



Scotland's Skills Delivery Landscape – Call for evidence on Behalf of James Withers, Advisor to the Scottish Government

Submission to consultation

21.12.2022

Part 1 Skills Delivery Landscape

Q1. If there was one thing you would like to see change in how our skills landscape is structured and delivered, what would it be?

The complexity and inter-relationships within the skills delivery landscape means that it is impossible to choose just one thing and doing so risks losing the rich intelligence this inquiry is seeking to gain. So respectfully we chosen to provide a fuller response to this specific question.

We believe there should be increased alignment and streamlining of delivery agencies with the operational savings retained in the sector to invest in skills. Central to this re-alignment must be the adoption of an agreed definition of skills, including meta skills, which is understood across the sector. Currently there are too many interchangeable definitions in use across the sector and a holistic understanding is required.

The Open University (OU) in Scotland would like to see a system that is designed to support the upskilling and reskilling of people throughout their lives and careers, that supports learners to develop the skills required to support their own work and career aspirations, supports businesses and employers to attract, retain and develop their workforce to support their business ambitions and to respond with agility to opportunities to grow their business and increase innovation and productivity. The system should be designed and crucially, funded, in a way that supports skills and education providers to develop and

offer relevant, timely and responsive manner that provides surety to providers and is transparent and accessible to those seeking to upskill.

We also want to see a system that provides parity of esteem for those seeking to study part-time to develop their skills and one which focusses specifically on the needs of those who are furthest from the job market and least likely to be able to take up opportunities to develop themselves – those with protected characteristics and to encourage wider access to education for all.

The system should recognise the specific needs and challenges of the SME business community, the vital third sector and the needs of those working in and delivering services through the public sector.

Finally, we want to see a sector that has reduced duplication in terms of the landscape, particularly in relation to reporting and applications for funding.

Q2. Thinking about the vision in the Terms of Reference for a system that is simple, people focused and built on collaboration, how well are we doing against that vision just now? Can you provide examples of:

a. Success in the work of public agencies or the private/third sector: or

The tertiary education system – colleges and universities in Scotland have a successful track record in working closely with employers to co-design curriculum, undertake innovation, research and knowledge transfer and to help develop workforces for the jobs of now and the skills required in the future. The Modern Apprenticeship (MA) programmes run by colleges are well regarded, understood and recognised by employers for example. A robust funded system that supported Graduate Apprenticeships (GA) to be further developed by Higher Education Institution (HEIs) where employer demand is seen would support increase employer/provider collaboration greatly. A system that better supported the ability for employers and individuals to support upskilling and reskilling through funding and support would be encouraged.

For example, The OU in Scotland supported learners faced by furlough, unemployment and job changes due to covid to upskill and reskill for new roles in sectors such as digital, IT and healthcare. Working in partnership with Partnership Action for Continuing Employment (PACE), Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and employers and utilising the OU's unique open access supported entry and our suite of short modules and microcredentials, we were able to provide skills education to workers in retail, manufacturing, hospitality and healthcare professions most affected by the pandemic.

b. Elements that don't work, are confusing or need to be improved?

The system that supports Graduate Apprenticeships – where the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and SDS are both involved from a funding and particularly a reporting perspective causes confusion, duplication of effort in terms of double reporting the same information into two systems and an administrative burden for providers and confusion from apprentices and employers by way of misunderstanding over who is involved.

Q3. Thinking about the different national agencies and partners involved in skills delivery, are there areas where more clarity is required about roles and responsibilities or where you think the balance of responsibilities should be changed?

We repeat, in part, the answer we gave to question one. We believe there should be increased alignment and streamlining of delivery agencies with the operational savings retained in the sector to invest in skills. Central to this re-alignment must be the adoption of an agreed definition of skills, including meta skills, which is understood across the sector. Currently there are too many interchangeable definitions in use across the sector and a holistic understanding is required.

Q4. Thinking about how our economy and society is changing and the Scottish Government’s ambitions for a skilled workforce as set out in NSET, do you have any evidence on where the current skills and education landscape needs to adapt or change and how it could be improved? Please provide evidence to support your answer.

