



The Open
University

Scotland

Developing a flexible model of Open Learning Champions: report on findings from pilot sites in Shetland and Dumfries (2015)



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Executive summary

Open Learning Champions: a flexible model

The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) takes a learner-centred approach to widening access. Collaboration with trusted organisations is integral to this approach.

The OU in Scotland has recently completed a pilot of a widening access model of Open Learning Champions (OLC) in collaboration with two carers centres – Voluntary Action Shetland and Dumfries Carers Centre.

The OLC model draws on an existing relationship, for example between a carer and their support worker, to enable ‘new learning in familiar spaces’ with people who may not otherwise consider themselves to be learners. OLCs may come from third sector organisations, community learning and development, libraries, trade unions, or support groups. The role will vary according to the OLC’s work context and their relationship with potential learners.

OLCs make flexible use of the Open University’s free, open educational resources (OER) to meet the needs of learners in diverse settings. The pilot used OER developed for a Scottish context as a starting point:

- *Caring Counts* – an online reflection and planning course for carers
- Open Pathways to Higher Education – a resource developed by OUiS to help learners navigate their journeys from informal to formal learning

This report presents the findings and recommendations from both pilot sites. We report on what we have learned about the process and delivery of learning in familiar spaces and make recommendations for a sustainable model of OLCs. As well as the findings from the pilot, the report considers feedback from a wider group who attended the first OLC workshop in June 2015.

Key findings

The OLC model is an effective way to deliver new learning in familiar spaces. Support from a facilitator and peers had a measurable impact both on learner experience and completion.

Additional local support in Dumfries and Galloway was considered a factor in higher participation and completion rates at this site.

All the learners interviewed intended to continue their learning journeys and/or to progress to employment.

Challenges included lack of IT skills/ experience, technical difficulties, rural internet connectivity, and guilt about making time for learning.

The flexibility of OERs was considered an advantage for learners who may not be able to commit to fixed study times.

Use of a relevant OER, in this case *Caring Counts*, helped learners realise the value of their caring role and the skills they had gained from it. This highlights the value of contextualised reflection to learner experience.

Open Pathways was considered a useful tool to support learners to continue their learning journeys, to other OERs and from informal to formal learning.

Though too soon to measure impact, the reach of the OLC workshop participants to learners was significant. A ‘ripple effect’ was also observed with colleagues and other professionals which suggests a potential impact beyond that of the initial cohort.

Recommendations and next steps

The pilot benefitted from a small amount of funding for OLCs to increase their capacity to facilitate learner groups and participate in evaluation. The OUiS could provide a fund of small grants for future OLC activity, which could:

- increase OLC capacity to develop the model, and
- support participation in longer-term research to establish an evidence base for learner progression.

The model of local project support in Dumfries and Galloway could be expanded to other regions to support OLCs and other OUiS project activity, building on the existing network of Associate Lecturers. This would require:

- development workshops for project staff to support the OLC model, and
- additional capacity within the OU to provide this.

To overcome potential barriers to engagement, OLCs could provide enhanced learner support, including digital literacy for accessing online learning. This could be offered in partnership with existing community learning networks, including libraries.

The OUiS should further explore interest among OLCs and other learning partners in enhancing their capacity to tailor, reversion or co-create bespoke OERS for their learning context.

The OUiS should explore with a range of learning partners the wider potential of Open Pathways as an effective tool for progressing from informal to formal learning.

The OLC workshop model could be further rolled out in partnership with interested organisations, including third sector, community learning and development, libraries, colleges, and others.

To ensure a consistent approach, the OUiS should work with the other OU nations to develop an effective framework for monitoring and evaluation of OLC activity.

Conclusion

The Open Learning Champions pilot demonstrates that this is an effective model which could enhance the social mobility of people who may not otherwise consider themselves to be learners. It has the potential to be scaled up with additional resource for OLCs, the creation of a network of locally-based project staff and increased capacity within OUiS to develop and support this. Working with the other OU nations to ensure a consistent approach could enable the model to be rolled out UK-wide.

*Gill Ryan and Lindsay Hewitt
The Open University in Scotland
April 2016*

[1.0] Introduction

The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) works in partnership with a wide range of organisations which share our commitment to increase learning opportunities for all. Working in partnership to deliver ‘new learning in familiar spaces’ is the overarching aim of our Widening Access Strategy (Scotland) 2015-16. To articulate this strategic objective, OUiS has recently completed a pilot of Open Learning Champions (OLC) in collaboration with Voluntary Action Shetland and Dumfries Carers Centre.

Using a qualitative approach, the report evaluates the experiences of the Open Learning Champions and learners who participated in the pilot. Reflective evaluation is integral to the project and we report on what we have learned about the process and delivery of learning in familiar spaces, and issues around supporting OLCs and their learners, particularly in rural and remote areas. We also explore the opportunities and challenges that open educational resources (OER) present and consider what we have learned in terms of developing a sustainable model for OLCs.

As well as the findings from the pilot sites, this report considers feedback from a wider group who attended a workshop for Open Learning Champions in June 2015, which expanded the model beyond the pilot sites. The report explores the potential of this model for learner progression from informal to formal learning and concludes with recommendations for the development of the OLC model.

[2.0] Open Learning Champions: a flexible model

First developed by the Open University in Wales, the concept of Open Learning Champions (OLC) builds on previous Open University in Scotland widening access initiatives, which are considered in 3.0.

The OLC model draws on an existing relationship, for example between a carer and their support worker, to enable ‘new learning in familiar spaces’ with people who may not otherwise consider themselves to be learners.

OLCs may come from third sector organisations, community learning and development, libraries,

trade unions, or support groups. The role will vary according to the OLC’s work context and their relationship with potential learners.

OLCs make flexible use of the Open University’s free, open educational resources to meet the needs of learners in diverse settings. This pilot used resources developed for a Scottish context as a starting point (see 4.0 for an overview of OER):

- *Caring Counts* – an online reflection and planning course for carers
- Open Pathways to Higher Education – a resource developed by OUiS to help learners navigate their journeys from informal to formal learning

As the learners in the pilot were carers, *Caring Counts* was a suitable OER to engage them. Beyond the pilot, the model offers scope for potential OLCs in other networks or practice settings, using OERs relevant to their learners, to provide contextualised learning.

[2.1] Why carers?

Carers were identified as a priority group in The Open University’s Widening Access and Success Strategy 2012-2015. An outcome of our widening access activities in Scotland has been collaboration with carers’ organisations and the co-creation with carers of *Caring Counts*.

OUiS has had a longstanding relationship with Dumfries Carers Centre, which collaborated on *Caring Counts*. Building on this relationship, they were identified as a potential partner to pilot the model of OLCs. The manager of Voluntary Action Shetland’s Virtual Carers Centre project attended the launch of *Caring Counts* in 2014 and expressed an interest in participating in the pilot.

[2.2] Resourcing the pilot

The pilot was funded through the provision of small consultancy contracts of £500 for each of the OLCs. The Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project, funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), provided the funding for these contracts. Four OLCs took part, two in each pilot site, who recruited and then facilitated the learning experience of participating carers in these locations. In addition, a local OUiS project officer was involved in the Dumfries and Galloway site.

[3.0] Context and background to the OLC pilot

To understand the development of the OLC model it is helpful to consider both the immediate context to this pilot and the wider background, including the legacy of earlier OUiS widening access activity. OUiS partnership engagement has been developed over time and within a policy and funding framework that has encouraged the development of a partnership approach to widening access (Cannell and Hewitt, 2010).

The notion of ‘learning champions’ within trusted organisations is not new: OUiS has a long history of collaboration with local authorities and third sector organisations to support informal learning in the community, as well as facilitating transitions into formal study at higher education level. OUiS initiatives such as the Open Road programme (1999-2003), and the development of core activity such as ‘Openings in partnership’, illustrate a step change in how widening access activities are managed, the value of reflective learning, and also how this has culminated in the co-creation of open educational resources such as *Caring Counts*.

[3.1] The Widening Access Strategy

The Widening Access Strategy (Scotland) 2015-16 makes it clear that our strategic approach in Scotland follows two central objectives: to use OU resources to reach individuals and communities who are distant from higher education; to develop and evaluate formal and informal pathways into degree level study; and to support transitions. We translate these into action by:

- developing and evaluating the pedagogy and practice of widening access through:
(i) appropriate accredited curriculum; (ii) models of appropriate student support, and (iii) the development and use of open educational resources to support routes from informal to formal learning.
- creating sustainable partnerships with colleges, schools, employers, trade unions and third sector organisations.

