1. Do you think there are opportunities to realise this collaborative approach?

Yes

Please explain why:

The Open University (OU) in Scotland welcomes the collaborative approach set out in the Digital Strategy for Scotland and we believe we can play a key role in supporting the Scottish Government and COSLA’s vision of a modern, digital and collaborative government, designed around people.

COVID-19 has brought to the forefront issues relating to digital poverty and access, highlighting the need to improve digital skills amongst individuals and ensuring that businesses are supported to meet existing skills gaps and the needs of the future economy.

Drawing on 50 years of experience as a leading supported distance learning provider and with digital expertise central to our work, The OU in Scotland has worked collaboratively across different sectors to help them benefit during the pandemic from the free open educational resources available on our OpenLearn and FutureLearn platforms.

We worked with the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to develop a new portal for furloughed workers on myworldofwork.co.uk, and our free learning resources through the OpenLearn website were accessed by 2.5 million visitors across the UK between April and June 2020.

The OU supports people across all levels to develop digital skills – ranging from free introductory digital literacy courses to postgraduate qualifications for digital professionals.

Our courses benefit from 50+ years of pedagogical expertise in developing at scale programmes for learners at a distance. Through constant innovation, our courses are designed specifically to be digitally accessible rather than adapted from face-to-face tuition as many other universities have had to do in the current academic year. The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic has been such that we’ve supported universities, colleges, businesses and third sector organisations pivot learning online. We have produced specific resources to support teachers to do this as the country was faced with home-schooling at the outset of the pandemic.

We offer a supported digital experience and The OU in Scotland consistently receives high satisfaction rates (The OU in Scotland rating of 91.5% (average over 10 years 2011-2020). Each student has a tutor and access to specialist student support and forums, and hard copy
materials are available for students who are unable to use screens. Courses range from humanities, social sciences and business to health care, science and technology, including state-of-the-art capabilities, including virtual STEM labs that enable students to operate specialist equipment at a distance including telescopes in Majorca or undertake fieldtrips in virtual reality.

The OU’s teaching model receives high student satisfaction ratings, with OU in Scotland being consistently in the top 3 of HEIs since the NSS began. Our graduates are highly regarded by employers. We produce the UK’s third highest number of graduates employed by the world’s largest tech companies, exceeded only by Oxford and Cambridge.

Key to our approach has been working together with stakeholders to design and adapt our online module and course offer, which we believe demonstrates the strength of taking a collaborative approach in delivering the Digital Strategy.

2. Of the opportunities which you have identified, which do you think are the priority ones?

There is an opportunity to place individuals, communities and businesses at the centre of developing and delivering Scotland’s Digital Strategy.

This should be delivered alongside ensuring everyone has access to flexible, online learning opportunities to improve their digital skills wherever they live or whatever their economic or social circumstances – whether that might be an older or disabled person needing support to learn essential day-to-day digital skills, or someone retraining in cyber security to support the needs of business.

We welcome that there are plans for a new National Digital Learning Strategy, but believe that the integral role of the higher and further education sector in supporting the realisation of Scotland’s Digital Strategy should be more clearly highlighted in the main strategy document.

3. Is the vision that we have set out in the supporting narrative in each of these sections the right one?

- No One Left Behind No
- Services Working for All Yes
- Transforming Government Yes
- A Digital and Data Economy Yes
- A Vibrant Tech Sector Yes
- An Ethical Digital Nation Yes
If you have ticked ‘no’ or you think we could improve the vision please explain why:

No One Left Behind

Social justice is The OU in Scotland’s raison d’être and we are committed to ensuring high quality education is accessible to all, regardless of age, income, qualifications or geography.

There is an opportunity to highlight in the strategy the important opportunities that digital access and online learning provide for people who have a disability, chronic illness, or who are carers. The OU in Scotland supports students with disabilities and long-term health conditions to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential through engaging in higher education online. Among our latest intake of students, 24% have declared a disability.

At the OU we have a demonstrable pedigree in taking people with no qualifications to successful outcomes. Our supported open entry policy means that we are actively looking to develop people in technical skills at all levels.

We have worked in close partnership with Lead Scotland to create a digital skills course designed with and for disabled learners. Funded by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) Digital Participation Fund, *Everyday computer skills: a beginner’s guide to computers, tablets, mobile phones and accessibility* aims to break down some of the barriers to learning essential digital skills experienced by disabled people and carers.