The breadth and depth of the work of The Open University (OU), as a national provider, means that we will approach this question from several different perspectives.

Workforce

Changing demographics, new working patterns and trends and the need to support the Scottish economy and its productivity and ambitions towards a just, fair and net zero society require the need to develop a skills and education system that truly supports lifelong learning and upskilling opportunities – particularly one which encourages and enables all of Scotland’s talent to be fulfilled, which reaches those in society in Scotland who are furthest from the education system and job market.

In a post covid, post Brexit Scotland, the needs of business to fill skills gaps – and indeed staffing gaps- are many and urgent. The need for an education and skills system that provides parity of esteem for part time learners/those seeking to upskill through their careers is now urgently needed.

Each year The OU publishes its Business Barometer Report which provides a temperature check on the UK's skills landscape and helps employers develop skills strategies to face business challenges. This year's report highlighted the need for employers to take a long-term strategic approach to addressing skills gaps, many long-standing, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the impact of Brexit on the movement of people.

Our key findings in Scotland show the significant challenges employers are facing:

- 70% of respondents agree that their organisation is currently facing skills shortages
- 84% of respondents say that the impact of these shortages has been increased workload on other staff; while 77% are seeing reduced output, probability or growth
- 52% of respondents expect to increase their investment in staff training over the next year
- 16% say that on balance the trend to flexible working has helped them attract new staff; while 6% say that it has caused them to lose staff

Access to skills remains a top priority for employers. Recruitment is becoming more difficult as employers compete to attract skilled and experienced workers, particularly those with technical and higher-level skills. As the workplace becomes progressively more automated, digitised and low carbon, the mismatch between the skills people have now, and those that employers need, is likely to increase.

Funding for courses

Funding for modular, accredited short courses and microcredentials – alongside formal, longer qualifications across the whole spectrum of the Scottish Qualifications Framework (SCQF) – will support a high-performance learning culture, where more people are learning and able to continuously refresh and renew their skills. It will help boost the level of technical skills in the workforce and resolve many of the skills shortages that are holding back the economy.

Entrepreneurship

Scotland has considerable potential to grow and develop entrepreneurs and to support existing entrepreneurs. In our view we need to have a much more coherent and seamless support ecosystem. The OU has identified entrepreneurship as a key priority in its new research and innovation plan and will develop a continuum of resources to support new and existing entrepreneurs develop their business ideas – including entrepreneurs who have perhaps faced challenges of exclusion linked to for example disability and geography including rurality.

Union Learning

Our positive relationship with trades unions allows us to engage with a diverse workforce across the country with differing needs. We received the following feedback to help inform our submission.



The current skills landscape should have scope to adapt to pressures on workers in developing their skills. Workers that undertake complex shift patterns struggle to access learning programmes through traditional access routes to adult learning. Workers in lower paid positions also struggle to access traditionally organised learning programmes as working overtime becomes a necessary activity to increase income. Employer-led programmes seldom provide personal development opportunities, employer-led workplace learning is also subject to internal workplace budgetary pressures. Union-led learner centred models, working in partnership with professional learning providers, provide effective and rounded access to skills across workplaces and workplace roles, allowing workers to develop workplace specific skills, transferable skills and personal development.



Q5. Can you provide any evidence of skills structures in other places that are delivering outcomes in line with Scotland's ambitions which Scottish Government should look to in achieving its ambitions?

England

The OU is the largest degree apprenticeship provider in England. Popular courses included Nursing Associate, Police Constable, Digital Technology Solutions and Registered Nurse. Levy-paying employers in England can use funds in their Apprenticeship Service Account to fund apprenticeship training costs, and they will also receive a 10% Government top-up into this account.

For non-levy paying employers, the Government will fund 95% of the cost of training an apprentice, with a 5% contribution from the employer. For businesses which employ fewer than 50 people (including the apprentice), that increases to 100% funding for apprentices aged 16-18 or aged 19-24 with an education and healthcare need.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland people aged 18 and over and eligible to work there can access a range of free accredited courses to help them re-train and re-skill, through [SKILL UP](#) – the flexible skills programme.

