role of an OpenLearn Champion as a key person who can signpost free learning to people within their networks or organisations, *"champions of learning across Scotland's communities."*

In partnership with a local authority, she provided a taster session on OpenLearn to council staff working in employability and community learning, as well as local voluntary and business sectors. This session was successful, and a follow-up was arranged with people who wanted to become Champions. Following this, they now have 31 champions in the local authority area. This was run as a pilot but given the success the team has been engaging with local authorities across Scotland to roll out the Open Learning Champions programme with communities. This is supported by the umbrella body for local authorities in Scotland as it aligns with the Community Wealth Building agenda.

In terms of the value that the OpenLearn Champions project brings to the Open University in Scotland, *"I think it's a relatively efficient, effective way to provide learning that doesn't need a lot of resourcing."*

3. Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

OpenLearn

The impact of the pandemic can be clearly seen in OpenLearn data for 19/20. An almost doubling of visitors to OpenLearn reflects many who accessed the site for the first time during the first lockdown between March and July 2020, when daily visitors to the site across the board increased from 40,000 a day to more than 200,000. In Scotland, there was a 92% increase in visitors, from 313,275 in 18/19 to 601,267 in 19/20 (see Chart 11).

The OpenLearn team were quick to respond to the pandemic, curating timely collections of resources such as Take Your Teaching Online, Skills for Work, and Mental Health and Wellbeing. The OU in Scotland worked to improve awareness of and access to OpenLearn across a range of partners and social media channels, including to the Open Learning Champions network.
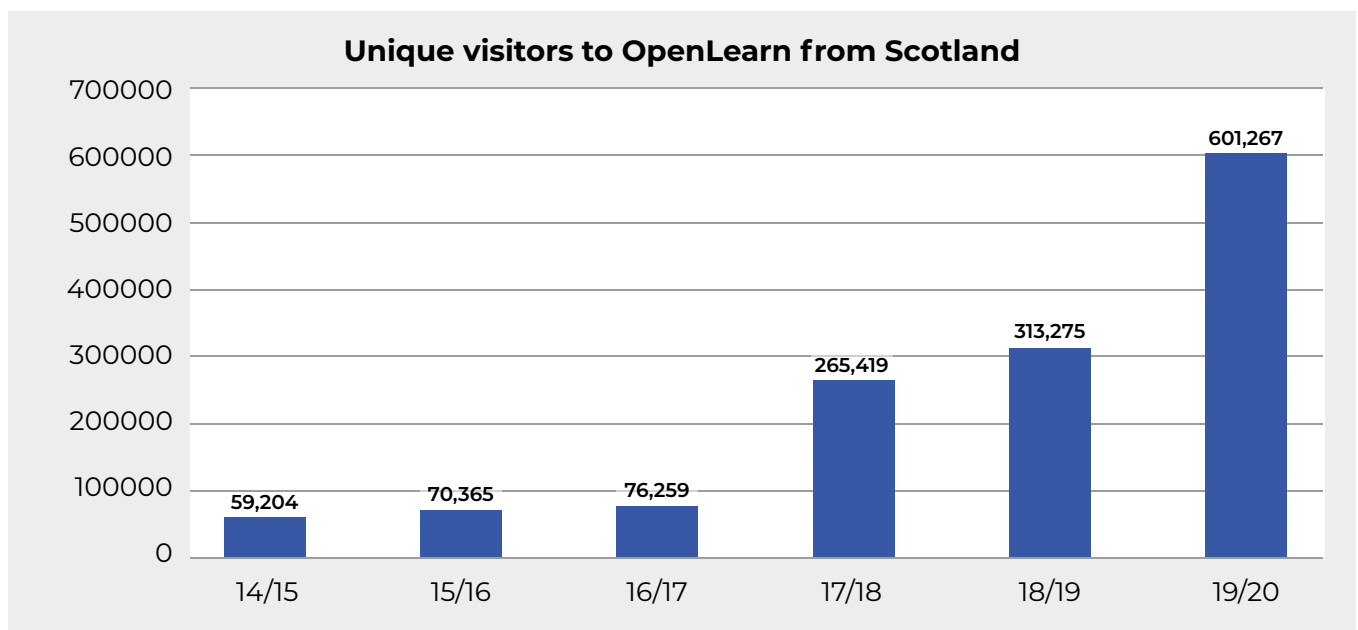
Unique visitors to OpenLearn from Scotland

Year	Visitors
14/15	59,204
15/16	70,365
16/17	76,259
17/18	265,419
18/19	313,275
19/20	601,267

Chart 11: Unique visitors to OpenLearn from Scotland 2014/15 – 2019/20 (source: OpenLearn Nations Report 2019-20, December 2020)

Mailings

To support champions in the pivot online, we sent monthly mailings to the network highlighting useful resources and the new OpenLearn collections. We also included resources, events and activities that our champions had shared. In our 2021 survey, which included questions to capture the impact of Covid and lockdown, feedback from champions suggested that 84% found the mailings useful or very useful. In addition, 28% of champions had used OpenLearn's Take Your Teaching Online resources, which were promoted in the mailings.

