

Policy for the admission of applicants under the age of 18

1. Introduction

Following the decision of the University Senate in November 2006 to reduce the minimum age of entry to 16 in line with Age Discrimination legislation, this policy addresses a small number of restrictions for students aged 16 and 17 (see sections 5 and 6 below) and, in response to the increasing number of applicants to The Open University who are under 16, aims to ensure consistency in the exceptional admission of this cohort.

The University also has a separate Safeguarding policy to protect its students who are under 18 (see www.open.ac.uk/student-policies/p3.shtml).

2. Young Applicants in Schools and Colleges Scheme (YASS)

Students who are 16 or 17 years old and are attending a school or college which offers the Young Applicants in Schools and Colleges Scheme (YASS) are encouraged to seek to join The Open University through YASS, as doing so will provide a higher level of support through the school or college.

YASS is normally open to students in years 12 or 13 in England and Wales/ years 13 or 14 in Northern Ireland/ S6 in Scotland.

In the case of England and Wales, students in Year 11 (and those in year 12 in Northern Ireland) may be admitted as they will have reached the age of 16 in that academic year. Schools are advised **not** to register their students for a module starting before the May presentation to avoid conflict with GCSEs. It does not make academic sense to study at Level 4 before students complete their GCSEs (Level 2). Science short modules beginning in May will not interfere with the successful conclusion of the student's GCSEs; those in arts and technology do not offer the same flexibility. Scottish schools wishing to register students below S6 will be referred to the procedure for individual applicants.

Any student in a school who does not meet the criteria above will be considered according to Section 3 below, and if successful, may then be registered through YASS and receive the higher level of support referred to above.

Modules in the University's Openings programme are not directly promoted through YASS as they do not offer the same level of 'stretch and challenge' to gifted and talented students, which is the rationale of the Scheme. For further information on YASS, please refer to www.open.ac.uk/yass

3. Students under 16 years of age

The University will exceptionally consider applications from students under the age of 16.

The University wishes to ensure that study at The Open University is right for students who have not yet reached the age of 16 by the start of their module. It is considered that the University's style of teaching – 'supported open learning' – may not suit some young students. Applicants from this age group need to appreciate that they will mostly be learning on their own and in their own time – in their own home or perhaps at school or college –

through activities such as working through module material delivered either through printed units or online, writing assignments and at times working with other adult students. They will need to be aware that they will have to use a variety of media to facilitate their learning, such as printed material, cd-rom and software, websites, online conferencing, DVDs and home experiment kits.

All applicants under the age of 16 will be advised of the following:

- that studying at university level in this way, on their own and in their own time, will be demanding;
- that studying with The Open University involves not just understanding what is being read, but also the ability to communicate that understanding through assignments at Higher Education level and through discussion with others;
- that they will need to be able to manage their time effectively and develop strong study and organisational skills (such as the ability to take responsibility for their own learning by seeking help when it is needed), follow strict timetables, plan ahead and meet deadlines;
- that their learning will be supported by a personal tutor (or, in the case of some short modules, by a study adviser) and the Learner Support Team at regional and national centres.

Applicants who are under the age of 16 will be required to demonstrate to the University's reasonable satisfaction that they will be able to meet these demands and will be able to cope with The Open University's supported open learning style of teaching.

The admission process for applicants under the age of 16 is described in section 4 below.

Where there is doubt about the readiness of applicants who are under the age of 16 for study with The Open University, they may be referred to alternative opportunities (perhaps as a precursor to studying with The Open University) for example, studying a module by distance learning through the National Extension College (NEC) (www.nec.ac.uk/info/) or taking up one of the wide range of activities for gifted and talented children in England, including taster modules or residential schools offered by other universities. Prospective students in Scotland may be referred to LearnDirect Scotland (www.learnirectscotland.com).

Applicants under the age of 16, who are considered ready for university-level study will be encouraged to enter at Level one, which is the equivalent of first year study at a conventional university – see <http://www3.open.ac.uk/studyatou/new/>

Parents, guardians or carers will be encouraged to get involved in their child's application. However, applicants themselves will be required to confirm that it is their own firm wish to undertake their chosen course of study.