The Department for the Economy, with funding from the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Finance, is supporting free short courses, delivered by the local further and higher education providers, including The OU in Northern

Ireland. There are up to 7000 free places available until end of June 2023 with more planned to follow in the next few years.

Opportunities are available from entry to postgraduate levels, focussing on skills identified by industry, linked to priority economic sectors, including:

- digital skills
- green technologies
- healthcare and life sciences
- advanced manufacturing
- leadership and management

Most courses will be delivered online and will provide an opportunity to re-skill and upskill into areas where job growth is expected to be high as the country emerged from the impact of coronavirus.

Wales

Following Prof Sir Ian Diamond's review of student finance and higher education funding in Wales, the Welsh Government introduced changes to the student finance system which made it possible for the first time for part-time students to receive maintenance support equitable to their full-time counterparts.

The experience of The Open University (OU) in Wales showed that this stimulated a latent demand for flexible, part-time higher study, with a 101.5% increase in part-time undergraduate enrolments at the OU in Wales between 2017/18 and 2021/22. The OU in Wales now has a total student population of over 15,500.

Nearly half of the OU in Wales' student populations live in some of Wales' most deprived communities, and indeed, there has been a particularly notable

increase in enrolments from these communities since the reform of the student finance system.

It is also notable that, as well as significant growth in enrolments from deprived communities, the OU in Wales has also seen promising growth in up-take among carers and care leavers, disabled people and people who are Black, Asian, and of other minoritised ethnicities.

Part 2 Apprenticeships

Q6. Do you have any evidence relating to the outcomes of the current funding and delivery of apprenticeship programmes (Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation Apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships) in terms of either outcomes for learners and/or the needs of employers?

Work needs to be done to ensure that Graduate Apprenticeships are meeting the needs of employers and prospective students. Current Graduate Apprenticeship Frameworks are designed only for a 4-year, 480 credit, full time Apprenticeship only (or 2 year full-time for postgraduate); there is no flexibility for delivery on a part-time or flexible basis.

Our experience highlights the issue of equity in this model for those who require/choose to work at less than full time hours – precluding caregivers, those with disabilities and those seeking flexible hours from taking part in Apprenticeships. This prohibits widening access – particularly for those who would require to work part-time or need to flex their apprenticeship, for example due to illness, caring responsibilities or financial reasons. This is reliant on the provider having bid and secured funding in subsequent funding rounds. It is at odds with the Scottish Government’s Fair Work agenda.

In addition, the current SFC funding model which provides funding for 1 year only – thereby requiring the HEI provider to accept apprentices onto the 4-year programme ‘at risk’ – exacerbates these issues.

Q7. The Terms of Reference sets out an ambition for apprenticeship programmes to be an embedded part of the wider education system to ensure that there are a range of different pathways available to learners. Do you have any views or evidence on how changes to the operation of apprenticeship programmes could support this ambition?

The SCQF framework provides a robust and well recognised system into which the Apprenticeship Family of 'FA, MA and GAs' can and does fit, providing a mechanism and learner pathway where a learner could choose to undertake one of all type of apprenticeship to suit their needs.

The funding for Graduate Apprenticeships (GA) is currently very volatile and whilst HEIs are wholly supportive of the aims of the GA programme – and work-based learning, it is becoming increasingly difficult for several providers to allocate scarce resource to run GA programmes when funding for them has been cut and is only guaranteed for one year. The current GA system whereby providers are limited in the number of GAs that are funded precludes these being offered at the scale to make them economically viable and the current small number of GA frameworks available means that the pathways that could be available for students to 'articulate' with advanced entry from an MA into a GA are very limited.

With over half of all part-time learners in Scotland studying with the OU – and with around 70% of our 21,00 students in-work, we would also propose that a system that supports the widest range of in-work upskilling and reskilling opportunities is one that should be developed, not only one that focusses on apprenticeships and (predominantly) those under 25. A system that supports

those seeking to develop their skills through part time learning whilst in work provides direct and immediate benefit to employers and supports the transferable meta-skills of learners, however there is currently a lack of parity in funding and maintenance support for PT learners which precludes many from 'earning while they learn'.