A number of work-streams have been developed to deliver the strategy, including the catalyst for this pilot.

[3.2] The Open Road programme and Openings in Partnership: a step change in partnership engagement

The Open Road programme (1999-2003) was unique in a UK context in bringing together community education materials, pre-access, access and undergraduate degree level study under one coherent framework. The aim was to provide a flexible pathway from ‘pre-access’ through to higher education. The programme was flexible and learner-centred. There were several key elements in its design and process that are pertinent to the current OUiS Widening Access framework and the development of a flexible OLC model:

- programme design, assessment and embedded evaluation,
- working with trusted partners to facilitate the learning experience, and
- co-creation of additional educational materials to suit individual contexts.

For further information about partnership engagement in Dumfries and Galloway over the past fifteen years see ‘Joined up access: the Open Road programme in Dumfries and Galloway (Cannell et al, 2005).

The conceptual changes arising from the Open Road programme informed subsequent activity in the region and elsewhere, including ‘Openings for Progression in Dumfries and Galloway’ (Hewitt 2009), and ‘Openings in partnership’ (Cannell and Hewitt 2010). These established a shift in boundaries and a transfer of power from the OU to the partner organisation. There was a clearer understanding of what the OU can do well in terms of its mainstream provision, and what the trusted organisation with its wealth of experience and local knowledge can do more effectively. This approach has progressively shaped OUiS widening access partnership engagement and has resulted in collaborative work that has produced open educational resources such as *Caring Counts* and Open Pathways to Higher Education.

[3.3] Developing an Open Learning Champions model

Progressive partnership engagement in Scotland established a flexible and innovative approach that recognised the role of the partner as trusted gatekeeper. These learning partnerships have afforded opportunities to co-create or reversion

OERs. However, it was colleagues in The Open University in Wales that took forward this approach and developed it further to include Open Learning Champions in 2012.

[3.4] The impact of open educational resources (OER)

A survey by Cannell and Hewitt (2010b) found that university outreach in rural Scotland was typically short-term funded and not sustained beyond the life of the project. Since the Open Road programme, OUIS has embedded widening access outreach activity into its mainstream provision, through work with key community partners who take ownership of the role in supporting learners engaging with OER before they embark on formal OU study.

Drawing on evidence from the Open Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project, Cannell et al (2015) argue that bringing together widening access and open education offers different and potentially more sustainable possibilities. Traditional outreach requires funding to be devoted towards appropriate content and tuition. Free, open-licensed resources allow attention to shift towards practice and sustainability.

[4.0] Open educational resources (OER) used in the pilot

OpenLearn is the OU's home of free learning. It offers free public access to a wide range of materials, including extracts from OU courses, articles by OU academics, videos, and online activities. This website is already being used by organisations across Scotland and in the rest of the UK in a range of ways to support transitions from informal to formal learning and to widen access to higher education. However, the sheer amount and diversity of material available can be daunting especially if you are working on your own and/or have little experience of using online learning. With this in mind, The Open University in Scotland developed [Open Pathways to Higher Education](#), which was launched in June 2015.

[4.1] Open Pathways to Higher Education

Open Pathways comprises a resource pack for learners and a website. These are intended to help learners navigate the range of resources available on OpenLearn, and to plan their learning journeys from informal to formal learning if they wish.

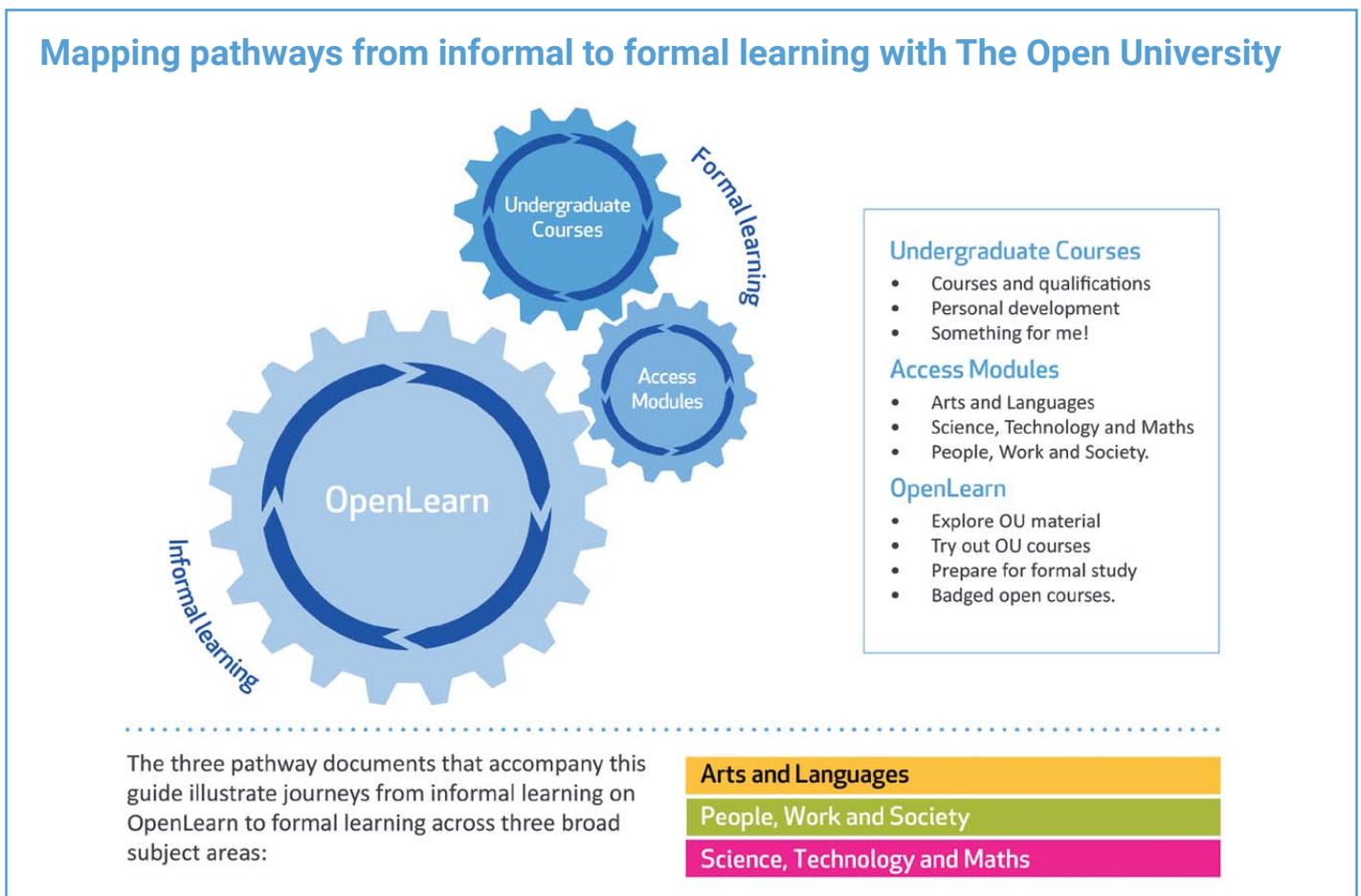
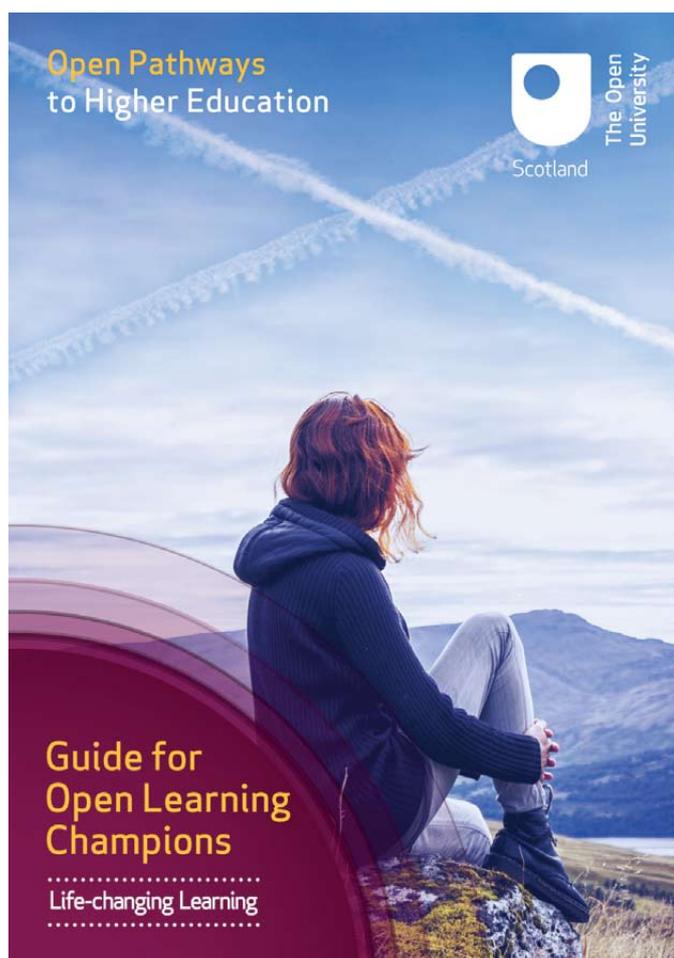


