

**Submission by
The Open University in Scotland**

**Health, Social Care and
Sport Committee**
Inquiry into Health
Inequalities

March 2022

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Inquiry into Health Inequalities

What progress, if any, has been made towards tackling health inequalities in Scotland since 2015? Where have we been successful and which areas require more focus?

The Open University in Scotland was one of the organisations who suggested the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee looks at health inequalities when deciding its priorities. In our submission we said:

“The challenges of reducing health inequalities through the type of preventive interventions referenced in the Christie Report are laid bare in the Legacy Report from Session 5 of the Health and Sport Committee...”

We openly acknowledge that there are many organisations large and small, local and national working directly in this space who are better placed to provide the range of answers the Committee are seeking from this inquiry. In making a submission our focus will be on the positive impact of access to education on tackling health inequalities, which comes within the ‘communities’ sphere of health inequalities as defined by Public Health Scotland:

“Communities: The physical and social environment in which we live and work has an important influence on our health and wellbeing. Positive aspects of communities that can nurture health and wellbeing include...access to job opportunities...”

From our perspective a positive contribution towards tackling health inequalities has been the progress made on widening access to further and higher education. 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.

We have seen our student numbers increase from 15,000 in academic year 2015-16 to over 22,000 in academic year 2020/21. In our view the Scottish Government’s introduction of the Part-Time Fee Grant in 2013 has been a significant factor in the increase in our student numbers.

“The Part-time Fee Grant is just tremendous. I wouldn’t have been able to study without it.”
Tracey Wilson BSC (Hons) Combined STEM

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.

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. This will be even more applicable in the post-pandemic environment as people return to study to gain new skills and improve their prospects of new employment opportunities, and in supporting the future economy.

We are continually seeking new ways to match our core curriculum, microcredentials and free OpenLearn content to the learning needs of people across Scotland. We continue to partner with all 15 regional colleges in Scotland to provide college students with progression routes to flexible degree level study. With Ayrshire, City of Glasgow, and Fife Colleges we have collaborated on campus-based delivery providing students with the opportunity to transition to an OU degree within the familiar environment of their local college. Dundee and Angus College have successfully integrated OU Access modules into their wider access programme, OU Options, at the college.

What are the most effective approaches to tackling health inequalities and how successful is Scotland in pursuing such approaches?

In our opinion partnership working, in its most genuine sense driven by the partners with a relevant agenda, is key to successfully tackling health inequalities. 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.

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 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.

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](#). 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
- [Skills for Work](#) - portal developed in partnership with all of Scotland's thirty-two local authorities and [SCVO](#). Supporting both the [Kickstart](#) and [Young Person's Guarantee](#) schemes and endorsed by [Young Enterprise Scotland](#) it provides those young people we know are most affected by the pandemic with employability and personal skills through a dedicated [portal](#).

What actions would you prioritise to transform the structural inequalities that are the underlying cause of health inequalities?

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 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. Evidence indicates the most deprived and rural areas will be hardest hit economically by the pandemic¹ and in turn that will have a disproportionate impact on those with protected characteristics such as age, race, gender and disability.

What has been the impact of the pandemic both on health inequalities themselves and on action to address health inequalities in Scotland?

Please note, the Committee is interested in hearing about both positive and negative impacts.

Health inequality increases when appropriately educated staff are unable to support communities. The pandemic has had a significant impact on health and social care education pathways particularly in relation to practice learning which in turn can lead to graduates entering the workforce later than expected. The Open University has worked closely with education partners to ensure that students have been able to progress as normally as possible in their chosen fields through practice learning solutions and study options. Nursing students have experienced a challenging two years experiencing distressing situations in practice that they have never previously encountered. The unique online learning and tuition model has responded very well to increased student need for human contact from associate lecturers, practice tutors and central OU staff including adapting library practices to include telephone support.

Health inequalities are inextricably linked to poverty, discrimination and other inequalities within society (the social determinants of health), and the OU is well placed through its wider social mission to contribute to addressing those issues by being open, accessible and available to *all* learners throughout Scotland. Equality and Diversity are also at the heart of our identity and we always attempt to have a very inclusive approach to learning, often working alongside community partners and other organisations who support people who are marginalised in society.

The pandemic has highlighted and brought into focus some of the key issues in this area more than before, and the OU is fully committed to learning lessons and playing its part as an HE provider, or by working alongside other organisations to tackle health inequalities going forward.

Can you tell us about any local, regional or national initiatives throughout the pandemic, or prior to it, that have helped to alleviate health inequalities or address the needs of hard to reach groups? How can we sustain and embed such examples of good practice for the future?

