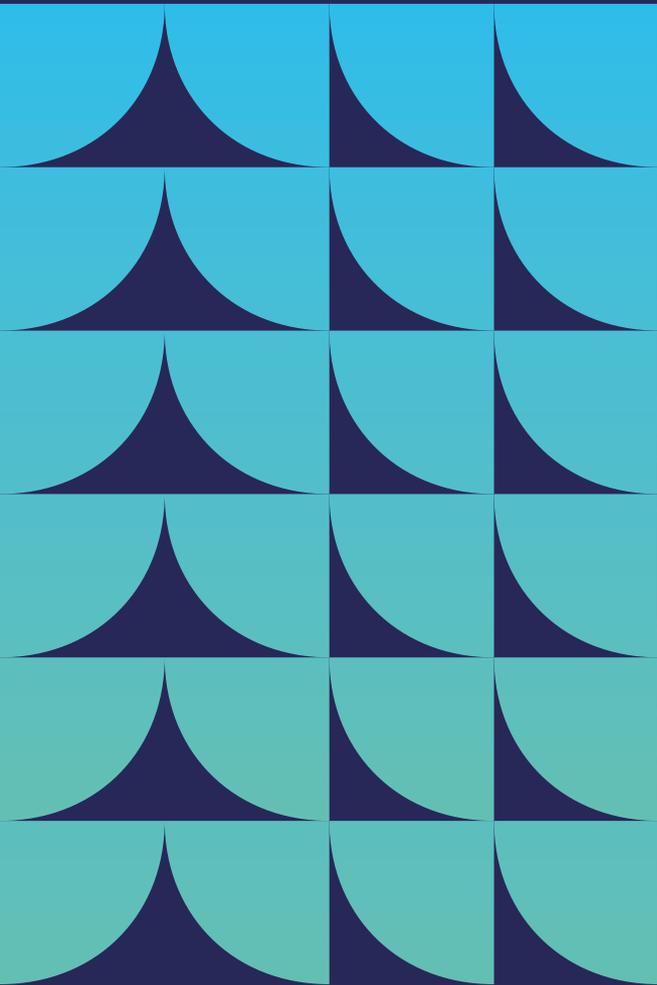


The future is flexible

The Open University's vision for the 2022–27
Northern Ireland Assembly



Embedding a culture of **lifelong learning** in our society will be a game-changer. Essential to that is accessible **part-time, flexible** higher education.

#TheFutureisFlexible

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Director's introduction

In recent years our lives, society and economy have been challenged in ways we could never have anticipated. We have had to adapt to change at an unprecedented scale, reassessing our priorities and valuing those that are most important to us.

The Open University remains passionately committed to people, places, methods and ideas. Through the power of learning we aim to transform lives and communities, opening up a world of possibilities for everyone. We have extended our reach into local communities through our work with:

- Further Education Colleges
- Knowledge Exchange Programmes
- Business Partnerships
- The Community Partnerships Project

This local connection is evidenced by the fact that **85% of our graduates remain where they studied** meaning this investment in knowledge and skills stays in their communities. I am proud that The Open University has risen to these challenges and supported our students and the communities they live in. For the eighteenth year running, we were voted the number one university in Northern Ireland for Overall Student Satisfaction.

The Open University welcomes the renewed focus on lifelong learning, both formal and informal, in addressing social issues, strengthening communities and building civic engagement. It is the most effective tool for meeting social policy objectives and creating positive social change.

An expert in lifelong learning, The Open University's reach and impact demonstrates how learning enables people to realise their potential.

Accessible, flexible, part-time further and higher education is fundamental to creating a culture of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland, and essential for addressing skills gaps, building better jobs and better lives for all citizens, as we transition to a more inclusive, net-zero economy.

The Open University's mission is to open up education and lifelong learning to all our citizens, and to be a movement for change. It is in that spirit that I am proud to present The Open University in Northern Ireland's manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly election and I urge all political parties to take our asks on board.

We look forward to working with you all.



John D'Arcy
Director of The Open University in Ireland



Executive summary

In recent years our lives, society and economy have been utterly transformed, beyond even our imaginations.

Our vision

Embedding a culture of lifelong learning in our society will be a game-changer. Essential to that is accessible part-time, flexible higher education.

Recognising its value and prioritising its growth is key to addressing skills shortages, economic productivity, regional imbalances, and social inclusion.

A flexible, higher education system which values part-time study and supports skills development will build a stronger economy and a more inclusive society across Northern Ireland.

As Northern Ireland recovers and rebuilds, The Open University is ready to play our part.

