

A response from The Open University to the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to “Enabling Success” A consultation on a new strategic framework to tackle economic inactivity in Northern Ireland – driving social change through economic participation.

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Consultation Question 1: Target Groups of the Strategy

1. To what extent would you agree that these are the most relevant target groups for the strategy to focus on?

Strongly agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University strongly agrees that these are the most relevant targets groups for the strategy to focus on and that the way to enable these groups to engage in employment is to provide the relevant support. These groups represent the two largest groups of economically inactive people in Northern Ireland, and identified in this draft strategy as least likely to enter the labour market.

The Open University has a legacy of providing similar support for individuals who face similar barriers accessing higher education. Our mission is ‘to be open to people, places, methods and ideas’, and for ‘people’ we are currently targeting five core groups:

- Students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Disabled students
- Students in prison
- Black minority ethnic students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Carers

Two of The Open University's target groups align with those of this draft strategy, therefore we currently provide routes for members of these groups to enhance their employment prospects. Continuing to do so, as part of our mission and operation here, we can be part of the proposed solution for tackling economic inactivity in these groups, as outlined in this draft strategy. We give some specific commentary on these two groups here, and reflect on Open University trends of these same groups, which may be useful comparisons:

Family commitments

We note that the number of individuals who have family commitments restricting their ability to work is highest at 20,000 in the age range of 35-44. It could be surmised that individuals of this age would potentially have a minimum of 30 years to work, and any intervention to enhance employability would be highly productive.

It is worth noting that in 2012/13 the second highest concentration of Open University students in Northern Ireland was within this same age range (26%).

Long-term sick/disabled

We note that the highest number of individuals who are long-term sick or disabled (but assessed as capable for work if provided with the right support) are aged 45 and over. This group potentially has 20 years before reaching retirement age.

Although those individuals over 55 in this category have a lesser amount of time to re-engage with the labour market before reaching retirement age, The Open University agrees that support should be available for this age group in the same way as it will be for other age groups.

Consultation Question 2: Factors affecting target groups

2 (i) Of the factors highlighted, which do you think are the most important to focus upon to reduce levels of inactivity?

The flexible, part-time distance learning offered by The Open University plays an important role in increasing access to and participation in higher education, and in enabling social mobility. In particular, it enables those who have missed out initially to fulfil their potential and achieve a university-level qualification, which can lead to greater opportunities to gain employment, and progress to higher-paid levels.

We consider this expertise to be highly relevant when it comes to the factors that restrict participation of these inactive groups in employment. We have identified the following in particular:

- Low qualification levels
- Personal circumstances
- Structural barriers
- Low motivation

We will address each of these in turn in terms of our own approach to overcoming these barriers.

Low qualification levels

As a university, we promote the development of knowledge and skills, which lead to qualifications and increased employability status. Given the low levels of qualifications reported for individuals in the target groups in this draft strategy, it can be concluded that learning, skills and qualifications must be a priority if individuals are to become employable, especially in the longer-term.

Figure 1.5 in the draft strategy shows that the majority of individuals in both target categories (long-term sick/disabled and family carers) have either no qualifications, or GCSE grades. It is important to note that The Open University has an open access policy and offers a route into higher education for anyone with a desire to learn. No other university makes this unique offer. On average, 45% of the OU's UK student population begins undergraduate study without the entry qualifications they would need at conventional universities. In Northern Ireland in 2012/13 49% of students began Open University study with 1 A-Level or less. Therefore the OU can be part of a solution to increase the skills levels of individuals in these groups.

The flexible nature of OU study means that individuals can work towards desired qualifications. In addition, if an individual within this target group begins OU study, they don't need to stop if they manage to gain employment. They can continue to 'earn while they learn'. Currently, over 71% of our students across the UK remained in work whilst undertaking their studies. In Northern Ireland last year, nearly 4000 OU students (around 65% of our total student body here) remained in work whilst studying on a flexible, part-time basis. Students can directly apply new skills to the workplace in this instance.

Up-skilling individuals once they are in employment leads to greater job retention and career progression. A further benefit is the contribution to economic growth. Part-time students who are also in employment are net contributors to the Northern Ireland economy through income tax and national insurance.

