SUBMISSION BY THE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN SCOTLAND

Social Renewal Advisory Board

Coronavirus (COVID-19): supporting people and communities - call for ideas

What needs to change to build a Fairer Scotland, learning from the response to the COVID pandemic?

23 October 2020
BRIEF SUMMARY OF ORGANISATION:

1. The Open University (OU) in Scotland is the country’s leading provider of part-time higher and flexible education – with over 75% of our students combining work and study (2019/20). Social justice is at our core and we are committed to ensuring high quality education is accessible to all, regardless of age, income, qualifications or geography.

2. Our open admissions policy means no formal entry requirements are needed for most undergraduate qualifications or modules, and many of our new undergraduates join us without standard university entrance level qualifications.

3. Working with our partners, from employers and trade unions, to schools and voluntary sector groups, we are at the forefront of using innovative distance education to deliver supported open learning to a wide range of people, at every stage of their lives and regardless of their background. Students can choose to study for a degree, diploma or certificate, or take a stand-alone module, course or microcredential.

DEMOGRAPHIC SUPPORTED:

4. The OU in Scotland reaches across the whole of the country, with students based in the Shetland Isles to Dumfries and Galloway. Our supported online learning model means we can operate at scale, at a national level working with partners across the country to meet local needs.

5. This includes active partnerships with the 15 regional colleges across Scotland to support college students with Higher National (HN) qualifications to articulate to a degree with the OU and campus-based delivery partnerships at Ayrshire, City of Glasgow, Fife, and North East Scotland Colleges.

6. A key focus of our work is ensuring that people from Scotland’s most disadvantaged groups and communities can all access higher education at any stage of their lives to help improve their work and life opportunities. We work in partnership with many third sector organisations to reach people from the most deprived areas, people with disabilities and chronic health conditions, carers, ethnic minority groups, and people with care experience. We embed support into our curriculum design and delivery at every stage of the student’s learning journey.

7. Currently we have over 18,000 students studying across Scotland, ranging from school age to 90. The median age of our undergraduate entrants is 27. In 2019/20, 72% of our new undergraduates earn less than £25,000 and are eligible for part-time fee grant. A fifth live in Scotland's most disadvantaged areas; and we’re proud to say we recruit more students from the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas. 24% of our new students have declared a disability and almost a quarter live in remote and rural parts of Scotland.
IDEA THEME:

8. In a Fairer Scotland, everyone will be able to develop their skills and life chances through access to higher education, irrespective of their qualifications, age, social, health or financial circumstances.

9. Through fair and open education, knowledge creation and skills development, we will ensure that all of Scotland's citizens play a valued and valuable part in Scotland's growth.

YOUR IDEA: What needs to change to build a Fairer Scotland, learning from the response to the COVID pandemic?

10. The introduction of a ‘Lifelong Skills Guarantee’ that commits to ensuring higher education is open to everyone, at any stage of life – irrespective of qualifications, age, social, health or financial circumstances.

11. The Advisory Group on Economic Recovery report makes clear the underlying resilience of our economy relies on fair work and quality jobs for all, and to create a society that is more equal.

12. This would be a national commitment to ensure that everyone in a Fairer Scotland would be able to access higher education opportunities leading to enhanced self-esteem, wellbeing, skills and employability, supporting everyone to play a valued and valuable part in Scotland’s growth.

13. As the Youth Guarantee seeks to ensure that COVID 19 does not result in a lost generation through youth unemployment, this guarantee would ensure that a Fairer Scotland can best develop and equip its people to thrive in a post Covid economy and a rapidly developing technological world.

14. Our learning from the pandemic highlights the need to ensure that everyone in Scotland has equal and fair access to high education learning opportunities to ensure they can boost their employability and other opportunities – whatever their circumstances and wherever they live.

15. Everyone’s learner journey should be flexible to allow them to personalise their higher education experience rather than having to adjust the rest of their lives to a one-size-fits-all approach. In a Fairer Scotland, there needs to be an overall shift away from the default position of viewing higher education only for school leavers transitioning to taking a full-time degree at university.

