



# **The Open University's consultation response**

## **Department for Communities' Disability and Work Strategy for Northern Ireland**

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This document contains a copy of the answers submitted to the Department for Communities' consultation questionnaire found [here](#).

## Strategy Scope

### 3a. To what extent do you agree with the scope of the Strategy?

- Strongly agree
- **Agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### 3b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the scope of the Strategy.

With 19.3% of our students sharing they have a disability (2024/25), the OU's flexible distance-learning model has long supported underserved groups. Lifelong

learning opportunities, including OU study, supports individuals from all backgrounds into quality employment for fairer economic growth.

The OU recommends expanding the scope to include people from the listed groups who are “from all ages and backgrounds, building new skills and gaining rewarding work through lifelong learning”.

The scope would be strengthened by more consideration of the needs of people with neurodiversity. An OU [report](#) ('Mind the Gap') found 31% of NI employers have no initiatives in place to support underrepresented groups

including employees with neurodiversity, and the [Buckland Review of Autism Employment](#) concludes that autistic individuals experience one of the worst employment rates of all disability groups. Mental ill-health also requires more consideration as [one of NI's most significant health issues](#).

## Guiding Principles

### 4a. To what extent do you agree with the guiding principles of the Strategy?

- **Strongly agree**
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### 4b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the guiding principles of the Strategy.

The OU's social mission – to be open to people, places, methods and ideas – aligns strongly with the Strategy's principles. Our flexible, person-centred approach enables individuals to learn at their own pace and place, while our practices and collaborative partnerships allow us to respond dynamically to Executive priorities. For example, our partnerships with all six further education colleges in NI as well as individual organisations such as AwareNI, The Kings Trust and Libraries NI offer just a few examples of how the OU takes steps to collaborate to help disadvantage groups into higher education, boosting skills development for a more sustainable economic growth with rewarding work for everyone, regardless of background. The OU's careers and employability

support for our students is driven by student needs and the barriers they report, exemplifying the flexibility and responsiveness underpinning DfC's Strategy.

## **Overarching Outcome**

### **5a. To what extent do you agree with the overarching outcome of the Strategy?**

- **Strongly agree**
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### **5b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the overarching outcome of the Strategy.**

The OU supports the overarching outcome but notes the target will be challenging to achieve without increased and sustained funding in skills provision, particularly given the skill shortages identified by the Department for the Economy as essential for strengthening our economy. Widening access to higher education is critical to achieving this outcome, as demonstrated by the Strategy's findings on how disabled people are less likely to be qualified to degree level, while disabled people with a degree level qualification or higher are more likely to be in employment. The OU recommends DfC work closely with DfE to ensure the Disability & Work Strategy aligns with the new Widening Participation Strategy, with ambitious targets for the inclusion of students sharing they have a disability. This will better

enable the individuals in DfC's scope to access higher education and progress into quality employment.

## **Sub-outcomes**

### **6a. To what extent do you agree with the sub-outcomes of the Strategy?**

- Strongly agree
- **Agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### **6b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the sub-outcomes of the Strategy.**

The OU recommends adding a sub-outcome to 'increase higher education participation rates among adults with disabilities'. Employment status closely correlates with educational attainment but NI student funding arrangements disadvantage learners studying flexibly or part time e.g. full-time students can access maintenance loans and childcare grants but part-time students cannot. 19.3% of OU students in NI choose to share that they have a disability (2024/25), yet many face financial barriers because OU students, regardless of study-intensity, are classed part-time. A fairer student funding system is a key enabler of DfC's Strategy. The OU urges DfC to work with DfE on the Higher Education Funding Review to help improve outcomes for students sharing they have a disability.

Further, the OU's [Open Business Creators programme](#)

includes funding to support disabled entrepreneurs, reducing inequalities in entrepreneurship and self-employment by providing equitable access to support and funding.

## Key Themes

### 7a. To what extent do you agree with the key themes of the Strategy?

- **Strongly agree**
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### 7b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the key themes of the Strategy.

The OU plays a critical role in delivering flexible high-quality higher education and personalised support to learners balancing their study with work and other commitments. The OU strongly supports the key themes listed and [we encourage close collaboration between the department, employers, FE colleges and universities, leveraging the OU's expertise as NI's prime provider of part-time, flexible higher education.](#)

Partnering with the OU will ensure the Strategy delivers sustainable skills growth and equitable access to education. The OU's [Careers and Employability Services \(CES\)](#) offers a strong example for the Strategy to follow.

CES supports OU students with concerns about employers' awareness and

practical commitment to supporting their needs and making adjustments. In addition, CES works with employers and offers free resources e.g. an [OpenLearn](#) course providing practical ideas and approaches to recruitment/retention, and embedding diversity and inclusivity into workplace culture.

## **The Strategy's Actions**

### **8. Please provide any comments on these actions in the box below.**

**In providing comments, please consider:**

**Do the actions address the key areas of need for Disability and Work?**

**Have you any particular comments related to any of the actions that you wish to provide?**

**Are there any actions missing, and why do these need to be included?**

The OU welcomes the Strategy's proposed actions and strongly supports the focus on lifelong learning and inclusive employment. The actions align with key barriers reported by our students in NI including students sharing they have a disability. Such barriers may include a lack of confidence, discrimination, and concerns about employer perceptions.

In particular, the OU commends Commitment 6, Action 2.10, which refers to DfE's lifelong learning project to address the needs of disabled people, those with health conditions, and neurodiverse individuals. As a founding member of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning (ALL), the OU is working with DfE to progress this work to ensure that the voice and experience of adult learners, including those with disabilities, is reflected at each stage of the policy-making process. The inclusion of this cross-cutting work in DfC's Strategy is welcome and will help

enable learners with disabilities to access the training and skills that lead to secure and fulfilling employment.

