

# ACCESS, PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS

# AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY



ACCESS  
PARTICIPATION  
SUCCESS



The Open  
University

**The Open University's (OU) commitment to enabling all students whatever their background to access higher education (HE) and succeed in their studies remains at the heart of the OU mission: to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. Our open entry policy has made higher education (HE) accessible for tens of thousands of people, for whom traditional, face to face university education is not possible. The Access, Participation and Success (APS) Strategy ensures that the needs of students, identified through funding body requirements and institutional and sector data as facing the most challenges to access HE or achieve equitable outcomes, are met alongside the delivery of the University's overarching strategic priorities.**

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This specifically relates to the student success strategic priorities (OU, 2019):

- Supporting open entry by ensuring students start with the right course, level and pace to enhance their chances of success
- Delivering a high quality and flexible student experience with high levels of student satisfaction
- Supporting students to achieve positive career and personal development outcomes.

Open access presents challenges to ensure that students, who come to the University from diverse backgrounds and with different educational experience, start their educational journey with us in the right place to enable them to be successful. The OU invests considerable pedagogic support to enable students to achieve successful outcomes. For example, our introductory modules at Level 4 or SCQF7<sup>1</sup>, are designed to enable students to develop confidence in their academic ability and study skills to prepare them for further OU study. Some students begin their studies with our Access programme which offers a unique tutoring model, 30 credits at Level 0<sup>2</sup>, aimed at students who have been out of education for some time and need some additional support to help develop their confidence prior to embarking on a full degree programme. Students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation or

disadvantage, who start with an Access module are at least 10% more likely to pass their first OU Level 1 than similar direct entry students. Specialists in supporting disabled students and students in secure environments (SiSE), respond to the different contexts within which each nation of the UK operates, and our Securing Greater Accessibility team (SeGA) ensures that our curriculum is inclusive and accessible to disabled students.

Despite this, persistent differential outcomes exist between different groups of students, which means that we must do more to ensure all of our students receive the support necessary to enable them to participate effectively in OU study and achieve equitable outcomes.

The OU must respond to government priorities, across all nations of the UK, to eradicate inequalities in access and participation in HE. Not only is this part of our social justice mission, but it is essential in relation to the requirements of funding bodies<sup>3</sup>, and pivotal in enabling access to financial support for students and other funding opportunities.

This Access, Participation and Success (APS) Strategy, presents the framework to drive this ambition forward, across the University. Supporting documentation provides contextual information, details of the approach taken to develop the Strategy and an Implementation Plan to enable successful delivery, monitoring and reporting against APS objectives.

1 Level 4 modules are equivalent to Certificates in HE or Higher National Certificates.

2 Level 0 modules are Entry level pre-HE qualifications which sit below Level 4 in the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications classifications, (QAA, 2014).

3 Office for Students (OFS), England; Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Scotland; Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW); Department of the Economy, Northern Ireland.

## Our approach

The approach to delivering APS at the OU needs to reflect the unique and diverse nature of OU students (including intersectional disadvantage) and the different funding body requirements across the four nations. We therefore commit to the following principles

- a. Recognise the unique and distinctive role of the OU in the sector and play to our strengths;
- b. Senior level accountability identified alongside a strategic commitment to deliver the APS;
- c. APS is embedded within institutional policy, planning and practice at all levels, and capability is developed to ensure sustainable delivery;
- d. Existing resource is effectively allocated to support the Strategy, and spend and effectiveness is evaluated and reported on in line with nation funding requirements;
- e. Every part of the University has a role to play in delivering the strategy;
- f. Four nations by design and delivery – seeking synergy where possible and using difference to drive innovation and test and learn;
- g. Recognition of the multiple identities that part-time adult learners present, requiring inclusive approaches to support, based on individual circumstances rather than support as a result of belonging to a particular group;
- h. All parts of the students' learning journey are addressed;
- i. Delivery of the APS Strategy is evidence-based and builds on scholarship, research and evaluation of current practice;
- j. Respond to changing demographics and new challenges identified by analysis of sector and institutional data, and the student voice; Principles of the Student Charter are upheld.

