



Purpose and Principles of Post-School Education

Scottish Government
Consultation

24.03.23

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. With over 21,000 students, we are the fourth largest university in Scotland and the largest provider of flexible, part-time study. Our students range from school age to 92, with an average age of 28. 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. 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. More than 20% of our undergraduates in Scotland join with qualifications below standard university entrance level, almost 19% are resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland, 26% declare a disability and 23% live in remote or rural areas. The majority of our students in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees.

Flexible study is core to our offer with 74% of our students working either full-time or part-time fitting study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that works for them. Our student experience is rated the best in Scotland alongside the University of St Andrews (National Student Survey).

As part of the UK's only four nations university, we are funded to teach students resident in Scotland by the Scottish Funding Council. Almost 200 staff operate from our Edinburgh offices with almost 500 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

Principle One – High Quality

High quality opportunities are available for people to enhance their knowledge and skills at the time and place that is right for them

Q1.1 Do you agree with the inclusion of and language of the principle of High Quality?

Yes. We do think however that this may mean different things to different parts of the sector and there should be a clear and understood definition of 'high quality'. Given the robust quality assurance framework in place for higher education institutions we believe this should not be difficult to settle upon.

With our unique position within the sector as the only Scotland-wide provider of personalised, supported distance learning we also believe that the current quality assurance system ensures that we provide high quality provision. We don't believe that there is the need for additional standards for online provision as the current arrangements are fit for purpose.

The discussion guide accompanying the consultation asked participants to think about the principle of high quality in relation to their "role in the broader ecosystem or Scotland's wellbeing economy more generally". In practice we know from over fifty-years' experience of delivering life changing education that this will mean different things at different points in a learner's life. Many learners choose to go to college first or pursue higher education at a later stage, perhaps due to work or family commitments, or financial reasons.

We are continually seeking new ways to match our core curriculum, microcredentials and free [OpenLearn](#) content to the learning needs of people across Scotland. This ambition has not always been matched by funding to enable and support as such innovation.

A key focus of our work is ensuring that people from Scotland's most disadvantaged groups and communities can all access higher education at any stage of their lives to help improve their work and life opportunities.

We have 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.

Our autumn 2022 intake saw a significant growth in 18–20year-olds choosing to study with the Open University and work at the same time as an alternative to the traditional four-year degree campus university model. This age group increased in size by 14% in headcount terms, while full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers increased by 22%.

We also know the benefit of learning later in life and keeping the brain stimulated and mentally active. We have delivered a series of online sessions in partnership with Voluntary Health Scotland on 'Health Ageing in Scotland'. We have also partnered with the Glasgow based not-for-profit language school [Lingo Flamingo](#) to support volunteer tutors and social care staff to deliver language classes in a variety of care settings.

Q1.2 This principle is about when, where and how opportunities are provided. How do you think we can best build a supportive and equitable ecosystem to enable different kinds of user journeys?

The ecosystem is currently not designed to enable different kinds of learner journey. There should be a move away from the current default position of viewing higher education as the transition of 17-and-18-year-olds from school into full-time university and adopt a wider view of the diversity of learners and their needs in Scotland. The reality is that many students do not follow a single linear journey. Immediately after school is not always the right time in a person's life to choose to pursue higher education. Many students will go on to college first or choose to come back to education later in life.

We welcomed the recognition from the SFC in their report [Coherent Provision and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research](#) that "Learning throughout life will become increasingly important and the pace of change in the jobs market will require more frequent reskilling or upskilling...". Putting this into practice will mean a move away from a default position of favouring the full-time degree both in terms of funding and measures. There needs to be more agile provision and the ability to fund small, 'bite-sized' modules and microcredentials. The opportunity exists to consider the potential of credit-based funding/funding by SCQF level as a way of truly supporting lifelong learning.

Principle Two – Supportive and Equitable

People are supported throughout their learning journey, targeting those who need it most

2.1 Do you agree with inclusion of and language of the principle of Supportive and Equitable?

Yes, see comments in 1.1. A supported journey however will look different for different students even within institutions before the student experience across the sector is considered. This can only truly be enacted if there is an increase of the unit of resource within the sector. We would refer you to the Universities Scotland submission on the Scottish Government Budget 2023-24 '[Time to Choose](#)' with a 37% real-terms cut in funding per learner since 2014-15.

