Scottish Government enterprise and skills review
Call for evidence

Response from The Open University in Scotland

Introduction

The Open University (OU) is Scotland's largest provider of part-time higher education, accounting for more than 40% of all part-time undergraduates in Scotland. Our students, of whom we have around 15,000, can be found in every Scottish Parliament constituency. Audit Scotland's recent audit of higher education in Scottish universities reported that 25% of Scottish students study part-time.

Our mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas: we do not require entrance qualifications for most of our courses, and we are constantly developing our innovative pedagogy, ensuring that the learning we offer is accessible and of the highest quality.

Our model of supported flexible learning allows students to study at a time and place that suits them. It is particularly convenient for people in work, who have families or other caring responsibilities, who live in remote or rural communities, with disabilities, or on low incomes.

We work with other organisations to widen access to higher education and to develop the Scottish workforce. More than 70% of our students are in full- or part-time work and 80% cite career-related reasons for choosing to study with us. Our partners include trade unions, community groups, colleges and other universities, and employers.

Almost nine in every ten FTSE 100 companies have sponsored their staff on OU courses. Part-time study is inherently efficient – and SME-friendly – as it allows students to earn and learn simultaneously and to apply new skills and knowledge immediately. There is no lag until the end of the course as with full-time study.

Our views

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach?

We believe there is value in routing and allocating institutional higher education funding through a non-departmental public body. This helps to maintain institutional autonomy within the wider public policy context and as part of a commitment to delivery of higher education for the public good. It also allows for the sustainable development and accumulation of knowledge and expertise specific to and necessary for the support of the sector.

Some of this knowledge and expertise can also be found within higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves. It is essential that this knowledge and expertise is utilised for the benefit of Scottish higher education through HEI representation on the board of any body involved in the direct funding of our HEIs. Such a body must also have a duty to consult with the sector on strategy and policy matters.

Outcome agreements have been a broadly positive development and have allowed HEIs to plan for and agree with the SFC their relevant strategic aims in advance, providing clarity and a degree of certainty for both the institution and the SFC (as well as students and any other interested party). However, the current process for development and implementation of outcome agreements does

not encourage multi-institutional or cross-sectoral working. There is perhaps even an argument that such cooperative activity is mitigated against.

We note that Audit Scotland's recent report on the sector made a number of recommendations in these areas and The Open University in Scotland would be delighted to support any work taken forward to implement these recommendations.

The 'map' of agency responsibilities and activities is hugely complex, and often difficult for skills providers and learners to navigate. Equally, greater accessibility and visibility in relation to skills provision by HEIs (including The OU) would be beneficial. Uncoordinated pockets of activity exist across the country and as a consequence Scotland is missing out on opportunities to play to its strengths, including the capacity of providers who can operate at scale (such as The OU) to upskill the workforce.

Apprenticeships are playing an increasingly significant role in meeting Scotland's skills needs and graduate-level apprenticeships (GLAs) are of particular interest to The OU as this is an area in which we believe we could usefully contribute and in which we will be launching relevant provision in due course. We appreciate efforts made to consult on aspects of the development of GLAs but in our experience the development process has not always been accessible or entirely clear to interested parties who are new to this policy area. Greater inclusivity and collaboration would be beneficial to our efforts to play a constructive role in the provision of high quality GLA opportunities.

What needs to change in the current system of support to make it simple and clear, and help us deliver Scotland's vision?

The agencies whose roles fall within the scope of this remit all do work essential to the economic and social wellbeing of Scotland. However, it is not always obvious that the "current system of support" operates consistently as a coherent system of support. Increased collaboration between and within agencies and with the wider sector, valuing and utilising all parts of the system and adopting a less proprietorial approach to information and data, would be a significant and positive step towards realising the Scottish Government's ambitions. For example, collaboration is required to provide appropriate support for adequate internships as well as for GLAs, and the agency for whom any given employee in this field works should be less important than the service they provide.

Global integration and technological innovation ensure that the pace of change in our economy – in all economies – is ever faster. It is essential that the Scottish workforce – the whole Scottish workforce, and not just recent school-leavers – is able to adapt to changing economic and employment circumstances. This change will bring both opportunities and challenges as new kinds of jobs are created and older ones become less prevalent. In both cases, the ability to improve existing skills and develop new ones will be critical.

A holistic, comprehensive skills strategy which covers the work of all relevant agencies is needed. Part-time study, which enables learning while earning and the immediate application of newly-acquired skills and knowledge should play a significant part. The provision of support to SMEs, who make up the vast majority of businesses in Scotland and account for a very substantial proportion of Scottish employment, should be a priority within this strategy.

Related to this, high-quality careers guidance is valuable at all stages of a career. "Changing career" is no longer unusual, and is expected to become the norm for students currently in school. People can expect to work not just in several jobs throughout their lifetime, but in several different sectors

and job types. Such guidance should enable enquirers to identify flexible solutions which meet their skills needs.

The current system does not foster a culture in which information is routinely shared, which has knock-on effects for service provision. Improved data-sharing, within the context of data protection legislation, would allow for better-informed and contextualised project and service design. An appropriately and sensitively designed unique learner number would also enable the notion of the 'learner journey' to be more practically supported, with key points of vulnerability identified, interventions designed, and resources deployed to greatest effect.