Fig 1: Mapping pathways from informal to formal learning © The Open University in Scotland

The Open Pathways guide takes a learner-centred, multi-exit approach. This means the learner decides the direction and destination of their learning journey, how much time they want to commit, the intensity of study, and if and at what pace they want to progress. Also included in the pack is a Learning Log to record progress. The three Pathway documents that accompany the guide illustrate potential learning journeys across three broad subject areas:

- Arts and Humanities;
- Science, Technology and Maths;
- People, Society and Work.

A companion [Guide for Open Learning Champions](#) is also available. This resource is for workers, volunteers and organisations with a role to support learners in diverse settings.



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[4.2] *Caring Counts*: co-creation of an OER

Caring Counts is significant as it is an OER developed with and for carers. The material was co-created by the OUIS project team with carers and staff from participating carers organisations. *Caring Counts* was developed from the Reflection Toolkit, an earlier OER which used a case study approach, drawing on the lived experience of OU students from diverse backgrounds to illustrate real life choices. Reflection is part of good learning practice and it can help learners to think about where they are now, where they want to be and how learning fits into their goals.

In *Caring Counts* there was an innovative leap as carers' reflections unfold in real time and the learner shares in that experience. That relevance to real carers' lives makes *Caring Counts* a familiar starting point for carers embarking on their own learning journey. Cannell (2016) comments that "making content relevant in the specific context of the partner happens [...]. Principally through establishment of social connections between learners who are able to bring their own experience to the study of material that may be generic or written with other learners in mind."

Caring Counts, and the original *Reflection Toolkit*, sit on [OpenLearn Works](#), a platform for publishing open educational resources, with tools for collaboration, reuse and reversioning. OpenLearn Works is part of OpenLearn.

[4.3] Open badges

Open badges have been developed in response to the needs of informal learners to have their learning recognised and can be useful stepping stone from informal to formal learning. A badge is a digital way to provide evidence of the learner's achievement. The Open University has developed a range of [badged open courses \(BOCs\)](#) on OpenLearn. Learners can also gain a badge on successful completion of the *Caring Counts* course.

[4.4] The Open Learning Champions workshop

Each of the pilot sites took part in a workshop to build their confidence in facilitating *Caring Counts* with learners, and to introduce them to other OERs on OpenLearn using Open Pathways as a navigation

tool. Building on interest from other carers centres generated by *Caring Counts*, a further workshop was promoted through wider carer networks and through social media. This created an opportunity to expand the Open Learning Champions model beyond the pilot sites.

This workshop took place in June 2015 and was hosted by the Ca(I)re Project at the Eric Liddell Centre in Edinburgh (see appendix B). It was attended by 18 people with a role in supporting or training carers, drawn from third sector organisations around the country, as well as one OU Associate Lecturer.

Using the same OERs as the pilot sites as a starting point, the aims of the workshop were:

- To increase understanding of open learning resources, including *Caring Counts*
- To give an overview of Open Pathways to Higher Education
- To explore ideas for how to use this with learners
- To get plenty of hands on practice
- Networking and partnership building
- To leave with a clear idea of what you can do as an Open Learning Champion

[5.0] Methodology

The Dumfries and Galloway pilot took place in two locations – one urban (Dumfries) and one rural (Wigtownshire area). The Dumfries location ran the *Caring Counts* course with two carers, with the OLC (who also has a caring role) undertaking the course at the same time. The rural location

had two learners complete the course with the OLC, one subsequent completer, and two who were working through the course at the time of the evaluation. Prior to the pilot, the Dumfries and Galloway site had run the course with a local OUIs project officer, with three carers completing.

We drew from all three cohorts for the evaluation, interviewing each OLC and three of the learners. These semi-structured interviews took place either face to face or over the phone. In addition, two learners submitted online feedback via the survey they are invited to complete at the end of the course and a further learner provided a written case study. Two of the facilitators also completed the Open Learning Champions questionnaire [see appendix A].

The Shetland pilot also opted to run over two locations – one urban (Lerwick) and one rural (Yell, North Isles). The intention had been to link both groups online, as part of the Shetland Virtual Carers Centre project. However poor internet connectivity proved a challenge and this was not successful.

As of October 2015, when the evaluation was carried out, the Yell group had six learners currently working through the course, while Lerwick had two learners who had completed the course. We interviewed the OLCs in both locations, but only managed to make contact with one learner during the evaluation period. One of the OLCs also completed the Open Learning Champions questionnaire on behalf of both locations.

In addition to the two pilot sites, we invited those who had taken part in the Open Learning Champions workshop in June 2015 to contribute to the evaluation. Of the 18 participants, six responded to the evaluation questionnaire.

Table A: Learner numbers in each pilot site

Pilot site	Number of learners who completed <i>Caring Counts</i> during the pilot period	Number of learners still working through <i>Caring Counts</i> as of Oct 2015	Total learners per site
Dumfries and Galloway:			10
Location 1	2		
Location 2	3	2	
Previous course	3		
Shetland:			8
Location 1	2		
Location 2		6	
Total learner numbers	10	8	18

6.0 Findings and recommendations

The findings of the evaluation are drawn from the sources outlined in 5.0 and are supported with quotes from the five OLCs: Fiona (rural Dumfries and Galloway), Gillian (Dumfries), Karen (Yell, Shetland), Kirsten (Lerwick, Shetland) and Meg (OUiS project officer in Dumfries), and five learners: Diane (Dumfries and Galloway), Duncan (Dumfries), Jane (Dumfries), Kim (Shetland) and Marion (Dumfries and Galloway). Case studies for each of the participants can be found in Appendix A.

The first six sections evaluate the OLC model as explored in the pilot sites, with support for each organisation provided by the national and local project team. A final section explores a variation of this model, which offers OLC workshops for interested organisation without project support.

The findings are presented with recommendations under the following headings:

- 6.1 The Open Learning Champions model
- 6.2 The Open Learning Champions experience
- 6.3 The learner experience
- 6.4 Using Open Educational Resources
- 6.5 *Caring Counts*
- 6.6 Open Pathways to Higher Education
- 6.7 Expanding the model

[6.1] The Open Learning Champions model

Delivery and approach

The historical context of OUiS partnership engagement in specific geographical areas had a bearing on the delivery and approach used in Dumfries and Galloway (see 3.2). This site also benefited from the continuity provided by a local OU project officer, who had experience of working with the local community, including Dumfries Carers Centre.

The Dumfries group followed an established model of blended learning. They began with an introductory session, then learners worked

online at home between regular group meetings. They completed the final session as a group and celebrated with lunch. The rural group also used a blended approach, meeting up every two to three weeks. In Shetland, on the other hand, the course was an 'opt-in' activity before a regularly scheduled carers' group.

Peer support

An advantage of a blended approach was that learners could access peer support and learn from other carers working through the course, as well as from the facilitator. Our experience with OU students confirms that peer support, whether face-to-face or online, enhances their learning experience. As well as offering the opportunity to share ideas and critically engage with course materials, study groups help to sustain motivation, improve time management and to generally boost confidence.

