

A consultation response from The Open University (OU) to the Department for Communities on a new Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland

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The Open University (OU) is the largest academic institution in the UK and a world leader in flexible 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 million students, and it currently has over 168,000 students, including more than 7,000 overseas. The OU has more than 27,000 students with declared disabilities.

The OU's operation within Northern Ireland is funded by the Department for the Economy, making it one of three universities here. We provide high quality distance learning to over 4,212 students in Northern Ireland most of whom study part-time. Students are supported by a team of Student Services staff in the Belfast office, in addition to Associate Lecturer and tutors.

Widening participation and social mobility is core to the OU's mission. Our part-time, flexible learning model plays a pivotal role by enabling individuals, regardless of their background, to fulfil their potential and earn a degree. Our 'open entry' policy means that no one is excluded, as traditional entry qualifications are not a prerequisite to study with us.

In terms of the Sport and Physical Activity, we provide access to a range of formal and informal learning materials and experiences to everyone in Northern Ireland in the following ways:

- (a) Formal study and qualifications
- (b) Free online content
- (c) Working with sporting governing bodies, such as FIFA, to strengthen standards and professionalise safeguarding standards in sport

(a) Formal study and qualifications

Students who choose a Sport and Fitness degree at The Open University will develop skills and understanding of sports science, psychology, training, coaching and leadership. The modules provided by the Faculty apply science and theory to practice, reflecting on case studies or real and potential work situations.

We offer the following qualifications:

- [BSc \(Honours\) Sport, Fitness and Coaching \(Q76\)](#)
- [Diploma of Higher Education in Sport and Fitness \(W07\)](#)
- [Certificate of Higher Education in Sport, Fitness and Management \(T05\)](#)
- [BA/BSc \(Honours\) Open degree \(QD\)](#)
- [BSc \(Honours\) Combined STEM \(R28\)](#)

(b) Free online content

The OU is a world leader in innovation and in developing technology to increase access to education on a global scale. The OU's Open Educational Resources (OER) have significant Sports and Fitness content and are accessible to anyone who has access to the Internet, on a PC, tablet or mobile device. This may be particularly appealing to rural communities who have limited physical access to such opportunities. It also appeals to those groups who are marginalised, for example carers, disabled people and those with limited access to travel.

OpenLearn

[OpenLearn](#) is the OU's free to use learning platform with over 15,000 hours of online courses and content available to all. Around 10 million people visit this site every year.

With over 950 short courses (varying from 1-1000 hours of study), learners can explore a vast array of subjects, get inspiration, build skills and confidence and earn recognition if they wish (via badged open courses), all for free. The dedicated Sports and Fitness section covers subjects such as sports psychology, nutrition and working with young people.

FutureLearn

[FutureLearn](#), founded by the OU in 2012, is now Europe's largest social learning platform delivering short massive open online courses (known as MOOCs) and micro-credentials. It partners with over a quarter of the world's top universities including Trinity College Dublin and Dublin City University. Subjects such as Mental Skills Training for Sport and Health and Supporting Physical Development in Early Childhood are included.

(c) Working with sporting governing bodies, such as FIFA, to strengthen standards and professionalise safeguarding standards in sport

The [FIFA Guardians Safeguarding in Sport Diploma](#) is a large-scale global education programme designed to strengthen and professionalise safeguarding standards across football. It was developed by the OU's faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, in collaboration with FIFA, global safeguarding experts, practitioners and academics in the field.

In line with FIFA's long-term commitment to professionalise and embed child and adult safeguarding standards across the game, the course provides the 211 FIFA member associations with a dedicated interactive educational resource to develop safeguarding best practice. The course can be used across the world and will benefit a wide audience as it is available in English, French and Spanish.

The five online courses are open and freely accessible at no cost to other learners that work, volunteer, support or play sports and want to learn more about safeguarding. If all five courses are successfully completed, they will be awarded the FIFA Guardians in Sport Award by the OU.

COVID-19 pandemic

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has created and exacerbated barriers for many, it has also encouraged new ways of working and opportunities for collaboration.

As part of The Open University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has developed a partnership with the Department for the Economy to provide a free learning toolkit for those impacted by the pandemic. The OU has also partnered with Invest NI to provide a new innovation learning hub to support SMEs to re-power their businesses during the recovery period. The courses are free with no cost for businesses and all employees can participate, with no limit on how many can be completed.

The OpenLearn platform was set up by the OU as a commitment to support the well-being of the community. This has been especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic when the website traffic quadrupled, recording an average of 40,000 visits per day during the first week when schools and many businesses were closed. Since then over 160,000 people per day have taken advantage of the free content and courses on offer.

The Open University welcomes the opportunity to discuss any of the above and how the OU can support the Sports and Physical Activity Strategy development.

