

A response from The Open University (OU) to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities

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1. Introduction

This response outlines The Open University's educational provision in the arts within Northern Ireland in order to assist the Committee's Inquiry.

The Open University is open to people, places, methods and ideas, promoting educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. It was established in 1969, with its first students enrolling in 1971. It is a world-leader in providing innovative and flexible distance learning opportunities at higher education (HE) level.

The Open University's operation within Northern Ireland is now funded by the Department for Employment and Learning, making it now one of three universities here. The University has provided high quality part-time and distance learning within Northern Ireland since its foundation, operating out of its headquarters in Belfast.

The Open University brings significant additional benefits to Northern Ireland due to its status as the UK's largest Higher Education Institution. From this position of strength the University is committed to delivering the knowledge and skills necessary for the future of its people, communities and society in Northern Ireland.

The Open University has over 5000 students in Northern Ireland, the majority of which study part-time. Students are supported by a team of Student Services staff in the Belfast office, in addition to Associate Lecturer and tutors.

66% of our new undergraduate students in Northern Ireland have 2 A Levels (or equivalent) or fewer and 23.6% of our new students come from the 25% most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. Approximately 9.5% (523) of our students in 2012/13 in Northern Ireland studied courses within the Arts and Humanities, a small rise from 2011/12, when 9% of Open University students (504) were registered on Arts courses¹.

¹ Most recent figures at March 2014.

The Open University is willing to give oral evidence to the Committee relating to this Inquiry.

Before proceeding, we wish to highlight two caveats to this response in relation to terminology used in the Terms of Reference:

a) Working class communities

The Inquiry asks specifically about the inclusion of ‘working class communities’ in the arts. . The Open University does not use, or have measurements in place to identify ‘working class communities’ in terms of statistical analysis, or self-perceptions of social groupings. As the OU uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation² (IMD) to identify the characteristics of locations where students are resident, or where OU activity takes place, this response will therefore reference the IMD scores when mentioning such locations or residential areas.

It is accepted that this measurement, while identifying spatial information, does not take into account individuals’ self-perception as belonging to a working-class (or other) community. However, the University does not collect or record this type of information, and therefore this response cannot report or speculate on those issues. It is hoped that the IMD measure will give significant indication of the reach and impact of the University’s work into different communities.

b) Arts venues and bodies

Although the Inquiry seeks accessibility and outreach activity of arts venues and bodies, The Open University is keen to outline its provision in arts as a public educational institution, providing teaching, learning and research in a variety of formats and delivery methods.

2. Addressing Inquiry Terms of Reference

The response is structured in relation to the Terms of Reference, taking each area of investigation in turn, and providing examples where appropriate.

2.1 Addressing Inquiry Terms of Reference (1)

Investigate the accessibility of the arts in Northern Ireland to working class communities and to ascertain the key challenges and barriers to the involvement of those communities in the arts;

The OU’s mission is to make learning accessible to all – in essence, transforming lives through the power of learning. In terms of the arts, we provide access to a range of formal

² The index of multiple deprivation, also known as the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) records spatial deprivation using a range of factors:

- Income
- Employment
- Health deprivation and Disability
- Education Skills and Training
- Barriers to Housing and Services
- Crime
- Living Environment

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) Outreach (see Addressing Terms of Reference (2) for fuller investigation)

2a. Formal qualifications in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Widening participation and the promotion of social mobility is core to the OU's mission. The OU's part-time, flexible learning model plays a pivotal role in enhancing social mobility by enabling individuals, regardless of their background, to fulfil their potential and earn a degree. The OU offers a route into higher education for anyone with a desire to learn. Our 'open entry' policy means that no one is excluded from OU study, and traditional entry qualifications are not a prerequisite to gain entry to studying with us.

Students who choose [Arts and Humanities](#) at The Open University will study human culture and history, and come to understand aspects of these in the past and present. The modules provided by the Faculty explore people's ideas and beliefs, their cultural practices and the objects they make. The subjects offered by the Faculty are:

- Art History
- Classical Studies
- Literature and Creative Writing
- History
- Interdisciplinary Studies
- Music
- Philosophy
- Religious Studies

Modules which are interdisciplinary examine aspects of a topic from the viewpoint of several subjects

We offer the following qualifications:

- Certificate of Higher Education in Humanities (T07)
- Diploma of Higher Education in Humanities (W35)
- BA (Honours) English Language and Literature (Q39)
- BA (Honours) English Literature (Q66)
- BA (Honours) History (Q01)
- BA (Honours) Humanities (Q03)
- BA (Hons) Humanities with Art History, Classical Studies, Creative Writing, English Language, History, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Religious Studies, French, German or Spanish (Q03)
- BA (Honours) Philosophy and Psychological Studies (Q43)
- BA (Honours) in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Q45)
- Open Degree (QD)

A full list of our subjects and courses can be found in **Appendix 1**. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation measurements, 22.8% of current OU Arts students are from the 25% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Last year, in 2012/13, 20% of students were from the 25% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland.

