

Consultation on a new Enterprise Agency for the South of Scotland

A response from The Open University in Scotland

Background

The Open University in Scotland (OUIs), is Scotland's national widening access university, supporting students throughout Scotland. We are a flexible distance learning provider, enabling learners to access education regardless of where they are. Almost 16,000 people from every part of Scotland study with us. Nearly a quarter of our students live in remote or rural areas, with just under 1,000 students across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. Our breadth and reach means we can work nationally, regionally and locally on priority issues with a wide range of partners. We have long and successful experience of working in remote, rural and sparsely populated areas. Our student body is diverse, and equality of opportunity and the promotion of social and economic wellbeing is central to our mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

We have a long and established history of supporting the skills agenda in Scotland, enabling students to study part-time and remain in work. Almost three-quarters of our students are in work and around 80% cite career-related aspirations as their primary motivation for studying with us. Developing innovative and flexible learning solutions, in collaboration with employers and others, is central to what we can offer.

We have excellent links with all of Scotland's colleges – including Dumfries and Galloway College and Borders College – and 130 sixth year pupils in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders participate in our Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, which enables pupils to study at degree-level in the familiar surroundings of their own school, whether rural or urban.

We are active partners on the Crichton Campus, bringing a distinct offer to the region. As a distance learning provider, we can reach the whole of the south, and learners can study from a location that suits them, rather than having to travel to a central location.

Additionally, our unique approach to supported and distance learning has meant that we have been able to lead on a new development for an Academy of Care for Dumfries and Galloway. This has involved partnering with all of the education partners on Crichton, and engaging extensively with statutory and third sector providers including the NHS and local care organisations. This is an example of the OU's methods and approaches being used for the wider benefit of the region.

1. Do you agree with our ambition outlined?

Yes.

Explain your answer below.

The Open University in Scotland agrees with the ambition outlined in the consultation document. There is a distinct need to support businesses within the South of Scotland to grow, and to increase productivity and economic output throughout the South. Micro and SMEs make up the largest proportion of businesses in the region and issues of scale have been historically challenging.

The new South of Scotland Enterprise Agency has the potential to better co-ordinate resources across a dispersed and large rural area to enable these businesses to innovate, develop and grow. A more coherent and less complicated system to support the development of skills and growth could be better co-ordinated by the SoSEA.

The Open University believes that rurality can be a barrier to educational and community participation. Helping local people feel more connected and involved in shaping local decisions, whether related to community or economic regeneration could be addressed by a more joined up approach. The Open University could be a key player in coalescing communities around learning, using informal and formal learning opportunities to build confidence, aspiration and to help people achieve their potential.

There are already significant strengths in the region that can be developed. Building community capacity, and drawing on community assets is an area that is ripe for development – especially for under-represented groups that historically have been disadvantaged and marginalised. As Scotland's widening access university, The Open University believes we could play a pivotal role in providing a wide range of learning opportunities throughout the South of Scotland to enable people to develop themselves and their skills for the labour market and to further personal growth and improve wellbeing.

The Open University wholeheartedly supports the aspirations of an agency “Created in the South, of the South and for the South”. We believe that the aspirations of the agency should also include maximising the potential benefits of national assets and provision, like The Open University to help to drive the education and skills agenda forward.

We commend ambitions around innovation to support growth, skills development and the issues related to reducing outward migration of young people from the region. As a distance learning provider, the Open University could have a pivotal role in strategically addressing some of these core challenges, using a flexible learning offer that would service the region regardless of where people reside.

As a university partner on the Crichton Campus, we have considerable experience of how we could further develop models to better service the needs of the whole of the South of Scotland through a supported, digital solution. Similarly, we believe that well developed partnerships with the colleges and businesses in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, could offer creative solutions to address some of the more longstanding issues in the region.

2. What would you like to see for the South of Scotland?

A vibrant and energised region that is known for its innovation, with world leading examples of research, enterprise and development opportunities, attracting a highly skilled labour force to live and work in the region. A place where business wants to locate, invest and grow.

A place where people want to come to live and work, and where existing residents want to develop their skills and careers, and where opportunities to do so exist throughout the South.