Collaboration across the sector would be enhanced by an improved system of transferring credit. This would accord with the notion of funding following the learner and would enable acquisition of skills from multiple providers in order to achieve the best outcome for the individual. It may be that there is scope to investigate the possibility of transferring credit not just between colleges and HEIs but between institutions offering formal academic programmes and those offering training programmes such as Modern Apprenticeships and particularly graduate-level apprenticeships.

What are the right:

- *roles;*
- *services;*
- *skills; and*
- *behaviours*

needed from our agencies to support this transformation?

Agencies should be oriented towards the delivery of a holistic approach to the improvement of skills and opportunities and not vice versa.

We would reiterate the earlier point that there is certainly a role for an intermediary HE funding NDPB. However, although it's important that HEIs retain a single point of contact, there is scope to integrate skills issues into outcome agreements and space for multi-agency engagement in sectoral agenda-setting. It should be possible to coordinate specific skills provision and support at a national level – for example, in relation to languages, early years care or cyber-security.

Indeed, the development of graduate-level apprenticeships should be integrated into other aspects of HE and FE funding, policy and provision, as well as the broader skills provision for the whole workforce. There is a need for greater transparency in and coordination of this activity.

How might we ensure this step-change reaches and benefits all of Scotland, building on regional and local strengths?

The new national framework for access to higher education, which is to be developed by the new Commissioner for Fair Access, will have a very important part to play in how we help learners from disadvantaged backgrounds enter appropriate modes of learning and skills acquisition and then, crucially, stay engaged. The framework must by definition be inclusive, and enterprise and skills agencies will have to consider how they can both utilise and contribute to it.

Scotland has existing resources (including The OU in Scotland) which are capable of operating at scale and which could play a larger role in provision of skills. New partnerships and collaborations should be explored – how can we take skills and learning to where they are needed, with provision

that is appropriate in terms of both content and mode of acquisition? The institutional make-up of these partnerships is less important than the learner outcome.

How would we know if the system is working better?

Demonstration of success is based on appropriate monitoring and evaluation. We have previously referred to the inadequacy of information and data-sharing across the sector and the need for an appropriate system of unique learner numbers.

The widening access targets set out by the Commission on Widening Access and adopted by the Scottish Government will provide important insight into efforts to make HE more inclusive. It is important that our enterprise and skills agencies, along with the HE sector, make efforts not just to provide equality of opportunity but to proactively reduce inequality of outcomes.

There is also a need to pay attention to use of skills as reported by employers. However, we must be aware that employers have various and diverse skills needs and that while there is an understandable emphasis on providing 'job-ready' candidates, generic skills will not always prove sufficient and therefore the system must be able to cope with enabling and supporting employers to develop their own staff as appropriate. There is a link here to how the Scottish Government could seek to use the Apprenticeship Levy funding in Scotland and the need for a flexible workforce development fund.

How might public resources be deployed most effectively to match priorities, deliver value for money, and flow through the minimum number of levels and organisations to the user?

It is important that a desire for efficiency does not curtail learner or service user options. An effective and efficient journey is important but it must be one that provides what the learner needs, where and when they need it.

There is an inherent efficiency in part-time study which allows individuals to learn and earn (or look after children or care for others or a variety of other responsibilities) simultaneously. Learners in relevant employment are able to apply new knowledge and skills in their work immediately, with no lag until the completion of the course.

While there is rightly much focus on how to protect research funding, we must also give due regard to appropriate funding of teaching in HEIs. Innovation and entrepreneurship depends on the outcomes of research, it also needs a talented leadership and workforce with appropriately developed skills.

Is there any other published evidence, or good practice, which you would particularly highlight that you wish us to take into account during the review?

The Open University in Scotland would be delighted to discuss its work further, but in particular we would like to highlight by way of example:

- Our partnership with Glasgow Clyde College, Heriot-Watt University and Scottish Water, which created a pathway with multiple entry and exit points which allows those interested or already working in the water industry to develop appropriate skills at various levels and career stages.
- Award-winning work with Asda to help retail staff across Scotland understand how to recognise and support customers showing signs of dementia in store.

-   The Third Sector Internships Scotland (TSIS) project with Queen Margaret University and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations which enabled students from all Scottish HEIs to make meaningful contributions to Scottish charities via paid internships. These internships were accessible regardless of socioeconomic background and boosted student employability as well as promoting local change and impact.
-   Back on Course is an SFC-funded project, delivered by The Open University in Scotland on behalf of the sector, which seeks to support early leavers from HEIs with impartial advice on positive next steps. This may include advice on how to return to higher education, or might see the enquirer sign-posted to other opportunities, depending on their needs and circumstances. The project also systematically collects relevant information from service users in order to help derive insights into why some students leave HE early, which HEIs can use to inform and improve their pastoral and support services. It also highlights the value of sharing data across institutions.

More information

For more information on any aspect of the work of The Open University in Scotland, please visit www.open.ac.uk/Scotland or contact Kenny Stewart, Communications and Policy Manager, on 0131 549 7961 or kenny.stewart@open.ac.uk.