Introduction
The Open University in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Energy, Economy & Tourism Committee’s inquiry into Underemployment in Scotland.

We have focused our response around the question of the role of the public sector in supporting the underemployed find full-time employment and ensuring the underemployed can access training. In particular, we have highlighted issues related to The Open University in Scotland’s unique role in providing opportunities for individuals to access employment at the highest level of which they are capable.

Access to education and training
To realise the potential of everyone in Scotland, appropriate opportunities must be made available for all, including those unable to access campus-based or full-time provision.

- **Employees wanting to re-skill or up-skill**
  Nearly three quarters of OU students (71%) are in part-time or full-time employment with most undertaking their studies part-time. It is important to highlight that for many of these students and other employees (particularly those undertaking shift work), part-time and/or distance learning courses are the only viable way they can access higher education to up-skill or re-skill.

- **Individuals in rural areas**
  Given that large sections of the Scottish population live in remote and rural communities, it is essential that higher education can be accessed regardless of where students live. The Open University in Scotland delivers a range of courses via distance learning to students across Scotland, and currently has around 3,000 students in the Highlands and Islands (where our student headcount is over 60 per 10,000 adults) and over 500 students in Dumfries and Galloway. These figures demonstrate the demand that exists in rural parts of Scotland for provision other than that provided full-time on campuses.
• **Students with disabilities**  
For many students with disabilities wishing to access higher education to up-skill or re-skill, campus based and/or full-time provision is not appropriate. One of the main reasons that a high proportion of student with disabilities choose to study with The Open University in Scotland is the flexibility of provision we can offer. (There are currently over 1,000 disabled students, studying with The Open University in Scotland, accounting for 7% of all our students.)

• **Students with caring responsibilities**  
For individuals with caring responsibilities, hoping to up-skill or re-skill, education and training provision needs to be available on a flexible basis, so that they can fit it around their other commitments.

**Support for flexible provision**  
For individuals in the groups highlighted above who may want to access higher education to secure appropriate employment or to re-skill, it is essential that part-time provision is incentivised alongside full-time, campus-based courses. In recognition of the additional costs of providing part-time courses, up until 2011/12, the Scottish Funding Council allocated a Part-Time Incentive Grant (PTIG) to HEIs based on their part-time students numbers. The PTIG has since been absorbed into regional coherence funding, in effect removing any financial incentive for HEIs to provide part-time courses at a time when more people may be looking for flexible provision to improve their marketability to employers. It is interesting to note in this context, that while part-time student numbers at The Open University in Scotland have held steady over the last few years, the HE sector in Scotland as a whole saw a 13% drop in part-time students between 2010/11 and 2011/12.

The Open University in Scotland would like to see more incentives for HEIs to provide part-time provision to ensure all individuals, but particularly those that fall into the groups highlighted above, are not denied access to education opportunities due to a lack of appropriate provision.

In addition to the decrease in part-time numbers within the HE sector, The Open University in Scotland is also concerned about the increasing focus on full-time provision at colleges on articulation routes. Over a third of students on HN courses in 2009/10, were studying on a part-time basis; if the number of HN courses offered on a part-time basis is reduced, there may be less opportunities for college students to enter university via this route. This is a particular concern to The Open University in Scotland as it currently has articulation agreements with 24 of Scotland’s colleges.

The Open University in Scotland commends the Scottish Government on its commitment to offer a place in education and training to all 16 -19 year olds. However, we have a concern that this commitment is encouraging education providers to structure their provision around full-time, campus based courses. In addition to the ongoing need to provide flexible provision for people currently in the workforce, we would argue that both the college and the higher education sectors need to be prepared for greater demand in the future from mature students and employees, once the economy recovers and the high level of applications from young applicants that we have seen in recent years starts to fall off.

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1 The Part-Time Incentive Grant was allocated to all HEIs in Scotland, except The Open University in Scotland on the basis of their part-time student numbers.

2 HESA Student Enrolments and Qualifications 2011/12.

3 Data requested from SFC shows that 18,767 students in Scotland’s colleges were studying part-time at an advanced level compared to 29,886 studying at full-time intensity.
Different models for young people
In the last five years, there has been a 48% increase in the number of under-25s studying with The OU in Scotland, with more than 1,000 new students coming from this age group in 2011/12 alone. While there are undoubtedly a number of factors influencing this trend, anecdotal evidence suggests that, in an increasingly competitive job market, some young people are actively choosing to combine employment in their chosen career with an OU qualification, so on graduation they can offer prospective employers several years relevant work experience in addition to a degree. Given this trend, The Open University would like to see part-time study presented as a valid option to young people by careers advisors.