Structural barriers

The Open University also has a track record of enabling individuals to overcome structural barriers in order to access higher education, which in turn increases employability prospects. We are committed to a social justice mission to create opportunities for those who are socially disadvantaged. We do this by identifying and tackling barriers which can prevent students from studying with us. Our practice and approach may be useful to this strategy when considering how to tackle the barriers to the labour market. Our expertise could be transferable in this sense.

21% of our current OU students in Northern Ireland come from the 25% most deprived areas here. This shows that university level study is achievable for those individuals who face spatial inequalities living in areas with high concentrations of crime rates, health deprivation and disability, education and training, low income and employment rates, and poor access to housing and services, and that we are working to enable those individuals overcome those barriers.

One way in which we do this is through provision of financial assistance to students on low incomes. We offer a range of options including fee grants, course grants and additional income allowances. 48% of students in Northern Ireland received help with their fees in 2012/13, and 6% were sponsored by their employer. The Open University also allows individuals to pay fees by installments or by interest-free loans via an Open University Student Budget Account (OUSBA).

For individuals who live in rural or remote locations the OU's online distance learning model means that students do not have to travel to attend university. Students can access learning materials online from home, a local library or even on the move. Last year, the OU launched the OU Anywhere app which enables students to access their course materials on mobile phones and tablet devices, making learning truly accessible from any location, and at any time.

The Open University's open access policy offers a route into higher education for anyone with a desire to learn. We also operate focused, target-driven activity as part of the implementation of The Open University's Widening Access and Success strategy.

Personal circumstances

In 2012/13 417 OU students (6.9%) in Northern Ireland looked after the home and family, and 283 students (4.7%) had a long-term sickness and/or declared a disability. It is significant that the OU has students in the same categories on which the strategy focuses.. We can impart expertise on the support we provide to enable students in these categories to overcome personal circumstances that are barriers to development. The Open University has developed a pan-institutional approach to accessibility and inclusivity, all of which delivers, promotes, reinforces and further influences the student learning experience. We enable individuals to learn wherever and whenever they want, fitting around those home and family commitments and in ways that support their needs – from their own homes, in their own time, around family commitments, and by providing specialist support for additional learning requirements where necessary.

Confidence

Of the students who have graduated with The Open University, many report anecdotally their experience of how OU study has enhanced their confidence and opened up avenues previously impenetrable to them such as jobs, promotion or the skills to pursue other interests and ambitions. This is important to bear in mind when considering the range of barriers to work mentioned in the draft strategy, which were experienced by those who are long-term sick or disabled (caring responsibilities; access barriers; losing benefits and allowances) and lone parents or carers (lack of qualifications; lack of confidence; lack of flexibility in work and commitments).

The Open University also offers a number of free online courses which provide a taster for individuals considering higher education. The OU's OpenLearn site is the UK's largest source of free university materials, and has had over 31 million unique visitors since 2006. Individuals can also access OU materials on iTunes U, and our YouTube channel. In 2012, the OU launched FutureLearn – a partnership with 27 UK universities and institutions – to provide a number of massive open online courses (MOOCs). This has opened up access to

learner for a wider range of students than ever before, and allows people to try out learning and gain confidence in doing so before committing to a full course which may enhance their skills for direct application in the workplace.

2 (ii) Are there any additional factors that should be considered?

N/A

Consultation Question 3: The Goal of the Strategy

Yes. It is clear that individuals in the two target groups face multiple difficulties in, and barriers to, engaging in employment (as reported in Figure 1.6). How are individuals expected to address this range of factors at the same time as adapting to support structures and changes in lifestyle? Consideration should be given to the multiplicity of challenges that these individuals may face in adapting to new circumstances.

3. Do you agree that the strategic goal is both challenging and realistic?

Agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The strategic goal is to increase the employment rate of Northern Ireland from 67.2% to 70% - an increase of 2.8% in 8 years. This goal is challenging in that this 2.8% of the population equals 300,000 people currently economically inactive, plus given the context of the period of economic difficulty. The goal is also realistic in that a 2.8% rise in employment by 2023 (8 years) in the current economic climate, seems proportionate compared with the 10% that has been achieved over 24 years, and taking into account the economic boom during this time.