All the OLCs reported that the learners enjoyed getting together and sharing experiences. They also felt that meeting as a group can help reduce carer isolation and maintain motivation. Feedback from learners in 6.3 supports this.

"The peer support was very important and not just support. It's the fact that you have something to aim for. If you are going to meet up and you are set a goal, then it is much easier to achieve that goal than to set it yourself at home."
(Meg, OLC)

Challenges

Internet connectivity was a recurring challenge in the rural locations. This had a significant impact in Shetland and their intentions to deliver the course partially online and to link the learners in both locations. Some strategies for addressing these issues are discussed in 6.3. Another recurring issue in both sites was that carers found it difficult to prioritise time for studying at home due to the demands of their caring role. In Shetland, this meant that the timescales for the course were

affected as learners had not completed activities between group sessions.

“We did initially think that [the learners] would be able to do it at home and we’d introduce some extra things like the Learning Hub stuff but then carers have been busy, so they haven’t really done it.” (Karen, OLC)

Completion rates

According to the analytics of OpenLearn Works, at the end of October 2015 there were 156 learners enrolled on *Caring Counts*, with 26 badges awarded (17 for carers, nine for support workers) so far. As the numbers receiving badges include three from the Shetland site (two learners, one OLC) and ten from Dumfries (two OLCs, eight learners) it is reasonable to conclude that the support and facilitation provided by the OLCs in the pilot sites was a factor in successful completion rates.

Sustainability

It is worth noting that the pilot sites received funding from the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project and both OLCs from the Dumfries and Galloway Carers Centre opted to use this to increase their hours as they work part-time. Without this extra capacity, the level of facilitation outlined above may not be sustainable.

“I would do a group again but that would be through my role here. Maybe not facilitating the whole way through but doing a beginning and an end [session], see how they get on and being at the end of the phone if anyone had problems.”
(Gillian, OLC)

Issues

- The OLC model is an effective way to deliver new learning in familiar spaces. Support from a facilitator and peers had a measurable impact both on learner experience and completion.
- The blended approach of self-directed learning (either on- or offline) with regular group meetings is recognised as an effective one.

- This level of facilitation requires staff capacity and may not be sustainable without the additional resource provided for the pilot sites.
- Even with support from the group and facilitator, learners with caring roles may find it a challenge to prioritise learning.
- Online learning requires internet connectivity, which may be a challenge in rural areas.

Recommendations

The pilot benefitted from a small amount of funding for OLCs to increase their capacity to facilitate learner groups and participate in evaluation. The OUIS could provide a fund of small grants for future OLC activity, which could:

- increase OLC capacity to develop the model, and
- support participation in longer-term research to establish an evidence base for learner progression.

[6.2] The Open Learning Champion experience

Scope of role

The OLCs in both sites reported that facilitating the *Caring Counts* course fit well with their role in carer support and/or training. Gillian in Dumfries had a unique approach, working through the course as a carer as well as a facilitator with her group, so was learning and reflecting together with the other participants.

Motivation for participating in the pilot

The Shetland site, Voluntary Action Shetland, was keen to participate in the Open Learning Champions pilot as it aligned with their concept of a Shetland Virtual Carers Centre. They were also keen to use *Caring Counts* with carers who are at a transition in their caring role, particularly former carers.

“We were wanting to develop training for carers and the virtual carers website more... just more learning tools that can help carers. We also created a policy for when someone comes to the end of their caring role, that we would try and support them for two years afterwards, and it fit in well with that. For somebody who was still coming to the support group, maybe, if they’re looking for a change in direction in their life, this could help them.” (Kirsten, OLC)

The Dumfries and Galloway site had been involved in developing the original *Caring Counts* course, as well as previous OUiS initiatives (see 3.2). The Open Learning Champions pilot seemed a logical progression. The rural locations in particular were keen to be involved as there are so few opportunities for rural carers.

“We are quite isolated in this area. Anything that encourages people and gives them opportunities and gives them an insight into what’s out there I think is really important. We are limited in what we can do. Online courses like this I feel are a real benefit to carers and other people as well” (Fiona, OLC)

Recognition and support for OLCs

At the outset of the pilot, Open Learning Champions workshops were provided for both sites, which explored *Caring Counts*, Open Pathways to Higher Education and other open educational resources. OLCs in both sites rated this ‘very useful’. Certificates of attendance were issued to each of the four OLCs.

The OLCs reported being generally happy with the level of support and contact from the national OUiS Project Officer. It has previously been noted that OLCs in Dumfries and Galloway also had access to a local OUiS project officer. This additional support may have influenced the higher participation and completion rates of carers in this pilot site (see Table A in section 5.0). In comparison, the Shetland site had three visits from the national project team, at the outset of the pilot and for the evaluation, with only email and telephone contact in the interim.

Impact on practice

In terms of impact on their own practice, the OLCs reported feeling more confident promoting the *Caring Counts* course and other OERs to carers and colleagues, and supporting learners through them. They had also improved their own reflection skills. In Shetland, the OLCs observed a positive impact on the group as a result of the course. It provided more structure and prompted discussion and peer support which had been lacking previously.

“I think that [the course] has taken us to another stage now, that we might be able to build more from it and that will help them to make the group better ...having the hour to focus on different things is perfect because you’ve got a bit more structure to it, rather than everyone just coming along, having a cup of tea and a natter.” (Karen, OLC)

Resources used

All the OLCs considered the Guide for Open Learning Champions to be very useful, though none had accessed the OpenLearn Guide for Social Partners course on OpenLearn Works, which was recommended at the initial OLC workshop. *Caring Counts* has a Guide for Facilitators resource, which the OLCs reported finding helpful in preparation for facilitating the course. The OLCs in both sites considered the Open Pathways to Higher Education resource very useful and intended to continue to use it with carers, colleagues and other groups (see 6.6).

Issues

- OLCs felt that having ongoing support and contact from the OUiS was essential. Additional local support in Dumfries and Galloway may be considered a factor in higher participation and completion rates at this site.
- The OERs used were reported to have had a positive impact on the OLCs’ practice with carers.

Recommendations

The model of local project support in Dumfries and Galloway could be expanded to other regions to support OLCs and other OUiS project activity, building on the existing network of Associate Lecturers. This would require:

- development workshops for project staff to support the OLC model, and
- additional capacity within the OU to provide this.

Building on existing relationships in Dumfries, further OLC activity using the learning from the pilot could be explored with partners in the Crichton Campus.

[6.3] The learner experience

Who are the learners?

Of the 18 carers involved in the pilot, we interviewed four, and a fifth provided a written case study. All those interviewed were parent carers and four were female, one male. Two of them were based in Dumfries, two in rural Dumfries and Galloway, and one in Shetland. All had an existing relationship with the local Carers Centre and had come to the pilot through word of mouth from other carers or being approached by a support worker.

Motivation

Two of the learners were at a transition in their caring role where they were actively considering returning to work. One is a current student with the OU and undertook the *Caring Counts* course on a break between modules in her BA in Childhood and Youth Studies course. Others saw the course as an opportunity to reflect and to do 'something for me'.

"It was just the right time when this course was offered and I thought it was perfect, it will make me reflect on what I've been doing."
(Jane, carer)

Making time for learning

The demands of a caring role can make it difficult to find time for learning. Learners reported different strategies for making time for themselves and maintaining motivation, such as getting up early or taking advantage of time when other family members were out of the house. There was 'carer guilt' about taking time for themselves and having to be 'selfish'.

IT, internet and rural broadband

Rural internet connectivity was also an issue for some carers, which made it difficult to download videos. Suggestions were made as to how some of these issues could be overcome, including working offline, providing DVDs or memory sticks with course content, and using the transcripts for the videos. One learner suggested that an orientation in IT would be useful before commencing the course, particularly for those not used to online learning.

"I believe a half day spent on the computer prior to the course starting would be to the students' advantage. This would enable students to navigate Open University and Caring Counts websites more confidently and I found this a challenge" (Duncan, carer)

Learner outcomes and impact

Learners reported increased confidence and resilience as a result of taking part in the pilot. Two carers were considering a return to work, with one actively applying for jobs and finding that the open badge she received on completion of *Caring Counts* was a talking point at interview. She felt more confident having done the course, and it helped her to articulate the skills gained from her caring role.