Applicants under the age of 16 will be encouraged to discuss their study plans informally with an adviser who has responsibility for younger students in their regional or national centre.

4 Admissions process for applicants under the age of 16

Applicants under the age of 16 at the start of their chosen module will be required to demonstrate that The Open University is right for them, that they are ready for The Open University's style of supported open learning, and that the module and level they have chosen are appropriate for them. These aspects will be considered as part of the admissions process. Each application will be considered on its own merits.

Applicants will be asked to provide:

- a written record of any previous academic achievement;

- a written statement in their own words giving their reasons for wishing to study with The Open University, explaining their interest (and the reasons for their interest) in their chosen field of study;
- a short piece of writing in answer to a question appropriate to their academic interest, for which they may be referred to a section of the University's *OpenLearn* website (www.openlearn.open.ac.uk), and
- (in line with the University's general *Conditions of registration*) a written statement from their headteacher or head of year supporting their application if they are attending school or college full time.

Once this written information has been received, the applicant will be invited along with their parent or guardian to meet and discuss their application with an Open University Assistant Director (in the case of Scotland, the Depute Director), or an educational adviser and a Staff Tutor with responsibility for the academic programme in their regional and national centre. In exceptional circumstances this meeting may take place by telephone (for example, if the applicant has a disability or would have to travel a substantial distance to attend in person and it would be unreasonable to expect the young applicant to make the journey). The aim of this meeting is to assist staff in considering the application more fully and for them to be assured that the proposed study is right for the young person. It will also provide the applicant with an important opportunity to explore more fully what study at The Open University will entail; the appropriateness of the module and of the level at which they are seeking to study; what alternative opportunities might be available; and whether, in the light of this exploration, they wish to proceed with their application.

The meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss with the applicant whether any specific arrangements should be made if they were to study at The Open University (for example, in relation to a disability or attendance at tutorials, residential schools or day schools).

If the application is for a week-long residential school, specific consideration will be given to whether it is appropriate and in the applicant's best interests to attend and, if so, whether any specific arrangements should be made, including the attendance of a chaperone. This consideration will also include the exploration of alternative learning experiences (where these exist) which provide the same core learning outcomes as the residential school.

Following the meeting, the application will be considered by a National Director/Assistant Director, Student Services*, to whom a recommendation will be made as to whether or not the applicant should be permitted to register as a student with The Open University for a particular module at a particular level. If permission to register is given, any specific arrangements in connection with the proposed study at The Open University (for example, in relation to a disability or attendance at tutorials, day schools or residential schools) will be taken into account. The decisions about whether or not to register the applicant as a student of The Open University and on which module and at which level (and whether any specific arrangements are to be made in connection with their study) will be made by the National Director/Assistant Director, Student Services*.

Applicants will be notified in writing of the decision of the National Director/Assistant Director, Student Services*. If the decision is that they are not to be permitted to register as a student, applicants will be provided with a brief explanation as to why The Open University does not consider that study at the University is right for them at this time.

Applications should be submitted to the Young Applicants Team, Student Registration & Enquiry Service via the applicant's regional or national centre.

* National Director (for national centres in Scotland, Ireland and Wales) and Assistant Director, Student Services (for English regional centres)

5 Applicants under 16 – second and subsequent Open University modules

If, having been registered by The Open University as a student on a module, students subsequently apply to study on a further module with the University and will still be under the age of 16 at the start of the new module, their subsequent application will be considered under the process set out in section 4 above. However it may not be considered necessary to invite the young applicant to a further meeting. Advice and guidance will continue to be provided through the regional or national Learner Support section.

Normally, it is expected that, if students have previously studied satisfactorily with the University, further study at The Open University in the same subject area at a similar level will be right for them. However, the University may wish to consider any subsequent application in more detail if there is evidence of difficulty in meeting the demands of university-level study by open learning methods in their previous module, or if the subsequent application proposes a change in subject choice and/or level. In these circumstances the student may be invited to a further meeting to discuss their application.