Consultation Question 4: Strategic Objectives

4. (i) Do you agree that these objectives adequately capture the core issues that would need to be addressed to achieve the goal of the strategy?

Disagree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The objectives somewhat capture the core issues that would need to be addressed in order to achieve the goal of the strategy. We seek further information in several areas:

There is no explicit mention of skills in any of the four objectives. Whilst the 'initiatives' and 'programmes' mentioned in objectives 3 and 4 respectively may include skills, this is not clear at present.

We also seek more explicit reference to pre-employment skills development in order to ensure able and capable individuals enter the employment market at the right level and can

progress. We therefore seek further information on how retention levels of employment, and how individuals can develop their careers and employment trajectories rather than just achieving initial employment per se.

The strategy should also reference skills levels and qualification requirements of employment opportunities, as outlined in the Access to Success strategy; taking into consideration that over the next 10 years, the Northern Ireland economy will have an increasing need for people with higher level skills (levels 4-8).

4. (ii) What additional strategic objectives could help to achieve a rate of >70% by 2023?

We consider that additional strategic objectives should:

- Aim to meet skills levels that will be required for the workforce (especially those indicated in the HE strategy Graduating to Success), and how to enable individuals can attain those.
- Outline and offer routes for career progression / development once people are in employment.

Consultation Question 5: A Strategic Taskforce

5. (i) Do you agree that this is the best approach in terms of strategic management and co-ordination of the final strategy?

Strongly agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University agrees that a coordinated response, including all stakeholders will be most effective.

5. (ii) Which key sectors and stakeholders should be represented on the taskforce to ensure that the strategic objectives are successfully achieved?

The taskforce should, in addition to the current suggested membership, include higher education institutions, further education providers, members of the business community (including private sector), and representatives from enterprise and investment sectors.

6. (i) Do you agree that the research projects outlined above are the key areas for further consideration?

Agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University seeks clarification on the first project (outlined in point 2.4) which aims to map 'existing service provision'. The strategy does not make clear what service provision this is.

The proposed project to map the accessibility of jobs currently available that require no formal qualifications (point 2.7) appears at odds with long term skills needs identified in the Graduating to Success Strategy, in order to: meet the needs of the economy; help individuals develop the skills to exploit future employment opportunities; and increase up-skilling in the workforce.

This proposed project also conflicts somewhat with the Access to Success strategy which aims to widen participation in education as an act of social justice and economic imperative. The requirement set out in Access to Success is that the Northern Ireland economy will have an "increasing need for people with higher level skills (levels 4-8) over the next 10 years and that higher level employment opportunities would be more biased towards degree level qualifications." (p.5).

It is recommended, therefore, that the draft strategy should be revised to more carefully consider the long-term consequences of removing unnecessary qualifications. Although this seems a practical starting point to enable inactive people to engage with the job market, there is the possibility that such a move will disincentivise individuals to consider longer-term skills development, and possibly exclude these individuals from higher level employment opportunities in time. In relation to this point, we seek further clarification in reference to this, as to how the strategy aims to develop individuals with low skills once they are employed (2.7).

Consideration of social mobility (at the individual level) and workforce development (at the national public level) is crucial to this strategy if Northern Ireland is to sustain employment rates and create economic growth.

6. (ii) What other areas of research may be beneficial to consider and why?

The strategy may wish to consider models of workforce development from Scotland. For example NHS Education for Scotland, and the Scottish Leaders Forum Workforce Development led by the Scottish Government. These are examples of how individual and national employment progression can be undertaken.

Consultation Question 7: A Framework for Action

7. (i) Do you agree that the key themes will provide a suitable framework to address the main issues associated with economic inactivity?

Agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

Yes. We consider skills development should be an overarching theme, as this can be undertaken formally or informally, at pre-employment stage or as a work-based initiative.

7. (ii) What other framework themes may be beneficial to consider and why?

It is recommended that consideration is given to skills development and education as a separate framework theme.

Consultation Question 8: Current provision and support available to address economic inactivity

The Open University is not in a position to answer these questions at this stage.