In partnership with Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS) we held a series of seven online talks on the theme of Ageing Well, with 366 registered participants across the series, providing guidance and input in this area. In addition, during 2021 we worked with VHS and some of their partners on two round tables related to mental health and the over 65's (it was felt that this group had not been well supported during the pandemic). The seminars explored some of the key issues that emerged during the last two years, with the intention of trying to inform future policy in this area.

We are also key partners with the Glasgow based social enterprise, Lingo Flamingo, who primarily support older people in residential care with language learning as part of a cognitive stimulation strategy. We provide training and support to help Lingo Flamingo develop their programmes, and to add value to the overall experience for learners.

¹ Skills Development Scotland COVID-19 Labour Market Insights

The OU also carried out a number of small scale Covid-19 research projects during the pandemic, and many of them had an implicit health inequalities theme. We're currently exploring how we can share some of the findings to a wider audience in Scotland, later in 2022.

In terms of embedding good practice, there are opportunities to work more collaboratively, rather than creating lots of small-scale projects working in isolation. We believe that more collaboration and joint working would lead to better all-round outcomes.

At the Open University in Scotland, we've been aware of the increase in demand for mental health services during the pandemic. Academics at the OU have received overwhelming support for their expertise in providing assistance to counsellors needing to move their services online.

Counselling of all kinds, dealing with mental health, abuse, anxiety, bereavement and relationship advice among other things, has been quickly moved to digital platforms to permit continuity for clients.

To help the transition a newly-created course, Taking Your Counselling Online has been launched on The Open University's OpenLearn Create platform and has seen more than 12,000 participants undertaking the course and 6164 who have downloaded the badge of completion. We have promoted this course extensively throughout Scotland.

How can action to tackle health inequalities be prioritised during COVID-19 recovery?

The coronavirus pandemic has seen a strengthening and deepening of our relationships with employers and industry at what has been a challenging time for everyone. We have worked in an agile way to ensure that we provided targeted skills support where it is needed most. Drawing on our unique distance learning model, we have collaborated with partners to roll out support at scale across Scotland.

Through a number of Scottish Government skills-focussed funding streams we have been able to rapidly respond in supporting businesses, workers, families and communities during the pandemic through our online platforms and flexible learning opportunities. To help support employees who were furloughed and facing redundancy as a result of COVID-19, we offered free places through the Scottish Funding Council Upskilling Fund on a new Coding Skills course to upskill and reskill people for digital roles and careers. We also saw significant demand for the suite of microcredential courses that we were able to offer, thanks to being able to access the Scottish Government's Flexible Workforce Development Fund which previously had been restricted to colleges only.

As Scotland recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Open University's ethos of being open to people, places, methods and ideas is as relevant today as it was when the University was founded over 50 years ago. We support our students and learners to achieve their goals with outcomes that open-up new opportunities in life and work.

A good example, driven by reform of health and social care delivery in Scotland, is our advocacy with NHS Education Scotland to extend our nursing programmes and support those looking to transition into, or advance in, the health and social care sectors. Our funded programme, delivered in partnership with health boards across Scotland, includes routes for those already working in healthcare support worker roles to become registered nurses. This develops the NHS workforce and supports people to achieve degree level education while continuing to work.

What should the Scottish Government and/or other decision-makers be focusing on in terms of tackling health inequalities? What actions should be treated as the most urgent priorities?

We believe that Mental Health Services should be treated as an urgent priority. Specifically, the transition from child to adult services and the reduction of barriers put in place of service users and their families.

It is our experience that services are too often designed to meet operational needs rather than those who wish to access them. Creating systems which are difficult to navigate around do not work for individuals and their families when they need assistance the most. The transition from child to adult mental health services is a prime example of individuals' needs failing to be met due to the complexity and lack of joined-up approach within service delivery.

What role should the statutory sector, third, independent and private sectors have in tackling health inequalities in the future?

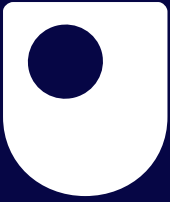
If there is to be a widescale and effective transformation of health inequalities in Scotland, then all sectors should be playing a full role. All too often the third sector has been treated as a bit-part player ignoring the significant role played in local communities by many organisations of varying shapes and sizes. We will leave it to organisations such as [SCVO](#) and [VHS](#) to make the case for the third sector and instead reflect on the role of the Open University in working in partnership to tackle health inequalities.

One such area is in the Digital skills and poverty – we have worked in partnership with [Lead Scotland](#) to develop [Everyday Computer Skills](#), a beginner-level digital skills course co-designed with disabled people. We have also worked with the [Connecting Scotland](#) initiative to curate free resources to support digital literacy.

A new collaboration with [Deaf Action](#) is creating two new short courses on British Sign Language (BSL). Aimed at educators, people working in health services, hospitality and retail, the rollout of the courses will help provide employment opportunities for deaf people in these industry sectors in line with the Scottish Government's BSL National Plan 2017-23.

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.

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



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