"I'd done Caring Counts and it had made me think I actually could do this... and when I went to the interview yesterday, it just flowed. The words just flowed, like nothing on earth. And the confidence level as well, I'm usually not this confident." (Jane, carer)

One carer reported benefits for the whole family, as they had a greater appreciation of all the carer did so helped out more to allow her time to study, and it created a positive role model of learning for her children. Another said feeling better about herself had a positive impact on her caring role.

All the carers intended continuing their learning journeys in some way. Most were interested in pursuing more informal learning initially, and using Open Pathways to explore their options (see 6.6).

Issues

- All the learners reported positive outcomes and intended to continue their learning journeys, particularly using Open Pathways, and/or to progress to employment.
- Carers may feel guilty about studying, which takes them away from their caring role and other responsibilities. Learners developed strategies for making time for themselves.
- Rural connectivity is an issue for some learners, and again they developed strategies for getting around this. Additionally, carers may not have experience of online learning or using IT and this may present a barrier to engagement with online learning.

Recommendations

To overcome potential barriers to engagement, OLCs could provide enhanced learner support, including digital literacy for accessing online learning. This could be offered in partnership with existing community learning networks, including libraries.

The Guide for Open Learning Champions could be updated to include learning from the pilot, including carers' strategies for making time for learning and for overcoming IT and connectivity challenges.

[6.4] Using open educational resources (OER)

Tailoring OER to the learner

A particular feature of OERs is that they can be adapted by users to create bespoke learning experiences. This offers the opportunity for the co-creation of courses, such as *Caring Counts*, but also the facility to reversion an existing course, for example *Caring Counts in the Workplace* – a course for managers and employers which is a version of the original *Caring Counts* course. In practice, reversioning has only been done by the OUIS with partner organisations but there is potential for users to create their own reversioned courses for their learners.

While reversioning may be daunting for users, many OERs on OpenLearn Works can be tailored by picking and choosing elements of a course, or adapting them to be more relevant for particular learners. This could focus on learner interest, such as career goals or the stage of their caring role. As part of the OLC workshops preceding the pilots, the potential for this 'pick and mix' approach was discussed.

However, both sites reported that as it was a pilot, they felt that they should work through *Caring Counts* in its entirety rather than adapt it. While the OLCs could see the value of tailoring the course to learners and the stage of their caring role, they still found it useful to work through the whole course. They all felt that judicious selection was something they would consider in the future, now that they were more confident in delivering the course.

“The learners that I had were quite happy to use it as it was but it worked quite well. If the person was having difficulty then probably you could [adapt it], or to help them and support them to find a way to make it easier for them to do it.” (Fiona, OLC)

Flexible and learner-centred

A key aspect of the open educational resources used in the pilot is that they are flexible, learner centred and multi-exit. They can also be adapted to different learning styles, with some learners opting to work

fully or partially offline. The ability to work at their own pace and in their own time, to pick up where they left off, was an advantage for learners as they could work around the demands of their caring role. OLCs also considered the lack of cost to be a significant factor for learners and for third sector organisation with limited budgets for learning and development.

While the pilot sites primarily used Caring Counts, a wider range of OERs can be used to meet diverse learners' needs. The Reflection Toolkit on which Caring Counts is based is a generic reflection and planning OER.

Remote and rural learners

Free online resources can increase accessibility to learning for rural carers, but there may be challenges with broadband speeds and internet connectivity, as mentioned in 6.3. However, learners found ways of overcoming this and one learner worked through the *Caring Counts* course offline. The resources on OpenLearn Works can be printed in their entirety, or saved onto a memory stick, and the accompanying learning logs can be completed on paper. The only requirement to go online would be to enrol on the course in order to gain the digital badge by completing the quizzes.

“One of my [learners] did it on paper, she didn't use the online way of doing things. She took slightly longer in doing it but completed it and got her badge” (Fiona, OLC)

First steps on a learning journey

One OLC felt that the OERs used helped to introduce people gently to learning and to take the first step on their learning journey by enrolling as informal learners with the Open University.

Issues

- The flexibility of OERs is an advantage for carers and other learners who may not be able to commit to fixed study times.
- While the facility to adapt and customise OERs exists on OpenLearn Works, OLCs may not feel confident undertaking this.

Recommendations

The OUiS should further explore interest among OLCs and other learning partners in enhancing their capacity to tailor, revision or co-create bespoke OERS for their learning context.

Guidance on this is currently being developed by the Open University's Open Media Unit and OEPS, which could be included in future updates of the Guide for Open Learning Champions and OLC workshops.

[6.5] Caring Counts

The OLC model uses OERs which are relevant to the learners' experience. Since the OLC pilot took place with carers' organisations, *Caring Counts*, a reflection course tailored for carers, was a suitable starting point for participants. OLCs suggested that the course was particularly useful for carers who are at a transition in their caring role, such as considering a return to work or coming to the end of caring.

“I think the course is ideal for carers. I think at the end of doing it, most people feel really quite good about themselves 'cause they possibly haven't spent time thinking about themselves and what they've been doing while they've been caring. But once you've done the reflection you see all the skills that you've gained and actually you have been working and gained knowledge so it benefits them in their education, gaining the badge, their self-confidence.” (Gillian, OLC)

Carers' lives

As the Dumfries and Galloway site had previously been involved in developing *Caring Counts*, local carers are among those who contributed their stories, experiences and reflections which are a core feature of the course. Both the learners and OLCs reported that these real carers' stories were particularly relatable for learners as they chimed with their own caring experiences, helped them to reflect and gave them hope for the future.

“It was really good to hear the carer’s experiences. Especially for us because Gillian was involved with that and my carers could relate to her because some of them knew her. It felt real to my carers as well. It wasn’t actors; it was real people’s situations.”
(Fiona, OLC)

Reflection on skills gained from caring

A recurring theme from each learner was how the reflection activities in the course had helped them to realise how much they do in their caring and the skills they had gained from this. It also helped them to value their role and articulate their skills in relation to work, rather than feeling they had been unproductive while caring full-time.

“before I did the course I didn’t realise all the skills and everything I do and you think that it’s just day in, day out and you don’t really see you’re learning anything... like multi-tasking and communication skills, and it has opened up my eyes a little bit more.”
(Kim, carer)

Challenges: Navigation, IT and connectivity issues

The biggest challenges reported by learners and facilitators were technical issues and navigation through the *Caring Counts* course. This proved daunting for learners who were not confident with IT. Support from the facilitator and peers to navigate the course was considered essential by learners. One OLC described it as ‘clunky’ particularly at the outset, and others that it was difficult to move between the course and the reflection tool, or to find your way back if you got sidetracked. One learner, who is a formal student with the OU, compared OpenLearn Works unfavourably with the other OU platforms.

There were mixed feelings about the quizzes. Learners reported enjoying the challenge, thinking about different skills related to their caring role and the discussions with the group prompted by the quizzes. However, they also found some of the questions confusing and frustrating.

Rural internet connectivity has been previously

highlighted as an issue for learners. There were also a number of technical issues which may require investigation. Most likely as a result of the issues above, the indicated times for the course and individual activities were widely inaccurate, with one site reporting that the course had taken twice as long as the indicated ten hours. This proved stressful for some learners as they felt they weren’t ‘keeping up’.

Planning ahead

With one exception, the learners had not participated in formal study or employment for some time. One of the benefits of the course was to start thinking about their next steps, whether that means returning to work, further study or investigating possibilities.

“at the end of it I looked at three different options for my life ahead, whether it was caring, caring in part-time work, or self-employed which I am still looking into. So I think the Caring Counts course gave me an opportunity to re-structure my life.”
(Duncan, carer)

Issues

- Use of a relevant OER, in this case *Caring Counts*, helped learners realise the value of their caring role and the skills they had gained from it. This highlights the value of contextualised reflection to learner experience.
- Technical issues and rural connectivity presented challenges which could be a barrier to engagement.

Recommendations

The OUIs should consider co-creating reflection OERs tailored to learner experience with other learning partners.

A review of the navigation and functionality of the *Caring Counts* course could take place as part of a planned upgrade of the OpenLearn Works platform by the Open Media Unit.

Learning from the pilot which could improve the learner experience should be shared in a revised Guide for Facilitators.