16. We know that there will be particular job market challenges as a result of COVID for certain groups particularly young workers, disabled people, minority ethnic people, women and those with caring responsibilities. PACE and Skills Development Scotland have highlighted greatest impact on the leisure and hospitality, retail, manufacturing and rural industries. Workers without formal qualifications or digital skills are more likely to work in these hardest hit sectors than those with a degree. The ability to upskill and reskill for a changing economy through part-time or modular learning will be key.
17. The Open University contributed to the ‘Upskilling Scotland: The Future of Skills and the Fourth Industrial Revolution report’ (SCDI Skills & Employability Leadership Group, January 2020). This report highlights our experience that lots of our students do not follow a single linear learner journey. Many students instead choose to pursue higher education at a later stage, perhaps due to social or family circumstances, or to reskill or make them more employable in a changing jobs market.

18. One of our 2020 graduates, Carla Belkevitz, shared her story with us about how she’d never imagined herself being able to study for a university degree after she had to leave her home as a teenager and ended up leaving school at 16. Despite working and raising her family as a single mother at the same time, Carla was able to study for an OU degree because it “fits in with life. You can make it work for you. You can learn at any time of the day, any time at night. You can do it whatever life throws at you.”

19. Faced by many life challenges during her studies, including being made redundant multiple times, Carla successfully gained an OU Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Open Degree this year and has now registered for an OU Postgraduate Diploma in Global Development to support her ambition to teach refugees. Carla’s story is one example of the difference higher education can make – her full story is also attached at Appendix 1.

Who will benefit:

20. By introducing a ‘Lifelong Skills Guarantee’, we believe that more higher education opportunities can be opened up to people at any stage of their lives and in a way that supports them to balance study with whatever life challenges they may face.

21. The proposed guarantee will continue to support widening access to higher education for the most disadvantaged groups and communities in Scotland, who are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and will need additional support post-pandemic.

What we learnt from COVID-19:

22. The OU in Scotland rapidly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that many people had the opportunity to access our vast online learning offer to study new skills and qualifications to improve their employment opportunities and support Scotland’s social and economic recovery.

23. During the pandemic, we have experienced:

   a. Demand for flexible learning opportunities has greatly exceeded the number of places available, particularly concerning demand for courses covering key skills gap areas. For example, supported by the Scottish Funding Council Upskilling Fund, we offered funded places on our new Coding Skills course to upskill and reskill people for digital careers. We received 675 applications for the original 40 places, which was later increased to 55.

   b. Significant take-up in short courses in business, maths, engineering, digital and cyber skills which were provided by the Scottish Funding Council to help
furloughed workers and in those facing redundancy. Due to demand, we were able to provide over 350 fully funded courses.

c. High engagement levels with a dedicated suite of Employability Badged courses on our OpenLearn platform developed for those facing career changes due to the pandemic. Working with PACE (Partnership Action for Continuing Employment), we offered them as part of a package of support to workers facing redundancy from the Michelin tyre plant in Dundee. We are now working with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and Fairstart Scotland to include these resources in COVID response activities.

24. COVID-19 is expected to significantly change the skills required for as many as 5 million job roles across the UK, driving a surge in employees seeking out distance learning opportunities, according to an independent study commissioned by The OU. With coronavirus uncertainty affecting almost half of current job roles across the UK, a quarter of employees have taken on additional learning opportunities to boost their employability and protect the value of their skills.

Supporting the principles of social renewal, making the country a more equal place, reducing poverty and disadvantage, and helping people live happier lives:

25. The OU in Scotland believes that our idea will continue to widen access to the most disadvantaged groups and communities in Scotland – making higher education more accessible, more affordable and boosting people’s confidence that they can upskill and reskill to gain new work opportunities post-COVID.

26. The guarantee would ensure that job prospects and opportunities for Fair Work are not closed to those without the relevant skills or those who are excluded through disability, health, caring responsibilities, or financial situation. It would provide a policy focus to drive parity for people studying part-time or in a modular way.

27. The Part-time Fee Grant has been hugely successful in widening access to higher education, but the level of the grant has remained the same for many years.

28. We believe that there needs to be greater flexibility concerning the income and credit threshold for the Part-time Free Grant – currently set at annual income of £25,000 or below and 30 credits – to support shorter, more skills-focused courses to be studied, to allow people to reskill, upskill and return to the workplace.