## Strategic Priorities

The Strategy will target six broad areas for change and improvement, building on work already in progress, and aligning with related strategies, such as the OU's student success priorities.

### 1. Curriculum choices

**Commitment 1: To enable students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage to access appropriate and relevant curriculum choices and be confident that these will meet their individual needs at each stage of their educational journey**

- Appropriate Access routes that meet the needs of all students will be provided;
- Findings from research and scholarship will be shared across the institution to provide the evidence to inform institutional practice.

**Commitment 2: To ensure students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage are guided and supported to get on the right study path**

- Supported Open Entry will ensure underrepresented and disadvantaged students' needs are met;
- Student Recruitment and Support will be fully informed of the needs of students who are underrepresented and disadvantaged to enable appropriate IAG and signposting;
- Evaluation of support provided to identify opportunities to support students better will be undertaken;
- Options to enable Supported Open Entry will be flexible and respond to individual needs.

**Commitment 3: To enable students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage to be supported to become study ready**

- All induction resources will be designed to take into account the specific needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged students;
- Where appropriate, materials and approaches will be tailored to meet the needs of students who are underrepresented and disadvantaged;
- Early engagement events and messages will be designed to address the diverse needs of all students;
- Soft skills and study skills will be embedded into all early curriculum and into open educational resources (OERs);
- Faculties will work with their SSTs to develop consistent specialist points of contact to provide dedicated support.

This Strategy will focus on the curriculum choices which are available to all students but with a specific remit to support students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage. Ensuring that students start on the right course for them, and with the appropriate advice, support, orientation and induction behind them, is particularly important for students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage, who are much more likely than the average student to drop out early in their studies. Resources available via our OpenLearn platform are used as key tools for these students to build confidence and offer support to them in transitioning from informal to formal learning, through the provision of essential skills and critical thinking.

The OU's Access modules are another important part of our provision for students who identify with characteristics of underrepresentation and disadvantage. Access modules are specifically designed to develop study skills and confidence, and to remove financial barriers to OU study through its fee waiver scheme in England.

However, not all students likely to benefit from a preparatory programme at Level 0 will register to do so. There are issues in how Access is marketed, and for some students, taking a nine-month Access module is too lengthy a commitment when they are keen to get on with earning credit towards a HE qualification. A review of Level 0 and the entry space (prompted by the Curriculum Plan and Student success priorities), and the transition into Level 1 informs the Implementation Plan.

## 2. Fees and funding

**Commitment 4: To enable students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage to be supported in the financial models available to them**

- Review financial support models with a view to ensuring underrepresented or disadvantaged students are supported to access HE and achieve equitable outcomes;
- Provide clear and timely information, advice and guidance in relation to financial support options.

Although OU courses are cheaper than many other HE institutions, fees and funding remain the main barrier for many students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage, particularly adult learners in England where grants are not available as in Scotland and Wales. The OU offers some financial incentives in the form of bursaries, the Disabled Veterans Scholarship Funding and the Carers Scholarship Fund. Some competitor institutions offer more variable pricing and payment options, including discounts and other financial incentives, and a wider range of options for financial support. The student consultation for this Strategy highlighted that many students struggle to navigate through the information about funding options, and some miss out on financial support that they would be eligible to receive. In addition, the financial implications for students who fail or drop out of OU modules can be hard-hitting, and are likely to impact disproportionately on students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage.

### 3. Enabling access through partnerships

**Commitment 5:** To support students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage through partnership arrangements:

- Develop a process for tracking progression from informal study to meet individual student goals;
- Establish a regular reporting process from our UK-based validated partner institutions on the numbers of students with identified characteristics embarking on OU validated courses and their success within those courses;
- Closer working with internal colleagues and external partners and networks to identify and undertake collaborative research activity;
- Develop processes to enable best practice to be shared internally and externally through seminars and workshops;
- Build on existing systems to enable learning from initiatives across all four nations of the University be embedded at scale.