Access to flexible learning pathways, including through adult education and non-formal learning, supports the Strategy's ambitions and this is highlighted in research by the ALL (March/April 2025) on '[Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland](#)'. This research notes a lack of recognition – in terms of funding – of the strength of non-formal learning as a pathway to employability for people with disabilities. Tools like 'distance travelled assessments' are commended as capturing learning progress in areas such as self-confidence, motivation, and ability to work independently – all skills that are particularly important for learners with disabilities facing additional barriers to employment. Case study evidence from real life practice includes the NOW Group's use of the 'Social Return on Investment' tool to show the impact of its services for people with learning disabilities and autism. The challenges identified for small organisations providing this support include resource limitations, and the report concludes with recommendations on greater collaboration between funders – such as the department – and providers to standardise qualitative measures (confidence, resilience, mental health) and to capture progression into employment more systematically.

The OU has lifelong learning at the heart of its mission and our flexible, accessible, and inclusive higher education pathways offer a crucial next step for many people with disabilities, supporting students to achieve their

goals through the provision of tailored support, experiential learning and direct links with employers.

In relation to Commitments 1 through 5, The OU's methods – as a clear leader in the accessible and inclusive delivery of skills through remote and blended learning – support many of the actions and offer examples of good practice. For example, we are collaborating with DfC and the UK Department for Work and Pensions to deliver an information hub for use by frontline staff, alongside training and resources, to improve their support for claimants facing barriers in their employment journeys, including barriers arising from systems, processes and workplaces that are not fully inclusive of disabled people. We hope this project will help deliver on the Strategy's Commitment 2 to ensure employability support is personalised and responsive to individual needs. The OU would welcome more information on how Commitment 2.5 (to provide specialist careers advice for disabled people at all ages and all career stages) will be resourced including any role for DfE's existing careers service and planned online Careers Portal.

Commitment 3 focuses on partner collaboration. The OU's partnership with Aware NI demonstrates the value of partnering with the voluntary and community sector to address mental health challenges. At The OU, every student's story and learning journey is different and mental health is a crucial issue affecting student's participation. Through OpenLearn, the OU also provides free online learning pathways to promote wellbeing and lifelong learning, reinforcing the Strategy's emphasis on holistic support. Lifelong learning plays a vital role in mental health through fostering personal growth, building

confidence and providing individuals with a sense of purpose and achievement.

In relation to Commitment 6, The OU reiterates our earlier recommendation (see 6b) for DfC to engage with DfE to ensure fairer funding for learners studying at a less than full-time intensity.

Commitments 7 through 9 address the need to support and enable employers. As stated previously (7b), the OU agrees these actions are necessary, particularly given our experience supporting students who report concerns and negative experiences about employer's perceptions and practical commitment to supporting needs.

## **The Disability and Work Council – Functions**

### **9a. To what extent do you agree with the creation of a new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed functions?**

- **Strongly agree**
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### **9b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed functions.**

The OU strongly agrees with the establishment of a new Disability and Work Council and welcomes the commitment to report regularly on delivery of the

Strategy. In terms of the Council's functions, the OU encourages the Council to expand and combine its oversight responsibilities to include scrutiny of relevant legislation passing through the Assembly, notably the 'Good Jobs' and 'Sign Language' bills which should be crafted with the Strategy in mind, as well as the implementation of other departmental actions and strategies including those related to skills development, anti-poverty and discrimination.

## **Disability and Work Council – Partnership Working**

### **10a. To what extent do you agree with the proposed representation across the Disability and Work Council structures?**

- Strongly agree
- **Agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### **10b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed membership.**

The OU welcomes DfC's plan to establish a Disability and Work Council for NI and while it is welcome to see experts from academia and the research community included on the Council, it is important that higher education staff working directly with students who share disability-related information are represented too. The OU recommends that the ALL and higher education institutions – including the OU – are represented on the Council. For

example, including the OU's Careers and Employability Service and similar bodies would help ensure the voices of part-time, distance learners, and those facing additional barriers to education and employment, are embedded in implementation plans, including the planned campaign to address misconceptions and build greater awareness amongst employers on the value of employing disabled people (Commitment 7).

**11. If you have any other comments on the Strategy, please enter them in the box below:**

The Strategy rightly focuses on employment outcomes, but achieving these depends on the accessibility of skills and training through flexible, inclusive learning pathways that meet the needs of learners with additional needs. OU student [Tanya](#) demonstrates this well (<https://university.open.ac.uk/northern-ireland/news/tanya-lands-her-dream-job-help-ou>). Tanya overcame language, health, and financial barriers to study *Physics and Maths* at the OU. This enabled her to move from hospitality to become a Process Engineer at Andor Technologies, contributing to cancer research. Tanya reflected on why she chose the OU over traditional universities for its flexible model: *“Everyone at The OU was so helpful and that’s why I’ve gone back to do my master’s even though with my BSc I could apply to any university.”*

Tanya's journey shows how inclusive higher education enables better employment and a sustainable, fairer economy.

Considering Tanya's story, and the many students with similar experiences of lifelong learning, the OU is encouraged by DfC's intention to take a

collaborative approach for data collection and reporting. The OU has made clear that widening access and participation targets in higher education should provide helpful insight to the Strategy's progress. Further information on DfC's intentions with reporting and any role for public organisations, including the OU, is welcome.