2b. Free learning 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 mission is to make learning accessible to all – in essence, transforming lives through the power of learning. The OU's Open Educational Resources (OER) outlined below are free, have significant Arts content and are accessible to anyone who has access to the Internet, on a PC, tablet or mobile device.

OpenLearn

The [OpenLearn](#) website gives free access to learning materials from The Open University which people can study independently at your own pace. Each study unit has its own discussion forum so it is possible to join a group and use the free learning tools to work with others if preferred. The extracts range in scope from a couple of hours' work to up to 20 hours – this would be more than a weeks' study. People can work through the 'units' or just dip in to the bits of interest. We have 85 free resources in the arts on OpenLearn. There are also around 1000 other types of arts-related items on OpenLearn from interactives to academic blogs.

iTunes U

iTunes U is a vast learning resource offering free educational content that users can download from Apple's iTunes Store straight to their computer, iPad, iPod and iPhone or Android. The Open University joined iTunes U in 2008, making available a range of high quality audio-visual assets used in their courses. Featuring over 280 albums with content from more than 136 courses, the OU on iTunes U reflects the diversity and strength of the University's curriculum and academic brand.

The OU became the first university in Europe to reach more than one million subscriptions through its 52 courses on the new iTunes U App since its launch in January 2012, and since then, hit 40 million downloads, making it a world leader. It is neck and neck with rival Stanford University, and ahead of universities such as Yale and Oxford in terms of downloads of materials. The fact that the materials are free and can be downloaded to mobile devices means that these learning materials are truly accessible from anywhere, and available to anyone with Wi-Fi access.

The Open University's iTunes U has an Arts section with 43 number of courses available to download, including *'How to Improve your writing'*, *'Studying Global Heritage'* and *'Exhibiting the Benin Bronzes'*. The Creative Writing module is a top download on iTunes U.

FutureLearn

[FutureLearn](#) delivers free massive open online courses (MOOCs), provided by its 27 UK and international partners (including Queen's University, Belfast). It is a company wholly owned by The Open University, with the benefit of over 40 years of their experience in distance learning and online education. The aim is to connect learners from all over the globe with high quality educators, and with each other. Courses are delivered online, one step at a time, and are accessible on mobile, tablet and desktop, so you can fit learning around your life, rather than your life around learning. FutureLearn delivers social value – allowing students to develop their own online learning communities and interact on virtual discussion fora. This makes learning about the arts truly accessible to all. At the end of the course, students get a sharable page as evidence of what they have learnt. FutureLearn is also piloting features that let students take exams or purchase statements of accomplishment as further evidence of skills.

The Open University partnered with Queen's University Belfast to provide a mooc in Critical Listening, which went live in January 2014. 8,300 students from across the world registered on this course.

FutureLearn recently announced six more to launch in 2014:

[Shakespeare and his world](#)

[The mind is flat: the shocking shallowness of human psychology](#),

[How to read... a mind](#)

[An introduction to physical actor training](#)

[Community Journalism](#)

[Start writing fiction](#)

2c. Open University Events

University of the Air

In 2013, The Open University invited tenders from artists in Northern Ireland to develop public artworks to celebrate the impact of OU research on public life. In Belfast, Carrie Neely was awarded the commission, after a very competitive call, to curate a series of artworks called “Luminous, Curious, Journey”. Carrie, collaborated with five local artists to create eleven new public art installations in two venues in Belfast. The artworks explored The Open University’s research theme of Arts and Humanities, in particular Creative Writing, and included a series of installations by filmmaker and digital artist Conan McIvor at Belfast City Hall and at The Open University building on Victoria Street in Belfast, together with an exhibition of work by local artists such as Colin Davidson, Deepa Mann-Kler, Lee Boyd and Christine Trueman. The works referenced Northern Irish literature, and include extracts by Open University Creative Writing students, OU lecturer Maureen Boyle, and Belfast’s first Poet Laureate, Dr Sinead Morrissey.

The work was available to the public from 4pm on the 5th November until midnight on 7th November 2013, at Belfast City Hall, and part of the collection is still available for the general public to view in the windows of The Open University building on Victoria Street, Belfast.

The project increased access to the arts by providing artwork in public spaces, and attracted new audiences to the arts, and to The Open University’s profile in the arts sector in Northern Ireland. For this project, The Open University developed strategic partnerships with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council in order to provide quality assurance on the public access to the artworks, and to draw on expertise on how to best maximise impact and benefit to the public.