[6.6] Open Pathways to Higher Education

Open Pathways as a navigation tool

As part of the pilot, the sites were expected to introduce learners to Open Pathways to Higher Education. This resource was launched after the pilots had commenced so the OLCs had only seen it in draft form prior to introducing it to their learners.

This was done in different ways in each location. In Dumfries and Galloway, one OLC introduced Open Pathways halfway through the *Caring Counts* course when the learners were ready to think about what else is out there. Another planned to have a final group session to explore Open Pathways when all five learners have completed the course. Shetland felt that they had introduced Open Pathways too early in the course, when learners had not yet begun to think about their next steps. A side benefit was that exploring Open Pathways helped to develop learners' IT skills.

Both sites reported having learners at different stages of their caring role, and that the content was not as relevant to some, such as retirees, rather than carers who were actively considering further study or returning to the workforce.

What do carers want to learn?

Most of the carers were intending to use Open Pathways to explore further learning options. They were interested in short courses, notably in maths, health and social care. Two were interested in learning more about the condition of the person they care for, through OpenLearn and other informal sources such as national and local support groups. One was already studying formally with the OU and intended to complete a BA Hons. While it is relatively early to track learner progression from the pilot, at least one learner has enrolled on a badged open course as a result of Open Pathways. Badges appeared to be a motivating factor for some learners.

"We've introduced people to just what's out there in terms of education, how easy it is to access, how easy it is just to spend

time having a look at what's out there. The short courses I can see a lot of people benefitting themselves and learning things that otherwise they would never have known anything about. I think it's just maybe taking the fear of learning away." (Gillian, OLC)

Future plans

The OLCs felt that the Open Pathways resource would be useful with other groups, as activities and discussion starters. One felt more confident in promoting the resources to carers and colleagues. Another OLC is the chair of a local Care Attendance scheme which employs care workers for respite and may introduce Open Pathways with them and also older people in the community who live alone. All the OLCs intended to further explore what's available themselves.

"it's always in my mind and if people are showing an interest or if I think that they could benefit I would certainly be promoting [open learning]" (Meg, OLC)

Issues

- OLCs and learners considered Open Pathways to be a useful tool to support learners to continue their learning journeys, to other OERs and from informal to formal learning.
- The optimum time to introduce Open Pathways would appear to be later in the course, when learners have reflected and are beginning to think about their next steps.
- OLCs intended to continue to use Open Pathways with learners and colleagues beyond the pilot.
- The evaluation took place soon after the completion of the pilot, and was considered too soon to measure to learner progression.

Recommendations

The OUIs should explore with a range of learning partners the wider potential of Open Pathways as an effective tool for progressing from informal to formal learning.

[6.7] Expanding the model

The pilot sites explored a particular approach to the Open Learning Champions model. A variation of this was to develop a workshop, similar to that provided to the pilot sites, and offer it to interested organisations without the support provided to the pilot sites. The workshop builds on the model used by the Open University in Wales.

Open Learning Champions workshop

The first workshop took place in Edinburgh in June 2015 and explored OERs including Caring Counts and Open Pathways (see Appendix B for programme). This cohort of OLCs was invited to contribute to the evaluation, with six of 18 participants responding to the online survey. These responses show us how the OLCs are using OERs in different ways to create new learning in familiar spaces.

“The workshop reignited my interest in learning both on a personal level and at work. It also gave me the confidence to look at open learning with an open mind. Previous e-learning has been dry and isolating. This is fun, interactive and can be a really positive way of getting people back into education” (OLC, Angus)

Open educational resources used by OLCs

As these OLCs also work primarily with carers, the most used resource was *Caring Counts*. Other resources used included Open Pathways, an OpenLearn course called *Foundations for Self-Directed Support* (SDS) in Scotland, *Caring Counts in the Workplace* (for managers) and massive online open courses (Moocs) on the [FutureLearn](#) platform. One was developing a blended learning programme for personal assistant employers to include OERs. Some intended to access the courses for their own personal and professional development.

Support and facilitation

The OLCs had used a number of different approaches to supporting learners, with levels of

facilitation ranging from signposting to one-to-one support. Three had signposted learners (including colleagues and other professionals), and three had used social media, intranet, blogs or websites to raise awareness of the resources. Four offered one-to-one support and found OERs a useful tool to encourage carers to consider education. An OLC from Dundee was using OERs as part of an Adult Achievement Award being piloted with Newbattle Abbey College.

Four had facilitated groups or courses, one an online group. Two had held one-off workshops or information sessions, including one for managers interested in *Caring Counts in the Workplace*. Some were still exploring the delivery method to be used. One was spurred on to devise a full training proposal with OERs embedded, while another was developing an overarching learning strategy across the whole organisation.

Another spoke of “the ripple effect” of sharing what they had gained from the workshop with other practitioners.

“the champion doesn’t have to do all the delivering to ensure the material is getting out there. The more professionals that know about it the more people there are to share the information with others” (OLC, Dundee)

Learner numbers and profile

Numbers provided were approximate in most cases and ranged from 4-5 to 20, reaching a potential total of 48 learners. Three had used the resources with parent carers, three with young adult carers, two with older carers and two with former carers. In addition, OLCs indicated they had used (or signposted to) the resources with volunteers, colleagues, managers and other professionals (who were working with young adult carers, users of SDS, and personal assistants).

“I supervise volunteers so open learning presents a positive opportunity for learning and development. The volunteers I supervise support carers on a 1-1 basis with a focus on wellbeing. In this way volunteers can pass information about adult learning on to the people they are mentoring” (OLC, Glasgow)

Learner outcomes and feedback

Most of the OLCs felt it was too soon to track learner outcomes. However, some reported continuing learning journeys. Four learners had enrolled on a massive online open course (mooc) *Caring for People with Psychosis and Schizophrenia* on FutureLearn. Seven learners were using Open Pathways to continue their learning journey, with one taking a badged open course. OLCs noted that knowing your learners and how they prefer to learn was important. Learners appreciated the flexibility of OERs.

“Most like the fact they can learn where and when they want and it’s not formal or stuffy.”
(OLC, Angus)

Recognition and support for OLCs

As with the OLCs from the pilot sites, respondents felt that their role as Open Learning Champion fit well with their support or training role at work. Many considered the role to be developing. Some felt they hadn’t yet had time to give the role justice but that there was huge scope for this. Four considered recognition for their role as very important and valued receiving the certificate for Open Learning Champions. One felt that this recognition validated their role and encouraged others into learning. Two had achieved or intended to achieve the badge for the *OpenLearn Guide for Social Partners* course and were keen to earn badges in order to demonstrate to learners. The Open Pathways pack and Guide for Open Learning Champions were also considered ‘very useful’ or ‘useful’ by every respondent.

Open Learning Champions network

An outcome of the first workshop was the creation of an online network for Open Learning Champions. This network was requested by participants at the initial workshop, and those attending subsequent workshops and OLCs from the pilot sites have been invited to join. As of October 2015, there were 19 members of the group, which is hosted on the social network site Yammer, but only a third of these are active contributors. Half of the OLCs responding to the survey found the online network useful, with the other three not using it.

Subsequent workshops

Subsequent workshops have taken place with new and existing OUIs learning partners, featuring themed OERs of relevance to their learner groups. A ‘standalone’ workshop in Glasgow, with the venue costs covered by the OUIs, was attended by just six people. The model of engaging with partners to provide the venue and to promote the workshop to colleagues, partner organisations and networks would appear to be a more sustainable approach.

Another feature of the workshops has been the involvement of OUIs associate lecturers, who have attended or co-facilitated. This has the impact of deepening their knowledge of open learning, and increasing their confidence in delivering similar workshops. In the future, this could potentially widen the capacity of OUIs to deliver workshops around the country.

Issues

- Though too soon to measure impact, the reach of the OLC workshop participants to learners was significant.
- A ‘ripple effect’ was also observed with colleagues and other professionals which suggests a potential impact beyond that of the initial cohort.
- Without the financial support provided for the pilots, there are limits to the expectation for OLCs to maintain monitoring and evaluation data. This could make it difficult to evidence learner outcomes in the long term.
- Despite interest expressed at the workshop, participation in the online network was low.
- The OLC workshop model may be more sustainable when delivered with interested learning partners, who can provide a venue and promote to their members and networks.