Additionally, it is important to also stress the need for accessibility to suitable devices and effective and reliable broadband. These present challenges around given the importance of digital access in terms of jobs, services and learning. With 22.8% of our new undergraduate entrants in 2019/20 living in remote and rural areas of Scotland we know how important rural connectivity is to being able to successfully support students to achieve their ambitions.

4. **Do you think that the potential actions set out in each section will deliver the vision set out in the supporting narrative?**

- No One Left Behind Yes
- Services Working for All Yes
- Transforming Government No
- A Digital and Data Economy Yes
- A Vibrant Tech Sector Yes
- An Ethical Digital Nation Yes

If you have ticked ‘no’ or you think we could improve any of the actions please explain why:
Transforming Government

The OU in Scotland would like to seek further clarification about the proposal that the Scottish Digital Academy would be the skills provider of choice for the Scottish public sector. It is our understanding that it was set up in collaboration with the GDS Academy and focused on supporting Scottish public sector organisations to have a coherent learning and development programme.

The OU works directly with multiple public sector bodies such as Local Authorities NHS, Sports Scotland, SSSC, Business Gateways, City and Growth deals, DWP and enterprise agencies.

Our current work with 32 local authorities through the Improvement Service includes social innovation programmes for increasing employability, skills support and community wealth building across Scotland communities. An example would be the skills portal for all community councils in Scotland.

We would like clarity on whether the Scottish Digital Academy will have a similar role to Civil Service Learning (CSL) that works with experts in learning and development to create and provide a range of high-quality learning that supports and equips civil servants.

The OU as the largest provider of part time education and with 50 years expertise of distance learning and developing the skills of the public sector we would be keen for the OU to be an integral part of a national digital academy.

In addition, as set out under the action on pooling digital and data expertise, The OU would seek to be included among the new, pooled resource of digital and data experts that public sector organisations can call upon to help them transform the way they work. We already have a body of research and experience relating to effective online pedagogies, and experience of implementing a design-led approach to online learning.

The OU in Scotland is able to support a number of the actions in the strategy. Our online platforms can support a consistent, quality digital skills learning offer with a national reach, including remote and rural parts of the country.

A Digital and Data Economy

We welcome that the actions include leveraging the National Transition Training Fund wherever possible to encourage more people to take advantage of the digital skills training. The actions could also include the Scottish Funding Council’s Flexible Workforce Development Fund. As part of Phase 2 of the fund, The OU in Scotland is the first university trainer partner to support small to medium-sized businesses with skills training to boost productivity and growth in response to COVID-19.
To ensure an increase in the digital skills talent pool and increased diversity in digital roles, it is important that digital learning opportunities are available on a part-time basis and support flexible study. As the country’s leading provider of part-time higher and flexible education, over 75% of OU in Scotland students are combining work and study (2019/20).

A Vibrant Tech Sector

As part of the action on expanding training, the important role of the higher and further education sector in supporting reskilling and upskilling opportunities should be acknowledged. A recent study found that The OU is the third biggest producer of UK graduates for the world’s biggest technology companies.

Coding Skills+ by The Open University was recently launched as a 13-week, free part-time training programme aimed at supporting those who are unemployed or on low incomes to gain the knowledge, skills and employability support needed for entry-level software development jobs. This is funded as part of Skills Development Scotland’s Digital Start Fund.

5. Are any of the potential actions more important than others?

No

Please explain why:
All of the actions set out will be important in helping to achieve the Digital Strategy for Scotland, underpinned by the new National Digital Learning Strategy.

6. How realistic do you think it will be to deliver these potential actions?

Please explain why:
Please see response to Q4.

7. Is there anything else you wish to comment on that has not been covered elsewhere?

The consultation document notes that there are plans for a new National Digital Learning Strategy to ensure a coherent digital learning experience.

Given The OU in Scotland’s role as a leading provider of high-quality, supported online distance learning, we would welcome the opportunity to be actively involved in the drafting of the strategy. The OU in Scotland has had an integral role in helping support schools, colleges and universities to pivot to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, benefitting from our pedagogical expertise and 50 years of experience.