▶ *"The mailings are great, a couple of our learners enrolled on courses from the last email you sent, it's a great resource."* Open Learning Champion, 2020

▶ *"The new Skills for Work courses are excellent and perfect for the client group I am working with. The OpenLearn courses overall are really accessible and searching for courses is straightforward. There is also a good range of courses to choose from and the quality of the courses are really good."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

▶ *"Some really good resources there. I will pop them over to the team and share with the students. I like the idea of the daily science experiment - what a brilliant idea."*
Open Learning Champion, 2021

Online sessions

Traditionally, open learning champions workshops have taken place face to face but in 2020 they came to an abrupt halt when UK lockdown restrictions were introduced. We had to figure out how best to take sessions online without trying to replicate the format of a half day workshop. We did this by offering a 1.5 hour OpenLearn taster session, with a follow-up 1.5 hour session on Open Pathways. In partnership with colleagues, we also offered a Taking Your Teaching Online session to Scottish Union Learning.

The feedback from these sessions was mixed, with many saying the content was timely and relevant but also that they were so busy that they didn't have time to put what they'd learned into practice. In the 2021 survey, some champions reported how their practice had changed, from one-to-one, face to face support to access resources, to signposting by email or phone.

► *"Prior to Covid I would sit with my clients and show them how to navigate the site but now I tend to either discuss this over the phone or for people that are more confident just sending them the links to the website with some additional information."* Open Learning Champion, 2021

In our 2021 survey, 78% of respondents expressed an interest in online opportunities to develop their knowledge and practice of open learning. They are also keen to resume our annual networking event to engage with other champions. One champion suggested that we make the workshop available as a self-study online option.

Case study: Supporting volunteers during the pandemic

The Head of Volunteer Practice at Volunteer Scotland has been an Open Learning Champion since 2019 and has attended networking events. He sees his role as an Open Learning Champion as *"just making sure that everybody knows that there are free resources there that people can go online and access."* He has used OpenLearn Create to develop a course called Involving Volunteers and, post-lockdown, Keeping Volunteers Safe: Restarting your volunteer programme. He usually suggests volunteers take the Volunteer Scotland course and then go and explore OpenLearn for further learning and development.

During the pandemic, Volunteer Scotland recruited around 350 'Team V Mental Health Volunteers' who will use their knowledge of mental health and wellbeing to support local communities, workplaces and personal networks. They reached out to the Open University in Scotland for support with this, and we curated a list of OpenLearn courses on mental health and wellbeing. We also provided three online Open Learning Champions sessions for volunteers.

He has received positive feedback about the resources on OpenLearn and some learners have completed a number of courses since being introduced to the platform. *"People are amazed at the range of materials that are there".* He is keen to ensure that more people are aware of the platform, especially volunteers. *"If you really want to reach the hard-to-reach communities, you've got to involve volunteers because that's where volunteers are."*

To find out more about the Mental Health Volunteers project and to review the full evaluation report please visit Volunteer Scotland.

4. Achieving our goals

Our social mission

The Open University (OU) was founded in 1969 with a social justice mission to make higher education accessible to all. Our Access, Participation Plan 2020-25 is what drives activity to achieve this across the University. In Scotland, the main driver is our Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council, the OU in Scotland's primary funder. We also have an Access, Participation and Success Plan for Scotland. Within this context, the APSS team uses open educational resources, such as those on the OU's free OpenLearn platform, as a tool for widening access.

Access, Participation and Success Scotland

The APSS team's priorities are outlined in our APS Scotland Plan 2021-22. Our four key aims are:

- Widening Access: To provide access to education for people from the widest range of backgrounds.

- Increasing Success: Once here, we aim to support all students in achieving their goals (personal, academic and professional) and to ensure a positive student experience.

- Student Voice: We will work in partnership with our students to ensure that the student voice informs all areas of our work.

- Enhancement Activity: We work collaboratively to support, evaluate and improve learning, teaching and support activity.

The Open Learning Champions project helps us to achieve the first aim. The evidence we have collated through the evaluation suggests that our champions are engaging with learners from a wide range of backgrounds and they are accessing free, open educational resources. We know that some of these learners subsequently transition into formal study, though tracking the exact numbers is a challenge. Nearly 5% of new undergraduates in the OU in Scotland started their journey on OpenLearn (see section 2.4).

Some champions have reported using open educational resources to support student success, through development of study skills or 'keeping warm' while they wait for their course to start. We can be more intentional about integrating this into our open learning champions activity. We can also build on our engagement with learners and consider ways that we can integrate student voice into the project.