Recommendations

The OLC workshop model could be further rolled out in partnership with interested organisations, including third sector, community learning and development, libraries, colleges, and others.

To ensure a consistent approach, the OUiS should work with the other OU nations to develop an effective framework for monitoring and evaluation of OLC activity.

The OUiS should explore the potential of an online Hub, recently developed by the OEPS project, for a revitalised and more effective OLC community for sharing good practice and exploring learning opportunities. This could be complemented with regular contact from the project team through an e-newsletter.

An annual knowledge exchange event for OLCs could facilitate sharing of good practice and measuring the impact of OLC activity.

Conclusion

The Open Learning Champion (OLC) model draws on an existing relationship, for example between a carer and their support worker, to enable 'new learning in familiar spaces'. The findings from the OLC pilot demonstrate that this is an effective model which could enhance the social mobility of people who may not otherwise consider themselves to be learners.

The model has the potential to be scaled up, working with learning partners from trusted organisations to roll out OLC workshops, using Open Pathways to Higher Education and relevant open educational resources (OER). The report makes recommendations for additional resource for OLCs to increase their capacity to develop the model, the creation of a network of locally-based project staff, and increased capacity within The OUiS to develop and support this.

This evaluation report highlights the potential of this model to achieve life-changing outcomes for learners. However, there are inherent challenges in measuring the impact and longer-term outcomes of informal learning. Development of a longitudinal evidence base for progression from informal to formal learning would require sustained collaborative relationships with OLCs and learning partners to capture the data from learner journeys. A framework for monitoring and evaluation should be developed with the other OU nations to ensure a consistent approach.

"This is like a first step because I think now we're all enrolled, we're all students now. Anybody that's done an OU course I now refer to them as a student of the OU because... they can take it as far as they want or dip in and out of it." (OLC, Dumfries)

Appendix A: Case studies

Dumfries & Galloway Open Learning Champion: Fiona

Fiona is a carer support worker with the Dumfries and Galloway Carers Centre and facilitated the *Caring Counts* course as part of the Open Learning Champions pilot. Fiona is based in rural Wigtownshire. As the area is quite isolated, Fiona encouraged carers to take up the opportunity for online learning and felt that the course was a real benefit to them.

An initial attempt to get a course running last winter 'petered out' due to technical issues; weather, staff and carer commitments, and Christmas holidays. The pilot in 2015 took place in Stranraer and timing was again an issue with the summer holidays, but this time three carers completed and a further two are currently working through the course. School holidays are a particular issue for parent carers.

The group met up every two to three weeks and that seemed to work quite well. It might have been nicer to have a slightly larger group to bring out more conversation. One carer completed the course on paper as she didn't like working online. Another much preferred working on her tablet. Getting online and registering was relatively easy actually but there were some IT issues that the group figured out as they worked through the course. The course navigation worked well and you could save your progress. The quizzes could be a bit confusing but they were a good challenge and generated conversation and competition in the group. The carers' experiences on the course were fantastic, especially as some of them were local so the carers could relate to them. It felt real; it was real people's situations rather than actors. The course brought home to carers the skills that they have.

The fact that it's flexible, carers could pick it up and work through it at their own pace. One carer finished it in a matter of days, while others took weeks. It depends on their caring commitments and how comfortable they are making time for themselves. Carers felt guilty about taking time away from their caring role but they saw the benefit of focusing on their own needs, and looking at the future.

The Guide for Facilitators was useful, as was working through the course myself. I felt far more part of it and was able to empathise with carers if they were having difficulty and have a laugh about it. I now feel more confident promoting the course and supporting carers through it. It helped us all brush up on our computer skills and reflection as well. The course has been invaluable for carers but it's been an opportunity for me too and I've really enjoyed it.

As an Open Learning Champion, the short courses in Open Pathways are going to be great. We introduced the Open Pathways resource half way through the course, but we are planning a follow up session to explore it with all five carers. We can use things like the autism quiz to start discussions with groups. I'm going to look into what else is available for carers. It's important to have someone available [at the OU] for OLCs to contact for information and support.

Dumfries Open Learning Champion: Gillian

Gillian is a part-time Training Organiser with the Dumfries & Galloway Carers Centre and was involved in facilitating a group doing *Caring Counts* as part of the Open Learning Champions pilot in Dumfries.

Most people feel quite good about themselves at the end of the *Caring Counts* course. Carers tend to just get on with it and describe themselves as 'not working'. Once they've done the course, they see all the skills and knowledge they've gained from caring. That is a huge confidence booster and gaining the badge also benefits their learning. I think the course is ideal for carers, particularly those wanting to go back into the workplace, or to use their skills for volunteering or sitting on trustee boards.

I facilitated the group as well as working through the course as a carer myself. Having a caring role can be quite isolating so it was good to do it as a group. We met up for the first session and navigated the *Caring Counts* site. We met every 2-3 weeks and would set ourselves tasks between meetings, aiming to complete one session per week. All three carers who enrolled managed to complete it and we finished the course together at our final meeting, got our badges and celebrated with lunch.

When the group met up we would discuss the sessions we'd done since the last meeting. We got quite a lot from the quizzes. It was a challenge and we discussed the scenarios and the answers we didn't agree with. The scenarios prompted us to discuss some situations of our own. That's what makes it real. We also talked about things we discovered about ourselves, that we felt quite brave about writing down and it was like being given permission to write it down in your reflection log. Reflecting on your caring role is about looking back and finding the way forward. It's a very underused skill. If every carer doing the course learns the skill of reflecting and takes that on board, that is a very positive thing for them. We also had loads of discussions around IT issues and really increased our computer skills.

We went through the Open Pathways folders during one session, then went online and explored what we wanted to do. That was really interesting and again it was about finding our way around the computer. I can see a lot of people benefitting from the short courses. I think it's taking away the fear of learning some people have. It's flexible and easy to access. Some carers want to study but going to college can affect your benefits, and it's hard to fit your caring role around college hours. Now we've taken the first step, we're all enrolled with the OU, so we're all students now.

Now that the funding for the pilot is finished, I wouldn't have the capacity to provide the same level of support in my work hours, but I could run it again with a meeting at the beginning and the end and phone support in between. Having facilitated it I'm more confident about using the course with carers now. I've learnt an awful lot and I'm trying to get the carer support workers at the Centre to do the course too.

Shetland Open Learning Champions: Karen and Kirsten

Kirsten and Karen are carer support workers at Voluntary Action Shetland. As part of the Open Learning Champions pilot, they ran the *Caring Counts* course in two sites: urban Lerwick and rural Yell in the North Isles. Two carers have completed the course, while the Yell group is continuing to work through it.

The pilot project came about because the Centre was trying to create a 'virtual carers centre' with learning tools for carers. Karen was the outreach worker for the North Isles where there was a good number of carers and we were hoping to get them on-board for the course. We were also creating a policy for when someone comes to the end of their caring role and the course seemed to fit well with that too. It can support people who are looking at a change in direction in their lives. Not everyone who was interested signed up initially but we will revisit it, for example with the Crafty Carers Group and with ex-carers in Lerwick.

We had a vision of how it was going to work but we've had issues with IT and connectivity. We initially did a group session in Yell, where we thought we would get everybody logged on and we had problems, but people said they would do this at home. We thought we could have online chats, but the carers have been busy so they haven't really done it. They're still quite keen but they didn't want to do it on their own. It's also to do with how slow our internet is in the North Isles. We had planned a Skype meeting between the groups in Yell and Lerwick that lasted eight and a half minutes before we lost our internet completely. We chose the venue because it had good internet but it just didn't work. We didn't even have mobile signal to do it over the phone. So that was the end of that session. We're trying to get around this by loading the course content on to pen drives.

We're doing the course now with the carers support group, where we usually have a cup of tea and then an activity. It's a really good opportunity to talk about stuff that people don't normally get to talk about. When we first set up the group I was hoping that we would have more discussions, support each other and build up resilience. I think that the course has taken us to another stage now. It has helped to give the session a bit of focus rather than just a time out from caring.

The carers can find reflection a bit upsetting to begin with, thinking about some of the issues, but then feel better about it. It can help to share this with the group but some people prefer to keep it private. Another challenge for carers was making time for the course. Carers' time gets filled up quickly. One of them sets time aside when her husband's walking the dogs, so she's got a regular 45 minutes to do it. It's hard to maintain motivation but we keep in contact with them by email and give them deadlines to work to.