29. The OU in Scotland has recently received enquiries from part-time students looking for greater support after changes in their circumstances due to the pandemic. A renewed focus is needed on ensuring that part-time study is treated on an equitable basis with full-time study, including an urgent need to review maintenance support in line with changes made in Wales to give part-time students access to a Welsh Government Learning Grant and Maintenance Loan to help with living costs while studying.
Implications for equality and human rights:

30. Our idea would ensure that equal access to higher education opportunities would be central in a Fairer Scotland and in supporting economic recovery post-pandemic. This supports the recommendation of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery that education be placed at the heart of economic recovery.

31. The guarantee would be key in supporting the important work of Scotland’s Commissioner for Fair Access and it meets the international human right to higher education (Article 13, International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights).

32. As Scotland’s leading provider in flexible learning, we are ready to put our expertise in online education and inclusive delivery into action to support a Fairer Scotland. It is vital that we achieve an inclusive recovery and learning has an essential role in this.

Additional information provided in Appendix 1: Carla Belkevitz case study

23 October 2020
Appendix 1

Graduate Success Case Study: “Kicked out aged 14. Now I have a degree!”

After a difficult start in life, Carla Belkevitz from Clydebank never imagined that university would ever happen for her. Despite the challenges, Carla didn’t give up and is now part of the OU Class of 2020 graduating class – gaining an OU Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Open Degree.

“I feel really validated by gaining a degree. It’s changed how I feel about myself,” says Carla, aged 41. “The confidence boosts it's given me are amazing. If there’s anyone out there who thinks it’s an insurmountable obstacle, then please don’t. The Open University is open to anyone.”

When Carla was kicked out of the house aged 14 years old, she felt that her life went “completely off the rails”. She explains: “I wasn’t going to school, or when I was in school, I was drinking and falling asleep at my desk. I wasn’t clothed properly. It was a horrific, terrible time. I managed to hang in there until I was 16 and left with some standard grades, but it was such a struggle.

“I went to Clydebank College aged 21 and gained three Highers. The night before my English exam I found out I was pregnant with my eldest son. So, my plans to go to university went out the window.”

‘I re-launched myself’

Carla went back to college as a single parent and completed a Higher National Certificate (HNC). She says: “I scraped by with jobs in pubs and butcher shops to fit in with my son. Then I met my partner and had my youngest son. I felt I had the support to be able to launch myself again.”

After applying to a brick university and being rejected, Carla started working with a young parents’ group in Glasgow. She says: “At that point I was tutoring kids in English and Maths and core skills and thought it was time for me to start learning again too. That’s when I got in touch with The Open University and started my degree.”

At first Carla was studying law with the OU, but after a year she changed to the Open Degree. “That made more sense for me. My big passion is history and I love creative writing, so I started with those subjects. I really enjoyed every module I studied.”

She studied with the support of a part-time fee grant for students in Scotland with a personal income of £25,000 or less. “I was so lucky to gain a degree with no debt because I was eligible for the grant. There is no way I would have been able to study without it.”

Carla has experienced many difficulties in her personal life whilst completing her degree. She explains: “We’ve had five redundancies between us. At one point I had to set up my own business selling bath bombs, just to keep us going over Christmas.

“For the last two years it’s been an enormous struggle. But the tutors were always amazing. I probably would have given up if the tutors hadn’t been so understanding and reassuring.”

‘The OU fits in with life’
Carla’s eldest son, aged 18, is an athlete and she would study at trackside, in car parks, or when her kids were in bed. She says: “The OU fits in with life. You can make it work for you. You can learn at any time of the day, any time at night. You can do it whatever life throws at you.”

When she’s not studying formal OU courses, Carla’s dipping into the OU’s free online learning site, OpenLearn. Her youngest son has dyslexia and she has worked with children with autism, so she found the courses ‘Understanding Dyslexia’ and ‘Understanding Autism’ particularly useful.

Carla currently works for MND (Motor Neurone Disease) Scotland as an advocate, making sure that their clients receive the housing and services they urgently need. She says: “I got my job because my OU studies proved I could work from home. The OU is a great career move. It gives you an edge.”

Carla’s now registered for the OU’s Postgraduate Diploma in Global Development to support an ambition to teach refugees.

“The OU is special. It's been the greatest journey of my life so far!”
The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (RC 000391), an exempt charity in England and Wales and a registered charity in Scotland (SC 038302). The Open University is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

All information in this report is indicative and correct at the time of going to press. Data referenced from 2019/20.