Key asks

1. A statutory right to lifelong learning

The Assembly should officially recognise the inherent value of learning and legislate for a statutory right to lifelong learning.

The Northern Ireland Assembly should introduce a Lifelong Learning Bill so that anyone can access learning when they need it.

2. A sustainable higher education funding model

Making part-time flexible further and higher education meaningfully accessible is essential.

Part-time students are more likely to be older and in lower paid jobs; to be female and have caring responsibilities, or a disability.

Part-time students should have access to loans that cover the full cost of the course, maintenance support and the childcare grant.

3. Prioritisation of investment in skills

Investing in skills is investing in our future. A ring-fenced skills fund that transcends annual budgets will help us build a modern, prosperous, and more sustainable economy.

Strategic workforce planning and policy integration should be in place between the Department for Health and Department for the Economy.



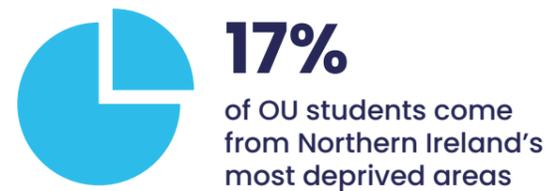
Key ask one

A statutory right to lifelong learning so that anyone can access learning when they need it.

The Assembly should officially recognise the inherent value of learning and legislate for a statutory right to lifelong learning.

► We call on the incoming Northern Ireland Assembly to introduce a **Lifelong Learning Bill**.

We must make education meaningfully accessible to all who want or need to access it, at any stage of life. To make this a reality we must take action to overcome existing barriers to education.



Students studying with the OU are more likely to be female, and have additional caring responsibilities



78%
of OU students work full or part-time

The Northern Ireland Assembly should:

- Encourage alternative routes to education e.g. further education and apprenticeships
- Put education at the heart of the criminal justice system
- Incentivise part-time higher education making it more accessible
- Invest in community education
- Create more educational opportunities for refugees, asylum speakers and BAME citizens
- Remove arbitrary age limits to accessing education
- Eradicate digital poverty and commit to zero digital exclusion
- Enable those with a disability and long-term health issues (including mental health) to access education in an easier way, recognising the positive impact of education on well-being
- Produce a new strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy
- Support those on Universal Credit who wish to engage in education and ensure their benefits are not penalised for accessing funding

Student spotlight



BSc Computing student Rasha came from Syria to Northern Ireland as a refugee.

University study had been a dream, but difficult circumstances had made following this path impossible. After seeing an advert for The Open University's Community Partnerships Project she decided to study an access course at a local women's centre.



The Open University's flexible distance learning model, has empowered me to achieve my goals by fitting my studies around my life. My improved knowledge and language skills, mean I am able to support my children with their studies, and can look forward to a good job in the IT sector in the future.

Rasha
BSc Computing



Key ask two

A sustainable higher education funding model which recognises the holistic costs of part-time higher education.

Ensuring part-time flexible further and higher education is accessible to all is core to lifelong learning. Part-time students should have access to loans that cover the full cost of the course, maintenance support and the childcare grant.

It is now widely recognised that a single period of concentrated study – often by school leavers – doesn't meet the needs of society today. Yet the higher education funding model in Northern Ireland is designed around full-time school leavers preventing access to education for all.

Research shows part-time students are particularly price sensitive, they are more likely to be older and in lower paid jobs, to be female and have caring responsibilities, or a disability.

Maintenance support is key to overcoming financial barriers to higher education study and is evidenced by the 35% increase in part-time higher education after the Welsh government introduced maintenance loans for part-time study in 2018. This included a 49% increase in students at The Open University, with a 67% increase in students from Wales' most economically disadvantaged areas, a 57% increase in disabled students and a 30% increase in BME learners.*

 Maintenance support is key to overcoming financial barriers to higher education study.

Part-time students do not have a level playing field

Support available/study mode	Full-time	Part-time
Maintenance Grant	✓	✗
Special Support Grant	✓	✗
Maintenance Loan	✓	✗
Childcare Grant	✓	✗
Parental Learning Allowance	✓	✗

Student spotlight



An adverse childhood left Michelle with a life long passion to work with vulnerable children and young people. However after being diagnosed with a chronic neurological condition, and with a young family, Michelle's dreams felt out of reach until she discovered the flexible distance learning options with The Open University.



I felt that degrees were for other people, not for people like me. The OU experience has shown me that no matter what background you have, or what your life situation is, the OU team are there to support you in every step of your learning journey.