The Open University would also like to see existing good practice in collaboration with the two Local Authorities, the two Colleges and University partners in the region be strengthened further. The

Agency needs to be the key strategic driving force, fostering synergies, catalysing existing partnerships and forging new ones. We believe that the potential is considerable.

Digital connectivity, superfast broadband and maximising the opportunities that new technologies offer should also be central to the ambition. There is also an imperative to make sure that local people are trained in the use and potential of emerging technology. Skilling people up in being able to engage with digital technology is therefore essential.

3. What are your ambitions for the future economic success of the South of Scotland?

From the outset of the new agency, we believe that it needs to have high expectations and an ambitious and bold outlook for the South of Scotland.

The Open University supports the view that the South of Scotland needs to have inclusive growth, and that it supports a resilient and diverse economy. We support the ambition to grow communities and the capacity of communities to influence change. Ensuring joined up approaches between communities and services needs to be central to aspirations, with a clear vision and unity of purpose. We believe that the agency needs to talk in a coherent voice, representing the needs of the region at the highest levels, nationally and internationally.

We believe that an ambitious SoSEA should also view lifelong learning as playing a significant part in supporting the transitions between education and employment – supporting people in their career aspirations and career journeys.

The agency needs to be forward thinking in helping to address issues including digital inclusion, widening access to education, and upskilling or reskilling staff while still in work. We also believe that the agency needs to be ambitious in helping small businesses to upscale, grow and to build their reputations.

The Open University believes that the new agency must support some of the key health and social care challenges that the region faces. For example, an ageing rural population, where people are living longer with long-term health conditions and multiple morbidities. Alongside our university and college partners on the Crichton Campus, we have been developing a proof of concept for an Academy of Care for the region. Joining up learning providers and raising the value of caring as a profession is central to this project. The idea has considerable potential to address some of the learning and development challenges across the whole of the South. Developing citizen leadership is also part of this aspiration, which chimes with the broader ambitions of the SoSEA.

4. What are the strengths you would like to see the Agency build on?

The South of Scotland has always had a strong sense of community and active participation from local people throughout the South. There are opportunities to further build and develop good examples of practice – and to learn and share best practice from successful projects. There are numerous excellent examples from which to learn.

The work on the Crichton Campus is an exemplar of further and higher education institutions working effectively together. Collaboration at Crichton has resulted in numerous positive outcomes for Dumfries and Galloway, and there are lessons to be learned that could have applicability across the South of Scotland. The institutions bring distinct capabilities and specialisms, and there is greater potential to capitalise on the benefits within the SoSEA.

5. What are the economic challenges you would like to see the Agency address?

There are notable gaps in provision of higher education in the region. For example, the STEM curriculum at HE level has considerable potential for development given the current lack of provision. This has a direct relationship with efforts to address economic challenges, and growing the skill base in STEM-related occupations from within the South of Scotland. The Open University has the capabilities and capacity to support a flexible STEM offer throughout the South of Scotland to businesses, their employees and communities. For example, we have been promoting a range of Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) in software development and cyber security to employers throughout the South of Scotland where employees can study while still in work.

Promoting more flexible opportunities to enable people to study in the workplace to upskill, particularly in small and micro businesses would also be helpful to explore and address.

A thorough review of how to support and grow SMEs and a detailed exploration of how to attract investment by business to support research and innovation. Specific support in helping small and micro businesses to successfully scale their operations has also been a longstanding challenge for the South of Scotland.

6. What currently works well in the South of Scotland?

There are well established networks across the South, and a good understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by rurality. Dumfries and Galloway and Borders are two very distinct regions, with similar but differing characteristics. There is much to learn from each other especially around community engagement and previous strategies that have been successful. Much of the groundwork has been done, and there is much to build on.

There are well-developed relationships between the current FE and HE providers – and a good understanding of the issues and potential opportunities in the region. There are already some excellent examples of partnership working, utilising the skills from the various education institutions present in the South, notably at Crichton, responding to opportunities and local need.

7. What would you add or take away from the potential activities that the Agency could carry out across the three areas:

a) drive forward the economy?

