

# The Open University in Ireland's response to the proposed Regional Jobs, Skills and Investment Private Members' Bill

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## Introduction

The Open University (OU) in Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the proposed Regional Jobs, Skills, and Investment Bill. The legislation seeks to address regional imbalances in Northern Ireland—an objective that aligns with the OU’s mission to provide high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.

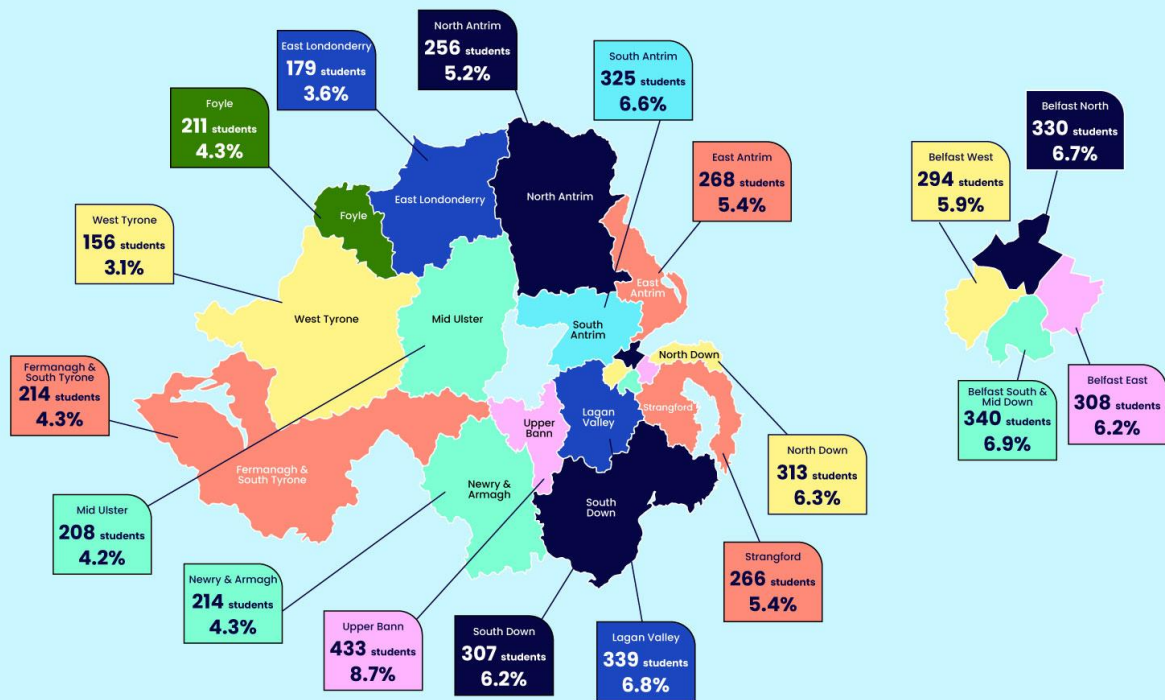
As a leader in supported distance learning, the OU is committed to lifelong learning and skills development. Our flexible, open-access model means there are no formal entry requirements for most of our courses, allowing learners from a diverse range of backgrounds to access higher education, regardless of educational background, location, or circumstance. Currently, almost 5,000 OU students across every Northern Ireland constituency benefit from this approach (see graphic 1).

The OU plays a key role in tackling educational and economic inequality:

- 40% of our students live in the most deprived areas,
- 45% receive financial support,
- 80% are in employment,
- The average age of our students is 29\*.

\*These figures refer to 2023/24 student data.

## Students by constituency 2023/24



Graphic 1: A map of OU students by constituency in Northern Ireland (2023/24)

The OU helps adults upskill and reskill to meet local workforce demands, addressing critical skill gaps in sectors essential to regional prosperity.

We support the Bill’s ambition to establish regional economic balance so that all individuals, regardless of geography, have equal access to opportunities for personal and professional growth. The following pages explain the OU’s view on how access to part-time and flexible higher education options is vital to addressing regional imbalances, and recommends this is factored into the proposed Bill’s mandates for departments.

# Key themes and Recommendations

## **Recommendation 1: In the proposed Bill's mandate for Executive departments, measuring the regional balance of policies, strategies and plans should include an assessment of the accessibility and inclusivity of skills strategies, as well as the reach and effectiveness of skills initiatives.**

At the OU we know our model of part-time and flexible distance learning boosts participation in rural and disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland, breaking down barriers to educational achievement, driving career progression, and helping to address regional imbalances.



BSc Computing student Rasha came from Syria to Northern Ireland as a refugee.

University study had been a dream, but difficult circumstances had made following this path impossible. After seeing an advert for The Open University's Community Partnerships Project she decided to study an access course at a local women's centre.



The Open University's flexible distance learning model, has empowered me to achieve my goals by fitting my studies around my life. My improved knowledge and language skills, mean I am able to support my children with their studies, and can look forward to a good job in the IT sector in the future.