Q8. Apprenticeships are often described as being 'demand-led'. Do you have any evidence about how process for developing and approving apprenticeship frameworks responds to skills priorities? Please include any suggestions of how the development process could be enhanced.

We believe there needs to be a broader range of Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) frameworks that reflect the post-pandemic skills needs e.g., social work, policing, nursing, and management at postgraduate level. GA need to support the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the public and third sector who cannot best take advantage of the programme as it currently stands.

The OU, for example, is a leading provider of Social Work education in Scotland and is one of the largest providers of Social Work Apprenticeships in England, where the apprenticeships system enables the OU as a provider to develop Pathfinder programmes and work with employers to use their levy funds to fund provision directly.

We have worked closely with Apprenticeship Levy paying local authorities and NHS Boards across the country for several years now to support them in their asks for a Social Work GA to be developed to support the sector in attracting

and retaining staff. We have been funded by the Scottish Government to run a pilot with local authorities to boost capacity on work-based routes in social work education with a view to the introduction of a social work graduate apprenticeship framework. Working with approximately 25 local authorities, the pilot will run over two years and provide opportunities for students to study part-time while continuing to work.

Q9. SAAB and AAG are described as employer-led groups Do you have evidence on the benefits or risks of employer leadership in apprenticeship development or the impact it has on outcomes for apprentices and/or employers? Please include suggestions for how the governance of apprenticeship design and delivery could be strengthened.

Whilst being in support of Apprenticeship Development being led by employers, it is also of critical importance that Apprenticeship providers, specifically colleges and universities are involved from the outset of programmes to ensure that their apprenticeship frameworks developed are robust and include academic content that is relevant not only to the needs of a section of employers currently, but supports the underpinning knowledge, critical thinking and 'meta-skills' of all apprentices, enabling them to receive a high standard of skills development and learn a range of systems, techniques and applications which are cutting edge, not just those in use in specific employers.

It is also of critical importance to the work of SAAB and AAG that the voices of SME businesses, those in the third sector and the public sector are heard when considering demand for programmes to enable a broad church of views to be

included in determining what skills development/work-based learning is required.

Part 3 National Occupational Standards

Q10. Do you have any evidence on how the current arrangements for NOS are delivering against the intended ambitions for the strategy?

The National Occupational Standards are useful, and we are aware that they are central to the current redesign of SQA Higher National Qualifications under the HN: Next Gen redesign project. It is critical that this project takes a holistic and outward looking view to how the national occupation standards interact with learning outcomes at advanced levels of study within subject disciplines, for example to support greater levels of articulation between college and university courses.

Q11. The NOS Strategy positions NOS as the foundation of vocational training and learning in Scotland. Do you have any evidence to support how changes to the delivery landscape for delivering and championing NOS could support this ambition?

Changes to the delivery landscape that affect future progression opportunities for students need to be handled sensitively and with engagement across the full range of stakeholders, including universities providing opportunities for progression. Experience has shown that where redevelopment takes place

through a collaborative and forward-looking approach there are benefits for learners in terms of the range of progression opportunities available and the availability of information to support progression.

Part 4 Upskilling and Reskilling

Q12. Do you have any evidence on how the current arrangements for NOS are delivering against the intended ambitions for the strategy?

The OU in Scotland has been able to access and utilise the Community Learning and Development (CLD) Fund, National Transition Training Fund (NTTF) and the Upskill Fund over the last few years, with only the latter now remaining as part of mainstream funded 'upskilling and reskilling provision', via the SFC, for individuals in 2022/23.