There are further opportunities to work with micro and smaller businesses to help them build capacity and to enhance and develop their skill base. More integrated working within the remit of the new agency should allow for greater economies of scale and a more strategic approach to development.

b) sustain communities?

There is considerable potential to build on community assets and expertise and to involve local people drawing on the powers within the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Environmental sustainability for example is clearly an area where the community can be actively engaged e.g. in the development of renewable energy. There are a number of well-developed networks that would relish the opportunity to have more influence and engagement.

c) capitalise on people and resources?

We support the aspirations outlined in section 5.13 which encourage productive and complementary relationships, overseen by the new Strategic Board, between the new agency, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council, and the broader higher education sector. Greater strategic co-ordination between the key organisations should result in a less cluttered landscape, more focused interventions and a more strategic approach, leading to better outcomes.

The OU is not currently funded by the Scottish Funding Council for its activity at the Crichton Campus but we would welcome the opportunity to discuss how the OU contribution can be supported to align more closely with broader ambitions for the Campus.

8. What would you prioritise as the key areas of activity for the Agency?

In the initial stages, how the agency is constituted and promoted to businesses, organisations and local communities is critical. The agency needs to establish its identity as a central player in the development of the South of Scotland. The early groundwork is imperative, although some positive “early wins”, even if modest in outcome are also essential. Building trust and credibility amongst communities is also essential in the early days.

There needs to be a review of existing data, and the identification of gaps in data to inform developmental planning. Priorities need to be clearly informed by evidence of need.

There needs to be a distinct focus on economic development and business growth. Developing a skilled workforce and exploring more flexible delivery models where people can remain in work should be a priority.

Identifying one or two key major social challenges for the region are also important e.g. a more integrated response to the consequences of an ageing society in the South of Scotland.

Identifying some other early priorities would also be useful (based on consultation and feedback).

9. What specific things could the Agency do to help you, your business, your sector or your community?

The Agency could collaborate with academic partners throughout the region to comprehensively map career-focused educational routes and pathways through FE and HE in the region and assist in promoting these to schools and individuals in the region in a more cohesive way. There is significant potential for improved marketing of inter-institutional educational routes in the region to make an impact on reducing the number of people leaving the region to study elsewhere.

More joined up and collaborative working in the business, skills and enterprise space could result in more opportunities and reduce duplication.

More flexible, straightforward and accessible funding arrangements as well as clearer signposting and advice to enable small businesses to access work-based learning would be welcomed.

10. What could the Agency do outwith its boundaries working with other local authorities or with agencies like Highlands and Islands Enterprise to support specific projects which benefit the South of Scotland and with national agencies?

Opportunities to collaborate more closely with neighbouring local authorities including South Lanarkshire Council and South Ayrshire Council are possible – potentially around sharing services and more integrated working. Similarly there are opportunities to work with neighbouring authorities in the North of England including Northumberland and Cumbria. In Stranraer for example there are opportunities to collaborate with Northern Ireland – and possible education partnerships there too around research, innovation and knowledge exchange. As a four nations university, The Open University has considerable potential to work across all of Scotland and the rest of the UK – bringing scalable benefits. There are distinct complementary benefits in the Borderlands proposal, and the Open University is well placed to play a key role here especially around the North of England and South of Scotland interface.

11. Which option, either from the list above or your own suggestion, do you think offers the best way to ensure the Agency is accessible to all across the South of Scotland?

Any given physical location in the region will be relatively inaccessible to a large proportion of the population. Therefore, the most important thing to consider is how to make the Agency's staff and services accessible to all, primarily through digital means. However, there may also be a role for mobile advice and guidance arrangements or for community-based clusters, ambassadors and groups. Co-location with existing organisations throughout the South could also be very advantageous e.g. with established services, or community organisations. Integrating into existing organisations should also be considered.

12. Which criteria should be used in reaching a decision about the location of the Agency?

Local consultation, and seeking views from various stakeholders including small businesses and current and prospective learners and workforce. We believe it needs to be an open process, informed by evidence – and an arrangement that will best serve the needs of the whole of the South. Drawing on the experience of Highlands and Islands Enterprise could also be useful.