2.2 How do you think we can best build a supportive journey and equitable ecosystem to support different kinds of journeys?

From the outset it is worth stating that the system is not equitable, and equity needs to be enacted. **In the 2020-21 academic year the OU recruited as many students from the most deprived areas as the least deprived areas** but there is more to be done to break the barriers to education.

The Open University has been designated as a part-time provider since its funding was transferred from HEFCE to SHEFC in 2000 – as a result, OU students are classified as part-time even if they are studying 120 credits i.e., full-time intensity. 22,000 students studied with The Open University across Scotland in

academic year 2020–21 and of the 8,094 new undergraduate entrants, 21% were registered for 120 credits. This proportion has grown considerably over the past five years, from 12% in 2016/17.

These students, despite studying at full-time intensity, **have no access to free tuition fees, student loans, bursaries and do not qualify for exemption from council tax.** They can access the Part-time Fee Grant from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) to help towards their tuition fees but only if they have an income of less £25,000 per annum. Neither the grant nor the income threshold has not changed since its introduction in 2013 despite inflation.

In 1999, 37% of all higher education enrolments in Scotland were part-time students. That figure now stands at 27%, with 69% of part-time students studying with The Open University.

The Open University was founded to provide high quality education, which is accessible to all, regardless of age, background, qualifications, or geography. Our flexibility means that we meet market demand particularly for those who don't follow a linear higher education journey, and we help address short and long-term skills needs vital to inclusive economic growth.

Most of our students combine work and study contributing to economy while they learn, and their new skills and knowledge can be applied immediately. There is no lag until a full-time course is completed and employment gained. Our students are not required to attend a campus and can study with us

wherever they might live, with access to our world-class online library and support services. This is of particular benefit to the 23% of our undergraduate students who live in remote and rural parts of Scotland, and who would otherwise have limited options to access higher education. The pandemic demonstrated the need for a flexible responsive system which allowed people to upskill and/or re-skill within short periods of time, outside of degree courses.

In 2017, the Independent Review into Student Support recommended action to implement equitable support measures for part-time students and those currently receiving Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)¹. That recommendation has not been implemented yet. **This means that part-time students still do not have access to the same range of financial support compared to full-time students.** This is not the case in other UK nations where for instance part-time students have access to maintenance grants in Wales and to part-time loans in Northern Ireland.

The Part-time Fee Grant from SAAS is available to students who have an income less than £25,000 gross per annum. 71% of Open University in Scotland undergraduate students are in receipt of the Part-time Fee Grant but neither the

¹ Scottish Government. (2017) A New Social Contract for Students; Fairness, Parity and Clarity. Independent Report for Scotland. Edinburgh: Government Publications

level of grant or the threshold has changed for a decade and the gap between the grant and the OU fee was over £290 in 2021/22. To ensure that our students are not disadvantaged in comparison to their full-time counterparts, who receive free tuition, The Open University absorbs the cost of the difference between the grant and the fee at a total cost of £3 million in 2021/22.

In addition, if you are care experienced and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are a lone parent and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not for** part-time students. If you have dependents and are a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are estranged from your family and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students.

We would like to see the Scottish Government address these inequities as well as considering the introduction of maintenance loans for part-time students. Students highlight an 'earnings trap' – that is, having begun full-time work, perhaps having started a family, they must continue to work to provide an income to service their various obligations. This makes the opportunity of study more challenging. Due to the cost-of-living crisis, we are also seeing a number of students whose salaries have just tipped over the £25,000 threshold, who are no longer eligible for the Part-time Fee Grant and are having to withdraw from their studies due to the financial pressures they are experiencing. Access to maintenance funding is one way to make the 'earnings trap' less challenging and it would support those facing cost of living challenges.

However, we would stress that repayment thresholds for maintenance loans for part-time students should be designed to recognise that most part-time students are in employment (so different repayment thresholds) and that part-time students can take longer to complete their studies than their full-time counterparts.

We would like to see a review of support for part-time study to ensure that it is treated on an equitable basis with full-time and that barriers to study such as maintenance support are given urgent consideration.

The Scottish Government should also consider the findings contained within the report from The Royal Society of Edinburgh [Tertiary Education Futures](#) report if it genuinely looking to support different kinds of journeys. The report found that:

“...the future system may come to resemble a web of hyper-articulated progression pathways which lets learners enter and exit the system at multiple points of their choosing at different stages of their lives. Not all of this learning will be formal...”