8. (i) Which existing government service(s) work well in your opinion and why?

N/A

8. (ii) What are the main barriers to accessing existing government services and why?

N/A

8. (iii) How can existing government services be linked more effectively to make them more user friendly and accessible to the customer?

N/A

Consultation Question 9: New Measures – Competitive Pilot Testing

9 (i) Do you agree that competitive pilot testing is likely to be the most innovative and cost effective way to identify the best models of future intervention?

Neither agree nor disagree.

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University is in favour of the most effective and value for money approach, which can enhance an individual's employability and career development prospects, in order to fulfil their potential.

9 (ii) What specific proposals should be considered for pilot project testing and why?

The Open University does not have a preference at this time.

Consultation Question 10: Increasing employment opportunities and enhancing support and incentives for employers

10. (i) To what extent do you agree that a controlled use of employer subsidies is potentially the most effective way to increase employment opportunities for the target groups?

Agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University considers that this is one potential way of increasing employment opportunities. We seek clarification that consideration is given to public sector employers and SMEs.

10. (ii) How should an employer subsidy be weighted in terms of the different target inactive groups and existing subsidy schemes?

N/A

10. (iii) How should an employer subsidy be structured to ensure that it promotes sustained employment for the target inactive groups?

N/A

10. (iv) Do you agree that a guaranteed employment and skills progression route for the target inactive groups should be integral to an employer subsidy incentive scheme?

Yes. Career progression should be considered in order to retain employees and maintain the employment rate. This also provides a long-term vision for developing workforces and individuals' skills.

10. (v) What other stipulations for employers accessing such a subsidy should be considered?

N/A

10. (vi) What other alternative incentives could be considered in lieu of an employer subsidy?

The Open University supports a reform of the tax relief that employers receive for workplace training to ensure that this measure incentivises investment in the kind of education and training that delivers long-term economic growth and development opportunities for employees.

The Open University also supports the development of apprenticeships to incentivise workers and employers.

10. (vii) What types of in-work support could be provided to both the employer and the individual to help promote sustained employment for the target inactive groups?

N/A

Consultation Question 11: Addressing Wider Barriers

11. (i) Do you agree that these are most relevant inactive groups to focus upon in terms of tackling labour market disadvantage?

Strongly agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

Given that mental health conditions dominate the statistics for those economically inactive long-term sick and/or disabled groups, a focus on measures to tackle mental health stigma in the workplace is highly relevant to this strategy.

Increased employment of older workers is also a suitable focus given that of those who are long-term sick / disabled fall within the 45-64 age group.

It is suggested that the strategy also considers the age group 25-45 as those with family commitments are highest in this category. At present, the strategy has no clear focus for this age group, and the types of family or caring commitments that present difficulties to individuals. A fuller understanding of this area would be beneficial in order to assess the requirements for those entering the workplace – e.g. if the individuals in these categories are caring for children, older parents, disabled family members or multiple dependents etc.

11. (ii) Which type of public awareness campaign would be most effective to promote the positive impact of employing older workers?

We seek clarity on the age-range of 'older workers'.

The Open University proposes that policy and strategy do not discriminate between ages of individuals, especially in terms of their modes and needs of skills development for employment. Therefore we wish to advocate for parity between older workers and other age groups.

This said, we are however cognisant that the economy cannot rely solely on 18 years alone to provide us with the skills we need for Northern Ireland to thrive. Therefore employers should consider individuals of all ages as potential workers, not just school leavers and / or graduates. Given that 80% of Northern Ireland's 2020 workforce already completed its compulsory education, it is necessary to focus on up-skilling and re-skilling the future workforce – which includes a large segment of individuals over 24. The OU is a solution for up-skilling and re-skilling the workforce as students are able to earn while they learn and apply skills directly and instantly to the workplace – increasing productivity and adding value.

11. (iii) Which key delivery partners should be considered to ensure that the impact of the public awareness campaign is maximised?

In keeping with establishing parity between individuals developing skills to enhance employment prospects, the OU agrees with the proposed measures to endorse age-positive practices in recruitment, with all delivery partners in order to remove any unnecessary bias towards one particular age group.

11. (iv) What new measures should be considered to raise awareness levels of mental health issues in the workplace?