The current QAA Scotland enhancement theme is 'Resilient Learning Communities' and the evidence suggests that our open learning champions community has demonstrated remarkable resilience during Covid, with support from us via mailings and online sessions (see section 3). How we further develop this sense of community is something to be considered for future activity.

Outcome Agreement 2020-23

Our outcome agreement with the Scottish Funding Council outlines a range of Scottish Government priorities for widening access, supported by targets for the OU in Scotland to work towards. The most relevant priority is:

> Access to education for people from the widest range of backgrounds, including implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access and addressing gender balance.

There are specific measures relating to recruitment of students from SIMD20/40 postcodes and groups with protected characteristics (including care experience). Our champions consistently report engaging with these learner groups (see sections 2.2, 2.3) and we have been intentional in partnering with organisations supporting these potential learners. Although a direct correlation is difficult to evidence, there is data to support that some of these learners transition from OpenLearn to formal study (see sections 2.3, 2.4). This suggests that the project contributes to the achievement of these measures.

OU Access and Participation Plan 2020-25

The wider Open University has outlined its priorities in the Access and Participation Plan. The current plan identifies a number of target groups, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, mature students, disabled students, care leavers and other groups who experience barriers to higher education (such as IMD postcodes). The plan sets target to increase the proportion of students registered from these groups by 2025.

Case study: Supporting young women's learning during lockdown

Heidi is YWCA Scotland Programmes Coordinator in Glasgow. She took part in an online Open Learning Champions workshop in December 2020. She also has taken opportunities for her own learning and development, obtaining a funded place on one of the OU's microcredential courses, Management of Uncertainty, and working through the Take your teaching online course on OpenLearn.

During lockdown, she has been supporting 27 women, many of them from minority ethnic communities, to complete the Digital skills: succeeding in a digital world course on OpenLearn. She has held support classes on Zoom every Tuesday morning between 23 March and 25 May. The classes have helped learners to understand OpenLearn and how to go through the course successfully. A few of them have now finished the course and are looking at doing other OpenLearn courses on their own. As Heidi states, *"The support from an Open Learning Champion is a good way to help learners understand OpenLearn and get guidance as they work through a course."*

She plans to support more learners on OpenLearn courses and encourage them to move on to other courses on their own, to grow their confidence to explore and to progress onto FutureLearn If possible.

"I am privileged to be doing a course called Succeeding in a Digital World. I am now building my confidence back, no longer the weakest link in my family." Learner, 2021

"As I have progressed through the course, I had the opportunity to explore different aspects of digital life and develop my skills and confidence. Throughout the course, I have been completing my Digital Plan, which is a good way to take notes and complete the activities, which we can refer to in future as well. Also, I would appreciate the efforts of Ms. Heidi [open learning champion], who has been a constant support for me. Thank you for being a good mentor. I will always be thankful to you." Learner, 2021

"Thank you so much, you really made the course more easier for all of us. I have passed and gotten the Certificate and badge now. I really appreciate it a lot." Learner, 2021

Reflections and recommendations

Measuring impact

Since the project began, it has been a challenge for us to measure its impact and this evaluation has confirmed that is a challenge for our champions as well. However, using a multi-method approach has allowed us to draw on a range of evidence in addition to our annual surveys. Using quantitative data from OpenLearn alongside case studies of champions and quotes from learners has helped us build a clearer picture of the impact of the project.

We can't reach a definitive number of the learners whose lives have changed as a result of the project but we can say that our champions are reporting positive outcomes, that many Scottish learners are accessing OpenLearn and that some of these journeys result in registrations for formal OU study.

Recommendation:

To track learner journeys more effectively, we could link open learning champions with other access, participation and support priorities to develop focused projects providing enhanced support to small cohorts of target groups with longer-term evaluation of outcomes.

Scaling the project

To achieve our vision of making open learning accessible to all of Scotland's communities, we need to take an intentional approach to scaling the open learning champions model. We will explore how to resource an expansion of the project in Scotland, particularly in partnership with other OU teams and national organisations. In order to do this, we would need to increase the number of people who can deliver the workshop. Ideally, we would have one key champion in each region of Scotland who could act as a local point of contact for champions and potentially arrange local networking events as the network grows.

Recommendation:

We could offer this as a learning and development opportunity to Associate Lecturers, OU Students Association reps, OU in Scotland alumni and others who may be interested in this role.

Reaching all of Scotland's communities

We do not have champions in five local authorities in Scotland with two of these island communities – Orkney and Western Isles (Eilean Siar). Given the remoteness of these communities and the challenge of physical access to education, these communities could potentially benefit from support to access open learning.

Our engagement with communities also aligns with the Adult Learner Strategy for Scotland, which is currently in consultation. It is timely to explore how the open learning champions model can support the revised strategy.