13. If you were to use the services of this Agency, what factors are important to you in terms of reaching it? (This might relate to the location itself, to transportation links, or to proximity to other services, or digital delivery, for example.)

Having good digital connectivity and superfast broadband – and the supporting skills to access the technology are key.

Good transport links - and accessibility.

Local support networks – someone based locally that you can access and speak to readily.

Streamlined processes in being able to access information, guidance and advice, with the minimum of fuss. Available quickly and with relative ease.

14. What sort of people should be on the Board of the Agency and what sorts of skills and expertise should they have?

The Agency's board should be representative of the communities it serves, with an inclusive approach to recruitment. It should include people with a connection to and knowledge of the region, with a track record of community development and engagement, from a range of sectors and geographies. It should include representation from those institutions which will be critical to delivering the ambitions for the Agency, including education providers.

15. We know that young people are less likely to stay in or move to the South of Scotland than they are other parts of the country. Do you have any comments on things the Agency could do to meet the interests of children and young people?

The Agency can help to keep young people in the area by growing opportunities for learning and work, with clear pathways between these developed for the local context. The Open University's Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, which has a long history in the South of Scotland, has a role to play here as does the OU's work with the region's colleges. A learner journey which is flexible enough to cope with the rural and remote context, understanding that learner journeys are not linear and often require multiple entry and exit points, is critical. Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) with particular local relevance will be an important tool in both providing opportunity and ensuring local businesses have the skills they need, with staff staying in the workplace.

In order to create attractive employment opportunities, there needs to be a focus not just on children and young people but on entrepreneurs and innovators who can be persuaded to stay in or relocate to the area. This can only be done if it is clear that the regional educational and skills development infrastructure is attractive and appropriate for local needs. In tandem with this, there needs to be opportunities for the workforce to upskill and reskill, as the labour market changes and the need for a flexible and adaptable system becomes even more apparent.

16. In delivering opportunity and growth in the South of Scotland, how can the Agency:

- **promote equality for people who share one or more protected characteristic as defined by the Equality Act 2010;**
- **combat discrimination; and**
- **foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not?**

In the Open University's view, in relation to education and training, geography will need to be considered as an inherently limiting factor in terms of access to and participation in HE among under-represented groups. Initiatives developed within the remit of the Agency should have a truly pan South of Scotland approach, harnessing digital delivery as an enabler of participation.

The Open University has equality at its heart and working with disenfranchised and marginalised groups can in part be tackled by a flexible and supported distance learning offer to build skills, confidence and develop aspirations. Our unique offer and approach to teaching – including our open entry policy, requiring no previous qualifications – opens up opportunity to all those who wish to

reach their full potential. Our offer is particularly accessible for people with disabilities, and indeed 21% of our students declare they have a disability.

17. Do you have any other comments on how the Agency might address specific needs?

The agency has the potential to take a strategic lead role in progressing some key social, economic and environmental challenges and “wicked” problems in the region e.g. social isolation in older people, access to healthcare, joined up approaches in the post school educational offer and so on.

18. We want to make sure that the Agency works effectively with a wide range of key stakeholders/partner agencies to ensure that inclusive growth also enables positive social and environmental outcomes. Do you have any comments on how this should work in practice?

The various development agendas need to be driven from within the South of Scotland, and local people need to be engaged from the outset. Co-production and co-creation would be a good model.

Developments should be needs-led and not service-led, and should feel that there is a strong sense of local ownership, “buy in”, and commitment from people living and working in the region. Social and environmental outcomes are arguably inextricably linked to improving educational opportunities and outcomes across the whole of the region – especially in relation to reducing outward migration of the future and current workforce. Education providers across the school, college and higher education sectors are critical, and need to be involved from the outset, as part of the solution to a complex array of issues.

19. Do you have any other thoughts on powers that the Agency will need?

n/a

20. Is there anything else you wish to say about the operation of the Agency?

The Open University stands ready to help in any way we can. We already have a deep commitment to the South of Scotland and our students in the region and we believe we can make an even more significant contribution to the educational and skills needs of the area and thus to its economic and social wellbeing.