The decision whether or not to register the student on a further module (and whether any specific arrangements are to be made in connection with their further study at The Open University) will be made by a National Director/Assistant Director, Student Services*.

6 All applicants under the age of 18

Advice and Guidance

Although YASS students receive additional support from their school (see section 2), it is recognised that **individual** applicants aged 16 and 17 may need more support before registration than traditional applicants. They will automatically be referred by the Young Students Team of the Student Registration & Enquiry Service to the applicant's local regional or national centre in order to help the applicant decide whether or not to proceed to registration.

Contractual Issues

A student under the age of 18 may enter into contracts for education without the consent of their parents, guardians or carers and the University's contract for the services we provide will rest directly with the student (see also section 7).

The registration agreement for students under the age of 18 will ask for a parental signature to confirm that they have read and understood the University's safeguarding guidelines for students of this age.

Support from parents, guardians or carers during the module of the child's study is welcome, but it should be recognised that the teaching relationship is between the child and the University, and the child must be able to determine his or her own progress through the module. (The University's guidelines on Advocacy apply to students under 18.)

Suitability of Modules

Some Open University modules may contain material which is inappropriate for students under the age of 18 on safeguarding grounds. Such modules contain material which has been externally rated as suitable for adults only (for example, including a discussion of an "18" film) or where the learning leads to a qualification only open to an adult (for example, social work) or involves an adult activity and access to vulnerable adults (for example,

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counselling). All new modules will be scrutinised for their suitability for students under 18 as part of the module approval process under the above criteria and will be identified accordingly. The content of continuing modules will also be examined to ensure that it is suitable for this age group.

Other modules may be considered 'unsuitable' because the materials, which are not controversial in their own right, may lead to a discussion of an adult nature – either at a face-to-face tutorial or on an online forum. The attention of students and their parents/guardians/carers will be drawn to the risk of the student being confronted by 'adult material' as a result of contributions from other students.

Some modules may be thought to require a level of 'life experience' in order to do them justice. A student under 18 who applies for such a module will be given appropriate advice and guidance but cannot be excluded on grounds of age.

7 Financial support for students under the age of 18

The Open University offers financial support for both module fees and study-related costs.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this support is in the form of non-repayable grants and is based on any income that the student may have and, if they have one, their partner's (but not parental) income. As the support is in the form of grants, there are no upper or lower age limits on the support offered by the University. In addition to meeting the financial criteria, the student will need to be studying towards a qualification. Financial support is not available if the young student is studying with the University as part of a group or programme organised by their school or college.

In Scotland financial support for fees is through an ILA Scotland £200 learner account, part-time fee grant or the part-time fee waiver scheme. None of these is available if the young student is under 16. Please contact the Enrolment & Fees team at The Open University in Scotland for specific information.

Although the contract for the **services** the University provides to the student is directly with the student, it is not possible to enter into a **financial** contract with students who are under the age of 18. Payment for a module will be accepted from the parent/guardian/carer on the student's behalf. It is not possible to accept payment by instalments by a third party through the Open University Student Budget Account.

8 Right of appeal

A student under the age of 18 may appeal against a decision to refuse their application to study. The appeal should be made in writing to the University's Complaints and Appeals Office within two weeks of the notification of the refusal. The student will need to give their reasons for appealing (attaching any information or correspondence that they believe is relevant). The case for appeal should be based on more than a simple statement of disagreement with the decision taken: for example, on evidence not previously available. The appeal will be passed to the Director, Students, who will consider whether there are grounds for upholding the appeal and whether the decision was taken fairly and correctly in accordance with the University's policy and procedures, with all the appropriate information taken into account.

The Director, Students will send a reply, or an acknowledgement indicating when a full answer will be given (or is likely to be given), within ten working days of the date of the Complaints and Appeals Office's acknowledgement letter.

Approved by the Director, Student Services, April 2011
(*minor updates June and August 2011*)