Recommendation:

We will seek to build partnerships within local authorities to raise awareness of online and open learning opportunities, particularly targeting those local authority areas where we do not have a presence.

Aligning with access and participation priorities

In line with our Outcome Agreement priorities, we must seek to ensure that we are reaching particular groups at risk of disadvantage, such as care-experienced, BAME and SIMD20 communities. The evaluation confirms our champions are working with these learner groups. We can explore ways to link the open learning champions work to other APSS initiatives that seek to enable learner voice and co-create open educational resources with learners, such as the Forced Migration pilot projects planned for 2021/22.

Recommendation:

We will identify partners in the community and third sectors and offer enhanced support to champions working with these groups to facilitate journeys into higher education.

Sense of community

The annual open learning champions network event is always evaluated positively, with champions welcoming the opportunity to meet others, to share practice and to chat informally. Maintaining this sense of community between events has been a challenge, with a lack of consensus among champions on what form this may take and a barrier being institutional restrictions on what social networks can be used. The most recent survey, undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggests an increased appetite for connection and also ideas on how this can be done.

Some of the lessons from lockdown have opened possibilities. We know that online sessions can work but not by replicating the same format as a face-to-face workshop. We can take forward suggestions for online opportunities for champions to meet up for networking and in response to their interest in learning and development opportunities.

Recommendation:

We could offer online sessions for existing champions such as a webinar series on practice and a more informal virtual 'coffee morning' for networking.

Open Pathways

A surprising finding of the evaluation has been the low take-up of Open Pathways by champions. This resource forms part of the Open Learning Champion workshops so it's not a result of lack of awareness. This is something that may be worth teasing out with champions. Wider challenges relating to navigation of the platforms and levels of resources will be fed back to colleagues in the OpenLearn team.

Recommendation:

We could add a specific question on this in future surveys and invite a focus of group of champions and learners to provide feedback on why that have or haven't used it. This could ensure future versions of the resource are more tailored to their needs.

Sharing the model

We intend to share the findings from the evaluation widely with colleagues across the Open University so that other access and participation projects may adopt the model and adapt it for their contexts.

Recommendation:

We will contribute an article to the Journal of Widening Access and Lifelong Learning and submit papers to relevant conferences.

Appendix A: Responses to Open Learning Champions surveys 2016-2021

Table 2: number of respondents to each open learning champions survey by year of survey and the year they took part in the workshop

Survey	Year workshop attended		Total respondents
2021	2015	3	
	2016	1	
	2017	2	
	2018	2	
	2019	8	
	2020	2	
			18
2019	2015	2	
	2016	3	
	2017	3	
	2018	8	
	2019	11	
			27
2018	2015	4	
	2016	4	
	2017	3	
	2018	4	
			19
2016	2015	7	
	2016	35	
			42

Appendix B: Graphics produced in response to champions' feedback

OPENLEARN

FREE ONLINE LEARNING

OPEN TO EVERYONE
no qualifications needed

INFORMAL LEARNING
does not count towards a qualification. Achieve a digital badge or certificate on some courses

LEARN AT YOUR OWN PACE
no assessments, deadlines or tutor support

YOUR FIRST STEP
develop study skills and confidence so you are ready to succeed when you move on to formal study

JOIN ANYTIME
take as much time as you need

OPEN UNIVERSITY IN SCOTLAND

ONLINE AND DISTANCE STUDY
fees for most modules but 75% of students receive funding

NO QUALIFICATIONS NEEDED
for most undergraduate modules

FORMAL STUDY AT UNIVERSITY
counts towards qualifications including certificates, diplomas and degrees

ASSESSMENTS WITH DEADLINES, SUPPORT FROM TUTORS AND OTHER STUDENTS

ACCESS MODULES TO HELP YOU STEP INTO FORMAL STUDY

DEADLINE TO REGISTER IS USUALLY 4 WEEKS BEFORE YOU START
most modules start in October or February and last 9 months

OpenLearn & OpenLearn Create

Informal
(also called non-formal, non-accredited learning)

3 Postgraduate level, usually extracts from Master's modules

2 Intermediate content is similar to degree level, usually extracts from OU undergraduate modules (Level 2 / 3)

1 Introductory is the best start for most people, content developed specifically for OpenLearn or extracts from Access or undergraduate courses (Level 1)

0 Beginner level, accessible language, functional skills

Open University modules

Formal
(also called accredited learning, as it leads to qualifications)

Postgraduate such as Master's degree, SCQF 11 — **POSTGRAD**

3 Third / final year undergraduate, Ordinary / Honours degree, SCQF level 9 – 10

2 Second year undergraduate, roughly equivalent to HND, SCQF 8

1 First year undergraduate, roughly equivalent to HNC, SCQF 7

Access – pre-degree level, SCQF 6 — **ACCESS**