

The Open University response to NILGA consultation on Developing and Programme for Local Government 2016-2020.



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The Open University welcomes this opportunity to respond to the NILGA consultation on Developing a Programme for Local Government 2016-2020. While we appreciate that this consultation is aimed at councils, we would like to offer some comment around the Specific Ask 5:

To devolve powers and funding for skills and employment support to councils, by March 2017, albeit regionally policy coordinated, in partnership with higher education colleges, to accompany the devolution of local economic development and regeneration, so that investment decisions can be based directly on what local economies and local businesses need in terms of future and present workforces to create jobs.

The Open University is the largest provider of part-time undergraduate higher education in Northern Ireland. There are currently around 3,800 Open University students in Northern Ireland and over 41,000 students have studied with us here since our formation in 1969. We have students in every constituency and council area across Northern Ireland.

The Open University has an 'open access' policy, meaning that most of our undergraduate courses have no formal or traditional entry requirements. We provide a high-quality learning experience to our students and have been the top university for student satisfaction in Northern Ireland every year since 2005 in the National Student Survey.

The Open University has a significant role to play in terms of skills and employability in council areas through the delivery of part-time higher education. Part-time higher education makes a hugely significant impact on the economy, on social justice and social mobility. It is well documented that the people who most benefit from accessing part-time higher education are women, those who are in work, those over the age of twenty-one, those who have caring commitments and those who are from non-traditional educational backgrounds.

Despite positive signs of improvement in Northern Ireland's economic position, it still lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom in most measures of economic performance. The impact of the recession has lingered on longer than in other nations of the UK. Concerns are expressed with regards to skills shortages in key sectors related to economic growth. It is widely acknowledged that the forecast pool of full-time graduates will not be enough to meet the skills demands of the future economy, something that will become even more acute in the context of a cut in corporation tax. There is therefore an imperative to incentivise up-skilling opportunities to people who have left formal education and who are either already engaged in the labour market, or who experience a number of barriers that have prevented them from doing so.

Benefits to economy, business and workforces

The primary motivator for most part-time students is to improve their employment prospects. Open University students are acutely aware of the impact that their study has on their future career prospects, for example in 2013/14, 37% of enrolments were in narrow STEM modules, subjects that are deemed to be of critical importance to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy.

The OU in Northern Ireland is supporting and enabling the capabilities and development of the Northern Ireland workforce. 84% of OU students in Northern Ireland say studying with the University improves their transferrable skills across jobs and industries.

Investment by employers in education and training for staff has a positive impact on career progression and retention rates. 76% of OU students in Northern Ireland say studying with the University directly increases their ability to do their jobs and 67% of OU students in Northern Ireland say they achieve more job satisfaction after studying with the University.

74% of Open University students are currently in work, juggling their studies around their employment (and other family/caring responsibilities). The productivity benefits derived from part-time study are immediate as students can apply their newfound knowledge and skills to the workplace. This can continue throughout the duration of their study, so there are great advantages to employers and employees.

According to research carried out by London Economics on behalf of The Open University in Northern Ireland, studying with the OU increases students' earning potential, thus aiding economic growth. The biggest economic impact is for students from a non-traditional higher education background, determined as those in possession of 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (or equivalent) but less than 2 GCE 'A' levels. These are students who would not otherwise have been able to engage with higher education, other than by studying part-time with The Open University.

Points for consideration

As the only university in Northern Ireland with students based in all 11 Council areas we would be happy to discuss the power of part-time higher education which people and organisations access from their homes and workplaces, and how this can contribute to specific ask 5.