Principle Three – Globally Respected

Research, teaching, innovation and knowledge exchange undertaken in Scotland, must be impactful; enhance and contribute to global wellbeing, addressing 21st Century challenges and attracting inward investment and talent to study, live and work in Scotland.

Q3.1 Do you agree with inclusion of and language of the principle of Globally Respected?

Yes, the language and the principle chime with the Open University's refreshed Research Strategy 2022-27 '[Learn and Live](#)' which has five goals: "Sustainability, Societal impact, Greater reach, Success for our students and Equity". Each of the goals are clearly defined and are supported by a series of institutional enablers.

Q3.2 This principle is about the contribution that research in Scotland makes to the world and the role it plays in supporting Scotland's global standing, teaching excellence, prosperity and connectedness. How do you think we can best maintain and leverage international respect for Scotland's research, education and skills ecosystem, inward investment and attraction of international talent?

Open University in Scotland staff and research students are actively engaged in a varied programme of knowledge exchange and research work, which is of impact and relevance both in Scotland and further afield.

We currently receive only a small proportion of funding from the Universities Scotland Innovation Fund. We firmly believe that post-Brexit there should be adequate funding of research within the sector. Again, we would signpost to the Universities Scotland report '[Time to Choose](#)' for further details.

We are a partner in the [Innogen Institute](#) – a collaboration with the University of Edinburgh and the OU. In 2021, we had two specific projects related to climate and the environment – one on [salmon farming in Scotland](#), and the other on [seaweed](#). Both of these projects have considerable potential for changes in working practices.

We have supported academics in the Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics to work alongside the Scotch Whisky Research Institute on a number of projects including the [detection of counterfeit whisky](#). Whisky production is a major contributor to the Scottish and UK economies.

We are also committed to International Development with over 4,000 primary school teachers and leaders across Zambia. In partnership with the Scottish Government, we are working with World Vision and the Ministry of General Education in Zambia to [improve the quality of teaching](#).

Principle Four – Agile and Responsive

Everybody in the ecosystem collaborates and delivers in the best interests of Scotland's wellbeing economy

Q4.1 Do you agree with inclusion of and language of the principle of Agile and Responsive?

Yes, however language needs to translate into similarly agile and responsive policy, decision making and action.

Q4.2 This principle is about the ability of the ecosystem to respond to global and domestic drivers. How do you think we can best support the ecosystem to be agile and responsive to the future needs of Scotland?

Reforming the ecosystem

First and foremost, the sector needs to be adequately funded with multi-year awards to enable sustainable planning and the development of curriculum. There should also be a move away from the current default position of viewing higher education as the transition of 17- and 18-year-olds from school into full-time university and adopt a wider view of the diversity of learners and their needs in Scotland.

The reality is that many students do not follow a single linear journey. Immediately after school is not always the right time in a person's life to choose to pursue higher education. Many students will go on to college first or choose to come back to education later in life. We welcomed the recognition from the SFC that "Learning throughout life will become increasingly important and the pace of change in the jobs market will require more frequent reskilling or upskilling...".

Putting this into practice will mean a move away from a default position of favouring the full-time degree both in terms of funding and measures. In the post-pandemic environment, there needs to be more agile provision and the ability to fund small, 'bite-sized' modules and microcredentials. The opportunity exists to consider the potential of credit-based funding/funding by SCQF level as a way of truly supporting lifelong learning. In the post-pandemic environment, the sector needs to be able to support people with the appropriate learning at the appropriate time and to be able to facilitate smooth transitions between institutions.

Collaboration

Collaboration is key to making higher education accessible to everyone across Scotland and more recognition / financial support should be placed on collaborative effort. A key focus of our work is ensuring that people from Scotland's most disadvantaged groups and communities can all access higher education at any stage of their lives to help improve their work and life opportunities. We work in partnership with 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.

Collaboration with colleges is an important element of widening access to HE in Scotland and increasing students' employability. The Open University is proud to have formal articulation partnerships with all colleges in Scotland other than those within the University of Highlands & Islands network. In addition to a range of degree programmes in specific subjects, the University's unique Open Degree is also available to all HN students, regardless of the HN qualification they have studied at college. This allows the student to gain credit for previous study, whilst building a degree programme more tailored to their own pathway development needs, or the needs of their employer. We note higher completion rates amongst those OU students articulating from college.