Support for part-time students
The Open University in Scotland is delighted with the Scottish Government’s recent announcement to extend the Part-Time Fee Grant from 2013/14 which we believe will be a significant help to people in employment hoping to re-skill or up-skill through part-time study. However, we believe the Part-Time Fee Grant will need to be further refined in light of recent changes to the eligibility criteria for ILA200, which have left a group of HE students on low incomes, studying less than 30 credits and in another form of education, ineligible for any form of fee support.

In addition, while The Open University very much welcomes the extension of the Part-Time Fee Grant, it is worth highlighting that the changes will result in a significantly higher volume of applications for SAAS to process. To ensure all applicants receive their fees in time to start courses in the academic year 2013/14, adequate staff resource must be made available at SAAS to enable them to process all Part Time Fee Grant applications.

Retention
Supporting students to successfully complete their courses is key to ensuring people gain the qualifications that will enable them to be employed at a level commensurate with their skills and ability. The Open University in Scotland invests a high level of resource in retention activity, given that many of our students fit their studies around competing priorities, such as full-time employment and/or caring commitments. As well as providing models and interventions to encourage our own students to succeed, we are also involved in sector wide activities to support greater retention.

Back on Course
back on course scotland is a free, impartial service available to undergraduates in Scotland who have left higher education without completing their intended qualification. The service, which will be staffed by The Open University in Scotland, launches on Thursday 31 January and will help early leavers find a positive outcome, which may include a return to study, thereby, increasing the student’s chances of completing a degree, to their benefit and that of the economy.

Peer support
The Open University in Scotland has recognised that a key means of encouraging people into higher education and supporting them progress successfully through their courses is to establish models that engender peer support. The examples below illustrate how peer support has been built into OU models.
Community-based partnerships
Since 2005, The Open University in Scotland has developed over 50 community-based partnerships with local organisations to establish sustainable pathways into HE for individuals from non-traditional backgrounds. Using this model, students are encouraged to sign up for OU courses with their peers and are then jointly supported by the community partner and a local OU project worker. The Open University in Scotland has developed this model with a range of agencies, including local authorities’ Community Learning Development Partnerships, unions and voluntary organisations.

College partnerships
The Open University in Scotland has developed a partnership model with three colleges (Aberdeen College, City of Glasgow College and Adam Smith College) which allow HN students to stay with their peers and continue using the college as their study base while they work towards an OU degree. Students are also supported by a member of staff from the college who has been appointed as their OU tutor.

Employability
The Open University in Scotland actively supports its students so they are prepared for employment commensurate with their skills and abilities, taking into account each student’s individual aspirations and motivations.

Support from The Open University to enhance student employability includes:
- An entitlement to supported personal development planning
- Integration of higher-level skills development within curriculum design including opportunities to reflect upon and articulate the skills that they have gained from their studies
- Ensuring curriculum relevance to employment through appropriate links with employers and professional bodies.

Internship opportunities
The Open University in Scotland acknowledges that many students need to supplement their studies with relevant work experience and recognises the demand from students for more internship opportunities. Such opportunities are valuable for those returning to the workplace after a career break, those seeking to change career, as well as those looking for their first graduate job. To meet some of this demand, The Open University in Scotland has led the way in establishing the, Third Sector Internships Scotland scheme with Queen Margaret University and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Careers Advice
The Open University recognises that appropriate careers advice is essential to guide students onto the right courses and to support graduates enter employment at a level commensurate with their skills and ability. The OU Careers Website offers a range of information and advice including downloadable resources, online tools such as a CV builder and links to external careers sites. In addition to offering individual advice from professionally qualified careers advisers, The Open University holds interactive forums where students can post queries about different careers areas. These forums are moderated by a Careers adviser and on occasion by relevant employers.

Careers guidance is available on an individual basis, by phone or e-mail, to registered students plus those who have studied with The OU in the last 3 years.
Guidance for those considering study
In addition to providing guidance for its own students, The Open University in Scotland has developed an open education resource, the ‘Reflection Toolkit’, to help learners from diverse backgrounds think about their present situation, including whether they would like to undertake further study or employment and how they can work towards that goal.

Recognition of Prior Learning
The Open University in Scotland believes that many people are underemployed or unable to move into higher level employment and/or further study because the skills they have learned in the workplace (or elsewhere) are not recognised by employers or education providers. Greater recognition of prior learning would enable more people to move out of lower skilled work and free up jobs for others.

We recognise that accrediting prior learning, particularly informal learning, is a time intensive activity and, for that reason, most education providers and employers do not have the time or inclination to develop expertise in this area. However, given the benefits of recognising prior learning in allowing individuals to access employment at a level commensurate with their skills and ability, there is merit in exploring how this area could be further supported.

Further information
The Open University in Scotland would be happy to expand or clarify any of the points in this submission.

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