**Rasha**  
BSc Computing



To support regional economic growth, education and skills interventions should serve as a key driver of regional development, ensuring that individuals can upskill and reskill throughout their careers in alignment with evolving labour market demands. To support this, skills strategies must prioritise accessibility and flexibility across the sector.

The OU provides a range of flexible learning options—including access courses, degrees, and short skills-focused micro credentials—designed to meet diverse learner needs.

To expand access the OU has partnered with all six Further Education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland, delivering 51 validated programmes. Since 2019, over 1,200 students have graduated through these flexible pathways, which combine the OU's expertise in distance learning with FE colleges' local support. These initiatives directly address local workforce needs, particularly in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, technology, and engineering, contributing to workforce adaptability and economic resilience. In addition to this, one of our partner colleges, North West Regional College, has given the OU office space in its Strand Road campus in Derry/Londonderry to progress further higher education access in the city.

To aid regional economic balance, investment in the flexible part-time higher education- exemplified by the OU - is essential. Part-time students currently receive minimal support with maintenance costs. To make higher education truly accessible, the OU strongly advocates for increased support for part-time students, including maintenance support and childcare grants (as stated in our [response](#) to the Executive's draft Programme for Government).

## **Recommendation 2: Include Lifelong Learning participation as a measurement of living standards between different regions.**

We recommend refining the Bill's definition of regional economic imbalance to include lifelong learning participation as a key measure of economic performance and living standards, given its role not only in economic productivity and workforce adaptability, but health, employment, and social wellbeing.

Lifelong learning is a central pillar in Northern Ireland's economic strategy. The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10x Economy (2022) emphasises the need to create a 'culture of lifelong learning' by prioritising upskilling, reskilling, and flexible learning to build a highly-skilled workforce. Accessible, high-quality, and flexible learning opportunities, particularly in rural and underserved areas where barriers to education and training contribute to regional disparities, is critical to achieving this goal.

Informal learning also plays a critical role in lifelong education. Our free learning platform, OpenLearn, offers hundreds of courses designed to boost confidence, employability, and skills development, particularly for those in areas with limited access to professional training. These courses provide a stepping stone to formal education and help bridge regional opportunity gaps. Examples of courses include "[Digital skills: succeeding in a digital world](#)" which teaches the importance of digital literacy and developing a critical approach to life online; and "[Everyday Maths](#)" which supports students to improve numeracy skills for increased confidence in using maths in everyday life.

Research on the impact of non-formal learning undertaken by the Alliance for Lifelong Learning – which the Open University is a founding member of – is soon to be published. This research, which was commissioned by the Department for the Economy, aims to improve the data collection and impact measurement of non-formal adult education, offering valuable insights into how lifelong learning contributes to economic growth, skills development, and social inclusion.

**Recommendation 3: In the proposed Bill’s mandate for Executive departments, measuring the regional balance of policies, strategies and plans should include an assessment of the strength of partnerships between education providers, industry bodies and employers when developing region-specific skills programmes.**

Assessing the strength of these partnerships is recommended because these collaborations are essential for addressing workforce shortages, boosting productivity, and ensuring that education and skills programmes lead directly to employment opportunities.

The OU has long worked with local employers, industry groups, and trade unions to identify regional skills gaps and develop targeted training programs. This approach has proven successful in sectors such as healthcare, digital skills, and renewable energy, equipping learners with the expertise needed to fill critical roles. For example, the OU works in partnership with the health and social care trusts, the private care sector and the Department of Health to deliver exceptional training to nurses and social workers. With health and social care as our most popular subject area in Northern Ireland, it is no surprise that UNISON doubled the number of students funded on our Introduction to Health and Social Care module last year.

Expanding investment in such partnerships ensures that education and training remain closely aligned with local industry demands, fostering economic resilience in underperforming regions.

The proposed Bill’s mandate on Executive departments should encourage them to work in partnership with education providers, industry bodies and employers



to ensure that skills development remains a cornerstone of regional economic strategy.

## Conclusion

The OU supports the Regional Jobs, Skills, and Investment Bill and its goal of addressing regional imbalances across Northern Ireland. As a leader in flexible, part-time higher education, we have seen firsthand how accessible learning opportunities drive economic growth, workforce adaptability, and social mobility—particularly in underserved regions.

To fully unlock the potential of education as a tool for regional development, policymakers must ensure that skills strategies are accessible and inclusive, with a particular focus on supporting lifelong learning and strengthening partnerships between education providers, industry, and government.

Measuring lifelong learning participation as an indicator of regional wellbeing will highlight its role in economic productivity, employment, and social inclusion. Additionally, fostering stronger employer–education collaborations will ensure that skills development aligns with labour market needs, particularly in high-growth sectors.

Embedding these principles into the Regional Jobs, Skills, and Investment Bill will support a more inclusive and resilient workforce. The OU remains committed to working with stakeholders across sectors to make high-quality education accessible to all, helping to build a more balanced and prosperous Northern Ireland.