The Open University in Scotland was proud to be a member of the Adult Learning Strategic Forum, in recognition of the key role we play in facilitating open learning pathways for adults in Scotland. 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.

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](#).

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

New 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.

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.

Principle Five – Transparent, Resilient and Trusted

The ecosystem is well governed, financially and environmentally resilient and trusted to deliver.

Q5.1 Do you agree with inclusion of and language of the principle of Transparent, Resilient and Trusted?

Yes.

Q5.2 The principle is about how the ecosystem is structured and ensuring that everyone understands what the system delivers, who is delivering and how that happens. How do you think we can best build a transparent, resilient and trusted ecosystem to support successful research and learner journeys?

Transparency

The Open University in Scotland were early adopters of the Outcome Agreement and welcome the opportunity to work with SFC on the proposed National Impact Framework. We believe that the development of a framework more aligned to Scotland's National Performance Framework and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals matches our own direction of travel as an institution.

Our National Students Survey (NSS) results show that we are consistently trusted by our students. Indeed, the last NSS results placed us joint first with the University of St Andrews.

Our own financial resilience would be improved if we were funded for the number of students that we have rather than the cap that is in place. Our open access policy means that we uniquely provide different pathways into higher education:

National Schools Programme for Tertiary Education in Scotland

We note the commitment to introduce a National Schools Programme for Tertiary Education in Scotland to develop existing projects acting as a bridge between senior phase and tertiary education. We are proud to see our [Young Applicants in Schools Scheme](#) (YASS) recognised for its contribution to widening access in the SFC Report.

Despite the extraordinary challenges faced by schools during the pandemic, YASS has continued to meet a clear academic need for pupils in their final year. We saw the highest level of participation ever with 1,232 students participating in AY2019/20 across all 32 local authorities and we were very pleased to see these numbers hold up again at similar levels in AY2020/21. YASS not only prepares pupils for independent learning but also provides a curriculum broader than they have access to in schools.

We remain grateful for the SFC's support of YASS with the funding now being mainstreamed into our main grant. We are keen to use our long experience of providing Scotland's only national bridging programme supporting school pupils with the skills they require for tertiary education in the development of the National Schools Programme. Given the financial constraints on the sector it doesn't make sense to us to re-invent the wheel with a new National Schools Programme when YASS already positively contributes to widening access as Scotland's only national bridging programme.

Students in Secure Accommodation

Open University students in secure environments have been gaining OU qualifications as well as taking and passing OU modules for many years. They include people from all backgrounds, many of whom have previously had negative experiences of education. Their OU studies have not only given them something constructive and worthwhile to do during their time in the secure environment, but also helped them to gain confidence and belief in their own abilities. For some, taking OU modules has been an end in itself; for others it has led to valuable qualifications and provided opportunities for a new start after release. We currently support 54 students in secure environments in Scotland; the only HEI to do so.

Resilience

We are absolutely committed to transparency in the public funding we receive however we do believe that the sector's resilience would be better served by a reduction in the duplication of reporting. The reporting for Graduate

Apprenticeships is duplicated between SDS and SFC. We believe that transparency can be retained while reducing the duplication with greater collaboration between the agencies.

Trusted Ecosystem

We believe in a learner-centred pathway and for this to occur then it will need a review of the funding regime. There needs to be a learner-centred approach to a funding pathway which will allow individuals to enter and exit the system at appropriate junctures. The focus cannot remain predicated on school leavers undergoing on four-year degrees on campus. As part of this review then we need to look at stackable modules which meets learners and employers needs with clear pathways.

Purpose of Post School Education, Research and Skills

To develop new thinking, products and systems through research and to ensure that people, at every stage in life, have the opportunity and means to develop the skills, knowledge, values and attributes to fulfil their potential and to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Q6.1 Do you agree with the purpose outlined of the post school education, research and skills ecosystem in Scotland?

We agree with the purpose outlined and would suggest that “and the economy” is added at the end to complete the statement. To meet the purpose then new thinking needs to be developed on the learner journey with clear and distinct pathways which reflect the multiple-entry-and-exit points which will be the norm. We cannot continue to view the ecosystem from the perspective of a four-year degree post-school education with limited interactions thereafter.