To date over 1,600 learners have accessed, and benefited from, the OU's online short course and microcredential provision through these funds. Of these learners:

- ✓ 14.5% resided in a SIMD Quintile 1 or 2
- ✓ 6.2% were BAME
- ✓ 9.1% had a registered disability
- ✓ All 32 local authority regions had learners participate in OU courses
- ✓ The average age of learners was 43

These above emphasises both the geographical reach and diversity of learners that are able to access and benefit from OU provision across the whole of Scotland, but also reinforces the important, and unique, role the OU offers the skills delivery landscape by broadening its access to provision for learners who

traditionally find it harder to access mainstream skills provision due to their EDI status, geographical proximity to brick educational establishments and / or socio-economic background.

With the above in mind, the OU in Scotland would strongly encourage Government to keep supporting / funding this important mechanism for upskilling / reskilling individuals across the Scottish economy. OU has been oversubscribed in terms of applications for the funded places since the Up Skill fund was launched and highlights the strong and much needed demand and value associated with it.

The above stats also highlight the growing demand for Upskilling / reskilling opportunities from learners in the mid to later life age groups, a factor being driven by high levels of post pandemic redundancy across many key sectors in Scotland along with the ongoing impact caused by Brexit. The Open University would therefore encourage Government to look at what additional support could be offered to support this demographic.

The OU in Scotland has participated in the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) since 2020/21, with 2022/23 being the first year the OU has been able to offer provision to both SME businesses as well as Apprenticeship Levy paying businesses.

To date over 780 learners, from 185 businesses, across 29 out of 32 Local Authority areas of Scotland have accessed and benefited from the Open Universities' online short course and microcredential provision through the FWDF fund. Of these learners:

- ✓ 7.7% completed one of the OU's Digital / IT programmes
- ✓ 2.6% completed one of the OU'S Green / Sustainability programmes
- ✓ 5.1% completed one of the OU'S Health & Social Care programmes
- ✓ 84.6% completed one of the OU'S Leadership & Business programmes

These stats point to a clear trend within businesses towards an increased investment in leadership skills, training and knowledge - in turn generating a greater focus and awareness in improving overall business performance and capability through productivity improvements, health and employee wellbeing, agile leadership and HR practices.

The OU in Scotland strongly encourages Government to keep supporting / funding the FWDF programme at a time when businesses are struggling to balance the daily challenge of maintaining product / service levels against a backdrop of increasing energy costs, business rates, interest rates, high inflation and significant increases in day-to-day supply chain costs whilst at the same time needing to attract and retain a workforce capable of helping their business and the economy grow. The 'OU's 2022 Business Barometer Report' further highlights the need for employers to take a more long-term strategic approach to addressing recruitment and retention challenges and see access to skills as a top priority in that regard.

Overall, the OU's ability to offer a high degree of study and learning flexibility within the online delivery of its short course / microcredential resonates well with its learners. 85% of OU graduates remain in the location where their study was undertaken, meaning this investment in talent and skills better supports and benefits local communities. It also allows individuals to better bridge the gap

between learning and working i.e., they do not have to make a choice, often with financial implications, to either study or work.

Q14. Thinking about the government’s ambition to optimise the existing system for upskilling and reskilling throughout life, do you have any evidence to support how changes to the delivery landscape could help to achieve this ambition?

In both the case of the Upskilling Fund (UF) and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF), individual and business awareness of these initiatives is still, in relative terms, low. Whilst FE / HE partners are funded to be able to offer the training delivery element, there is currently little allocation made to support the large-scale promotion of these initiatives to the very individuals and organisations that would directly benefit the most.

We believe some form of national campaign and / or increased funding to FE / HE partners to better support joint regionalised promotional activities, would help increase uptake and access to the provision available.

We would also support the Scottish Government in its ambitions to provide businesses with training through FWDF and encourage the national delivery bodies to consider revision of the rules to allow better collaboration between colleges and the OU.

Part 5 Upskilling and Reskilling

Q15. Thinking about the overall ambition to ensure that the skills and education system is aligned to local, regional and national skills priorities, what aspects of the current delivery landscape are working well to support this ambition?

Articulation and progression between Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma level courses in the College Sector and Degree level courses in the University Sector are an aspect of the current delivery landscape that works reasonably well. Where best practice and success in this area is achieved it demonstrates that it is possible for learners to navigate a complex range of provision when there is a systematic approach to pathway design, appropriate information on possible progression routes and consistent use of the SCQF Framework to underpin qualification structures.