Michelle
BSc Health and Social Care

To remove these barriers to lifelong learning the Northern Ireland Assembly should:

- Develop a maintenance support model that works for part-time learners
- Ensure that tuition fee grants and loans cover the full cost of part-time courses as recommended in the OECD Skills Strategy research
- Extend childcare grants, the parental learning allowance and special support grants to part-time students
- Address the long-term under-investment in higher education in Northern Ireland without placing the burden on students
- Introduce student finance options for modular study
- Allow access to student finance for those who wish to gain another qualification in a strategic growth area

Key ask three

Investment in skills supports social inclusion and economic growth and should be our economic priority.

The Northern Ireland Assembly's commitment to skills and the impact of the new Skills Strategy for a 10x Economy Strategy will be limited if investment is not prioritised.

In order to fulfil the proposed Skills Strategy commitment to publish a two, five and ten year plan, a ring-fenced skills fund is essential.

In the last decade, we've seen a significant drop in skills investment in Northern Ireland. We have lost our competitive advantage and this must be rectified if we are to provide opportunities and meaningful employment to all in our society. We can do better.

Investment in skills supports social inclusion and economic growth and should be our economic priority.

It is crucial that our public services, and those who provide them, are protected. We can do this by creating a more balanced economy with equal opportunity which is linked to improved social mobility, better health and decreased crime levels.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, The Open University has worked with the Department for the Economy to provide microcredentials and short courses to help those whose employment has been impacted to upskill and reskill.

We want to extend our work as partner with government, employers, and the newly appointed Skills Council to provide skills support at scale.

 Microcredentials are accredited short courses that allow you to gain specialist knowledge and practical skills to help advance your career.

Supporting our health and social care workers

The pandemic has deepened the crisis facing the health service in Northern Ireland. Robust investment in the skills of our health and social care staff is needed to address workforce, recruitment and retention issues. To achieve this, strategic workforce planning and policy integration between the Department for Health and Department for the Economy is needed. Improving skills, jobs and roles will lead to better healthcare and patient outcomes.

The Open University is willing to play our part.

For over 17 years, we have delivered a **highly successful work-based pre-registration nursing programme** in partnership with healthcare employers. Our students are already employed as healthcare assistants within the Health and Social Care Trusts and the independent sector, and train on the job, whilst studying part-time to become a fully registered nurse.

To ensure skills are prioritised, the incoming Northern Ireland Assembly should:

- Introduce a ring-fenced skills fund
- Engage in strategic workforce planning and policy integration between the Department for Health and Department for the Economy
- Invest in innovations such as microcredentials relevant to identified skills gaps and building a green economy
- Introduce Training Leave Legislation
- Incentivise SMEs to invest in skills development for their workers
- Work closely with trade unions to identify the needs of workers as our economy transforms

Student spotlight



Leona is studying an Adult Nursing degree with The Open University. A mum of three boys, she has her hands full juggling the demands of working as a Child Health Assistant in the Public Health Nursing Team in the Northern Trust, studying for her degree and looking after her family.

I love the opportunity to study and gain valuable clinical skills, working on various wards for my practical placements and meeting all kinds of people. It has taught me determination, resilience and strength. I feel great confidence when I have passed my assignments and I am ready for the next one!

Leona
BSc Adult Nursing



Since completing his education, Peter's career progression improved. He started working with Almac as part of their analytical team and he is now a Technical Leader in Mass Spectrometry. Along with full-time employment, the OU worked around Peter to ensure that he could still complete his new degree. A perfect combination of academic study and real-life practice.

The ability to obtain practical experience in a global organisation in many varied operational environments helped complete my understanding of the theory I was learning on my course.

Peter
BSc Open

▶ **33%** of our students are studying a STEM subject



The power of part-time

Four reasons why part-time flexible learning is the future.

1

It's for everyone

Part-time higher education plays a key role in supporting those for whom the traditional university route is either unaffordable or impractical. Students who study part-time are more likely to be older and have caring responsibilities.

In 2021/22 1,004 OU students in Northern Ireland registered with a disability or mental health condition. 1,200 Open University students come from Northern Ireland's most deprived areas.

2

It costs less

Course fees for a part-time undergraduate degree with The Open University in Northern Ireland is £1,074 per year or £6,444 in total compared with up to £14,130 to study full-time at other universities in Northern Ireland.

3

It supports economic growth

Those who enter The Open University in Northern Ireland with GCSEs as their highest prior qualification could earn an extra £219,000 on average in real terms over their career.

The financial benefit of The Open University's formal teaching and learning activities for the 2018-19 cohort in Northern Ireland is £21.3m — with a further £11.8m contributed to the public purse through income-based taxation.