The OU in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales operate successful partnerships with community organisations, colleges, and employers to expand educational opportunities for students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In England, this mainly happens through the OU's validated partners and the Social Partnerships Network as the OU is excluded from the Office for Students funded National Collaborative Outreach Programme. Opportunities include capitalizing on faculty links to employers and other partners; carrying out more national outreach activities through digital platforms and social media; and engaging more systematically with student and alumni networks and societies.

### 4. Identity and belonging through inclusive design

**Commitment 6:** To enable students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage to successfully meet their study goals; develop confidence in their learning ability; be aware of and understand their relationship with the University and its community and how it supports their progress.

- Curriculum design will meet the needs of students identifying with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage;
- Qualification and module teams will improve their knowledge to take account of the needs of all students whatever their backgrounds;
- Learning Design will be flexible and adaptable to meet student needs;
- Assessment strategies and tools will be designed to ensure that the needs of students are met;
- Students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage and who have reduced or no access to the internet will be supported by the University;
- The University will work with partner organisations towards greater digital inclusion;
- Associate Lecturers and academic staff will be developed to ensure ongoing understanding of the diverse needs of students and how to support them effectively;
- Student Support Teams will be supported to understand and address the diverse needs of these students;
- Signposting to sources of advice and guidance will be clear and accessible;
- Will be supported effectively at transitional stages of their educational journey.

**Commitment 7: To develop a sense of identity and belonging for students who are underrepresented and disadvantaged:**

- Systems enable the capture of information at point of contact which is accessible to all student-facing teams and tutors throughout the student journey;
- Proactive engagement is undertaken for students who have not made contact;
- Staff and tutor demographics represent the diversity of our student body;
- Information that is relevant to student success is effectively communicated to tutors at the start of modules and continually reviewed through the student journey;
- Structures, and processes will be established and appropriately resourced to enable associate lecturers to be supported and developed to better support students.

The OU has traditionally been a leader in areas such as accessibility design and the provision of alternative formats. Inclusive design in its broadest sense however, also includes curriculum content that reflects the identities of our diverse student body and assessment formats that offer flexibility and choice for our students.

The OU's blended learning model opens up opportunities for students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage but it can also present challenges. Access to IT equipment, spaces in which to study effectively, usability of OU systems and software, and support to develop the academic digital literacy skills, present barriers to success for some students. The implementation of this Strategy will provide an opportunity to benchmark our current practices against other institutions, and to identify where and how we can improve, whilst recognising that many sector level metrics are inappropriate for OU students.

Tutor support is consistently identified in student feedback as one of the most important, and usually positive, aspects of their OU experience. When asked to describe the attributes of good tutors, students talk of tutors who are proactive, approachable and have a positive, supportive attitude.

The success of the personalised, one-to-one tutor support model on Access modules shows what a difference this can make to students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage. A pilot initiative in which students can be referred for individual tuition in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is another example of how AL expertise can be harnessed to improve outcomes for students. This support helps to develop students' senses of identity and belonging to the University, which have been identified as contributory factors to student success.

Current challenges include the ability to share information between tutors, and between tutors and Student Support Teams. Such process ensure that the individual needs of students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage are supported consistently throughout their journey. Group tuition also presents issues, in terms of access to face-to-face tutorials, and the accessibility of online tutorials.

## 5. Proactive student support

**Commitment 8: To enable learning gained through proactive support campaigns and interventions to be embedded within institutional practice**

- Systemic approaches will be established to provide additional support for functional skills e.g. maths, English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP);
- The needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged students are explored through dedicated commitment within Scholarship and Innovation Centres, which is communicated effectively to student-facing teams and individuals;
- Evaluation of interventions and campaigns is embedded throughout the institution, reported centrally and used as evidence to inform practice.