Q16. The Auditor General recommended that the Scottish Government take urgent action to deliver improved guidance on skills alignment. Do you have any evidence to support whether the current arrangements are likely to deliver progress?

We do not believe that the current arrangements are likely to deliver progress. The challenges within the landscape were well set out in the Audit Scotland report. We believe rather than an inquiry given the clear recommendations in the report the required changes could have been delivered by letter of guidance.

Q18 Skills Development Scotland currently leads and coordinates approaches for Skills Investment Plans for sectors and Regional Skills Investment Plans. Do you have any evidence to demonstrate the success of this approach or to support the impact of SIPs on sector skills outcomes or RSIPS on regional outcomes?

Whilst the principle of Skills Investment Plans (SIPs) and Regional Skills Investment Plans (RSIPs) or Regional Skills Assessments (RSAs) are encouraged, supported and utilised by the OU in Scotland to help inform regional and national strategic priorities, the depth and robustness of the qualitative and quantitative data generated through industry consultation to help inform them is not always weighted correctly and / or can give a skewed position on the reported skills gaps and needs on a region by region basis.

Specifically, the mix between the views of large national / multi-national corporate organisations versus the often-varying challenges and skills requirements required by SMEs – even those working in the same region / sectors as their larger counterparts.

These differences in need can be vast, yet generalisations on skills needs presented in these publications do not always resonate well with SME businesses and often leads to local / regional skills strategies being developed that fail to address, or at worst alienate, the skills need of SME's despite, in many of Scotland's rural and island communities, SMEs accounting for upwards of 90% of local employment opportunities.

To ensure a stronger balance, and a more co-ordinated evaluation of SME business needs across Scotland, these publications need to better reflect, encompass and embrace the work and knowledge already gathered by industry trade bodies, chambers of commerce as well as academic and private training partners – all of whom are already engaged with many of these businesses on the front line, rather than SDS commissioning expensive and time-consuming research projects that fail to reflect the specific challenges faced, and solutions required, by SMEs.

SMEs are time and resource poor, generally don't have dedicated people employed within their business that look at skills, training and HR matters on a full-time basis and simply don't have the time or inclination to navigate through, or engage with, multiple agencies.

Q19 One of the major challenges and opportunities facing the economy is the just transition to net zero. Thinking about the current delivery landscape, how well is it structured to deliver this ambition?

It is our belief that the landscape isn't clear on what the demand and current provision is or what the future provision needs to be. Like other skills providers, the OU needs to know what roles and sectors people need to transition into to be able to offer up-skilling/re-skilling opportunities. While there are lots of activity happening amongst organisations across the country there needs to be a more strategic and joined-up approach to realise the Scottish Government's ambitions. There needs to be greater leadership around providing a strategic overview, and an easier way to help organisations achieve their strategic goals in this area.

It would be easy from a high-level reading of strategies and plans to think that Scotland is ready to meet the challenges of being Net Zero by 2045. We don't believe however that people are getting the right sort of qualifications to make the goal of net zero by 2045. Work is required to be able to benchmark the skills and expertise the workforce will need.

We're not seeking to be deliberately controversial or negative, just honest. We recognise that The Open University can be as guilty as anyone else in talking in the abstract 'about the huge shift in the skills needed in the workforce in the coming years to achieve net zero, as people of all ages move from carbon intensive industries to jobs focused on net zero and sustainability'. What is missing, we believe, are the details of exactly what jobs are required and the skills that will be needed to benchmark them against course curricula.

The OU currently offers significant Environmental Management and Sustainability related curriculum at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and as free open educational resources on OpenLearn. Careers relating to environment and climate change are promoted to OU graduates on our careers website. Building sustainability into the curriculum is important, so that no matter the subject, students gain an understanding of sustainability and its related issues (as national research shows there is high demand).