In total, The Open University's activities in Northern Ireland boosted the economy by £50.4m in 2018-19

4

It's responsive to the needs of employers and employees

Part-time and distance provision can be more easily shaped around the needs of businesses and fit around the lives of employees. Less time out of work is required for these flexible study modes. Shorter, flexible study more rapidly creates the benefits that businesses require. And shorter sub-degree qualifications, whose loans can be repaid more quickly, benefit the public purse.

About The Open University

The Open University (OU) is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in supported distance learning.

The university was founded with a clear purpose: to open up education to all. Since it began in 1969, the OU has taught more than 2.3 million students, and it currently has over 208,308 students, of which 37,078 students with declared disabilities.

We promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality, university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. We are here to help individuals, local business, the community, and the economy of Northern Ireland.

The Open University in Northern Ireland

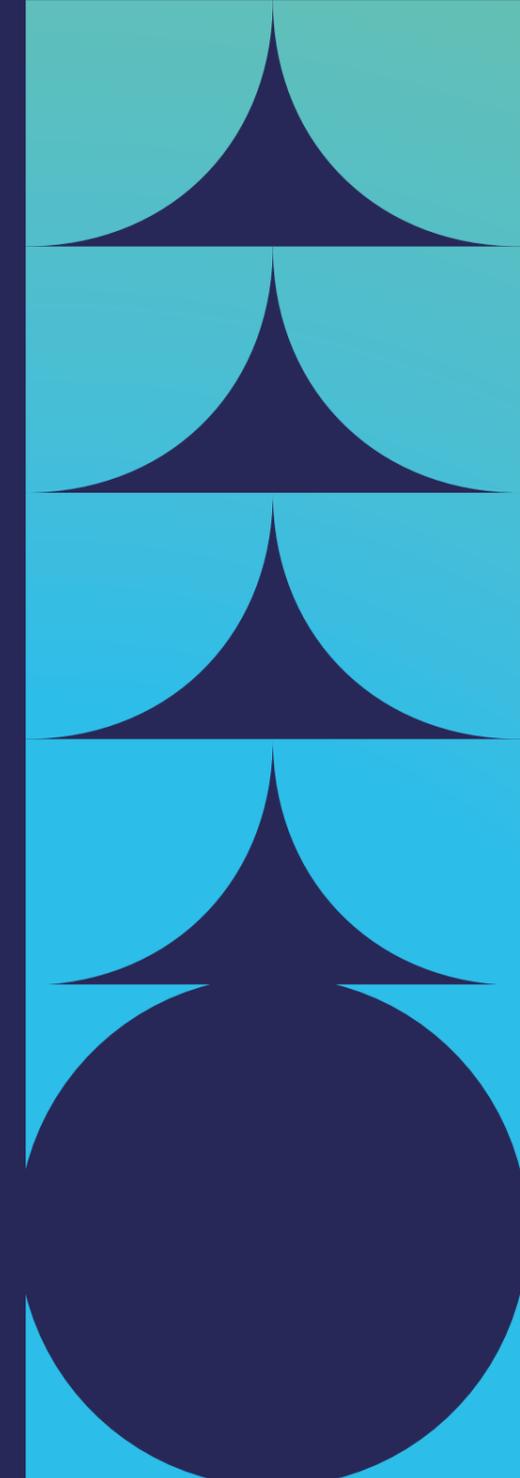
- The only university in Northern Ireland dedicated to supported distance learning, we are open to people, places, methods, and ideas. We are proud to have an overall student satisfaction rating of 88% and have the highest rating among Northern Ireland providers for the last 18 years.
- There are over **7,191 Open University students in Northern Ireland**, across every constituency with over 78% of students in full-time or part-time employment.
- The Open University supports 210 FTE jobs in Northern Ireland.
- The Open University's activities in Northern Ireland boosted the UK economy by £50.4m
- The total benefit to students of the OU's formal teaching and learning activities for the 2018–19 cohort in Northern Ireland is £21.3m.

Constituency	OU students in 2021/22
East Belfast	380
North Belfast	302
South Belfast	392
West Belfast	270
East Antrim	298
East Londonderry	202
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	189
Foyle	203
Lagan Valley	350
Mid Ulster	176
Newry and Armagh	246
North Antrim	232
North Down	272
South Antrim	319
South Down	280
Strangford	285
Upper Bann	381
West Tyrone	150

 Find out more
open.ac.uk/northern-ireland



A flexible, higher education system which values part-time study and supports skills development will build a stronger economy and a more inclusive society across Northern Ireland.



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