The Open University welcomes the proposed measures to raise awareness levels of mental health issues in the workplace, and tackling any stigma that still exists around mental health and ability to work, learn and fulfil potential. One of The Open University's target groups in terms of widening participation is that of disabled students, including those with mental health conditions.

The Open University has the highest number of disabled students of any university in the UK, with a current figure of around 20,000, forming 12% of our overall student body. In Northern Ireland, around 10% of our students declare a disability; the most-cited being mental health conditions. Therefore, the draft strategy complements our own strategy to ensure individuals with mental health difficulties can access employment in the same way as any other person.

A significant proportion of students with disabilities and long-term health conditions choose the OU because it suits their lifestyle. The OU has developed a pan-institutional approach to accessibility and inclusivity, all of which delivers, promotes, reinforces and further influences the disabled student learning experience. For disabled students, The Open University also offers a range of specific support. In Northern Ireland, a disabled student will, in general, have most contact about provision of their support requirements handled via educational advisers at the National Centre in Belfast. The OU requests, where appropriate, and supports students to apply for a Disabled Students' Allowance, and hosts a fully-equipped Access Centre for DSA Assessments. The Open University's Disability Resources Team arranges production and delivery of alternative formats of study materials and assistive equipment and services for home study, tutorials, day and residential schools, and assessment.

Studying in order to develop skills and gain qualifications, and thus enhancing employability prospects, is made highly accessible for students at the OU who have mental health conditions. Students don't have to worry about travelling or getting about a campus, because they can mostly study at home if they choose. In addition, because they can study at the times they choose, students can vary study hours to compensate for good days and bad days (although within each course there are key dates to work to.)

OU students that declare mental health issues as a disability may be eligible for Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA). The DSA is not means-tested and won't affect any disability or other state benefits that a student receives. DSA is purely for the extra study costs that an individual may have to pay because of his/her condition.

11. (v) Which key delivery partners should be considered to ensure that the impact of these new measures is maximised?

N/A

Consultation Question 12: Breaking the Cycle

12. (i) Do you agree that better integration of health and work services is the key preventative measure for reducing in-flows into the target inactive groups?

Strongly agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

The Open University considers this to be a sensible approach to reducing in-flows into target inactive groups. A partnership approach is likely to be most effective.

12. (ii) How do you see these two sectors integrating in the most effective way both in terms of supporting individuals and employers?

N/A

12. (iii) Do you agree with an expert panel approach to explore the feasibility and affordability of expanding and integrating access to health services in Northern Ireland?

Strongly agree

Please outline the rationale for your response in the box below:

Provision of the correct health support will be vital for those individuals who have been long-term sick or disabled entering or re-entering the workplace.

12. (iv) Who should be represented on the expert panel?

N/A

12. (v) What other key preventative measures should be considered to reduce in-flows into the target inactive groups?

The Access to Success and Graduating to Success strategies should be included in the key strategies that could address these factors, and consideration should be given to the anticipated results of the Committee for Employment and Learning Inquiry into post-19 Special Education Needs provision of employment and training.

Consultation Question 13: Conclusions

13. (i) In addition to the approach outlined in the consultation document, what other ways are there to effectively reduce economic inactivity in Northern Ireland in a sustainable and affordable way?

The Open University is willing to be part of a solution that works for Northern Ireland, and open to discussion of any other potential ways to effectively reduce economic inactivity.

13. (ii) What should be the top three priorities for the NI Executive to effectively reduce economic inactivity?

Skills
Health
Support structures

13. (iii) In terms of prioritisation of government spending, do you feel that tackling economic inactivity should be a key spending area?

Yes.

13. (iv) The working title of the strategy is “Enabling Success – Driving Social Change Through Economic Participation – A Strategy to Tackle Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland” - do you consider this title adequately encapsulates the purpose of the strategy?

Yes

Please outline any alternative titles in the box below:

N/A

13. (v) Please outline any other comments you may have that have not been specifically addressed elsewhere in the consultation document.

The Open University is willing to give evidence and share any examples of practice. We want to be part of the solution to tackle economic inactivity in Northern Ireland.

Additional Information

N/A

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