Utilising the Upskilling Fund and the National Training Transition Fund we have developed a microcredential 'Climate Change: Transforming your Organisation for Sustainability' to help meet the Scottish Government's ambition to support the move to net zero and to renewable energy. Hosted on the FutureLearn platform this 10-week microcredential equips participants with the knowledge,

skills and courage to transform their organisation's response to the climate and ecological crisis, whatever their level, role or sector.

We think that higher education, both the college and university sectors, have a critical role to play as part of a wider collective of organisations; each bringing their own expertise and skills to achieve common goals.

The first barrier to helping organisations achieve net zero goals is funding. A key role of the OU in supporting organisations achieve their Net Zero ambitions is to help them develop and upskill their workforces and residents for green careers and a net-zero future. There can be significant costs and lead in time in developing curriculum, therefore additional investment is going to be required to ensure that the activities that need to happen, once identified, occur.

The second barrier to effective joint working is in the key agencies protecting organisational interests. Our national agencies need to be able to work together at a national and regional level as highlighted by Audit Scotland in relation to the skills agenda. We will only achieve our net zero goals if key agencies work together in partnership alongside education and skills providers and the business sector.

We believe that higher education has a positive role to play within a collaborative approach be it through the city region deals or in our own case through the South of Scotland Education and Skills Strategic Coordination Group. The roles and remits of the newly created Pathfinder Programmes arising from the SFC's report on 'Coherence and Sustainability: Review of Tertiary Education and Research' add another layer of complexity to be negotiated.

Part 6 Careers and Young People

Q20. Do you have any evidence to inform how the new Careers by Design Collaborative could be embedded within the wider education and skills system and delivery landscape to enable the recommendations of the Careers Review to be taken forward to ensure people can access the advice, information and guidance that they need?

The Career Review focuses on young people, and it will be important to embed the career approach into the wider education and skills system and delivery landscape, recognising the central role of lifelong learning. Therefore, any Careers by Design model needs to align with adult skills and career and development strategy. This is of central importance to The OU and also wider HE sector, given over 25% of undergraduate students in Scotland are 25 years of age or older (Universities Scotland response to the Career Review). To meet the needs of employers, the approach needs to support individuals right across the working age spectrum, particularly in a time when career change is significant and career development a continual and fluctuating process.

While being embedded within the wider education and skills system there needs to be a recognition of the diversity of approaches and value of tailored support for people at different stages in their career and skills development journey. A one-size fits all will neither be feasible across the landscape, nor fit the needs of our diverse users.

The Careers by Design Collaborative and any linked careers coalition, provide valuable opportunities to share and learn from best practice, to facilitate continuous improvement across the sector. The Career Review noted evidence of professionalism and good practice within the HE sector in particular.

To embed within the wider system, careful consideration needs to be given to the feasibility of unified outcome measures. It is essential that any evaluation metrics are aligned with existing measures (e.g., Graduate Outcomes, NSS, Scottish Government Outcome agreements).

Further exploration and clarification would be required to explore the feasibility of data sharing mechanisms which are likely to present both practical and data security challenges. Relevant agencies would need to be included in these considerations.

Identification of dedicated resource to support the substantial developments proposed is essential to progress the review.

Q21. Alongside, Careers information, advice and guidance, do you have any evidence to demonstrate what additional support young people, including those from marginalised groups, might need to develop their skills and experience to prepare them for the world of work? Please include details about who you think should be responsible for providing this support.

The breadth and depth of the work of The Open University (OU), as a national provider, means that we will approach this question from several different perspectives.

Reaching across Scotland

With 22,000 students and almost half a million informal learners via our OpenLearn platform, we connect with people in every parliamentary constituency, and in every corner of the country from Dumfries and Galloway to the Shetland Islands. We are the fourth largest university in Scotland and, with around three quarters of our students combining work and study, the largest provider of part-time higher education. In addition, 24% of OU students in Scotland declare a disability and 23% live in remote or rural areas.

We believe the focus should not just been on young people as the impact of being care experienced goes beyond artificial age barriers. 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.

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. In the 2020-21 academic year we recruited as many students from the most deprived areas as the least deprived areas. Yet we know from our students that there is more to be done to break the barriers to education.