Belfast City Council’s ‘[Literary Belfast](#)’ initiative included a fringe programme as part of the University of the Air public installation, which involved a series of workshops, talks and performances from writers, singers, local arts organisations and groups. It was accessible to individuals from all communities across Northern Ireland (with a focus on Belfast). This partnership and collaborative approach is one which was highly successful, and could be replicated for further benefit to the communities which the Inquiry is addressing.

Culture Night

The Open University has participated in Belfast’s Culture Night – opening the building for Creative Writing students to read their work (poetry and prose) to audiences who are experiencing the artistic vibrancy of the city. This event has included published students, in particular author Leesa Harker, and lecturing staff like prize-winning poet Maureen Boyle.

Open Days

The university has also opened its doors for the BBC’s Your Paintings initiative to allow citizens to view the University’s collection of original art.

2.2 Addressing Inquiry Terms of Reference (2)

Examine the outreach activity of our arts venues and bodies with respect to how they make a meaningful contribution to social inclusion within working class communities, including the degree to which they can help tackle particular social issues

Academic staff members from the Arts Faculty in The Open University undertake partnership work to deliver free Arts courses in Northern Ireland through four main outlets:

- (a) Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
- (b) Falls Women's Centre
- (c) Friends of County Down Museym
- (d) Community Partnerships Programme

The aims of these projects have been to have offer scholarly expertise, contribute to skills development of individuals and to raise social capital, particularly in the areas of heritage skills and creative writing, and to bring learning into the heart of communities, some of which experience levels of social deprivation.

2a. Public Records Office of Northern Ireland Lecture Series

The Faculty of Arts has been working in partnership with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) since 2009, when PRONI moved into its purpose-built premises in Titanic Quarter. The Open University has delivered three public lecture series to date, which were designed to improve audience awareness of local history skills and techniques.

Dr Janice Holmes, Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in History, who coordinates The Open University's MA in local history, has developed these lecture series around various aspects of family and local history. The lectures are based on the internationally-regarded collections at PRONI but seek to give audiences the skills and understanding to use these sources in innovative and creative ways. The first series had an initial attendance of over 90 people between 2010-11. Since then average attendances have continued at around 40 people in 2012 and 2013.

The aim of the series has been oriented around skills: to show audiences how they can use some of the techniques employed by professional historians in their own family and local history research. The lecture series is open to the public, and in addition the first series can also be viewed on YouTube, thus enhancing accessibility for learners or interested parties.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ofp7hOMbIE>

http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/exhibitions_talks_and_events/talks_and_events/exploring_family_history_lecture_series.htm

Although no measure of participant's residential area was used to identify participants' socio-economic grouping or if they lived in an area of high deprivation, this project demonstrates what it is possible to undertake with individuals from all communities in Northern Ireland with an interest in the Arts, and in gaining knowledge and skills in this particular area.

2b. Falls Women's Centre

Local history project

The Open University delivered a 5 week local history project designed in co-operation with women at the Falls Women's Centre in November and December 2013. The Centre lies

within the second most deprived ward in Northern Ireland³. Dr Janice Holmes (Senior Lecturer in History) and Heather Richardson (Arts Faculty Manager, author) met with staff from the Falls Women's Centre to discuss a possible local history project. The Centre had a group of approximately 10 local women who were interested in history and wanted to pursue this.

The group co-created the content and purpose of the project, which was to undertake a local history of the Falls Road via an in-depth study of sources (street directories and the Census of Ireland). Using these, the women reconstructed the Falls Road as it was in 1901. They engaged in a number of small-scale demographic analyses and reconstructed, in detail, the familial and religious character of 5 different communities around Falls. One of the sessions involved a trip to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, where archival staff showed the group original maps and documents relating to Falls and where they could come if they wanted to do further research. Only one group member had been to PRONI before. At the end of each session group members posted their findings onto a wall-sized map of the Falls Road. In the final session, participants created a small exhibition based on primary source research which examined a subject of local interest in a new and distinctive way.

Dr Holmes is running a second project with the Falls Women's Centre after Easter 2014 for a 6 week period.

Creative Writing Workshops

Heather Richardson (Arts Faculty Manager in The Open University here, and a published author in her own right) delivered a series of 3 Creative Writing workshops at the Falls Women's Centre between October and November 2013. Approximately 6 to 10 women from the local area attended each workshop. The Open University is now working with the Centre to establish a self-sustaining Writers' Group run by the women themselves, thus enabling communities to increase participation in, and access to the arts at a local level.

Each of the outreach projects has had an element of social inclusion and encouraging greater engagement with arts institutions. The first two projects drew on traditional and familiar audiences, and the work at the Falls Women's Centre project has been most creative in its attempt to reach non-traditional arts audiences. Although no measure of social inclusion was implemented, it is possible to draw some preliminary qualitative conclusions about the impact of the work, especially around the degree to which it targets social issues.