Since summer 2017, faculties and student recruitment and support have developed more proactive approaches to student support, using predictive analytics to target students at risk of dropping out, and delivering outbound calling campaigns to speak to these students. Campaigns are designed to be inclusive and to reach all students within a diverse student body – but they also focus in particular on students identified as vulnerable or at risk. Research has shown, over a long period and in many settings, that students most in need of support are often among the least likely to ask for it – therefore proactive support is essential for these students, many of whom present have characteristics associated with underrepresentation or disadvantage. This support aims to strengthen motivation and confidence; deliver information and advice which can support re-engagement and skills development; and offer access to further advice and guidance. The aim is to develop this proactive support further, so that students will receive tailored and timely support throughout their OU journey.

## 6. Personal and professional outcomes (learning, career and professional gain)

**Commitment 9: To develop a greater understanding of the personal and professional outcomes of students who are underrepresented and disadvantaged**

- Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) and Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS) data will be analysed through the lens of underrepresentation and disadvantage;
- Action based on outcomes of data analysis will be embedded within operational planning.

The expansion of the OU's Careers and Employability Services (CES) and development of an Employability Framework bring new opportunities to improve provision for students. Students associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage are likely to have a particular need of advice, resources and guidance. Data are being collected on usage of CES by these students, and a CES Diversity Strategy is being developed to address the specific needs of discrete groups of students.

The APS team will work with the EECF programme to share information and align plans. The OU's specific Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS) will be an important measure of the success of our APS strategy for students who identify with characteristics of underrepresentation and disadvantage.

## Access, participation and success measures

Through the APS Strategy we aim to ensure our student body is representative of UK demographics more widely and eradicate the differential outcomes of students from different demographic backgrounds across the student lifecycle.

Analysis of institutional data has been undertaken across the student lifecycle and different student demographics. Success measures focus specifically on the issues that this analysis has identified for students who identify with characteristics associated with underrepresentation and disadvantage, including those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. We expect to see ongoing progress throughout the life of the APS Strategy to meet our ambitions to eradicate differential access, participation and success.

**The focus for the 2020-25 APS Strategy is:**

### Registration

- Under-representation of specific student groups;
- Credible data based on the declaration of students from different demographic backgrounds (eg carers, care experienced learners, students from military backgrounds);
- Scholarship to explore the disproportionate drop-off between the point of registration and the first fee liability point;
- Proactive information advice and guidance (IAG) in relation to fees and funding;
- Scholarship to inform the conversion from informal to formal learning.

## Module completion

- For those registered at the first fee liability point.

## Module attainment

- Students who have completed and passed their module;
- Students who have completed and gained a good pass (equivalent to a 2:1 or first).

## Module progression

- Continuation to the next module.

## Qualification Awarded

- Certificates of HE and Diplomas;
- Degree;
- Good degree (2:1 or first);
- Degree classifications that lead to membership of professional bodies;
- Develop metrics to identify distance-travelled/ value-added as a key measure of success for students in an open access system.

## Progression to further study or higher skilled employment

- Progression to postgraduate study with the OU or another provider;
- Employability of qualifiers survey (EQS);
- Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) survey.

## Monitoring of performance

Regular updates will be reported to VCE and Council, through the Student Success priorities monitoring by an APS Steering Group with nation specific targets reported in line with funding body requirements. Performance reports will be disseminated across the institution to inform future planning, disaggregated by student characteristic and nation.

## Data management

In order to achieve this ambition, consistent use of data definitions across the institution must be aligned. This requires collaboration between the University's Strategy Office, Data and Student Analytics, nations' planning and data teams and the APS team to ensure consistent use of definitions across the OU whilst maintaining adherence to nation-specific definitions.

## Evaluation

The University must continue to learn from the many initiatives which are undertaken across the four nations of the UK. Evaluation must therefore be embedded within the delivery of this APS Strategy. The Evaluation Strategy will provide an institutional approach to evaluation and a mechanism through which impact can be reported and learning embedded within institutional practice.



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