We recently carried out research to identify how best to give those living in the most deprived areas of Scotland the capability, motivation and opportunity to access further or higher education. We will be progressing our test and learn approach with South Lanarkshire Council in the new year.

Funding of Part-Time Students in Scotland

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 OU has been designated as a part-time provider since its funding was transferred from HEFCE to (then) SHEFC in 2000 – as a result, OU students are classified as part-time event if they are studying 120 credits i.e., full-time intensity. In the academic year 2020–21 21% of our new undergraduate entrants were registered for 120 credits.

These students, despite studying at full-time intensity, have no access to free tuition fees, student loans, bursaries and do not qualify for Council Tax exemption. They can access the Part Time Fee Grant (PTFG) from Student Awards Agency Scotland (SASS) to help towards their tuition fees but only if they earn less than £25,000 per annum.

In addition, if you:

- are care experienced and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students
- are a lone parent and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students
- have dependents and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students
- 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 PTFG 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 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.

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

entrants who live in remote and rural parts of Scotland, and who would otherwise have limited options to access higher education.

Working with communities

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

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.

“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

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

Young Applicants in School Scheme (YASS)

The OU in Scotland has worked with external partners such as Developing the Young Workforce Inverness and Central Highland (DYWICH) to deliver the Mock COP, which was an event designed to increase understanding and awareness of COP events and sustainability, as well as developing key skills to prepare them for the world of work such as teamwork, communication, and public speaking. The event was held in Inverness on the 15th November 2022 this year, and online in November 2021.

Events such as the Mock COP which bring together expertise from across sectors, including higher education and employment, allow for a broader method of support for young people to find out about different careers. Using a different method of exploring careers, involving active or participatory engagement, could also be seen as a way of including young people from marginalised groups.

The partnership also framed the event as a skills-development and career exploration opportunity for the schools taking part, reminding the young people as participants that the event was a great chance to explore careers relating to sustainability, as well as developing key skills that would be challenging to develop elsewhere.

Employability Programmes

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.

Careers and Employability

Addressing diversity and ensuring equity of opportunity in service design is vital. It is important to identify how to get to the people who need the most support and where engagement might be an issue.

Social capacity is a very real challenge – how will you support and enable those who need it the most to access opportunities i.e., work experience/placements/internships, networking opportunities (those from marginalised groups have no network and already excluded). How will you enable them to participate where cost of living might impact, neurodiversity and mental health may prevent participation (engagement data evidences additional barriers to engagement)? How will they be embedded in a digital service design to improve access and equal opportunity? How will they tailor and target without using characteristics?

Online delivery could enable young people from across the school and FE/HE sectors come together for some of the delivery, peer to peer learning and enhancement activities. Use of support needs rather than characteristics, based

on individual career readiness stage. Digital delivery also has the potential to deliver at scale. The introduction of a Digital Badge such as a skills award could lend itself to gamifying these sessions and enable higher engagement and a sense of purpose.

There would also be merit in offering practical sessions in networking, applications, assessment centres, interviews, enterprise innovation hubs. Use of innovative methods including Artificial Intelligence tools with built in feedback, offering self-serve anytime access could also help develop the social capacity.

Part 7 Employer Support and Engagement

Q22. Do you have any evidence about how the current arrangements for employer engagement in skills and education are supporting delivery of Scottish Government's ambitions and outcomes?

We believe that employers are better placed to comment on this. We would be supportive of the suggestion by Universities Scotland that it would be advantageous to bring universities (and colleges) together with industry and employer groups on a more regular basis, rather than using public bodies as intermediaries.

Q22. Thinking about the different aspects of the system in which employers have an interest, and the existing mechanisms for feeding into policy and delivery, do you have any evidence to support how changes in the delivery landscape could improve the partnership working between Scottish Government, its public bodies and employers?

Again, we believe that employers are better placed to comment on this. We would welcome any initiative to bring together the sector and employers to discuss and develop partnership working; and criteria therein which provide for effective and robust measurement of the impact of national policies.