The driving concern of this outreach work has been to improve the skills of the groups with which we worked. While the arts content is important, we see skills enhancement as a key priority – and a priority which we are able to address given our resources and expertise. Therefore the skills levels of the participants were raised during the workshops, and have encouraged further interest in skills development, for example, the Writers' Group to be established. The increased confidence of the participants as a result has been marked. The project at the Falls Women's Centre generated massive enthusiasm. Attendance among the participants was very high, with almost all participants attending all of the sessions. Interest in the project spread beyond the group itself, as other users of the centre could see the project developing as the weeks progressed. The Centre is keen to take this project further and the University is currently in discussions about how this initial success might be developed and consolidated.

Friends of Down County Museum

This project explored local aspects to the decade of centenaries and was part of the widespread Peace III funding initiatives for local councils. Dr Janice Holmes gave 8 weeks of

³ www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation Electoral Ward Summary Measures

lectures from May to June 2012. The project attracted around 30 regular attendees who were all adults. Most were from Friends of Down Museum, but about 4-5 were from a local mental health group and came with their care worker.

2c. Community Partnerships Programme

Since its inception in 2009 The Community Partnerships Programme has significantly supported community outreach work in Northern Ireland, enabling students from disadvantaged backgrounds to take a first step into higher education. This first step has provided learners with much needed pathways to progression, both in education and employment. The Community Partnership Programme has also successfully supported the development of sustainable partnerships through which effective engagement and local support can take place and in addition, developing trust and challenging the perception that higher education is 'for them' and not 'for us'.

The Programme takes a community development approach to working with widening participation students, whereby process and relationship building is crucial to engendering a sense of 'community' ownership' and thereby increasing the potential for retention, progression and sustainable partnerships. Partners include women's centres, ex-prisoner organisations, the Salvation Army, trades unions and workplaces. Working collaboratively with these bodies has given 525 students from disadvantaged communities, the opportunity to take a first step in to higher education and has significantly raised the profile of The Open University within Northern Ireland.

In terms of Arts provision, The Open University offered a short Openings module called *Making Sense of the Arts*. 10 students participated on the course during 2011-12. The courses took place at several venues: Ballybeen Women's Centre, which lies within the 15% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland in relation to health, education and child poverty⁴. It had 2 students on the course, and Falls Women's Centre (situated in the second most deprived ward in Northern Ireland) had 5 students, one of which has progressed to BA (Hons) Humanities).

2.3 Addressing Terms of Reference (3)

Identify any examples of good practice in accessibility and outreach work – either within Northern Ireland or elsewhere – which could usefully be replicated by arts venues and bodies here

The Open University wishes to highlight several areas of good practice which could be replicated by arts bodies, or which could be consolidated by arts bodies via a partnership or collaboration.

- Online provision of free educational content relating to the Arts as an example of good practice in accessibility. The Open University is willing to work in collaboration with venues or bodies to promote skills developments in the arts, and call individuals to action to undertake further informal learning in relation to the arts;
- Outreach projects with a skills element (informal or formal) to encourage co-creation of learning, and access to the arts, as demonstrated in the Falls' Women's Centre projects;

⁴ www.ballybeenwomenscentre.org

- Encourage communities to develop their own self-sustaining arts provision, drawing on resources where necessary, as The Open University has done in the Falls Women's Centre.

2.4 Addressing Terms of Reference (4)

Make recommendations for improvements in policies, delivery mechanisms and collaboration among key stakeholders which will maximise the potential of our arts venues and bodies to address social inclusion issues in both urban and rural working class communities and across communities in Northern Ireland.

The Open University is open to collaboration with arts venues and bodies to address issues of social inclusion in Northern Ireland. The partnership work that the University has undertaken to date with Belfast City Council, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, PRONI and both Falls Women's Centre and Ballybeen Women's Centre is exemplary of the potential relationships that could be developed to supplement arts activities with learning opportunities. This would enable an additional dimension to social inclusion agendas, aligned with the Department for Employment and Learning's Access to Success and Graduating to Success strategies.

The Open University has real potential to deliver arts resources via the Internet, which 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. Working in partnership with existing arts bodies will maximise potential to reach those communities who have least access to the arts in Northern Ireland.

Closing remarks

We wish to note that members of staff within The Open University in Belfast have played influential roles in the arts within Northern Ireland. National Director, John D'Arcy was founding Chair of the Oh Yeah Centre, is interim Chair of Sports NI, and was also on the board of Audience NI. Dr Frances Morton is an Artistic Assessor for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and worked for the body in 2012. Heather Richardson is a published author and has developed partnerships with the John Hewitt Society, in addition to participating in the East Belfast Festival writing workshops. We are keen to contribute our expertise to future developments of arts provision in Northern Ireland, as part of The Open University.