

Universities (Public Mission Agreement) Bill – The OU in Ireland Response – 25/03/ 21

1. Do you believe there is a need for more transparency and accountability in respect of Higher Education providers in receipt of public funding?

Yes, the OU believe that any organisation in receipt of public funding should never shy away from increased transparency and accountability. We are happy to sign up to these proposed terms:

(i) Publication of all senior staff pay and costs, including a detailed breakdown of Vice Chancellor's salary, expenses, and pension contributions.

(ii) Level of proportionality between pay grades and Institutional budgets.

(iii) All regulations relating to staff dismissal, discipline and grievance procedures must be made publicly available.

(iv) The level of dialogue and engagement granted to trade unions and affected staff in redundancy and redeployment processes.

(v) Fair employment terms and conditions as defined in the Good Jobs Index.

(vi) There must be fairness and equivalence in salaries and wages regardless of gender.

The Department for the Economy already receives information of this nature, but increased transparency would be welcome. We believe the OU are exemplary in terms of fair pay and equal opportunity for all staff.

Similar requirements have been placed on our colleagues at the OU in Scotland, as a result of their Outcome Agreements and similar legislation, without issue.

2. Do you believe that the Bill proposal facilitates an adequate balance between institutional autonomy and accountability?

Yes, the bill makes clear it will not inhibit the Right to Academic Freedoms.

We would caution that measurements are not burdensome or fixated on full-time or young learners. The bill should recognise and accommodate for different methods of delivery.

A focus on retention and progression would not be helpful (e.g. the percentage progressing from year one to year two) The Open University has a largely part-time student population. The full picture of our work cannot be captured using this metric. A focus on student satisfaction and success would be more appropriate.

At the Open University, our students come first. We are proud to have an overall student satisfaction rating of 91% and have the highest rating among Northern Ireland providers for the last 16 years.

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3. Do you believe that this Bill will provide the wider public with a better understanding of the contribution that Higher Education makes?

Increased transparency should lead to a greater understanding of the contribution Higher Education makes. It would also incentivise universities to be mindful of the impact their work is having on society and allow their priorities to reflect that.

The OU is here to help individuals, local business, the community, and the economy across the island of Ireland.

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.

Going forward it is likely that more and more people will engage or re-engage with higher education. The principle of lifelong learning must be woven into the fabric of everything we do.

We need to move away from the outdated notion that you study a degree and move into a single career path. We need to reinforce from school through to university and the Careers Service that you must continuously engage in learning in order to have a successful career within the modern economy.

Increased transparency and awareness would lead to people making more informed choices about their education and careers thus opening up more opportunities for them.

4. Do you believe that the Core Principles of the Public Mission Agreement will complement the aims of all stakeholders in the Sector?

Yes. The OU is happy to sign up to a Public Mission Agreement. We take seriously our role in tackling deprivation and inequality, and supporting the creation of a fairer, more regionally balanced, and sustainable economy.

The Open University recognises our responsibility to ensure environmental responsibilities are met. Indeed, there are many 'green' benefits of a non-campus model of Higher Education.

In order to develop the skills, we need to ensure recovery post-Covid, both Government and education providers must fully understand the needs of local business and industry.

Working toward a common goal under the umbrella of a Public Mission Agreement would be helpful in this regard.

This is particularly true of the terms laid out under "Social Value". A focus on supporting local schools and businesses will be increasingly important while our economy and society recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

We support our students and local businesses through the Careers & Employability team by offering work placements, to allow them to put their learning into practice and to gain first-hand industry experience.

A number of Open University students are currently on placement with organisations such as:

- SpotX

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- Radox
- Phillips
- eir Business NI
- A & L Goodbody
- Young at Art

The Public Mission Agreement would be more beneficial if enabled by resource. Creating policy that will embed and deliver equality, diversity, and inclusion in the sector must contain enablers and motivators, which in turn requires resource. Resource and capacity building are key issues to ensure adequate investment across all protected characteristics, to ensure posts can be created to carry out the work required to transform culture.

5. Do you believe that the Bill will improve the delivery of Higher Education in the North of Ireland?

Yes. A higher degree of accountability and transparency will benefit all students and learners. Universities should welcome this as a chance to improve upon their existing practices and an opportunity to welcome a more diverse group of students.

The Scottish government made equal access to higher education a high priority. They wanted to make sure that everybody from socially deprived areas, students with additional needs and BAME students, had equal access to higher education. As a result, over the last 5 years there has been an increase in the proportion of students coming from these categories.

This would benefit our society and economy as a whole.

The Open University is committed to removing barriers to education including the application process and entry criteria. We provide flexibility for students, a strong support network from the OU Faculty and Student Support Services and cater to those with individual needs.

The Open University has shown that people who don't have substantial pre-existing qualifications can succeed at Higher Education level provided they have a supportive and engaging learning environment.

6. How do you think the proposed legislation will impact on human rights?

Positively. Education is not a privilege. It is a human right.

People should not have less access to education by virtue of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, or those with additional needs.

The Open University is committed to removing barriers to education including the application process and entry criteria.

7. How do you think the proposed legislation will impact on equality of opportunity?

Positively. By having universities sign up to a Public Mission Agreement, there should be an increased focus on accessibility and inclusivity.

The Scottish experience tells us this but only when it is backed by penalties for non-compliance. Universities were financially penalised for not achieving their targets which was key to the increasing diversity of their student population.

While this bill will go some way to improve equality of opportunity, there are other actions which could have a big impact on this.

- Part time students here have less access to student financial support than full time students. This creates a significant barrier for adult learners. Wales have been successful in reversing this trend following The Diamond Review.
- Digital poverty and poor broadband access will be major barriers to enabling people to meet their potential, particularly given the acceleration of digitisation in a Post-Covid-world.

8. Do you believe there is a need to review the current governance arrangements which are in place for Further Education Colleges?

Yes, in line with The Northern Ireland College Of The Future: A Nations-Specific Final Report. Accessible here: <https://bit.ly/3rgQoS8>

9. If you disagree with this Bill proposal, please outline, if any, the adjustments to the proposal or alternatives to the measures proposed which would garner your support for this initiative.

N/A