We distributed the Open Pathways pack as part of the timeline session but at that stage, people weren't thinking yet about continuing their learning. We plan to revisit it in session 7. The timeline session was great, there were some really good ideas about how to do it. One had a woven timeline and another was wanting to do it all based on music, songs from a period in her life. It could be a really powerful thing to do. We will go back and revisit that.

Dumfries and Galloway Open Learning Champion: Meg

Meg has been involved in various widening access projects with the Open University in Scotland as an Associate Lecturer and Project Officer for Dumfries and Galloway over 25 years. She was involved in developing the *Caring Counts* reflection course with Dumfries carers and facilitated the first offering of the course earlier this year.

Delivering the *Caring Counts* course was a continuation of my work with the Dumfries Carers Centre. Dumfries and Galloway is a big region and I was keen to involve Newton Stewart and Stranraer because there isn't much on offer here. The support workers identified carers who were interested in doing the course and we ran taster sessions. Some of the carers found it difficult to commit the time but we had three who completed the course.

Getting them started is hard, because the course is very clunky at the beginning and the badges can be confusing. I am sure we could lose people there. Once they had started then it's quite straightforward, but a lot of people are not very computer savvy. One carer struggled at the start but we got him on and he is able to do all sort of things on the computer that he hadn't been able to do before. So there are a lot of side benefits

The carers thoroughly enjoyed the reflection part. They felt it was something for them rather than the person they care for. They were able to reflect and realise the skills they had obtained over the time of being a carer. The sessions about jobs weren't as relevant as none of them were planning to return to work at the moment, but we explored interests rather than career goals. We had a follow up session and explored Open Pathways. Some of them planned to do further study with open learning courses and one has completed a Maths badged course.

Doing the course as a group works well as they like getting together and sharing their experiences and what they have learnt as carers. The peer support was very important and the fact that you have something to aim for. We would set a goal for the next meeting, and it was much easier to achieve that goal than if you set it yourself at home. Other things can get in the way when you are at home on your own. Some of the carers found that working through the course helped them to 'switch off' from the stress of their caring role.

Though I'm retiring this year, I still plan to be an Open Learning Champion. I am involved in a local Care Attendance Scheme and there might be some opportunity there to get people involved. We also have people who are living alone and regular social groups in the villages around the place. It's always in my mind and if people are showing an interest or if I think that they could benefit I would certainly be promoting it.

Diane, learner and carer, Dumfries and Galloway

The *Caring Counts* course wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. Working through the course at my own pace highlighted strengths I didn't know I had and made me aware that I've been through a lot and come out the other side. I made some new friends who I'm still in touch with and I've completed an Open University course, yes me! Not only that, I've very recently enrolled in a Maths course in OpenLearn. The *Caring Counts* course gave me an outlet, something to focus on and something for me. We all know that things for carers are few and far between.

Marion, learner and carer, Dumfries and Galloway

My caring role started after my daughter was diagnosed profoundly deaf and then with autism. I was unable to return to work as planned because I was my daughter's main carer. I joined the carers group for support and to meet others in a similar situation. I have been interested in finding something to take me 'away' from my caring role and open other doors, so when I heard of *Caring Counts* I decided to find out more and enrol on the course.

I have found the course interesting and it has made me realise I am not just a carer but a valuable member of the community. It has made me realise I have the capability to 'get out there' and use my skills and qualities to move on and try something different. I enjoyed the course as it was structured and got me back into thinking about studying. Meeting the others on the course gave me a reason to get out and meet up for a chat and help each other.

Looking to the future, I am going to use 'Open Pathways to Higher Education' to explore the Open University's free courses to see what else I can do.

Duncan, learner and carer, Dumfries & Galloway

My name's Duncan and I just took part in the *Caring Counts* course. I am a single parent with five children, some now grown up. I am a full-time carer for my thirteen year old son who has got Asperger's Syndrome and sometimes it can be quite challenging. I gave up my engineering career as I couldn't fit the hours around my caring role. A big reason I decided to do this course was to evaluate my life because I'm at a turning point, trying to juggle interests and career prospects, but my main priority is caring for my son.

There were challenges doing the course. It took maybe half a day to get to grips with the IT, and I ended up doing some of it on paper. Coming to the group meetings was good as we could help each other through it. It also meant we had a deadline, having to get the sessions done before the next meeting where we would discuss them as a group. There are so many responsibilities at home so I got up early to do the course when the house was quiet because I wanted to get the maximum benefit from it.

The course has helped me realise the importance of my caring role. There are some skills that are transferable to work: managing my time, being able to motivate myself, life structure, family routine. I reflected quite a lot throughout the course. Some of the carers' stories in the videos were very similar to my caring role and experiences.

The *Caring Counts* course helped me realise I want to do something for me, as well as caring. I plan to continue my learning, whether it is going to be Open University or whether it is going to be other things. I will look at some of the other short courses on Open Pathways. I will continue to learn about my son's condition and I'm getting more involved in Autism Scotland. I am learning all the time. I would recommend the course to any other carers because I think it was really helpful.

Jane, learner and carer, Dumfries & Galloway

I'm a parent of two boys with disabilities. Before then I didn't have any idea what a carer was, until nineteen years ago when I was hit square in the face. I'm a full time carer and a volunteer but I'm looking for a part-time job, just to be me. I miss the camaraderie of other people.

The *Caring Counts* course came along at just the right time. It helped me reflect on what I've been doing for thirteen years when I gave up nursing to be a carer. It gets your brain working in a different way, a way of thinking "actually I'm quite smart, I can pull this off, and maybe get a degree, or look at a different challenge". I had an interview yesterday and it was amazing, because I was using all these huge words and thinking where did that come from? It just flowed and I felt so confident. I mentioned that I'd done *Caring Counts* and I got my 'open badge' for it. The course really gets you thinking about what you actually do and what your value is.

I had to be selfish to make time for the course and that's not like me. I had to make time for myself, which I never do. I got through the two weeks and the hubby and the kids all made it fine. I think it made them realise just how much I do, so it has been a benefit for all of us. For a little course, it's really opened up quite a lot.

Kim, learner and carer, Shetland

I care for both my children, my son is autistic and my daughter has lots of medical issues, and I also care for my mum who has severe arthritis. I also home school my children, I'm a volunteer and I'm a student with the Open University, working towards a degree in Childhood and Youth Studies. So I'm a very busy person!

I decided to do the *Caring Counts* course when I had a break in my studies and because I'm involved in the carers group. I'm used to studying so I was able to manage the time, but the biggest challenge was internet connectivity in Shetland which made the videos hard to download.

Before I did the course I didn't realise all the skills I have and everything I do in my caring role. It's usually just day in, day out and you don't really see you're learning anything, like multi-tasking, organising hospital appointments, and communication skills. It has opened up my eyes to exactly what I do. It was also good to know that there are other people out there going through the same thing. The carers' stories make you feel that you are not alone and you can see people coming through their caring roles, that their lives still carry on.

I was already looking towards the future with the Open University anyway. Studying is my way of having time to myself, something for me.

Appendix B

Open Learning Champions workshop programme

Open Learning Champions Workshop Eric Liddell Centre, Edinburgh 16.6.15

The aims of the workshop are:

- To increase your understanding of open learning resources, including *Caring Counts: a reflection and planning course for carers*
- To give you an overview of the OUiS Open Pathways to Higher Education
- To explore ideas for how to use this with learners
- To get plenty of hands on practice
- Networking and partnership building
- To leave you with a clear idea of what you can do as an Open Learning Champion

Programme

10.00 – 10.30 Introductions

Caring Counts: a reflection and planning course for carers

Hands on: Registering for an OU account

Facilitating the course

Discussion: Working with Groups

Moving on from *Caring Counts*: Using Open

Pathways to Higher Education

12.30- 1.00 Lunch

What is an Open Learning Champion?

Hands on: Exploring OpenLearn

Discussion: Ideas for using OpenLearn with your learners

Social Partners Badged Course

2.45 – 3.00 Evaluation – participation in OUiS evaluation/case studies

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Scotland

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Gill Ryan and Lindsay Hewitt
The Open University in Scotland
April 2016

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